**CHANTEUSE** ©

 a Tom Larkin

 international thriller

 **by**

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  **Episode Six**

 **CHAPTER 16 – THE KING WILLS IT**

 Sprawled on the floor, Larkin awoke painfully and frowned as

 he felt the back of his head. Sitting up, he stretched with a groan, then

 looked at his gold Rolex to see he’d been out for only a few minutes. He

 staggered to his feet and rubbed the back of his neck. He sniffed the air

 and wrinkled his nose—the smoke from the chimney. He went to the

 fireplace and used a poker to disturb the ashes. Sparks flew up the

 chimney.

 Seeing a smoldering corner of parchment, he removed it from the

 ashes and blew on it to clear off the cinders, but his breath made it flare,

 and the burnt edges crumbled at his touch. He spat on a corner of his shirt

 and dabbed at the parchment to keep it from burning more. Holding it to

 the window, he observed the frail parchment backlit by the dawn’s early

 glow.

 Reading the scripted words, he thanked his high school French

 teacher, Miss Duval, for having such a fine figure that he’d stayed after

 class for extra help before final exams. Though now fluent in Spanish

 after fifteen years on tour for the DEA in Mexico and South America,

 French lingered only in his subconscious along with images of Miss

 Duval’s derriere, but enough for him to know that *le roi le veut* meant,

 “the king wills it?”

 Carefully, he put the delicate parchment in his jacket, but a sudden

 creak from a floorboard startled him. He heard it again and backed towards

 the rear of the house to hide. Finding a rear door, he cautiously backed away

 from the house, but stumbled clumsily over a motorcycle.

 “Franklin,” he growled under his breath.

 He reached for his gun, but found its holster empty. Steering the

 motorcycle downhill away from the house, he put his foot down on the

 starter, then accelerated downhill with automatic gunfire spraying at his

 heels from the house.

 “Larkin!” Franklin shouted. “Stop!”

 Unarmed, Larkin drove past The Battlewagon parked where he’d left

 it. Franklin ran downhill and started The Battlewagon with Larkin’s keys still

 in the ignition. He pursued Larkin down blind, winding bends on the steep,

 narrow road, firing once but missing him.

 Larkin gained enough speed to get out of range and sight. He took a

 sharp, skidding right at the fork and hid with the motorcycle in the tall shrubs.

 At high speed, Franklin missed that right fork in the road, but jammed on his

 brakes, backed up, and turned blindly to the right.

 When Franklin passed Larkin’s hiding place, Larkin jumped out from

 behind the shrubs and heard the sudden squeal of The Battlewagon’s bad

 brakes. Franklin screamed right before a thunderous splash of the The Battle

 Wagon plunging into a bog.

 Larkin ran to the edge of the bog in time to see Franklin scrambling

 onto the roof of the sinking vehicle. The quicksand made a sucking sound as

 The Battle Wagon seemed to let out a groan before steadily sinking nose first

 into the bottomless quagmire.

 Franklin drew his gun and aimed it at Larkin as he shouted, “Larkin!

 Get the rope from my bike and toss me a line! Hurry, damn it!”

 “Throw me your weapon first!”

 Franklin fired at Larkin’s feet. “Bull shit! Get the damn rope!”

 “Take your best shot, Georgie. You’ve got sixty, maybe ninety

 seconds at best, before you’ll be in the deepest cover you’ve ever known.

 Without me alive, you’re dead.”

 “I swear, Larkin! I’ll kill you!”

 “Save a shot for yourself or be prepared to hold your breath for two

 . . . maybe three minutes . . . and counting.”

 “Son of a—! Ah!”­ He threw his gun at Larkin.

 Larkin picked up the weapon and casually walked to the motorcycle

 as quicksand gushed into the car’s open rear windows.

 “Hurry! Where the hell are you going?” Franklin shouted.

 Larkin started the motorcycle, pulled up to the edge of the bog, and

 stared coldly as Franklin, whose feet were still tippy-toed on the hatchback

 of the sinking car. Franklin sank chest deep into the bog and pleaded as he

 struggled, slowly sinking deeper with each flail of his arms.

 Larkin finally threw him a line and tied his end to the motorcycle

 Franklin secured himself at the waist. Then Larkin revved the bike and

 screeched off, dragging the mud‑caked Franklin for a fifty painful yards

 before cutting the line and leaving him in the road.

 “Sorry, Georgie, no room without the sidecar. *Ciao*!”

 Franklin cursed as Larkin sped off.

 \* \* \*

 In uniform, Theo greeted Larkin at the front gate to Larkin’s home in

 Ocho Rios

 “The back of your head’s bleeding, Tom. What happened? You’d better

 see a doctor, mon. You could have a concussion.”

 “I’ve got to get to Grand Cayman this morning to see what Chanteuse

 is up to there. She could be in grave danger.”

 “*She’s* in danger? What about you? Maybe *she’s* the danger. I think this

 bird’s already got her talons into you, Tom.”

 Ignoring Theo’s words, Larkin packed an overnight bag.

 “Your domestic, Lucea, is OK, but a bit shaken,” Theo told him. “She’s

 looking after your dog. Are you listening to me, Tom? You seem lost in a fog.

 I should take you to the ER in Kingston before you go off half-cocked.”

 As if Theo wasn’t there, Larkin shaved and splashed water in his face

 and under his arms. He patted the back of his head with a cold, wet towel and

 saw the blood crusting, so he added a baseball cap in his bag in case he needed

 to cover his wound. He wiped the corner of his mouth with his thumb and tasted

 Chanteuse’s lipstick. As he did, he heard Theo’s voice as if someone had suddenly

 turned on the radio.

 “Have you been listening to me, Tom?”

 “No. Sorry. This is important. I found a singed fragment of old parchment

with the phrase *le roit le veut* inscribed on it.”

 “The King wills it,” Theo said with a frown. “It’s a formal proclamation

 honored by international law for centuries. There are many such proclamations

 in our museums, but some even remain on current legal documents.”

 Larkin held the scrap of parchment to the light. “I can just make out

 the words *Las Tortugas* and *Le Petite*.”

 “Where’d you find this, Tom?”

 “I took Chanteuse to an old house in the hills above Annotto Bay,

 where her mother lived before marrying Simon. I found this smoldering in

 the fireplace. *Las Tortugas* means turtles, but is it a place or a thing? Could

 this be genuine parchment from the seventeenth century?”

 “I could have Kingston CSI test the ink,” Theo offered.

 He handed it to Theo. “Do it. I’ve got to go.”

 \* \* \*

 A constabulary van dropped Larkin off at the U.S. Embassy parking

lot. He walked by his red Porsche and Riley’s black Mercedes, the only cars

 in the lot at that early hour, then he entered the embassy. After showing his

 security clearance, he unlocked the DEA office, turned on the office lights,

 and found the British High Commission’s file labeled *Rabelle* in an envelope

 marked *T. Larkin*—*Personal*. He read the few pages from Quigley’s files,

 noting that Simon Rabelle’s last-known address was Owen Island, a minute

 coral cay off the Cayman Islands. He called Theo.

 “I have a High Commission file on Carmen Rabelle’s assassination.

 The coroner listed *you* as the first Constabulary officer on the scene.”

 “That’s correct, Tom. Why?”

 “Then you actually saw Carmen Rabelle’s corpse?”

 “What remained of her. If it weren’t for that gold tooth in her shattered

 skull, I wouldn’t have been convinced it was Carmen. But it was.”

 “Did you check her dental records at the time for positive ID?”

 “There was chaos that morning,” Theo admitted.

 Larkin pushed further. “Any chance Carmen’s still living?”

 “Pray to God, no. It was a gruesome sight I’ll never forget.”

 “I also have a copy of a Constabulary report from ten years ago connecting

Guy Jasparre to a major drug bust.”

 “Yes, a shipment of Mexican Gold, a thousand kilos of the best-grade

 ganja was dumped into the sea off Negril. It was a mixed-up venture. Jasparre

 was responsible for the sabotage of the marijuana, not to help the Narcotics

 Division, but to break Mexico’s monopoly on marijuana distribution. He was

 barely eighteen when he took on the Mexicans and Colombians for control of

 Caribbean narcotics.”

 “A bold move, Theo, even if he’d been a seasoned pro. Who commanded

 the Narcotics Division of the Constabulary on that case?”

 “Hmm. I don’t recall offhand. Our Narcotics Division kept those names

 out of the media to protect the officers’ covers. Jamaica is sixty-miles long, so

 there’s nowhere to hide for long before some arm of the law will be kicking

 down your door.”

 “Then how could Jasparre possibly have hidden for ten years?”

 When Theo gave him no response, Larkin said, “Forget it for now and

 just meet me at the airport.”

 Larkin hung up, went to Mona’s desk, and felt for the latch beneath

 to open the hidden drawer. There he found the key to Riley’s inner office

 and his plane ticket to Grand Cayman. He opened Riley’s office and went

 to the files. Leafing through a file on Jasparre, he found a report on the

 Mexican Gold bust from ten years ago, but something else caught his eye.

 Pensive, he called Chief Barnes at Quantico from his cell phone.

 “Tim, I need to contact Special Agent Carl Fredericks.”

 “He’s head of our overseas training school. He’s in Qatar this week.”

 “How can I reach him, quickly?”

 “Qatar might as well be the moon.”

 “I have an affidavit from his Foreign Service Report from ten years ago.

 The cook aboard a Panamanian schooner was the only one arrested in a marijuana

 bust off Negril where they dumped ten thousand kilos of Mexican gold. The cook

 said there was a ‘snowbird, in the Jamaican Constabulary’s Narcotics Division

 working for Jasparre to sabotage that Mexican haul. Fredericks’ report shows no

 follow-up. I need the name of that Constabulary narc suspected of doubling for

 the bad guys.”

 “I’ll try to reach Fredericks, Tom. Where can I reach you during the next

forty-eight hours? From my own log, I understand you’re minding the store since

Jim Riley returned Stateside for a trial in LA this week.”

 “I imagine I have you to thank for that, Tim. I’ll be in the field for the

 next few days, so give the information from Fredericks to Mona at the Kingston

 office. She’s one of ours.”

 “I’ll do what I can, but I have people to answer to here. You’ve no

 idea. Be careful, Tom.”

 “Always.”

 Hanging up, Larkin took the keys to Riley’s files and read a dossier

 in which Riley claimed Larkin had personally manufactured a level‑one case

 against a fictional drug lord, Guy Jasparre, to cover his own alliance with

 Chanteuse Rabelle, whose letters were a danger to U.S. national security. In

 cooperation with the British Secret Service and the CIA, Riley recommended

 *termination* for both Chanteuse and Larkin.

 Larkin found a photo of Chanteuse and him kissing at the Rabelle

 mansion the first day they’d met. Under a file drawer, he found attached by

 magnets, Riley’s mercenary contract with the CIA disclosing his Swiss and

 domestic bank accounts. Larkin copied the contract and account numbers

 then returned the keys to the hidden drawer. He left his signed promissory

 note giving Mona his Porsche if he reneged on his agreement to send her to

 New York for two weeks after closing the Jasparre case.

 *Trips to Manhattan, a rendezvous in Ecuador, and a niece held*

 *captive,* he thought. *What am I thinking by spreading myself so thin? At*

 *least avoiding booze feels under control. That’s a start.*

 He knew he was a desperate man, but when he arrived in Grand

 Cayman, he couldn’t let it show. He figured if he did, he’d be—*soon dead.*

 **CHAPTER 17 – MINI-SUBS**

 When Larkin’s plane touched down in George Town, Grand Cayman

 he called Mona at the office. “I’m expecting an important call from Chief

 Barnes, so contact me with the information he gives you immediately.”

 “Sure, and thanks for the promise—in writing for a change. Don’t

 drive recklessly like you did with The Battlewagon. I don’t want any

 scratches on what could be *my* Porsche.”

 “Done.”

 He took a taxi, but thought he saw someone tailing him in another cab.

 Trying to shake off his paranoia, he told the cabby to continue along the harbor

 so the suspected tail would have two cars between but still remain close behind.

 They passed a sign on the docks that read:

 Blue Horizon Sub‑Aquatics, LLP

  *Neptune*Submarine Dive

 $50 Adults $25 Children

 Larkin paid and tipped his cabby from the backseat and told him to

 stop short so he could get out quickly, and the cab could take off. Once out

 of his tail’s sight around the next corner, Larkin jumped out of the cab with

 his backpack before the cab following him could catch up. Larkin’s cab

 suddenly sped away, catching the cab tailing him off guard.

 The chase ended abruptly when Larkin watched from a distance as

 George Franklin got out of the other cab at a traffic light and angrily kicked

 a tire when he saw Larkin had escaped.

 Larkin backtracked to the Blue Horizon Sub-Aquatics office on the

 pier. Posing as a potential investor, he pumped the owner for information.

 Dan Hurley, an Australian mariner in his forties, greeted him casually as he

 sat at his desk. Ruddy-faced and sun-bleached, Hurley had a direct manner

 with Larkin as he creaked in his swivel chair and scrutinized him when

 Larkin asked for detailed information about investing in his mini-sub

 operation.

 “I saw your ad in the *Daily Gleaner* about seeking investors,”

 Larkin said. “How many shareholders are there so far, and who are the

 limited partners and the *general* partner?”

 Hurley grinned with forced patience. “Unless you’re a shareholder

 already vested with Blue Horizon Sub‑Aquatics, the only information

 available to you is what’s available to the public—a copy of our prospectus.

 In it you’ll find lists of individual invested *amounts*, but it doesn’t disclose

 any names or whether they are individuals or corporate entities.”

 “Very discreet—I like that,” Larkin said with a nod. “I’m personally

 a *need-to-know* kind of guy, too.”

 “As a potential investor, you’re entitled to a courtesy voyage on *The*

 *Neptune*, our tourist mini-submarine. A picture’s worth a thousand words, Mr.

 Larkin. Take the next dive. You’ll see why it’s worth one hundred thousand

 dollars to invest.”

 “A hundred grand isn’t pocket change, Captain Hurley.”

 “That’s the minimum investment in Blue Horizon, just to join our

 network.”

 “What network?”

 “Your investment makes you privy to our technology and puts you

 on a priority waiting list for prime locations if you decide to navigate a Blue

 Horizon franchise.”

 Larkin cocked his head with curiosity. “And if I don’t?”

 “With our seven‑year lease and open‑ended buyout, we provide a

 qualified crew with a safety and maintenance warranty. We feel, after seven

 years experience, you should qualify to manage those responsibilities on

 your own.”

 “How many of your investors are running their own franchises

 *without* your crews?” Larkin asked.

 “Only one. This is a brand-new venture,” Hurley explained. ”It’s

 unusual to find someone with both submarine experience and that much

 money. But it’s an entrepreneur’s dream—hi‑tech, vast commercial

 potential, and no previous experience required.”

 “Who’s the investor who chose to brave the deep without your

 crew?” Larkin pushed.

 “Sorry. As I explained before, that’s privileged information only for

 those who’ve bought in. We pride ourselves on our confidentiality. You’ll

 appreciate that if you purchase.”

 “The article in Kingston’s *Daily Gleaner* said you expect to earn

 hundreds of millions in profits within a few years,” Larkin recalled.

 “We’ll yield one billion dollars annually by next year—before

 shareholder’s dividend distributions,” Hurley boasted, handing him a

 prospectus.”

 Larkin browsed through it. “I see from your prospectus, as you

 said before, you’ve listed each investor by a shareholder ID number—no

 names. With such a sizable investment, how will I know who my partners

 are?” Larkin continued to push. “That’s an added risk if you become a

 limited partner, especially if the general partner, turns out to be a felon.”

 Finally impatient with Larkin’s grilling, Hurley reminded him again,

 “That information, as I’ve said several times, comes only with the buy‑in,

 Mr. Larkin. How about it? Ready for that first dive? Maybe after a voyage

 on the *Neptune,* you’llwant to ante up today.”

 Larkin shrugged. “Sure. Let’s do it.”

 \* \* \*

 Several miles beyond the shoreline reefs, Hurley’s speedboat stopped

 at a buoy. Larkin felt uneasy with nothing but the turquoise sea in sight. A

 sudden gush startled him as a 60-foot submarine emerged like a whale from

 the water. In black letters on its white hull were the words, *Neptune I.*

 He assessed the suband mentally calculated its potential use for

 smuggling. “How much cargo can she carry?” he asked Hurley.

 “We don’t carry any cargo, but she seats up to forty tourists,” Hurley

 explained. “Any more than forty would take away from the quality of the

 unique experience. At fifty dollars for adults and twenty-five for kids, we

 try to give our patrons their money’s worth. Try it and see for yourself.

 Pretend your Captain Nemo.”

 *Or Guy Jasparre*, Larkin thought.

 Two shuttle boats pulled alongside the sub to take tourists back to

 Grand Cayman. The tourists’ expressions and comments gave rave reviews

 of the dive. Larkin and Hurley descended into the pressurized hull. As the

 submarine descended, Larkin observed a serene undersea panorama.

 “She’s quiet,” Larkin remarked.

 “Our electric thrusters provide a quiet ride at half a knot,” Hurley

 said with pride. “You get plenty of legroom and the best underwater view

 money can buy with a 150-foot descent along the Cayman Wall—and no

 discomfort from the pressure.

 “What are your criteria for future locations, Captain?”

 “The sub does fine in open sea, even in the worst stormy weather,

 but submersion in protected waters for tourists’ comfort is our priority. We

 seek locations with three hundred thousand tourists yearly.”

 “Is Jamaica on your list of prime sites?”

 “Not currently. We’re in production at scattered Caribbean sites.

 Why do you ask, Mr. Larkin?”

 “I’m connected with well-funded parties in Jamaica who have

 expressed interest in a franchise, but it would be counterproductive to

 have two submarines competing for that same tourist market.”

 “It’s reassuring to know how serious you are about investing

with us.” Hurley smiled broadly. “However, although I respect your

inquisitiveness regarding such a large investment, since few prospective

partners actually invest and merely have a look, without a cashier’s

check from you, confidentiality prevails at Blue Horizon Sub-Aquatics.”

 “It’s your confidentiality that’s sold me,” Captain Hurley. “That’s

 why I’ve been so persistent about gathering information. I’ll have the money

 wired to me here and I’ll sign the contract in the morning. One more question,

 your prospectus lists franchise sites already operating or under construction.

 I see that Little Cayman is on the list. Is there a contract on that site?”

 “It’s not available for tourism, Mr. Larkin. It’s a research site which is

 independently managed, but funded by Blue Horizon’s stockholders.”

 “Research?” Larkin said with a cock of his head. “May I see that location?”

 “Certainly, Mr. Larkin—in the morning, when I have your hundred grand.”

 “Could you at least quell my curiosity by telling me where to find that

 research facility on Little Cayman?”

 “That’s public knowledge,” Hurley said with nonchalance. “It’s located

 on Owen Island inside the South Town Reef.”

 “Hmm,” was all Larkin expressed, but he agreed to return the next

 morning with a cashier’s check for one hundred thousand dollars. In turn,

 Hurley would take him for a firsthand inspection of the research facility

 owned by Blue Horizon and located on Owen Island.

 That evening in his hotel room in George Town, Larkin spread the pages

 from the British High Commission’s files on his bed. He read them pensively

 as he grabbed a map of Little Cayman then excitedly pointed to one paragraph

 stating: Owen Island—last-known address of Simon Rabelle where he receives

 treatment for his illness.

 **CHAPTER 18 – HONORARY CONSUL**

 Larkin phoned, Ziggy Schwartz, a longtime friend of Chief Barnes.

 Ziggy was serving as Honorary Consul in the Cayman Islands. He was a

 bachelor at fifty-five and retired from law enforcement with the Canadian

 Mounties after serving thirty years.

 “Tom? Ziggy here. What a coincidence. We were just talking about

 you,” Ziggy said, much to Larkin’s confusion.

 “I’m in George Town and have urgent company business to discuss

 ASAP. When are your guests leaving so we can talk privately?” Larkin asked.

 “I’ve got only one guest, Tom, but he’s with the diplomatic corps.

 We haven’t started dinner yet. How soon can you get here? Please, join us.

 Where are you staying? I could send a car to pick you up.”

 “This business must be between you and me alone, Ziggy.”

 “My guest has top clearance, Tom.”

 “Who is it?” Larkin asked with caution.

 “Your new Honorary Consul in Montego Bay, Richard Ludlow,

 the famous writer.”

 Larkin stared at the receiver with stunned disbelief.

 \* \* \*

 Half an hour later, Larkin felt compromised as odd man out in the

 company of no less than *two* Honorary Consuls, both wearing formal dinner

 attire. Ziggy ingratiated himself to the best‑selling author while playing the

 snob to Larkin.

 Ziggy was five-ten, wiry, and balding. His face always appeared

 freshly shaven with rosy, high cheek bones and a prominent chin. His wide,

 thin-lipped mouth sported a thin, graying moustache. His voice was gruff,

 but affected by a lilting British accent that reminded Larkin of Errol Flynn,

 though Larkin thought his accent was fake.

 Ludlow, a good listener, threw out some bait before reeling in each

 morsel of information. He struck Larkin as an egghead, a field agent wannabe

 with unfulfilled aspirations. Ludlow was a slumped six feet with a slight pot

 belly and sloping shoulders. He was clearly not at the peak of good health.

 Watery, milky blue eyes with flecks of red veins in the whites betrayed a

 stifled rage in the man in his late sixties.

 Impatient, Larkin went through the protocol, but wanted to call

 Chief Barnes at Headquarters, hoping the Chief could provide the means

 for him get to Owen Island—undetected.

 “It’s a tragedy you lost your wife so young in life, Richard,” Ziggy

 said. “but I’m surprised you’ve never used your experiences with the Green

 Berets as fodder for your novels.”

 “It’s a long time ago, but the pain of losing my wife, Kim, stays with

 me. A Vietcong mine took her after we married in Nam. We have two daughters

 and I have three grandchildren, but some feelings are too painful and better

 left untold. I don’t want to bore Tom with my tragedy. That’s history.”

 “Perhaps we have more in common than you know,” Larkin said.

 “Someone murdered my wife, Vera, last October, a professional hit just to

 get back at me.”

 “I’m so sorry,” Ziggy said, flushing. “My god, Tom. I had no idea.”

 “How could you know? The DEA has kept the details under wraps

 even from me,” Larkin said, not mentioning the kidnapping of his niece.

 Then he turned to Ludlow. “You were a Green Beret in the Vietnam War?”

 “Yes,” Ludlow replied, “a lifetime ago. I was so young back in 1969.”

 “Before I was born.” Larkin shrugged. “My sister-in-law read all

 your books. She died last year, but I’d heard her tell my wife that you’re a

 very private person who shuns the public eye. She said you don’t do book

 signings or give interviews. So why would you take on an honorary consulship?

 Montego Bay draws a bustling crowd all year round—not a place I’d consider

 a retreat for peace and solitude. You’d be better off in Belize.”

 Acknowledging Larkin’s piqued scrutiny, Ludlow said, “I need a

 recharge if I hope to keep going. Frankly, most of my close friends are dead.

 I want to write at least one more meaningful novel before I die.”

 “A book about Jamaica?” Larkin asked.

 “If there’s a new story to be told. Take this flash roll you’ve requested

 from Headquarters in Quantico,” Ludlow said, alarming Larkin. “The way I

 understand it, you’ll use a hundred thousand dollars just to bait this drug dealer,

 Guy Jasparre.”

 Larkin saw no harm in providing more details about something

 Ludlow already had a handle on.

 “The flash roll will show I’m a high-roller. It will get me inside

 and win Jasparre’s confidence. It could lead to a monumental drug bust.

 The flash roll of money gets me through the door to meet the major players.

 I expect Jasparre will be one of them, if not the only one. My sources tell

 me that his minions are muscle and firepower rather than brains. He’s

 probably the only clever mind behind the operation. You have to be

 shrewd to avoid ever being seen by the DEA or local narcotics forces

 for the past ten years.”

 “Richard tells me Jim Riley is in LA,” Ziggy said. “He was told

 by Ambassador Smythe. That’s why you have to contact Headquarters

 for the authorization to proceed to Owen Island. Let me see if, Ms. Wells,

 my secretary, has heard back from Chief Barnes yet.”

 Ziggy left the room to check on the contact with Barnes to request

 the wired funds while Larkin and Ludlow shared conversation over cigars,

 Ludlow with a brandy and Larkin with club soda.

 Larkin resented Ludlow’s inquisitive intrusion into his case and

 thought he was an intellectual masquerading as a pseudo-diplomat—that

 was until Ziggy left, and Ludlow spoke more frankly.

 “Tom, we both know damn well this protocol overseas is fine for

 the Brits, but I’m not about to let this glorified Kentucky colonel position

 of mine as Honorary Consul go to my head like Ziggy has. How about

 some straight talk between us—one Yank to another?”

 “Well, Your Honor,” Larkin said sarcastically, “do you want to

 discuss the Super Bowl or the World Series?”

 “I’m serious. Call me Dick. I’m fascinated by what you do, Tom.”

 “Fascinated? You know the drill. It’s dirty and dangerous, but

 I’m the one who’s got to do it. I could tell you all the details, but then I’d

 have to kill you. Fact is, driving a New York City bus is more dangerous,

 and probably pays better, too.”

 “OK, man to man, I get it, Tom,” Ludlow said with a shrug. “You’re

 pissed that I’ve been thrown into your lap unexpectedly, and you see that as

 some kind of punishment rather than a trusted responsibility.”

 “Don’t screw with me on this case, Dick,” Larkin warned. “Don’t start

 taking notes for your next book on my watch when there are lives at stake, one

 in particular, that means a great deal to me other than my own. That’s all I have

 to say about it. Got that? Maybe you should jot that down so you don’t forget.”

 As Ludlow nodded, Ziggy returned excitedly and ignored the stare-down

 between his two guests.

 “Let me warn you, Tom,” Ziggy cautioned, “Chief Barnes has received

 your classified cable requesting one hundred thousand dollars.” He handed

 Larkin a phone. “But he wants to talk to you about it—and he seems quite

 perturbed.”

 Larkin took the phone and heard Barnes ask, “What the hell is going

 on down there, Tom? I spoke to you this morning, and you never mentioned

 anything about a hundred grand. Now you drag me away from dinner with a

 goddamn NYAC, urgent-urgent asinine request for a flash roll! And what the

 blazes are you doing in the Cayman Islands? Your assignment is in Jamaica!”

 “The money’s just for show, Tim. You know the drill. The hundred

 Gs gets me inside. I need it wired to Barclays Bank in George Town in the

 morning. This cash trail will most likely lead me to Jasparre.”

 “Damn you! This needs the Attorney General’s approval. And don’t

 you dare remind me about Mexico again and how you saved my life. We’re

 even on that one now. This had better go down smoothly. I want this Jasparre

 case documented in detail from day one. If it blows up in your face, you’re

 on your own. With Riley away, who’s minding the store? It was supposed to

 be you. It was hard enough for me to get Riley out of the way for a week.

 You have no backup in Jamaica, but at least I have some control there. In the

 Caymans you’ve got zip, not even a half-ass support system from Headquarters?”

 “Not necessary, Tim. I’m not making a drug purchase. I’m just scouting

 the setup from the inside. The trail led me to the Cayman Islands. Anyway, I

 can’t even carry a weapon on the flight to Little Cayman.”

 “Back-up not necessary? My ass! I’ll get back to you after I’ve run it

 by the AG. So sleep on it till then!”

 Larkin heard a dial‑tone. Ziggy was right; Barnes was pissed.

 Apparently taking notes for his next book, Ludlow disregarded Larkin’s

 warning and was eager to know more details about his case. Larkin tried to

 ignore Ludlow’s enthusiasm. He slept in a guestroom while waiting for the

 next call from Barnes.

 \* \* \*

 At sunrise a ringing phone awoke Larkin, still wearing the same

 clothes from the previous night. Needing a shave, he scratched at his

 disheveled hair. Mona called from Kingston with Chief Barnes’s approval

 to wire the money to Grand Cayman with the Attorney General’s instructions.

 “Headquarters wired the money as you requested,” Mona said, “but

 there’s one stipulation. You can’t go alone.”

 “I have no choice. No one else is available,” Larkin replied confidently.

 “You got only the first part right, Tom—you have no choice.”

 “How so?” Larkin asked, puzzled.

 “Let me read the Attorney General’s memorandum to you: ‘For

 propriety assurance with the return of the Impress Fund amount of one

 hundred thousand dollars, yielding to Special Agent Larkin’s guarantee

 of no hazard, we entrust these funds to him as well as the safety of his

 collaborator, Honorary Consul, Richard Ludlow. Good luck, gentlemen.’”

 Larkin was disgusted. “Am I supposed to tell this to Consul Ludlow,

 or does he already know?”

 Ludlow popped his head through the door. “Tell me what, Tom?”

 “I guess you must be a hell of a poker player, Dick.” Larkin glared at

 him.

 “I’m not bad at cards, Tom, but I prefer chess—three dimensional.”

 As they stared at each other, Larkin’s eyes reddened with disdain for

 the D.C. good ole boy tactics that the Attorney General employed by tying

 a millstone around his neck with the dead weight of the Honorary Consul.

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 **(To be continued in the next issue)**