**CHANTEUSE** ©

 a Tom Larkin

 international thriller

 **by**

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  **Episode Seven**

 **CHAPTER 19 – FLASH ROLL**

 On a bright, sunny morning in George Town, Richard Ludlow

 remained in the car as Larkin entered Barclays Bank and went directly to

 the manager with all the identification required to claim the wired flash

 roll money from Headquarters. The mousy manager, peering over his

 magnifying spectacles, noted Larkin’s U.S. federal law enforcement

 passport and international driver’s license for ID.

 “How would you like that, Mr. Larkin?” the manager asked with

 an agitated sniff.

 Larkin had anticipated the manager’s snobbish attitude, but there

 was no chance to shower that morning—not for two days. He was wearing

 the same clothes he’d slept in the night before. There was a reason for

 Larkin’s purposeful lack of hygiene. He figured the manager would be

 eager to move him along quickly in the process of completing his financial

 transactions with less regard for details. Ludlow was too polite to say

 anything to him about it in the car, and Ziggy always smelled like a goat,

 so he wouldn’t even have noticed.

 Larkin grinned at the manager and gave his instructions: “First, I need

 two cashier’s checks made payable to Blue Horizon Sub‑Aquatics for one

 hundred dollars Cayman Ian each. I left my wallet in my room when I took

 my family on the submarine tour. The owners were kind enough to trust us

 overnight with no more than our hotel room number, so I want to repay them

 right away.”

 Bored and testy, the manager impatiently handed Larkin two blank

 cashier’s check forms.

 “You can write them yourself.” He raised an eyebrow. “And what

 about the balance, Mr. Larkin? It will take some time if you want almost one

 hundred thousand dollars in cash.”

 Larkin handed him two U.S. one-hundred-dollar bills and a fifty.

 “Add that to the balance and open an interest-bearing checking account in

 my name for one hundred thousand U.S.”

 Larkin looked out the bank window as the manager turned away to

 his computer. Larkin gave a thumbs-up to Ludlow watching him from the car.

 He went to the counter to fill out the cashier’s checks to Blue Horizon

 then made out each blank check for one hundred dollars Cayman Ian, but

 left enough room on each check for a clean revision of the amounts.

 With more attention to the six-figure deposit Larkin made into his

 new account, the manager glanced at the two bank checks made out to the

 popular tourist attraction, saw the amount, and stamped his approval of each

 check without hesitation.

 Larkin went to the counter and neatly added a comma and three

 zeroes after each one hundred and added the word *thousand* after the words

 *one hundred* on each check. Proud of his artwork, he rejoined Ludlow in the

 car.

 “Everything work out?” Ludlow asked.

 “Perfectly, Your Honor,” he said with a wink as he got behind the

 wheel. “My apologies for my foul odor. When I had to cash my first DEA

 paychecks years ago, I noticed that the tellers moved faster when customers

 from the sanitation department came to the counter. Distractions and high

 finance make fine bedfellows—if you get my drift—literally.”

 Ludlow smirked before cracking his window and turning up the

 A/C fan as he said with a phlegmatic chortle, “You’re quite a character,

 Tom. Indeed, you truly amaze me.”

 “I think that’s what the Fat Man said to Sam Spade,” he said with

 a Cheshire grin. “Now we’re off to purchase a submarine.”

 Ludlow stared at him with curiosity as he started the car and drove

 them towards Blue Horizon. Larkin winked then hummed the tune of the

 Beatles’ song, *Yellow* *Submarine.*

 Fifteen minutes later, Larkin entered the Blue Horizon office with

 Ludlow behind him. Hurley and his pilot, Jacques, a black Caribbean with

 a military air, greeted Larkin, but both seemed surprised that he had someone

 else with him.

 “I assumed you’d come alone,” Hurley said.

 “Mr. Ludlow is my legal consultant.”

 Hurley turned to Ludlow: “While Jacques flies me and Mr. Larkin

 to Little Cayman, you might enjoy a dive on the *Neptune*?”

 “I must go with Mr. Larkin to assess his investment.” Ludlow said.

 “Not possible,” Hurley balked. “We can’t even let family members

 enter the research facility—investors only. You’ll find that stipulation on

 page thirty of the prospectus.”

 “Didn’t I mention that we both intend to invest? We have two cashier’s

 checks for one hundred thousand dollars.

 Shocked, Ludlow blurted, “We do? I mean yes—we do.”

 “I prepared only one contract,” Hurley said. “I didn’t expect two—

 but that’s great. The more the merrier. I just need to make a call.”

 “I’ll sign this contract,” Larkin said, “while you bring another for

 Mr. Ludlow before we leave.”

 When Hurley went to another room. Jacques remained with Larkin

 and Ludlow so they were unable to discuss his sudden change of plans.

 “I’m used to flying in small aircraft,” Larkin said to Jacques, “but

 would you show Mr. Ludlow the plane we’re taking, just to ease his mind?”

 Jacques agreed, and Ludlow went along, leaving Larkin alone so he

 could eavesdrop on Hurley’s phone conversation.

 “But he’s got somebody with him,” he heard Hurley say. “They both

 have the money to buy in . . . OK, I’ll use that, but this Larkin is slick with all

 the moves. What if he persists? . . . OK, I’ll take the money . . . and you’ll settle

 with him later . . . Sure. You’re the boss.”

 Hurley returned with another contract. “You *each* brought a cashier’s

 checks for one hundred thousand dollars?”

 “Of course.”

 “I was afraid of that. You see, Mr. Larkin, you bought the last share at

 that price. The next lot goes for one hundred twenty-five thousand dollars.”

 “I see. I wish I’d known that yesterday. Did you say one hundred

 thousand *U.S. dollars*?”

 “Your being a Yank, I assumed you understood I meant U.S. currency.

 I wanted to talk your language so there wouldn’t be any misunderstanding. I’m

 sorry if Mr. Ludlow doesn’t have enough money because of the confusion.”

 “It’s not a problem. Our checks are for one hundred thousand dollars

 *Cayman Ian*, equal to one hundred twenty-five thousand U.S.—according to

 today’s exchange rate at Barclays. You owe me, twenty-five thousand

 dollars change, but I’ll be happy to wait until after we tour the research

 facility on Owen Island. Shall we?” Larkin motioned towards the seaplane.

 Frustrated from being countered by Larkin at every turn, Hurley

 sighed with defeat, knowing he’d soon have to answer to his boss.

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 Jacques piloted the bright-yellow seaplane with Hurley beside him

 and Larkin and Ludlow seated behind them.

 “We’ve got a Cayman‑clear day, gentleman. Great viz,” Hurley

 pointed out Owen Island below with its protective reef and just a quarter

 mile off the southern shore of Little Cayman. “You can see Owen Island

 below to your right.”

 “Who owns it?” Larkin asked.

 “At one time, the British royal family owned and used the island

 exclusively, but the current tenant has a lifetime lease. Blue Horizon just

 sublets the land.”

 Larkin asked, “Do you pay her by cash or barter?”

 “She gets a check from our—” Hurley realized he’d been tricked.

 Larkin leaped at the chance, asking, “Who is *she*?”

 Stumbling for only a moment, Hurley recovered abruptly with:

 “*Her Majesty*, of course. I did say the royal family owns the island.”

 Ludlow nudged Larkin and glared at him. He gestured for some

 indication from Larkin that he’d brought a weapon with him. When

 Larkin shook his head, Ludlow appeared unnerved.

 “It’s a toss-up between here and the Great Barrier Reef, but scuba

 diving here is the best in the world by my account,” Hurley said. “Have

 either of you been scuba diving off Little Cayman yet?”

 Winking at Ludlow and peering at Owen Island below, Larkin told,

 the Aussie captain, “Not yet. But from where I sit, mate, I don’t see how I

 can avoid a scuba dive—real soon.”

 **CHAPTER 20 – A DEAD DUCK**

 Armed guards with pairs of Doberman pinchers at their heels patrolled

 the beachfront around Owen Island as Hurley’s yellow seaplane glided onto the

 turquoise water within the reef then taxied to a dock. Hurley led Larkin and

 Ludlow from the dock to the beach and into the facility densely enclosed by

 tropical foliage and barbed wire. Larkin and Ludlow exchanged nods noting

 the extremely tight security of fierce dogs and armed guards. Ludlow wrinkled

 his red, rummy nose at the fishy smell pervading the air on a clear, cloudless

 day. Larkin continued making mental notes while Ludlow paled with anxiety

 assuming Larkin hadn’t counted on such tight security measures for a commercial

 research lab.

 “They run a tight ship,” Ludlow said to Captain Hurley. “Guard dogs and

 automatic weapons seem extreme for such a quaint little island. I feel like I’m at the

 Palais National in Port-au-Prince, Haiti rather than a Cayman Island laboratory.”

 “Commercial espionage can be a nasty business, Mr. Ludlow,” Hurley said

leading them inside a sterile, white, two‑story stucco building.

 The design curved within an oval‑like stadium enclosing something

 obviously valuable. The hospital-like atmosphere was quiet, sterile, and

 solemn. Hurley asked them to wait in the foyer while the director came out

 to meet them for their tour. At the entrance, a sign read, *Blue Horizon*

 *Aquaculture Research Centre.*

 When Hurley left them alone, Lulow turned to Larkin and remarked

 incredulously, “Though I admire your resourcefulness, I’m afraid to ask how

 you turned one hundred thousand dollars into two hundred fifty thousand.

 That’s not pocket money, and I know you didn’t get that much from your

 Chief Barnes at Headquarters. I probably don’t want to know either, but

 you did manage to get both of us inside. Now that we’re in, what do you

 plan to do?”

 Nodding towards a security camera above them, probably equipped

 with a microphone, Larkin replied, “I’m just looking forward to the tour. No

 planned agenda. Just playing it by ear from here.” He squinted at Ludlow.

 “You look pale around the gills, Dick. Are you OK?”

 “Just a bit airsick,” Ludlow conceded. “What’s your plan if they

 decide to check the clearance on our bank checks from Barclays?”

 “I’m afraid the buck stops here, Your Honor.” Larkin admitted,

 looking through some literature put out by the Blue Horizon Aquaculture

 Centre. He handed a brochure to Ludlow.

 “Hybrid Crustaceans,” Ludlow read aloud. “Tomorrow’s perfect

 food by C. Rabelle PhD. Ever heard of him?”

 “*Her*. It’s Chanteuse Rabelle.”

 “Then it appears that *Ms.* Rabelle is an authority on the genetic

 engineering of aquatic life for mass food production—quite a noble

 project. How do you know this woman?”

 “Just a brief encounter—or two,” Larkin said with a smirk.

 “Short but sweet?” Ludlow asked with a raised a brow.

 “More like down and dirty.” Larkin nodded with a grin. “But

 based on my personal experience in the field—Chanteuse is as good

 as it gets.”

 Larkin went to a door marked *Emergency* and peered through its

 small glass window.

 “What do you see?” Ludlow asked.

 “A floor plan in case of fire. There are ele­vators from a lower level

 to the level above us. They’ve marked the lower level *restricted*.”

 He took out his phone and took a zoom photo of the floor plan.

 “Let me see.” Ludlow stepped up to the window.

 “Just keep an eye out for Captain Hurley,” Larkin cautioned. “I detect

 shimmering waves of light in the stairwell. Looks like water is reflecting

 sunlight onto the wall.”

 “Seawater?” Ludlow asked.

 “If so, it must be from a man-made lagoon. I checked out Ziggy’s sea

 charts last night,” Larkin told him. “There’s no interior water on Owen Island.

 Something’s fishy about this setup.”

 Ludlow reflected, “This place has a droning quality, like the hatcheries

in Huxley’s, *Brave New World.*”

 His literary recollection was suddenly shattered by a single gunshot

 startling them as it echoed down the hall. Ludlow gasped and clutched his

 chest. Larkin instinctively dropped to one knee and reached for the weapon

 that wasn’t there at his left armpit.

 “Are you hit?” Larkin asked.

 “No. Just startled. It’s . . . my heart,” Ludlow puffed short of breath.

 A female voice called to them from down the corridor as if coming from

 a cavern with its echo. Dressed in a white lab coat, Chanteuse walked purposefully

 towards them. “Sorry, gentlemen. We didn’t mean to startle you, but we’ve just

 had some dangerous intruders invade our island.”

 Ludlow stammered, “You *shot* them just for trespassing?”

 “It’s the only way to deal with them,” she said coldly. “Not people—

 wild ducks. They’re the primary danger to our breeding tanks.”

 “Is it really necessary to use *automatic* weapons against birds?” Ludlow

 objected.

 “We can’t afford to miss,” Chanteuse explained, ignoring Larkin

 as if he weren’t standing beside her. “We carefully select our adults through

 genetic breeding. Our harvest could potentially produce billions of dollars

 worth of marketable food for worldwide distribution. It’s a war to me—

 our enemy is hunger.”

 “I’m looking forward to seeing your process, Dr. Rabelle,” Ludlow

 said, finally regaining his breath.

 “I cannot permit that,” Chanteuse said abruptly with a frown.

 “Why not?” Larkin asked. “Isn’t our money any good?”

 Chanteuse acknowledged him with a turn of her head and a

 penetrating glare. “*Your* check is good up to the required amount, Mr.

 Larkin. If you’ve planned to cover Mr. Ludlow’s investment from your

 own account, you’re running short at Barclays to cover him, too.”

 “But I’ve come so far, and the funds will clear by tomorrow,”

 Ludlow said, having become a quick study of the Larkin bluff. “Surely

 one day won’t make that much difference to you?”

 “It seems *one day* has made a big difference to all parties concerned,”

 she said sarcastically, pointing her finger at Larkin. “Mr. Ludlow must stay

 here while *you* willcome with me.”

 As she led him away, Larkin asked softly, “Come with you? There’s

 a vision. You look great in white, love. It accents your ochre irises.”

 She glared at him angrily and motioned him into an elevator. Hurley

 handed Ludlow a planter’s punch as a distraction. Larkin saw Ludlow’s

 concerned expression as the elevator doors closed.

 In the elevator, the essence she emitted reminded him of the sweet

 taste of her lips and the warmth she emitted in their embrace. She was the

 first woman other than his wife, Vera, to make him feel vulnerable, mentally

 as well as physically. He felt Chanteuse Rabelle might be more than his

 match.

 At the lower level, Chanteuse and Larkin stepped off the elevator

 to an area with twelve round, chest‑high breeding tanks, each twelve feet in

 diameter and full to the brim with paddling shrimp.

 “These are our main breeders,” Chanteuse explained, “hybrid shrimp,

 third generation male and fourth generation females.”

 “Big suckers,” Larkin remarked blithely peering into the tank. “So this

 tank is the honeymoon suite?”

 “The *honeymoon* is over, for us, Thomas.”

 “I figured as much when one of your hired goons cracked my skull.”

 “One of *yours*—not mine. Probably James Riley’s—as if it matters.”

 “I had to play along. George Franklin pretends he works for Jasparre by

 protecting me from you, but he actually works for James Riley and the CIA

 to destroy my letters.”

 “I’ll grant you that. I confirmed what you told me about Riley. He has

 a contract with the CIA to receive money in a Swiss bank account held in

 George Town—*if* he successfully destroys your letters.”

 “I need my mother’s letters to continue my work here,” she said.

“World hunger is my primary concern.”

 “They burned one letter in the fireplace before we arrived last night.

 I saved a small but worthless remnant to authenticate its age. It’s being

 analyzed by a private source. They must’ve paid Riley for a job well done.

 He used Franklin to do his dirty work while he went Stateside.”

 Distressed and angry, Chanteuse huffed, “They’ll stop at nothing.”

 Larkin challenged her with, “Can you explain to me why Riley’s files

 link you with Cuba?”

 “It’s Jasparre who has connections there—not me. They just want

 to discredit me, to take from me what’s rightfully mine. My intimacy with

 Jasparre was just a means to an end, hopefully his rather than mine.”

 “Am I a means to an end, too?” Larkin asked. “Before that crack

 on the head, you actually had me going, Sugar Plum.

 “What I want is clear—no compromises. The choice is yours,

 Thomas. If you bring my remaining letters to me, you’ll have Jasparre,

 your niece, a promotion, and can live happily ever after—alone!”

 She turned away in a huff, but he grabbed her, spun her around,

 and accused her.

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 “Isn’t this so‑called research lab just a front for Jasparre’s drug

 operation?”

 “No!” she insisted. “The secrecy is to protect our techno­logy from

 commercial pirates and *foreign* interference.”

 “Then prove to me this place is legit.”

 Chanteuse led Larkin to an open-air interior with a hatching and

 maturation field. They walked down sandy aisles between rows of many

 square ponds containing shrimp at various growth stages. The small ponds

 were green with algae and patrolled by more armed guards with leashed

 Dobermans.

 “By hybrid breeding I’ve weeded out undesirable traits. Fluctuation

 of light and temperature indoors induces breeding. We transfer impregnated

 females to these hatching tanks where ninety-thousand out of every two

 hundred thousand survive.” She scooped a beaker of pond water. “There’s

 a hundred thousand crustaceans, just in this one beaker.”

 “Who’s your competition?” Larkin asked.

 “Brazil, Ecuador, and Southeast Asia, but our product is superior

 with ten billion marketable adults each year.”

 “With such success, where will you expand?” Larkin asked. “This

 hatchery appears to be at full capacity.”

 She shrugged. “That doesn’t concern me, now.”

 “You’re an idealist, like your father. Where is Papa these days?”

 “He has nothing to do with my work,” she said, shaking her head.

 “And Jasparre? Where does he fit into this?” he asked. “You might

 just be smuggling narcotics with your shrimp?”

 “I’m not, Thomas—if my word counts for anything. Some of my

 shrimp feed his posse, that’s our only connection. They may be thugs, but

 everyone deserves to eat. That’s how we’ll catch him off guard, when he

 comes here to feed his posse. ”

 “If this is where we’ll arrest him, when will it happen?”

 “It’s too soon. You’ll ruin everything,” she implored. “Without my

 letters, I can’t help you—or myself.”

 “He’ll be here tonight, won’t he?” Larkin persisted.

 Chanteuse shuddered without reply. He took her in his arms, lifted

her face to his and kissed her. She struggled at first then returned his passion.

 Opening his eyes as he kissed her, he saw someone peering from a second-

 story window. A shot rang out across the field of ponds with an echo. Startled

 by gunfire, shrimp rippled across the surface of the ponds.

 Larkin and Chanteuse broke from their embrace as a headless duck

 fell to the sand beside them. Larkin saw the curtains suddenly pulled closed

 at the window above.

 Seeing where he was looking, Chanteuse, said, “Your tour is over.

 It’s too dangerous for you to stay here any longer.”

 “Dangerous for me?

 “For both of us.”

 An armed guard called to them across the ponds. “Everything OK,

 Ms. Rabelle?” Even at a distance, Larkin saw it was George Franklin.

 “Never fire when guests are in the hatchery!” she called back.

 “Sorry, Ms. Rabelle, but if one gets a taste, others will follow!”

 “A taste of you, or the shrimp?” Larkin asked her.

 She stepped on his foot with her sharp heel and yelled back to

 Franklin, “I make the rules! Obey them! Leave the dogs and take your

 leave!”

 He dropped the leashes and slowly retreated. Larkin watched how

 the dogs waited for Chanteuse’s command, their saliva dripping on the hot

 sand. With her hand signal, the dogs fought in a tug-of-war over the duck’s

 carcass. Larkin had to step aside to avoid the dogs’ kicking up sand in his

 face.

 Another signal from Chanteuse sent one dog at the other with a sudden

 kill to the throat. The victorious dog waited, and Larkin watched anxiously. The

 dog brought the duck’s carcass to Chanteuse. On command, the dog devoured it.

 “That’s a tough act to follow,” Larkin said with a frown.

 “Whoever this Ludlow character is, get rid of him,” she said coldly. “I’ll

 deal with Riley’s man. Don’t come near this place again, unless you have my

 letters. Do it soon, Thomas, unless you want to end up—a dead duck.”

 She pressed close to him with Franklin watching from a distance. At

 Chanteuse’s heel, the Doberman sat growling at Larkin.

 “You’re not wanted here,” she said.

 With a shrug of defeat, he left to rejoin Ludlow, who seemed much

 relieved to be departing Owen Island in one piece, but also wondering what,

 if anything, Larkin had accomplished.

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 After motoring the seaplane across the water to South Town, Hurley

 stood with Larkin and Ludlow on the dock.

 “Are you gentleman sure you don’t want Jacques to fly you back to

 Grand Cayman?” Hurley asked.

 “Thanks, but we have other business here on Little Cayman,” Larkin

 told him.

 They waved to Hurley as he and Jacques took off and flew back to

 Grand Cayman without their two guests.

 “What now, Tom?” Ludlow asked with wonder etched across his

 haggard face.

 “Rent a car and find us a hotel, and I’ll rent scuba gear for a midnight

 dip.”

 “Don’t tell me you’re planning to go back there,” Ludlow said with

 disbelief seeing Larkin’s answer expressed with his grin. “What about the

 killer dogs and the armed guards—there’s no way.”

 “The seawater in the hatching ponds has to come from the bay. I’ll

 find a way in.”

 “I’ve been scuba diving before,” Ludlow offered. “What can I do

 to help?”

 Larkin eyed him with continued suspicion. “Just stay the hell out of

 my way, Your Honor.”

 Larkin saw how Ludlow’s blue eyes glistened and his rummy nose

 spread an underlying rage across his wrinkled face like wildfire in a Santa

 Anna wind across a forest in a drought. He was sure there was much more

 to this old man than an honorary overseas title. Larkin wasn’t sure from

 which direction the drift was coming, but he smelled a rat.

 **CHAPTER 21 – SIMON SAYS**

 Watching Larkin intently as he checked his scuba gear, Richard

 Ludlow asked, “Why *two* sets of tanks?”

 “I could be underwater a long time,” Larkin said impatiently.” I have

 to get into the research facility and back out before daybreak. If you don’t

 hear from me by five o’clock in the morning, call Chief Barnes.”

 “Why the underwater camera and recorder?” Ludlow asked, bewildered

 by the equipment Larkin had spread out on his bed at their hotel.

 “I’ll use high-speed exposures for above and below the surface,” he

 explained. “I hope to get a clear photo of Jasparre with some dialogue from

 the camcorder.”

 “According to Chief Barnes, I’m supposed to go with you, Tom.”

 “Get real,” Larkin said, shaking his head. “Just write about it when it’s

 all over and Jasparre is either locked away or six feet under. Could be a bestseller.”

 “Hmm. Perhaps I will.”

 Larkin laughed as he threw his gear over his shoulder. Ludlow followed

him out the door.

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 One hundred yards off Owen Island, Larkin surfaced for a closer look.

 He could see several guards with dogs patrolling the jagged, coral beach. A

 sudden current pulled at him. He clutched his spare tank as the swirling current

 dragged him under. Near the barrier reef off Owen Island, the research center’s

 water-pumping system pulled him into an underwater tunnel leading to a ten-foot

 turbine where he gripped the wall and noted that it stopped periodically.

 Realizing that only the one tank on his back could pass between the

 halted blades, he left the spare tank outside the turbine for his hopeful

 escape. With the first air tank less than half full, Larkin knew he’d have

 to swim fast through the maze of narrower tunnels leading to the interior

 maturation ponds that Chanteuse had shown him that afternoon.

 After swimming underwater for a hundred yards, he saw light

 shimmering above him through a metal grating above. He swam upward

 towards the light then pried open the grating with a knife. Once through

 the open grating, he slowly broke upward towards the surface of one of

 the maturation ponds. He was careful as he broke the surface so he wouldn’t

 attract the attention of a guard or a dog with a sudden gasp for breath.

 One search beam scanned the interior field from a security tower

 atop the research center. The only other lights were the elevator and a few

 second-story windows. Undetected, he left his nearly empty tank at the

 bottom of the pond and ditched his flippers and face mask in the shrubs.

 He could hear Chanteuse from a distance giving orders to her workers,

 most likely in expectation of Jasparre’s arrival. Her mellow voice

 resounded across the field of shrimp ponds.

 With the guards and dogs heavily patrolling the outer beach perimeter

 at night, Larkin was able to enter the building unseen. He took the staircase to

 the second‑story and caught a napping guard by surprise. Knocking him out

 and disarming him, he gagged and bound him then locked him in a storage

 closet.

 From his viewpoint earlier that day, Larkin calculated the position of

 the room where he had seen someone at the window. He checked the building

 layout he’d photographed with his phone that afternoon. In the third room he

 searched, Larkin found Simon Rabelle. In his fifties but emaciated, he sat

 in a wheelchair. He was wearing a straitjacket and appeared a mere shadow

 of the man Larkin had seen in the portrait at the mansion.

 Larkin turned on his phone recorder and began asking him questions:

 “Have you been held here against your will, Mr. Rabelle?”

 Simon stared blankly at him and drooled.

 Larkin said, “I’m a friend of your daughter, Chanteuse.”

 Simon suddenly drew back from him, obviously in fear.

 “What’s wrong?” Larkin asked. “I only want to help you.”

 Simon nodded to the bindings on his wrists.

 “If I release you,” Larkin bargained. “I need some answers.”

 Simon remained clearly apprehensive, but nodded with glaring eyes.

 “Is Guy Jasparre holding you here to force Chanteuse to work for him?”

 With glazed eyes, Simon slowly shook his head.

 “Then who did this to you?”

 Simon strained at his bindings. His head shook convulsively as he

 growled, “*Maman‑chere*…*Maman‑chere*…*Maman‑chere*.”

 “Calm down. I’m sorry about your wife, but Carmen’s been dead

 for ten years.”

 Simon laughed hideously. “So many lies. *Maman‑chere* never dies.”

 “Are you saying Carmen is alive? Where’s Guy Jasparre? Who is he?

Is he coming here tonight?”

 Simon nodded to his bindings again and glared at Larkin.

 “Soon come, Simon,” Larkin promised. “If *Maman‑chere* isalive, is

 she working with Guy Jasparre, or against him?”

 Simon nodded half‑heartedly as if toying with Larkin.

 “What about her letters? If Carmen is alive, does she know where they are?”

 Simon shook his head with an emphatic *no*.

 “Do you know where the letters are, Simon?”

 Drooling again, Simon grinned with a nod.

 “You won’t tell Chanteuse where you’ve hidden them,” Larkin assessed.

 “Is that why she’s done this to you?”

 Simon growled angrily, the frustrations of a once powerful man reduced to

 frailty by his imprisonment.

 “Why don’t you want Chanteuse to have these letters?”

 “Burn!” Simon said.

 “But they’re valuable, Simon. Aren’t they?”

 “Cursed! Evil *lettres des marques*!” He shook with rage.

 “The Americans and Brits want to destroy them, too. Will you tell me

 where they are if I promise to destroy them for you?”

 Simon nodded to his bindings with a grin.

 “OK, but while I’m untying you, tell me where they are.”

 Simon nodded. Larkin tucked the guard’s pistol in his belt, turned off

 the recorder, and started to free Simon’s wrists.

 “*La brac* burned. *La petite* and *la grand* lettersare hidden behind our

 portraits. Only two *lettres des marques* remain. Burn them!”

 With his free hand Simon snatched the pistol from Larkin’s belt and

 pointed it at him. “If not so weak, I would come with you to be sure you

 destroyed them, but now there is nothing left for me.”

 Simon put the barrel of the pistol in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

 Larkin watched helplessly, as if in slow motion, images of the *klong* girl

 Min doing the same flashed in his memory, as did his father, a New Jersey cop,

 when Larkin was a teenager.

 Larkin shook himself from his trance as he realized the shot must’ve

 been heard throughout the complex.

 He took the pistol from Simon’s limp hand and peered out the

 window. Security was busy closing off all exits to the beach. Chanteuse led

 patrols of dogs into opposite ends of the building, leaving the field of ponds

 unguarded. Larkin saw a palm tree close enough to the window worth

 jumping to.

 As he moved towards the window, Franklin suddenly barged through

 the door and grabbed him from behind. They fell and struggled on the floor.

 “You killed Simon Rabelle. Give it up, Larkin,” Franklin said.

 Larkin knocked him cold with a left hook and got up. “I wish I could

 take your ass with me, Georgie, but right now I’ve got my own butt in a sling.”

 Larkin leaped from the window to the tree and slid down to the sand

 with a pained groan, then he headed for the pond where he’d entered before.

 Looking up at Simon’s window, he tripped over a crate of shrimp

 and saw a metal hatch wherethey loaded crates.

 “Block the exits!” Chanteuse shouted from a window. “Let the dogs out!

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