**CHANTEUSE** ©

a Tom Larkin

international thriller

**by**

**Gerald Arthur Winter**



**Episode Eleven**

**CHAPTER 29 – LOVERS’ LEAP**

The U.S. Coast Guard’s cutter *Flamboyance* made its brave but

dangerous run to the Cayman Islands where it found shelter from the

hurricane’s wrath. Days later, all those aboard ship departed physically, if

not mentally, unscathed. In Kingston, Jamaican clean‑up crews cleared debris

from the streets as Red Cross trucks aided homeless victims of the storm

with food, clothing, and group shelter. The search had begun for the

missing, injured, or dead. From all corners of the globe, professional

volunteers came with provisions of food, water, and medical aid to help

victims of the catastrophe throughout the island of Jamaica, worst hit in

the Caribbean by the horrific Category 5 hurricane.

\* \* \*

A week after the storm, a taxi dropped off Larkin at the U.S. Embassy

parking lot. His undamaged red Porsche was parked beside Riley’s Mercedes,

which had been crushed by the lot’s only tree when it blew over from the

hurricane’s Cat 5 winds. Larkin grinned at the sight then admired the new

company car Chief Barnes had sent to replace The Battlewagon. A white

Ford Edge, fully equipped was at Larkin’s disposal instead of the twenty-

year-old station wagon he’d lost in a bottomless bog last week.

He entered the building and passed Mona at her desk where he

heard a boisterous argument between Jim Riley and Chief Barnes through

Riley’s closed office door.

Turning to Mona, he said, “Don’t worry. You’re job’s secure. Even

if Riley wants your head, I could use a secretary in Manhattan when I open

my PI office. Interested?”

“Benefits?” she asked with furrowed brow and pursed lips.

Larkin shrugged. “Hmm. I’m sure we can work something out.”

“Like all the other promises you’ve made?”

“How about this for starters?” He handed his car keys to her. “A

private eye can’t go around waving a red flag in public. But if my secretary

rides in class, maybe I’ll pick up a few high rollers to even the pot by making

up for any pro bono cases I take on for the needy.”

“Suddenly you’re Robin Hood?” she kidded. “I’m holding you to

that job offer, Tom. But in case you need to drive anywhere today, here are

the keys to the new company car. After dumping that old Battlewagon in

the swamp, you finally got a car with dual air bags as standard equipment.

Let’s hope you don’t need them.”

“I saw it in the lot. Nice change. I won’t be using it more than a

day or two though. My offer still stands about New York.”

Mona raised a brow and pursed her lips as they heard Riley’s

squawking again through the door.

“I know absolutely nothing about this one hundred thousand dollars

in my bank account! It’s a frame! Check with my Swiss bank to find the

source of that money! I don’t know how it got there, but I’ll bet your

buddy Larkin had something to do with it!”

Larkin winked at Mona as he put his hand on the doorknob.

“The Swiss bank won’t reveal the information, Jim,” Barnes replied.

“It’ll go much easier with the Office of Professional Responsibility if you

admit to your CIA arrangement. I have the original contracts. These are

just copies for you to explain at the hearing.”

“Instead of me and that money, they should be interrogating Larkin

and Franklin about Agent Paino’s death!”

“They both have included their corroborating statements in the

Foreign Service Report. Larkin’s and Franklin’s depositions gel. Both say

Paino admitted working with you for the CIA to destroy the letters for the

bounty. Franklin shot Paino in self-­defense. We’ve got it on video from

Chanteuse Rabelle’s security system which recorded all of it. Even Paino

shooting Ms. Rabelle’s cook.”

“You planted that son of a bitch Larkin! If I go down, he’s going

down with me!. I’ll see him fired from the DEA and he’ll lose his pension!”

“You’re a little late for that, Jimbo,” Larkin said from the doorway.

“I resigned from the DEA *before* I came to Jamaica as part of a private

contract that kept the agency’s records clean and let me work as an internal

private investigator for a nominal fee.”

“What fee?” Riley growled.

“I took my full pension early and, as my compensation, as a G-15.

This first job has worked out well, so I’m going to stick with the PI racket.

I want to see what nasty critters I can flush out of the shadows for some

decent, hard-working folks with no one else to turn to for help.”

“A bum like you will sink fast, Larkin,” Riley sneered. “There’s

only one place to go for a *rat.*”

“Not if it’s to serve and protect the people as whistle blower,” Barnes

said with a smile. “Here are your choices. You tell all you know and who you

worked with, and you’ll get a G-16 retirement package at the end of the year.

Otherwise, you’re going to prison for defrauding the United States government

as a bounty hunter for the British while we were paying you to stop drug

trafficking from Jamaica to the States. That smells of conspiracy and collusion

just for starters—possibly treason. By the U.S. Patriot Act, you’d be charged

with money laundering for sure. You could do a minimum of twenty years.”

Barnes waved his hand towards the photos showing Riley with

celebrities and politicians.

“If you cooperate, you’ll have time to play golf with these fine

folks, but don’t ever try to run for political office, or this will have a nasty

way of floating to the surface at campaign time. Just stick to golf.”

Riley slumped in his chair. “Damn it! You bastards win”

“Fine. Pack your bags for Quantico,” Barnes said firmly. “You leave

with a federal escort within the hour.”

Larkin complained, “You’re kidding, Tim! That’s too good for him!”

“This is none of your business, Tom—never was. Remember, you’ve

resigned. So now all you need to concern yourself with is becoming a New

York City shamus. Do that and get the hell out of *Margaritaville*—for good?”

“Maybe, but just until I’m too old to take a punch, then a hammock in

the tropics might not be so bad. I’ll give the Big Apple a shot as a shamus,

then we’ll see.”

“Good luck, Tom, and with Dawn, too. She’s staying with your sister?”

“Raising a teenager isn’t my cup of tea. Dawn knows that, too, but I’ll

be there for her whenever I can—just to spoil her like I’ve always done. My

brother-in-law is the homey type, so he’ll be a better influence on Dawn.”

“Sure, Tom. What now?” Barnes asked.

“Just a few details to tend to here in Jamaica then I’ve booked a little

R ‘n’ R for a few days before I head to Manhattan to set up my new office.”

Barnes nodded then remembered, “Oh, Tom. Before I forget, this package

came for you in the overseas mail pouch from Stateside. The hurricane delayed

its arrival until this morning.”

“Oh, yeah. It’s from my sister. She’s a big Richard Ludlow fan. Read

every book he wrote. She found a first edition at an estate sale in Jersey and

asked me to get the Honorary Consul to autograph it for her.”

Larkin took the package to the outer office and opened it to find an

old photo of Richard Ludlow from 1969 printed inside the book jacket. He

said nothing to Barnes when he saw that the man, despite so many years ago,

obviously was not the same Richard Ludlow he’d come to know and respect.

Larkin went to the outer office, blew a kiss to Mona, and called Quigley.

“Quigs, I need your help. I found the last letter, but I’ve got a problem.

This is what I need you to do . . .”

\* \* \*

Larkin drove the new company car, the white, fully-equipped Ford

Edge, up a steep road as the sun set on Jamaica’s western coast. When he

reached the top of the high ridge, he saw a sign that read: *Lovers’ Leap*

*Altitude 1,500 Ft*.

He parked near the edge of the precipice overlooking the Caribbean,

now mauve at dusk against the dimming orange sky. He got out of the car,

leaned his butt against the front fender and waited.

Several silent, impatient minutes later, he watched a yellow taxi

cab below him with its headlights glowing as it spiraled up to the peak

where he anticipated tonight’s clandestine rendezvous with its passenger.

But the taxi stopped before reaching the top. Larkin heard a car door slam

shut, then watched the taxi descending the dim, winding road from where

it had come.

Cautious, Larkin listened for the taxi’s passenger. Then he heard

footsteps shuffling on the gravel road. Squinting to see more sharply, he

could barely make out a man’s silhouette against the setting sun.

“Stop right there!” Larkin warned.

“Tom, it’s me!” the voice called back to him. “Dick Ludlow!”

“You’re not who you claimed to be!” Larkin shouted back.

“What are you talking about, Tom?” the fraudulent Honorary Consul

and author asked.

Larkin told him, “I have an old book of yours from 1969, a collector’s

first edition. Richard Ludlow has never appeared on TV or anywhere in the news

media since, and no one knows what he looks like anymore! But this rare book

has your photo inside the dust jacket! It’s not you, not by a long shot! Who the

hell are you? What’s *your* stake in these old letters?”

“I can explain, Tom. I had to see you tonight! It’s all here! With

Chanteuse Rabelle dead, now I can tell you! Even better, let me show you!”

Ludlow moved towards Larkin as he remained still and wary of the man

masquerading as the famous author.

Suddenly, a shot rang out from behind the man approaching him.

Ludlow, or whoever he was, fell to the ground and lay there motionless.

“He was about to shoot you, Tom!” Quigley’s voice called out from

the shadows, just as Larkin had instructed him to do, having staked out at

Lover’s Leap an hour earlier than the meeting arranged with Ludlow. Then

walking up to the body, he bent over and grabbed a manila envelope from

Ludlow’s grasp as he aimed his pistol at Larkin.

“What are you doing, Quigs?” Larkin asked.

Quigley said with a grin, “While we were wasting time at sea,

Ludlow must’ve found the last letter on his own. He was a crafty son of

a bitch.”

“But he wasn’t Richard Ludlow, so why would he bring the letter to

me?” Larkin asked with confusion. “What good is it too you with Chanteuse

dead? The CIA and Her Majesty’s Secret Service won’t pay a bounty on it

now. The last letter can’t be worth anything, certainly not worth killing me

for it.”

“If you say so, Tom, but I have to pin Ludlow’s murder on you. There’s

no other way. Back up towards the edge of the cliff. Go on!”

Larkin complied, stalling with conversation at the cliff’s edge, where

he stumbled slightly as his heel backed into a metal lever in the dimming light.

“*You* were Paino’s British contact, not Stinky Snipes,” Larkin realized

“You faked the bogus letter and planted it, mostly burnt, in the fireplace at

Carmen Rabelle’s old home in Annotto Bay. If that was your set-up, you

must’ve been the brains behind that counterfeiting conspiracy in Bermuda

as well.”

“You helped me frame my competition and got me a promotion, too,”

Quigley confirmed sarcastically. “Hell of a way to show my gratitude, Tom,

but that’s the bloody breaks.”

Quigley kept his aim on Larkin as he got behind the wheel of Larkin’s

new company car.

Larkin glanced at the lever by his foot and saw that it connected to a

thick, tightly coiled, metal spring. It was the same kind of device used in the

embassy parking lot by the sanitation department to tip a dumpster into the

back of a garbage truck, only there was no dumpster that night at Lovers’ Leap.

Quigley started the car and steered with his right hand while aiming the

gun at Larkin out the open window with his left. With no guardrail, Larkin had

his back to the 1,500-foot drop to the sea as Quigley blinded him with the high

beams.

The sun vanished below the horizon.

Only ten feet stood between the bumper and Larkin, and he was

hemmed in on both sides by huge boulders.

“It was your blood on my dog’s teeth that night in Ocho Rios,”

Larkin said, stalling as his foot softly prodded around the lever and spring.

“Sorry, Tom, but that DNA test won’t be forthcoming. I guess I’ll

have to kidnap your lovely niece again. No bother. The first time was easy

with help from Chanteuse. But with that crazy schizoid bitch gone to the

deep and you dead, I’ll just snatch Dawn when I come to your funeral and

win her confidence as your old chum.”

“What do you want Dawn for?” Larkin said angrily. “Kill me, but

leave Dawn the hell alone!”

“I have a buyer for her in Hong Kong. A blond virgin like Dawn will

bring me a handsome price. Nice of Chanteuse to keep her intact for me. ”

Larkin tried to divert him. “Not so high as the price you paid for

Chanteuse’s virginity. You didn’t count on that, did you Quigs? I remember

the look in your eyes when you saw Chanteuse’s blood on my sheets. I took

that prize from you didn’t I? That sweet flower didn’t cost me more than a

hangover.”

“Shut the bloody fuck up!” Quigley rasped.

“What makes you think the last letter’s in that envelope?” Larkin

challenged.

“It’s the most-valuable one of all, the deed to Grand Cayman.”

“It has no value to you with Chanteuse dead.”

“Some have more lives than others.” Quigley laughed. “For Chanteuse,

another life is *standard equipment*.”

As Quigley hit the accelerator, the engine roared in neutral. Larkin

stared at the front bumper, thinking about Quigley’s words—*standard*

*equipment*. Quigley jerked the car forward one foot at a time ready to

force Larkin over the cliff.

Larkin recalled the force of the spring lever hoisting the dumpster

in the embassy parking lot. With the car’s last jerk forward, Larkin jumped

with both feet and slammed his full weight onto the lever. It leaped up with

a heavy *thunk* into the car’s bumper just as Quigley accelerated in gear.

The air bag exploded in Quigley’s face, and the surprise made him

slam his foot on the gas with a knee jerk reaction. Larkin rolled onto the

hood and pulled himself over the roof by grasping the luggage rack. The

car seesawed , halfway over the cliff. Quigley fired his pistol through

the roof, but missed as Larkin rolled off the rear of the car. Without

Larkin’s weight as leverage, the car tipped forward.

“Grab my hand!” Larkin shouted as Quigley begged for help, but

ironically, his face and chest were riddled with shrapnel from the Takata

Japanese airbag made in Mexico.”

Unable to reach Quigley, Larkin futilely grabbed the rear bumper, but

Quigley’s weight was too far forward as he struggled to get out. When the car

tipped farther over the edge, Larkin had to let go at the last moment to avoid

getting dragged over with it. The car went over the cliff with Quigley trapped

inside, and his high-pitched scream faded to a moment of silence, then a

thunderous crash resounded from below followed by a fiery explosion of the

gas tank.

When Larkin struggled to his feet, a voice startled him from behind.

“Are you OK, Tom?”

“No thanks to you,” Larkin said turning around. “I thought Quigley

shot you?”

“I was wearing my vest,” Ludlow’s impersonator said, tapping his

chest where the bullet was imbedded.

“Who the hell are you?” Larkin demanded.

“Brian Clary, U.S. Department of Treasury,” he said, flashing his ID.

“Sorry I couldn’t tell you about my masquerade. You, of all people, know

the importance of a good cover. Everyone was suspect, even you, because

the stakes were so high.”

Larkin shrugged. “You mean possession of the Cayman Islands?”

“More important than that was control of Cayman Islands’ offshore

banking. If Chanteuse took possession, she could’ve set us back thirty years.

She was already laying the groundwork for the Chinese Triad and a cabal

of Russian oligarchs to move their illegal cash to Grand Cayman for laundering

—others would soon follow.”

“To fund narcotics production and distribution, human trafficking, and

arms, just to name a few—even weapons of mass destruction, since Chanteuse

already had her claws into Cuba.”

“Right, Tom. When she finished laundering their money, the thugs

and terrorists would have their fingers into every legitimate business in the

States and throughout the world. Chanteuse would’ve become their personal

banker without retribution from law enforcement.”

“What better place for Quigley to run a counterfeiting ring than a

banking center like Grand Cayman?” Larkin said, then asked. “Do you

have the last letter in that envelope?”

“Afraid not, Tom. We have no clue where the last letter could be.

These are the blow‑ups and digitally enhanced photos you took underwater

at Owen Island. I still have the negatives. They show Quigley aboard that

mini-sub with your niece held captive onboard. Apparently several Chinese

marine biologists accompanied him to help Chanteuse with her aquatic genetic

engineering project. I’m sorry, but there were no photos of anyone who might

be Guy Jasparre.”

“Hardly. Chanteuse, Carmen, and Jasparre were all the same person,”

Larkin explained. “What’s the deal with your using Richard Ludlow as a

cover? My sister will be disappointed about not getting an authentic autograph.”

“Richard Ludlow died, and there were no photos or announcements

because of an estate settlement regarding his copyrights and a matter of an

Internal Revenue debt. The U.S. Treasury Department has been screening

those types of settlements since the U.S. Patriot Act began, and it gave us

a cover we didn’t think would be challenged in Jamaica. I suggest your

sister take that book to Sotheby’s for auction. Could bring her a decent

price, since no one knew Richard Ludlow was an African American who

used a pen name for forty years.”

“You had me fooled,” Larkin admitted, “but only because you

came to me from a higher channel, Tim Barnes.”

“If you knew I was with the Treasury Department, would you have

worked with me?”

“Kicking and screaming,” Larkin admitted with a laugh. “No. I

would’ve bowed out for sure. It might’ve been you instead Quigs down

there blown to kingdom come.”

“Then, as Chief Barnes had advised, my cover was the right move.”

“Figures.” Larkin squinted. “What could Quigley have gained from

the remaining letter, assuming Chanteuse is dead?”

“You saw her ship go down, Tom. Nothing could’ve survived that

storm. We might never find her body. By now birds and the crabs will have

picked her bones clean. The last letter remains unaccounted for. So, until it’s

destroyed or Chanteuse’s body washes up, your life still remains in jeopardy.”

Peering at the smoking rubble of the company car below, Larkin said,

“Before I can finish my Foreign Service Report on the loss of the DEA’s new

company car, the paperwork alone could kill me.”

**CHAPTER 30 – DEPTHS OF DECEIT**

At Manley Airport in Kingston, Larkin waved to Mona across the

tarmac where she sat in her red Porsche with its top down. Larkin loved

that Porsche, but he figured she’d earned it. Chief Barnes made last-minute

security arrangements with Major Witt for Larkin and him to fly to Gitmo

to coordinate their report with Captain Harddacker about Dawn’s kidnapping

and the sinking of the *Marie-Galante* in the hurricane. Barnes and Theo

seemed satisfied with the arrangements for the small propjet chartered for

their flight to Cuba.

“Walk *good*, Tom,” Theo said. “A part of me goes with you.”

“I’m sorry about Chanteuse, Theo. You understand how I felt about her.”

“The same way I felt about Carmen, but that’s like trying to lasso the

wind.”

The only passengers aboard the eighteen-seat propjet were Barnes

and Larkin. From his window seat, Larkin waved to Theo, who returned the

gesture and turned to three men with their backs to Larkin. Taking a sip of

his coffee in a paper cup, Larkin offered the rest of it to Barnes. The Chief

nodded and finished it in two gulps.

“The trauma team has done a great job with Dawn,” Barnes said.

“She’s a tough kid but, as you’ve admitted, she’ll be better off apart from

you and staying with your sister’s family in Florida.”

“Yeah. I need to put all of this behind me for a while,” Larkin agreed.

Barnes suddenly grimaced. “Damn! This coffee’s raising hell with

my stomach.” He handed Larkin the empty paper cup. “Feels like it’s going

right through me. I’ve got to use the john in back.”

He walked to the toilet in the rear of the propjet and flipped on the

“OCCUPIED” sign as he locked the door behind him.

Larkin felt uneasy as the plane taxied and turned to take off. Heading

slowly towards the runway, he saw the faces of the three men with Theo. He

thought, for a moment, they were the Mexican hit men from his nightmares.

But when a luggage trolley passed between them, blocking his view for a

moment, he then saw Theo standing alone and still waving to him. He

shrugged it off as nerves, but sniffed the dregs left in the paper coffee cup

as the plane took off. He shook his head and laughed for feeling so suspicious

then he dozed off . . .

Larkin awoke when the flight attendant called to him from the food

and beverage station several rows behind him. Staring out the window, he

asked for a beer, feeling he deserved it after saving Dawn and ending the

threat Chanteuse had posed. He took out his wallet to tip the flight attendant,

but the cracked photo of Chanteuse in a bikini, which he’d taken from the

Rabelle mansion on their first encounter, fluttered from his wallet into his

lap. He unfolded the photo and stared at her haunting face. Visions of

Chanteuse passed through his mind recalling the *Marie‑Galante* shattering

in the waves and sinking 150 feet to the bottom of the Cayman Trench.

Then he remember Captain Hurley’s words: “These mini-sub’s

are fine on the open sea, even in the worst kinds of stormy weather.”

He thought about the radar operator’s sighting of a reef or fifty-

foot debris under the cutter *Flamboyance*.Breaking into a sudden sweat,

he began to peel off the back of Chanteuse’s photo and saw the words

*le roi le veut* in one corner. He quickly got out a cigarette lighter and lit

the corner of the last letter, which had been sealed behind her photo all

the time he’d had it. He watched her face distort as it burned, a vision

of her multiple personalities crumbling in flames.

He looked out the window and realized when he saw the Cayman

Islands below that they must be flying off course.

The attendant’s hand touched the back of his seat as she said,

“Sorry, no smoking—*Thomas*.”

“Old habits die hard,” he admitted, turning slowly to see Chanteuse

dressed as a flight attendant. One eye was still puffy where he’d punched her,

believing she was *Maman-chere*. She wore a parachute pack and aimed a

9 mm pistol at him. Her other hand was just a metal hook, which she used

to snag his collar.

“The *Marie‑Galante* must have been a disposable shell on the deck of

a mini-sub,” he said. “I must admit, Chanteuse, a brilliant plan.”

“You’re clever enough to figure that out, so you must know what I

want.”

“This is all that’s left of your damned inheritance.” He blew the

ashes from his food tray into her face.

Chanteuse kept the gun aimed at him as she opened the side hatch.

“Come with me, Thomas. There’s only one parachute to share, but it’s not

late for us. We’re cut from the same cloth.”

He felt himself moving towards her. Her sweet essence flared in his

nostrils, and her long, corn-rowed hair draped over both their shoulders as

he put his arms around her. She fell back, pulling him with her and free‑

falling in their passionate embrace.

At first, it felt wonderful as they floated down and kissed several

times. The soft, slow beat of reggae music in his head gradually increased

to a frantic tempo when the chute wouldn’t open, even when he yanked the

emergency cord.

Pulling him closer, she opened the parachute. Grinning seductively,

she said: “Just to excite you, Thomas, with your death at my fingertips.”

They floated peacefully again to the calm music in his head. They

embraced with a lingering, open‑mouthed kiss but, when he opened his

eyes, he was holding a cadaverous *Maman‑chere* with a white streak in

her dreadlocks. Her horrible, zombie-like face glared at him as she

shrieked with hideous laughter exposing her bright gold tooth. She

shoved him away letting him fall.

He plunged far with her shrill scream still in his ears. Anticipation

of his deadly impact into the sea woke him with a jolt to the sound of Chief

Barnes banging the door from inside the john.

Larkin sniffed the dregs of the paper coffee cup again and crumpled

it. Getting up to see what was wrong, he noticed the plane’s half-open side

hatch. As he looked out, he saw the billow of a descending parachute below.

Barnes banging on the door and shouting distracted him. Larkin shut

the hatch and went to the rear of the plane. He removed a wedge jammed

beneath the john’s door.

“Try it now, Tim!”

The lever slid sideways and the sign read “UNOCCUPIED.” There

was a loud *whoosh* as the plane tipped forward. When he’d opened the

door, suction from inside pulled him forward until he saw Chief Barnes

clinging precariously to the sink with his pants still around his ankles.

The john’s floor had opened like a trapdoor with Tim’s legs dangling

below the belly of the fuselage.

Larkin struggled until he pulled Barnes back through the door

and jammed the door closed again, which steadied the plane from its

awkward descent. Barnes pulled up his pants and removed the wedge

to the cockpit door where the co‑pilot was banging on the other side.

“Are we OK?” he asked the pilot.

“We’ll be fine. I’ll contact Captain Harddacker to let him know

all is well. We should land in Guantanamo in half an hour.”

Larkin went to the window and saw the speck of the white parachute

still descending to the turquoise sea. Without mentioning the parachute below,

he turned to Barnes. “This time it was you instead of me caught with your pants

down, huh, Chief.”

“Just when we were finally even over your saving my life in Mexico,”

Barnes grumbled. “Damn it! Now I owe you again.”

“Forget it, Tim. I was the cause. Your death plunge was meant for me.”

Barnes saw Larkin was distracted, so he squinted to look out the

window.

“Who did this to us, Tom? Did they get away? Do you see anyone down

there? Damn it! I lost my glasses when the floor dropped out from under me

on the can.”

Larkin took out high-powered binoculars used on stakeouts and

looked below. He shook his head.

“There’s nothing to see, Tim. Ever since Mexico I’ve been seeing

things that aren’t there. Sorry about the new company car, but I think the

driver-side was sabotaged by Mexicans. I was meant to take that lover’s

leap, not Quigley.”

Larkin saw the parachute floating on the water below and someone

swimming. Then a white mini-sub emerged from the turquoise Caribbean and

picked up the swimmer. He said nothing to Barnes about what he saw, and just

remarked in his usual glib manner, “Nothing a little R ‘n’ R won’t cure, Tim,

Nothing at all.”

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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