**CHANTEUSE** ©

 a Tom Larkin

 international thriller

 **by**

 **Gerald Arthur Winter**

 

  **Episode Five**

 **CHAPTER 13 – CAUGHT IN THE ACT**

 Larkin watched the five musicians with dreadlocks quickly get in sync. The

whispers of the close, crowded room ended abruptly in total silence. The cacophonous

plunks of a steel drum were counterpoint to the bass guitar players’ dirge‑like chant.

Each instrument blended, creating a unique harmony held together by a buzzing reggae

beat. The crowd’s adrenaline flowed with the hypnotic music before a single spotlight

 suddenly beamed on Chanteuse, but showing only the left profile of her face as she sang:

 “Man’s love extends to others.

 Goes beyond his need,

 Outside her realm, across the line.

 Easy come, easy go.

 When he goes, why he goes,

 She doesn’t know. He just goes.

 He just goes.”

 Even without a microphone, her voice shook the room. Larkin grabbed his beer

bottle to stopped it from shaking on the table. With her final high note, the room went

dark. Then the chant began again, building to a crescendo until the spotlight returned,

but on a male Jamaican singer’s right profile, a lean face with a mustache as he sang:

 “A woman’s love denies all others.

 She fulfills his need inside their home,

 Within herself. ‘Soon Come,’ she say.

 She stays, forever, stays. He say,

 ‘You stay. Never go away.

 You must stay.’”

 The music continued faster with an interchange from Chanteuse to the male

vocalist, each singing alone in profile with the other in darkness. They exchanged

verses, building to a final crescendo with Chanteuse’s solo profile on a high note.

 Thunderous applause followed in total darkness. When the applause subsided,

the single spotlight beamed on the male vocalist in left profile where Chanteuse had

been before.

 “I want to thank you in behalf of Chanteuse,” he said. “You’re a great crowd.

 All you first‑timers—where are you? Stand up, please. Thanks for coming to The

 Green Parrot Club. Come join us here again soon.”

 Some stood, but Larkin remained seated and hidden in the shadows.

 “Chanteuse wrote that first number, but I gave her a little help with the

middle eight. It’s called *One Love, Two Worlds*,and we have CDs for sale before

you leave . The lyrics express the separation between a man’s world and a woman’s

world. Notice you never see me and Chanteuse in the spotlight together. The dark

void represents that intimate realm between a man and a woman unseen by others.”

 Larkin leaned closer to Stinky:” Where’s Chanteuse’s dressing room? I

 need to check it out before she comes back onstage.

 Stinky nodded. “I’ll take you there.”

 Following Stinky, Larkin heard the male singer say, “Before Chanteuse returns

 for her next song, I’ll sing a number she wrote just for me called *Jah‑maman‑Jah,*

which means my Mother God.”

 Stinky led Larkin to a private room where ten closed‑circuit security screens

 monitored key points inside and outside the club.

 “It’s essential that I search her room before she sees me here.”

 “You’d better go now,” Stinky cautioned him. “You’ve got about ten

 minutes, tops.”

 On Chanteuse’s dressing room door, Larkin found her colorful poster

 showing her in voodoo makeup and headdress. He compared that with her photo

 folded in his shirt pocket that he’d taken from the Rabelle mansion.

 He poked through her wardrobe for clues and brushed through her sexy

 costumes. At her dressing table, he checked out her makeup. In her purse was a

 voucher to Grand Cayman on Cayman Airways for tomorrow morning.

 Satisfied, he returned unseen to the booth where Stinky waited.

 “Find what you were looking for, Mr. Larkin?”

 “Maybe. Where’s Peter?”

 “He was paged on his beeper by the High Commission. He’ll be right

 back. He’s seen the show a dozen times.”

 “Will Chanteuse perform tomorrow?”

 “No. She’s taking a few days leave.”

 “Did she say where she was going?”

 “Not where, but she told me that it has something to do with her father.”

 “Who’s the male vocalist with her? He’s half the act, but gets no billing?”

 “You don’t know the half of it,” Stinky said with a horse chortle. “Wait’ll

you see the finale, then you’ll understand why.”

 As Larkin and Stinky waited at their table the room went dark, a drum

 roll brought the audience to a hush. A single drum beating slowly was counterpoint

 to a rattling sound. The beat quickened until the spotlight came on showing Chanteuse

 facing the audience head‑on for the first time in the show. She wore the same headdress

 and makeup Larkin had seen in the voodoo poster. With the right side of her face

 painted white, her eyes remain closed.

 She chanted high notes then low notes until the final drumbeat.

 Then she hit a shrill note as she opened her eyes wide as if in a trance, a

 vision making Larkin recall his hallucination from the drugged beer at

 Calico Jack’s.

 Out of Chanteuse’s mouth came the deep voice of the male vocalist

 singing his part of *One Love, Two Worlds*.Then her own perfect high soprano

 pitch sang her part. The strobe spotlight flickered as she sang, with her face

 bisected by the makeup and lighting. The spotlight went out, then shone on

 her left profile with headdress and her natural dark skin. Lights went out,

 then came on again, but with her *opposite* profile in white voodoo paint.

 The male vocalist’s voice came from *her* mouth as she sang:

 “She stay, forever…stay…he say!”

 Chanteuse reached up to her hairline and ripped off the thin, white

 mask, revealing the male vocalist’s mustached profile. She turned head‑on

 to show half of her figure in a headdress as Chanteuse, with the other half

 as the man.

 Then she tore off the false mustache and eyebrows with plastic make-

 up around the chin and nose of the male vocalist’s face to show she had played

 both parts from start to finish. In the finale, she sang:

 “When he goes, why he goes, she doesn’t know.

 He just go‑o-o-oes‑away‑eeaaay­!”

 On Chanteuse’s high note, Larkin’s beer bottle shattered in his hand.

 The audience laughed and applauded. The lights went out for ten seconds

 then, when they came back on, Chanteuse and the musicians were gone and

 only the empty bar stool remained on stage.

 Larkin grimaced at Stinky. As the lights brightened, Quigley appeared.

 “My apologies for having to leave,” he said. “Shed any light on your

 case, Tom?”

 “She had me fooled, but I’m sure there was one point in her act when I

 saw a man’s left profile then a man’s right profile.”

 “Aye, you did. If you weren’t Mr. Quigley’s good chum, I’d never

 tell you. She does it with mirrors and lasers. She’s a hi‑tech woman, but

 you’ve got to be sharp to catch it, Mr. Larkin.”

 “And to catch *her*, too,” Larkin agreed. “Does she shatter a beer bottle

 or glass during every show?”

 “That was a first, but it’s a great gimmick. I’d like to have her break

 a bottle at every show.

 Larkin seemed cool and unshaken when he told Stinky, “Not me. It

 wasn’t her singing that broke the bottle, but a *bullet*.” He took a penknife from

 his pocket and dug a bullet from the knotty, wooden panel of the booth. After

 examining it, he put it in his pocket.

 “Bloody hell, Tom! It might’ve killed you!” Quigley said excitedly.

 “Me? Don’t think so. I haven’t learned that much here. But I think

 someone wants to keep Stinky from telling me any more than he already has.”

 “I’ve told you everything I know, Mr. Larkin. Most of it is word on

 the street—a mix of common knowledge and rumors.”

 “Then be thankful that he or she was a lousy marksman. The shooter

 could be here right now. Let’s have a look at Chanteuse and her crew from

 your security cameras.”

 Larkin followed Stinky to the security room. Before he could observe

 Chanteuse, he saw the camera’s view of the rear parking lot. He recognized

 George Franklin in his Rastafarian attire sitting on a motorcycle with an empty

 sidecar as he talked casually to the musicians from the act Larkin had just seen.

 “What the hell’s *he* doing here, Stinky?” Larkin asked.

 Stinky squinted at the screen and shrugged. “Don’t know him, but

 he’s been picking up Chanteuse with that bike after each show.”

 “He’s our shooter,” Larkin said. “What’s the fastest way to the front

 gate?”

 Stinky pointed, then Larkin pushed him out of his way dodging club

 patrons as he ran towards the parking lot with his weapon drawn and safety

 off prepared for a deadly shot.

 **CHAPTER 14 – A VICIOUS CYCLE**

 With Larkin running towards him, George Franklin revved his motorcycle

with a roar and took off with a loud *chirp*. The musicians scattered as Larkin dived

at Franklin, but missed. Sprawled on the ground and engulfed in a cloud of dust,

Larkin scrambled to his feet and grabbed the keys from a valet’s hand as he was

getting a car for another patron. He started the car, then screeching after Franklin,

fishtailed towards the entrance gate to the parking lot.

 Franklin released the sidecar and raised the motorcycle on its rear wheels

 before zeroing in on the front gate as it began to close. With Larkin right behind,

Franklin barely got through the gate, which crunched the vehicle Larkin borrowed.

The grinding of metal against metal sent a spray of sparks into the air.

 Quigley and Stinky ran to the smashed car. Larkin had to step across

 the trunk to get out through the rear of the Jaguar convertible. A crowd of

 jabbering patrons gathered around him.

 “Bloody hell, Tom! Are you all right?” Quigley asked.

 “Yeah. Damn! I nearly had him,” Larkin huffed. “Sorry about the

 damage, Stinky.”

 “No harm to my gate, but the owner of that car wants a word with

 you. He’s bloody pissed about his Jaguar.”

 Behind Stinky stood shaken Ambassador Smythe.

 “Sir, I thought you’d left for New York already,” Larkin said.

 “In the morning,” Smythe said with a scowl. “Until a moment ago,

 I thought I’d be chauffeured to the airport in my favorite vehicle.”

 “I was pursuing our missing agent, George Franklin,” Larkin

 explained, “but he got away.”

 “I’ll want a full report when I return,” Smythe grumbled. “I hope

 this isn’t an indication of how you’ll handle business while Jim Riley is

 away.”

 “I’m sorry, sir,” Larkin apologized. “You can count on me.”

 “Carry on then,” Smythe grumbled.

 Joining Quigley at the main gate, Larkin asked, “Can you get those

 files for me on the Rabelle family? I’ll be out of touch for the next couple

 of days.”

 “Nothing is classified, but it will take at least a day to organize and

 assemble.”

 “What about Guy Jasparre? Got anything on him?”

 “I recall coming across a page on a drug bust that had gone bad about

 ten years ago. That was the first time Jasparre became known as a criminal.”

 Quigley shrugged. “That’s about it, Tom.”

 “Will you deliver those records to my office first thing in the morning?”

 “Sure, Tom. Any way I can help, just ask.”

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 That evening Larkin drove The Battlewagon through the electronic

 security gate of his home in Ocho Rios. His German shepherd, Missy, barked

 and fussed greeting him in the front yard. Larkin was surprised to see a strange

 car in the driveway. Parking alongside the black BMW convertible and getting

 out, he touched its shiny hood. The hood felt hot, and a green puddle of coolant

 had leaked from beneath it onto the blacktop.

 Lucea, his housekeeper, wore an odd expression when she greeted

 him at the door: “You didn’t say you were having a dinner guest, Mister Tom.”

 “That’s news to me, too.” He grimaced, thinking, *who the hell could*

 *that be? Too soon for Richard Ludlow to darken my door.*

 “Forgive me, but she wasn’t taking ‘no’ for an answer. Made herself

 right at home. She’s been in your bathroom showering before dinner.”

 *“She?”*

 “It’s the one with the evil eye, but I’ve been keeping my own sharp

 eyes on her,” Lucea assured him with a squint. “She wasn’t snooping. Though,

 I must say, she acts like she intends to spend the night.” She wrinkled her nose

 and shook her head as if to say, *What nerve!*

 “That’s OK, Lucea. I’ll take over. Leave us something cold for dinner

 and take the rest of the night off.”

 “Surely, Mister Tom. But you be careful of *that* one.”

 Larkin nodded and went to his bedroom. He heard the hiss of the

 shower coming from the adjoining bathroom. He loosened his tie, unbuttoned

 his collar, and put his iPhone on speaker as he called.

 “Theo, Chanteuse’s flying to the Cayman Islands tomorrow,” he said

 softly. “She’s involved with some mini-submarine company. Somehow, it’s

 connected to Jasparre. I’m flying there tomorrow to see what she’s up to.”

 “You’re on your own outside Jamaica, Tom. I can’t provide you with

 any backup there.”

 “Keep your eyes open for George Franklin while I’m gone. I’ll call

 you when I get back.”

 “If you ever get back,” Theo warned. “Once you leave these shores,

 I’ll be of no use to you. I’d think twice about a possible trap.”

 “I’ll be fine, Theo. But just in case, even though she holds my IOU,

 Riley’s secretary, Mona, gets my Porsche.”

 “Some day you’re gonna regret taking your own life too lightly.

 Anyway, *walk good*, mon….” Theo used the common slogan of the island

 with sincerity to make his new friend feel like a native.

 “You, too . . . mon,” Larkin said, hanging up.

 Larkin knocked on the bathroom door without getting a response.

 Opening the door, he found the bathroom engulfed in a cloud of vapor.

 He stuck his head in, but a hand suddenly grabbed him by his tie. With

 a towel wrapped around her and dripping wet from steam, Chanteuse

 embraced him firmly.

 “I told you I could take care of business, Thomas,” she purred.

 “Are you nuts, Chanteuse?”

 “It’ll be *your* nuts if you don’t play this game. We need to talk.”

 She brushed past him with a waft of musky essence. The *loo* is all yours.”

 “The *loo*? What’s that?”

 “Sorry, Thomas, must be the British influence on my education,”

 she giggled playfully. “The toilet.”

 After a hot blast of a massaging shower, he held his head under the

 cold water spray. Then he dressed in tan chino slacks and a cerulean blue

 silk shirt before he went to the wet bar and poured himself a Johnny Walker

 Black on the rocks. He figured he’d jump off the wagon because this could

 be an evening like none before, not even compared to Vera’s games to

 heighten their passion, or his recurring nightmares. Turning away from

 the bar, he saw Chanteuse seated in his easy chair and stroking Missy’s ears.

 “Missy, doesn’t usually take to strangers,” he said.

 “I’ve always had my way with animals.”

 “With people, too, I imagine.”

 “With powerful men and with children, perhaps.”

 “How about with a girl about fourteen? Any further description needed?”

 “Your niece looks fetching with her long, blond hair braided in cornrows.

 I assure you no one has harmed Dawn—not yet. I would never hurt her, whether

 you help me or not. But others . . . I can’t account for their behavior.”

 “Neither can I.” He glared at her. “I have no control over what the CIA

 or British Secret Service will try to do to you, maybe even kill you.”

 She smirked with an aloof dismissal of fear.

 “Since you are going to be in Jamaica for some time, you should get

 some friends of yours from the British High Commission to take you to their

 private club, The Green Parrot. You might enjoy the entertainment there.”

 “Are you having me followed, Chanteuse? Isn’t that counterproductive?”

 “I saw you there myself, Thomas.”

 “Not inside, but in the parking lot. I was handling a problem for

 Ambassador Smythe.”

 “I didn’t have you followed, Thomas. Everyone saw you there today.

 You caused a reckless disturbance in the parking lot. You need a lower profile

 to accomplish what I want,” she cautioned him with a frown.

 Carrying a food platter, Lucea entered, her eyes widening as she glared

 at Chanteuse. She set the platter down and retreated to the kitchen with a huff.

 “See? I don’t always have as much luck with people as with animals.

 Your cook dislikes me as much as mine dislikes you.”

 “Maybe a mud wrestling contest between your Zeena and my Lucea

 could settle the matter,” Larkin joked.

 Chanteuse fought off laughing aloud and put her long fingers to her

 sensuous lips to keep her from doing so.

 Larkin liked her much more when she smiled and wasn’t threatening

 him. He wondered if he could ever make her feel lighthearted for more than a

 just a moment—*untamed* as she was. She was like a wild animal in a cage with

 her *maroon* blood making her fierce beneath the guise of her father Simon’s

 socio-political correctness.

 “My family was in the political limelight for some time,” she said,

 as if reading his mind. “There’s still some bad blood. I’ve become used to

 that reaction from others. Your cook, Lucea, can’t help herself.”

 “Is she reacting to you or to how much you resemble your mother?”

 he challenged her, just testing her temperament to see her reaction. “Most

 Jamaicans seem to react, just at the mention of your notorious mother’s

 name.”

 “And what are you reacting to, Thomas?” she asked, narrowing her

 stare.

 “I’ve got a pulse, but that’s it. Otherwise, until I get some facts, I’m

 immune to the package.” He looked her up and down. “Even as neatly wrapped

 as your package appears, I think it has a few loose strings around the edges.”

 “When this is all over,” she said, “and I have what rightfully belongs

 to me, I want you to take a closer look at this package—and *us*.”

 “*Us*?” he balked. “Now, there’s a stretch. You expect me to bite at

 that?”

 “There’s a lot more to you than I’d expected from your dossier,” she

 admitted almost apologetically. “I like what I think lies beneath your hardened

 exterior. Will you kiss me again, now, when no one is watching, and for no better

 reason than it feels right? Very right?”

 “What’s in it for me?”

 “You know you want me, Thomas. All of me. Even the bad.”

 “Want you? Doesn’t *everybody*?”

 “Yes, but when *I* want something, I take it. One day soon, I think

 I might want you badly enough to take you. So be ready, just in case. In

 Jamaica, we have a saying, ‘*soon come’.*”

 “I’ll keep it in mind,” he said nonchalantly. “Is that all this surprise

 visit is about? I’ll show you mine if you show me yours. Been there—done

 that, when I was only twelve. Didn’t make for a lasting relationship, even if

 it was the thrill of my life at the time. Tonight? I’m thinking—same-same.”

 “I can see why I’m so attracted to you now, Thomas, when every

 instinct tells me not to go there.”

 “Please share, love, because I’m at a loss.”

 “You’re just as *untamable* as I am,” she said. “We’re two of a kind.”

 He grimaced. “I thought it was *opposites* that attract.”

 “They do, in most cases,” she admitted, “but in very special cases, just

 as I’ve shown in my night club performance at The Green Parrot, a man and

 a woman can be of one mind and soul—that’s a unity that transcends even

 beyond the grave.”

 He felt a twinge and a slight shiver as her eyes seemed to look through

 him.

 She put her hand over his and drew him close to soothe him. “But that’s

 not why I came here tonight. You need to know about a possible hiding place

 for my letters. It was my mother’s house before she was married. I want you to

 go there tomorrow and search for them.”

 “Tomorrow’s out. I have important DEA business.”

 “Since when do you work on the weekend?” she challenged.

 “While the boss is away, I must pay, with long hours.”

 “The place I want you to search isn’t far from here. You can take me

 there now.”

 “OK, but I have to be up early for work.”

 “Let’s go.”

 He got in The Battlewagon. She came around to the passenger side

to join him. As she was getting in, he used his remote to open the security gate

to leave. A flash of light blinded them as Chanteuse’s car exploded in flames.

She fell to the ground. Larkin got out, shielded her, and carried her to safety

by ducking behind The Battlewagon

 The gas tank on her car exploded, but The Battlewagon shielded them

from flying debris.

 “I shouldn’t have come,” she said. “I’ve endangered you with my

 quest to regain my mother’s letters.”

 Within five minutes, flashing fire trucks doused the car fire. Chanteuse

 sat in The Battlewagon waiting for Larkin to take her to safety. Theo came, and

 Larkin spoke to him away from Chanteuse’s hearing.

 “You have to keep this under wraps until I return from the Cayman Islands,”

 Larkin said. “Get your men to put out the fire and clean up the mess, but no press

 coverage on this bomb incident until Jasparre is in my hands.”

 “Sure, Tom. I can do that,” Theo agreed.

 “I don't know who did this, but I’m sticking close to Chanteuse. I leave

 for Grand Cayman in the morning,” Larkin said. Seeing Lucea trembling nearby,

 he went to her and put his arm around her. “Don’t be afraid. Major Witt will take

 you home. Come back tomorrow. There’s no more danger.”

 “It’s her. She’s bad, like her mother,” Lucea warned him. “Don’t mess

 with her kind. She’ll rob your soul, Mister Tom.”

 As Lucea entered the Constabulary van, she shunned Chanteuse.

 Larkin left Lucea, Missy, and his home in Theo’s care. Then he got into

 The Battlewagon and eyed Chanteuse suspiciously as they drove away together.

 She nestled beside him, holding him tight.

 He thought about what she’d said—her feelings for him. He felt something

 inexplicable for her, too, but he’d become so honed as a federal law enforcer that

 he couldn’t let those feelings penetrate his tough hide. He’d done so only once in

 his life, and now Vera was dead. Any genuine feelings with tenderness he’d have

 for a woman seemed to have died Vera.

 **CHAPTER 15 - SOON COME**

 Larkin drove The Battlewagon along a dark winding road with thick

 tropical foliage bending in from both sides and narrowing his view of the

 rugged road ahead.

 He turned to Chanteuse sitting beside him and said bluntly, “If you

 staged that incendiary display just to win my confidence, I’m impressed by

 your resources, but I’m still unsure of your motive.”

 “What?” Chanteuse protested. “That bomb could have killed me!”

 “Rather timely, I’d say,” he shrugged, turning to her with a glare.

 “If I had been in the car,would *that* have convinced you?”

 “I’m just saying—”

 “We couldn’t be having this conversation if I had!”

 “Just a thought. I put nothing past you, sweetheart. When you talk

 about your mother’s letters, your glazed eyes remind me of shark as it comes

 in for a kill.”

 “You’re not exactly warm and cuddly either, Thomas, darling.”

 He grinned. “No shit. So what’s the deal with this other house?”

 “Before my mother married, it was her home. It’s been abandoned

 since she was killed. I haven’t been there since I was a child. She used to

 bring me there to play in the yard. Her own childhood was connected to the

 house as well.”

 Larkin pursed his lips with a thoughtful pose then cocked his head,

 agreeing, “ All right. Seems like a logical place to start our search for the letters.”

 “Yes. I’ve wanted to look for my letters there for some time, but I’ve

 been afraid to go there alone. Until now, I’ve had no one I could trust with

 the letters—or my life.”

 He nodded. “How far is it?”

 “Less than an hour from here,” she said, staring ahead pensively, then

 she turned to him abruptly with, “Why were you spying on me today at The

 Green Parrot?”

 “I wasn’t spying on *you*,” he blatantly lied. “I’ve got a job to do while

 I’m in Jamaica that’s not related to you or your damn letters. We share this

 island, love. Sometimes, inadvertently, our paths must cross.”

 “It’s not that small an island,” she huffed. “What were you doing at The

 Green Parrot? Don’t you understand? Those people want me dead.”

 “The Brits?” He shrugged with a frown. “Not likely.”

 “Don’t let them fool you just because they’ve agreed to help you.

 They want my letters, too. I’d keep my friends close, but I don’t have any

 friends, so I keep my enemies very close by singing at The Green Parrot

 just to infiltrate their network. Just don’t forget, Thomas, you’ve agreed to

 work for *me*. Not for them.”

 “*With* you, just to get Dawn back safely, but I’ll never be working

 *for* you. Until you show me some solid evidence that you can lead me to

 Guy Jasparre’s lair, we have no deal.”

 “I can’t vouch for him between now and the time you find my

 letters,” she warned. “Jasparre might turn your niece over to the Mexicans

 or Colombians, then they might offer her as a bargaining chip to the

 Chinese Triad in exchange for favors in their eastern pipeline.

 Angrily grabbing her wrist and twisting it hard, he drove with

 one hand and demanded to know, “If I haven’t personally interfered

 with Jasparre’s pipeline to the States yet, why would he bother to take

 my niece?”

 “Leverage against you to get inside information on DEA plans.

 Jasparre is possessive. He believes I’m with you only for that purpose. He

 would have second thoughts about my having a close relationship with

 you if it didn’t work to his advantage.”

 “You sure know how to play one against the other,” he said with a

 sneer. “What’s your connection with George Franklin? That’s what I need

 to know.”

 “Who’s that?” she asked with a blank stare.

 “Your driver, the pseudo‑Rastafarian with the motorcycle and sidecar.

 Your goddamn chauffeur.”

 “Oh, him. He goes by some Rasta name. But I’ve known he’s one of

 yours from day-one. I feed him false information to throw off my enemies.”

 “You expect me to buy that? Franklin’s a rogue agent.”

 “He answers directly to your boss, James Riley,” she said with a shrug.

 “That’s what he’s supposed to do, but it’s Riley who ordered me to

 bring Franklin in.”

 “Very clever of your *hump*. That is what you called him.” She grinned.

 “He pits one agent against another. That way he’ll have the bounty all to himself.”

 “What *bounty*?”

 “Your CIA put a bounty on my letters,” she explained. “The British

 may have raised those stakes, but Riley wants it all. We’re both expendable as

 far as Riley is concerned, so don’t get careless. I’m depending on you, and you

 alone, to find my letters first and give them to me—they’re my birthright!”

 He stared at her as she pouted, slinked down in the seat, then snuggled

 next to him to show her trust. While Chanteuse slept with her head on Larkin’s

 shoulder, he followed the general directions she’d given him to find her mother’s

 old home. He drove The Battlewagon around blind, narrow curves and strained

 to see through the fogged windshield. In the mist of the humid night air, he missed

 some road signs.

 Chanteuse awoke lazily with a yawn. “Did you pass the first fork

 in the road and take the right turn?”

 “No, the left.”

 “Stop! Turn back!” She jammed her foot on his brake foot, halting

 the car. “Back out of here, but very carefully. There’s a bottomless bog ahead.”

 He backed up slowly, asking, “Why isn’t this road marked for danger?”

 “No one’s been up here for years,” she said, then pointed. “See. There’s

 the old warning sign.”

 He rolled down his window and saw the tilted sign that read:

 Danger Ahead — Quicksand.

 He drove in reverse back to the fork and turned right. They soon came

to an old, stone plantation house on a high cliff silhouetted against the glow

from a lighted marina below.

 Chanteuse stared at him seductively. “This is it.”

 He leaned toward her and kissed her parted lips. She responded with

 a swirl of her tongue, then suddenly bit his bottom lip. He withdrew with a

 howl. She got out and slammed the door, then leaned into his open car window

 and glared at him. Carmen’s haunting eyes from the portrait in the Rabelle

 mansion flashed in his mind as he turned off the engine and sucked on his

 bleeding lip.

 “You may kiss me, Thomas, but only when *I* say so.”

 She turned and took the path to the house. Larkin turned on his

 high beams and observed her body’s motion with every sensuous step. She

 turned, faced the headlights, and shouted defiantly, “If I decide to become

 your *one love*, Thomas—soon come!”

 As she approached the house, Larkin thought of all the warnings about

 her—how Carmen’s spirit was within her. The old house on the cliff brought

 that forbidding spirit of Maman-chere to the surface. He watched her enter the

 house then noticed a thin trail of black smoke coming from the chimney.

 Chanteuse screamed, then came four rapid gunshots from inside the

 old house. Leaving the key in the ignition, Larkin ran towards the house.

 Drawing his automatic pistol, he dived into the room and rolled off his right

 shoulder, coming up in a crouch ready to fire.

 In the dim light, he saw the house was devoid of furniture. Chanteuse

 was in the far corner, holding a small revolver aimed at him in her shaking

 hands. He stood slowly and walked carefully forward, then removed the

 revolver from her tight grasp.

 His voice echoed across the empty room, “Sneaky little weapon

 you’ve got here, a double‑deuce. Only a five-shot, but easily concealed

 snuggly against your soft inner thigh.” He weighed it in his hand and

 spun the barrel as he circled the empty room, his footsteps echoing on

 the bare wooden floor.

 “Is this Papa Rabelle’s gun?” he asked.

 She stared blankly. “Hardly. He’s against any violence.”

 “Was this gun *Maman‑chere’s* piece?”

 She smacked him hard across his face. Unflinching, he just glared at her.

 “Only I can call her that. No one else!” she shrieked.

 He slapped the revolver back into her hand and turned his back to her

 as he walked towards the fireplace. “Just you, Chanteuse…and her *many* lovers.”

 “I’ll kill you!” she threatened.

 He heard the empty snap of the revolver, then turned to face her. He

 walked towards her as she pulled the trigger three more times, *snap- snap-snap.*

 They stood nose-to-nose, and she pressed the gun’s muzzle beneath his cleft chin.

 “That’s a *five*‑shot, love,” he said. “One left. I like to take risks, just like

 you, but at least give the barrel a spin before you pull the trigger. More sporting,

 don’t you think?”

 Chanteuse spun the barrel defiantly and prodded his mouth open

 with the revolver. In the humid heat, they both broke into a sweat. Larkin

 tried not to give in to his fear. He’d been this close to death at the hands of

 a woman before, among them the ruthless Thai swamp princess, Min, and

 even Vera. He’d faced death at least a dozen times in their love/hate kinky

 marriage. But Chanteuse was glistening with excitement from her control

 over him as she took a deep breath and pulled the trigger with another hollow

 *snap*. Then she exhaled slowly, excited and aroused.

 Larkin grabbed the gun. “Consider our partnership dissolved.”

 She tried to slap him again, but he held her wrist and smacked her

 face with the back of his hand, not with brute force, but hard enough to

 sting and make her dark cheek redden, ironically, to the color *maroon*.

 She flailed her arms. “Is this how you treated your wife?”

 “No! I never hit her, not even when I drank. Never!” He grabbed

 her as she struggled to get free.

 She sobbed and wilted in his arms, whimpering against his chest,

 “Don’t quit in the middle of the game. The prize is too great to lose and

 worth winning at any cost.”

 “If *you’re* the prize, I’m not interested,” he declined with a sneer.

 She grinned maliciously. “You’re so hung up on me, Thomas,

 that you haven’t even noticed what they’ve done. They’ve taken all the

 furniture from my mother’s house. They must have torn it apart to find

 my letters.”

 “Who?”

 “I’ve told you—MI-6 or the CIA—maybe both. What’s the difference?

 The letters belong to me. At first, I needed your help because you’ve got

 embassy access and are independent enough to gamble on me. We’re two of

 a kind.”

 She touched his swollen lip where she’d bitten him before.

 “But we, together . . . this isn’t what I’d ever expected. *You* aren’t what

 I expected. I thought you’d be some dumb cop I could charm to do my bidding.”

 Frowning, he said, “You sink your teeth into me and then try to shoot me.

 What do you call that, foreplay?”

 Within his grasp, she lifted her head and lightly kissed his swollen

 bottom lip. Warily, he kissed back, and her gentle warmth and sweet scent

 made him feel serene.

 “We’re different from other people,” she said tearfully. “Together, we

 could change all the rules. I say, *yes.* It’s up to you, Thomas. What do you say?”

 Still holding her firmly with one arm, he used the other to brush tears

 from her face. She looked up at him. Their eyes studied each other searchingly

 for some resolution to their denied mutual feelings.

 “This isn’t a game, Chanteuse. My niece’s life is on the line.”

 “Tell me you don’t want me then. Not from those hardened eyes, but

 from somewhere deeper inside, where you can’t deny your feelings for me.”

 She nibbled his ear and yielded to his embrace. “Promise me when this is

 over that there will be a place for us—together. You name the place. If

 we’re both still standing when the dust clears, no matter what, I’ll be there.

 Will you be there, Thomas?”

 He looked into her childlike expression, a side of her he hadn’t taken

 time to notice. He hated himself for wanting her so much. Like his need for

 booze, he knew there would be a morning after—and if their passion didn’t

 quench and satisfy—painful, irrevocable withdrawal would cripple him,

 maybe kill him..

 “There is a place, Chanteuse.” His own voice sounded like a stranger’s

 to him. “When I spent three years assigned to Ecuador, I found it unexpectedly.

 On the Rio Napo at the headwaters of the Amazon, there’s a remote hotel

 called *El Jaguar.* You can only get to it by motorized canoe. No one would

 find us there. Will you remember that?”

 “Of course, Thomas. In my mind, I’m already heading there in a

 motorized canoe. I can hear the sound of the engine.”

 “I have a strange way of showing up unexpectedly,” he warned her.

 “So even if everyone thinks I’m dead, and even you’re sure I’m dead, go

 there anyway, just in case on the longshot that I’m not.”

 “And you as well, because I’m a survivor, too.”

 “But until then—” He shrugged.

 “Until then, Thomas, we have only now.”

 They pawed each other, tugging at their clothes. As Larkin pulled his

 shirt over his head, he heard Chanteuse shriek in his moment of blindness. A

 hard blow to the back of his head plunged him into a dark abyss.

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