**CHANTEUSE** ©

 a Tom Larkin

 international thriller

 **by**

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  **Episode Ten**

 

 **CHAPTER 28 – MAMAN-CHERE’S MINIONS**

 The four‑man crew of Larkin, Major Witt, Franklin, and Quigley

 anxiously awaited Japarre’s vessel to signal them as the winds rose. The

 sky darkened, and the turquoise sea turned slate gray with choppy white

 caps tossing *The Sea Bitch* from side-to-side and drenching the reluctant

 crew.

 “We need a weather report,” Larkin said pacing the deck with

 frustration

 “Look at your bloody barometer!” Quigley said. “It’s dropped

 an inch the past hour.”

 Franklin paled. “I’ll take my chances with gunfire, but I wasn’t

 counting on drowning at sea.”

 Voicing the obvious, Theo said, “We can’t break radio silence

 until we hear from Jasparre.”

 Larkin looked hard at Theo. “Hear from Jasparre or from

 *Maman‑chere*?” he asked. “Admit it. Carmen has a hold on you. *She*

 pulls your strings.”

 “*Had* a hold on me, yes. She’s dead, mon.”

 “No, she’s not. You handled the homicide report.” Larkin accused

 Major Witt. “You were first officer at the supposed murder scene.”

 “Yes, Tom—all true. I was in love with *Maman‑chere*, but Simon

 bedazzled her with his wealth and power. He told her what the letters could

 be worth and warned her that her life would be in danger if she ever made

 her claim. The British paid off Simon with a lifetime lease on Owen Island

 and government shipping contracts if he conveniently misplaced Carmen’s

 letters. He’d succeeded for over ten years, until now. With Simon dead,

 Jasparre wants those letters.”

 “You mean Carmen wants them. I’ve seen her, Theo. She’s alive, but

 as raving mad as a rabid coyote. All this time she’s hidden, masquerading

 as the non-existent Guy Jasparre. She still pulls your strings, Theo, because

 you were the snowbird in the Narcotics Division working for the Mexican cartel.”

 “That was a long time ago,” Theo protested. “You’ve got me wrong,

 Tom. I swear Carmen is dead—has been these ten years.”

 Larkin held up his wounded wrist. “I suppose a *ghost* did this?” He

 turned to Franklin. “Hey, Georgie! Did you ever see Jasparre when you were

 with Chanteuse?”

 “Never! Not even on Owen Island.”

 “Quigs! Any Jasparre sightings on file at the High Commission?”

 “Only mentioned, Tom, but he was never seen physically by our people.”

 “How long have you known Stinky Snipes?” Larkin asked Quigley.

 “Since my promotion, when I first started going to The Green Parrot

 Club regularly—about a year ago. You don’t think Stinky’s involved in this?”

 “Paino struck a deal with a Brit for a finder’s fee, *not* to destroy the

 letters. Stinky let Chanteuse sing in his club, maybe as a cover, so they could

 work together. Chanteuse and her mother may have scored a deal with Snipes

 to set up his business in the Cayman Islands where he could launder his ill

 begotten gains from narcotics distributed to the States.”

 “Hmm. Makes sense.” Quigley pondered for a moment. “So Chanteuse

 has been playing one side against the other, as long as she gets the letters.”

 “Look!” Franklin shouted. “The storm is getting worse!”

 Stronger winds and higher waves tossed the skiff. Dead fish floated

 in the waves crashing over the deck.

 Through the dense clouds, Quigley saw a light. “There! Starboard! A

 yacht flashing a signal!”

 They read the Morse code, then Jasparre’s yacht, the *Marie‑Galante*

 came towards them.The message told them to follow Jasparre into the eye

 of the storm where they could make the exchange in calmer sea. A Cuban

 weather forecast reported a possible Category 5 hurricane approaching

 from Martinique. Having already devastated Jamaica, the storm was heading

 directly towards them.

 Franklin tried to puke over the side, but the waves splashed his vomit

 back in his face. For all their weapons and shrewdness, the crew felt suddenly

 helpless.

 Theo bolstered their courage. “If we survive the storm’s first hit, we

 can ride the storm’s eye westward towards Little Cayman for shelter.”

 Searching the dark horizon, Larkin weighed Major Witt’s wisdom.

 “I hope our backup can keep up with us. OK, Theo. Let’s go for it!”

 \* \* \*

 Unseen beyond the dark squall by Larkin and the crew, another

 sea craft was heading towards them with their precious cargo, Larkin’s

 niece, Dawn, who’d been bound and gagged for the past forty-eight hours

 while the details of the meeting were settled.

 Though she’d been fondled and prodded by Jasparre’s posse for the

 past months, that had been the extent of her abuse. She’d been fed well and

 cared for by Chanteuse whenever the infrequent occasion arose. Chanteuse

 had even tried to comfort Dawn over the loss of her Aunt Vera, but she

 continued to assure her that, if her Uncle Tommy did exactly as he was told,

 no harm would come to her, and she would soon be free.

 Dawn came to trust Chanteuse, but when she wasn’t around, and

 Dawn had to be blindfolded, the mysterious Guy Jasparre had spoken to

 her from the dark void with his mellow baritone voice and heavy Jamaican

 accent. Though he wasn’t harsh or in any way unkind to her, he was firm

 about the danger to her if her uncle with the DEA didn’t comply with his

 every demand.

 “You’d better not hurt my Uncle Tommy, either, you bastard!”

 Dawn had worked up the courage to say to Jasparre earlier that same

 day when he told her she would be free and safe in a matter of hours.

 From her blindness she detected amusement from her captor.

 “It’s not funny, you jackass!” she blurted, out of character for the

 sheltered teen, well-disciplined by her Aunt Vee.

 Jasparre’s hand clenched her face to keep her quiet as they were

 approaching the coordinates for the switch.

 “No, child,” she heard Jasparre say softly with his lips touching her

 ear. “There’s nothing amusing about today, because if your uncle doesn’t

 give me the letters, you will either drown in the melee or be taken to the

 Middle East for a very high price as a virgin in the white slave market.

 You favor your beautiful Aunt Vera over your plain mother, so the bidding

 will be very high. Regardless, I’ll gain something today, at your uncle’s

 expense.”

 She tried not to cry, but she shuddered with the effort.

 A voice called out from above on the deck, “They’re in sight!”

 Jasparre ordered his posse to bind Dawn in heavy chains, and gag

 her. She was too powerless to resist and felt woozy from the rocking of

 the ship in the rising storm.

 \* \* \*

 After much turbulence throwing the soaked crew around in the boat,

 they navigated *The Sea Bitch* into the calm of the hurricane’s eye. They had

 a clear view of the larger but lighter *Marie‑Galante,* lit by a full moon shining

 through spiraling clouds above. Another Morse code signal told them to bring

 Theo’s skiff alongside the *Marie‑Galante* for a fast exchange so both ships

 could make their separate runs for safety.

 When the two ships were side-by-side with twenty feet between them,

 Larkin held up the two letters. Jasparres’s crew set up two planks between the

 swaying crafts. One was for Larkin, the other for Dawn. Larkin noted seven

 Rastafarian types on deck in rain gear and armed with Uzis—the notorious

 posse who’d murdered Carmen Rabelle and, probably Vera, and had been

 holding his niece, Dawn, for ransom for several months.

 *All just to get back at me*, Larking thought, but he tried to redact

 any horrific images of Dawn’s ordeal so he could focus on the immediate

 opportunity to save her.

 Then the illusive specter of Guy Jasparre suddenly appeared on

 the swaying deck of the *Marie-Galante*. His threatening image in the bluish

 moonlight startled Larkin as he precariously tried to balance on the plank

 creaking between both ships with the sea’s rolling ebb and flow.

 Dreadlocks dangled to Jasparre’s shoulders from under a broad-

 brimmed hat decorated with a bright red feather. He wore a black patch

 over his left eye and had a thin mustache with a straggly beard. He wore

 a light blue, ruffled silk shirt and a black leather vest. His tan pants were

 baggy at the thighs and tucked tightly at the knee into shiny black boots.

 Though his image seemed like an attempt to look like a Seventeenth

 Century buccaneer, Larkin thought he looked more like a pimp.

 When Dawn appeared, Larkin’s heart skipped a beat. A thick metal

 collar was around her neck, and a heavy metal chain from the collar was

 attached to a five-pound iron ball that she held in her trembling handcuffed

 hands.

. Larkin anxiously watched her straining to hold the weight of the ball.

 She was blindfolded and gagged and, after months of captivity, her

 blond, cornrowed locks draped to her knees.

 Larkin fought his fury at the sight of his terrorized teenage niece.

Livid and struggling for control, he swallowed hard and gritted his teeth,

knowing he needed a cool head to secure her safety.

 “Put the letters in your teeth and your hands above your head as you

 cross over!” Jasparre called with a deep mellow voice—James Earl Jones

 without Darth Vader’s gurgling hiss.

 “Not until she’s safe aboard our boat!” Larkin shouted back.

 “Don’t play games with this innocent child’s life! If she loses her

 balance and falls in with all that weight, she’ll sink more than a hundred fifty

 feet! Before I release her, I must authenticate the letters! I’ll not be tricked by

 the likes of you!”

 “Do you think I’m fool enough to risk her life? The letters are

 genuine! Simon told me where to find them! I’ll walk across when Dawn

 does! I’ll be your hostage if the letters aren’t genuine! Time is running out

 with this storm quickly approaching us!”

 Noting the increasing winds, Jasparre nodded. Larkin moved

 awkwardly along the plank towards the *Marie‑Galante* while Dawn

 came towards *The Sea Bitch*. Their movements were hesitant and clumsy

 with the sea’s swells causing sudden jerking motions on both watercrafts.

 “Stop, Dawn!” Larkin said. “Let me remove her blindfold!”

 Jasparre nodded, and midway on the planks, Larkin stopped to

 console his tearful niece as he removed her gag and blindfold.

 “It’ll be OK now, Dawn. I’m so sorry. Just look at me. You’re very

 brave.”

 “They scared me, Uncle Tommy, and they didn’t hurt me, but,”

 she whimpered, “they killed Aunt Vee.”

 “Don’t worry about that now. Just look at me and walk towards our

 boat,” he encouraged, waving with both hands for her to go to Peter Quigley.

 “Never mind that!” Jasparre barked. “Bring me my letters!”

 Larkin hesitated until he saw that Dawn had made her way safely

 aboard *The Sea Bitch.* Inching his way forward, he boarded the *Marie‑*

 *Galante.* Jasparre’s crew withdrew the planks as Larkin faced Jasparre

 on deck.

 “You’d better not have damaged my letters,” Jasparre warned.

 “You mean Carmen’s letters.” Larkin stalled, seeing the huge white

 bow of U.S. Coast Guard cutter *Flamboyance* on the horizon and rapidly

 closing the distancebetween them. He put the letters between his clenched

 teeth and moved towards Jasparre.

 “U.S. Coast Guard approaching from the stern!” a posse deckhand

 shouted.

 Larkin lunged at Jasparre and ripped the patch from his left eye. It was

 swollen closed as it would have been from when Larkin had punched Carmen

 during their scuffle at his home. Jasparre’s beard and mustache shifted off kilter

 as they struggled.

 “Carmen Rabelle, you’re under arrest for abducting a U.S. citizen on

 the high seas!” Larkin said. “Where’s Chanteuse? What’ve you done with

 your daughter?”

 Reverting to character, she pulled off her dreadlock wig, and revealed

 her sparkling gold tooth, as she hissed, “Give me my letters, Babylon man!”

 The *Flamboyance* blasted their siren to warn them of their presence.

 Carmen drew a knife and held it to Larkin’s throat. “I’ll run circles around

 that Coast Guard dinosaur. Full speed! The letters or your life. Now!”

 The *Marie‑Galante’s* sudden accelerationmade Larkin fall backwards.

 Carmen dived at him. Her knife missed but pinned his parka to the deck as

 he held onto the letters in the struggle. The *Flamboyance* fired 50 mm

 cannons across the deck of the *Marie‑Galante*, warning them not to flee.

 Franklin radioed from *The Sea Bitch* to warn Captain Harddacker

 that Larkin was captive aboard the enemy vessel. Quigley comforted Dawn

 as she shivered in fear for her uncle’s safety.

 Carmen straddled Larkin’s chest and tried to force her knife into his

 throat. The *Marie-Galante* and the *Sea Bitch* opened fire at each other as the

 two vessels pulled apart.

 “Give…me…my…letters!” she shouted.

 “First prove to me that Chanteuse is safe,” Larkin demanded.

 “My darling, *Thomas*, don’t you know when your *one love* is close?

 Your niece is safe as I promised. We’ve got the letters. Come with me.”

 Stunned, he realized the full depth of her deceit.

 “Tell your crew to cease fire,” he insisted. “I’ll give you the letters,

 but raise your white flag and surrender. I’ll drop the kidnapping charge. I

 can do that. Take your letters to the World Court, Chanteuse. Get back what’s

 rightfully yours, but legally. You said you wanted to feed the hungry. I’ll

 stand by you if you do. I swear I will.”

 They searched each other’s eyes.

 “Cease fire!” she shouted. “All hands below deck!”

 Franklin radioed Chief Barnes aboard the cutter to hold their fire.

 The gunfire stopped as Chanteuse and Larkin stood face-to-face in sight of

 *The* *Sea Bitch*.The only sound was the roar of the approaching winds as the

 eyewall of the hurricane’s winds moved closer.

 “We’re coming in,” Barnes told Franklin then shouted to Larkin,

 “You’ll have to board us quickly so we can make a run for it within the

 eye of the storm. Our reports say a hundred-sixty-mile-an-hour winds have

 leveled much of Jamaica, and the storm’s heading directly towards us.”

 Larkin held out the letters to Chanteuse.

 She smirked at him and said, “Do you really think one woman—

 a *black* woman—could ever stand up in any court against greedy, powerful

 nations? I never thought you’d be so naïve. This is the only way, my darling

 Thomas. Just come with me, now. Stay here with me and my minions. We’ll

 be rich and powerful, but not greedy.”

 “You know I can’t,” he said shaking his head with disbelief.

 “So be it!” She snatched the letters from his hand, but Theo fired

 a modified M‑16 round at her hand, which exploded—with the letters—

 into smithereens. Chanteuse’s flailing arms knocked Larkin backwards

 sending him toppling awkwardly overboard as the sea kicked up with the

 soaring winds approaching.

 Surfacing with a mouthful of brine, Larkin saw Chanteuse wrapping

 a blood-soaked bandanna around the stump of what had been her hand. Her

 face was ashen from shock as she shouted to him, “I’ll see you all in hell,

 Babylon man!”

 She turned from the deck and disappeared below. The *Marie-Galante*

 made a desperate run to escape the Coast Guard cutter by going directly into

 the oncoming hurricane’s winds. The Coast Guard crew threw a line to Larkin

 and pulled him aboard where he joined Dawn, Theo, Quigley, and Franklin, all

 soaked to the skin and wrapped in blankets.

 Larkin held Dawn in his arms as the sea raged. “Go after her!” he

 implored Chief Barnes and Captain Harddaker.

 Captain Harddacker shook his head. “Our only chance of weathering

 this hurricane is by reaching the Cayman Islands. Suicide seems to be her

 choice. The *Marie-Galante* can never stand up to these winds.”

 Larkin watched Chanteuse’s craft head into the blackness of the

 approaching storm. Harddacker’s words echoed in Larkin’s mind with

 images of his father, Min, Billy McCann, and Simon Rabelle committing

 suicide, the pattern of his life. He watched the *Marie-Galante* shatter

 from the force of the storm’s eyewall quickly sucking Chanteuse’s yacht

 beneath the sea in a whirlpool. He shuddered at the thought of her death,

 then he noticed Jim Riley recording the wreck with his iPhone. Riley

 treated the event as if it were no different than presenting Ambassador

 Smythe with congratulatory evidence on a case.

 He knocked the iPhone from Riley’s hand and punched him hard

 in the face, knocking him out cold.

 Barnes restrained him. “Let it go, Tom! It’s over!”

 Larkin saw Theo slumped in a corner and accused him. “You

 were against Chanteuse from the start and working for her enemies.”

 “You never understood, Tom,” Theo said. “You knew only half

 the truth. I told you Carmen was dead. Your lab reports will confirm

 that it was Chanteuse pretending to be Carmen all along, just trying

 to keep her mother’s memory alive.”

 “If Guy Jasparre never existed, then who killed Carmen?”

 “Guy Jasparre was Chanteuse’s creation,” Theo explained. When

 she learned about the letters, and how Simon had kept them from her mother

 in return for payment from the British, Chanteuse planned to kill him with a

 political hit, but my Carmen, my darling *Maman‑chere,* was on the balcony

 instead of Simon that morning. In error, Chanteuse had killed her mother.”

 “She killed her own mother?”

 “By mistake. It was the same as killing part of herself. She had to believe

Jasparre existed and had killed her mother just to cope with her guilt over her

matricide.”

 “If Chanteuse couldn’t reckon with the truth that she’d killed her mother,

 and then took on the ghostly image of *Maman‑chere*, where do you fit in, Theo?

 What could any of this tragedy matter to you?”

 “Carmen was my *one love*, but she left me. She was lured by Simon’s

 wealth and prestige with the promise of sending her daughter to the best schools

 and bequeathing all of his wealth to Chanteuse upon his death. I never forgave

 Carmen for leaving me, but I still loved her until her tragic end. But the legacy

 of bad blood and betrayal had to end here—by my hand alone, because Simon

 wasn’t her blood father. I’m Chanteuse’s father.”

 “But do you have any claim to the letters, Theo?”

 “No. I wanted to destroy them for Chanteuse’s sake. I never meant

 to harm her, but I’m relieved it’s over. Now Chanteuse can rest in peace with

 her mother. *Maman‑chere’s* legacy to her sole heir is eternity beneath the

 Caribbean.”

 “You were right about your daughter, Theo—a triple threat—but to

herself.”

Theo sighed, saying, “The legacywas documented in a diary

written by a magistrate about the original Carmen Jasparre. Henry Morgan,

Lord Governor of Jamaica, pardoned his illegitimate, pregnant daughter

from hanging for her piracy.”

 Larkin felt a sense of déjà vu, asking, “How do you know all this?”

 “I took the diary from Carmen the day Chanteuse killed her. She’d

 just learned what it said. There are no more heirs, Tom, but… there’s still

 one letter remaining somewhere. The remnant from the fireplace, the charred

 corner of the parchment you gave me to analyze, it was fake. Someone

 tried to fool the CIA to collect the bounty for its destruction.”

 Larkin glared at Riley still dazed from his punch.

 Quigley stepped between them. “The last letter and the diary must be

 worth something , maybe to a museum. Where is it, Tom?”

 “I don’t know,” Larkin huffed with exhaustion and exasperation.

 “Are you sure, Tom? Think hard.” Quigley prodded.

 Before Larkin could answer, the radar operator said, “We’re picking

 up a reef below us, Captain.”

 The captain went to look at the screen, but it was blank.

 “It was huge and filled my screen for several seconds,” the operator

insisted. “Now it’s gone.”

 “But we’re still directly over the Cayman Trench.” Harddaker said,

 shaking his head with confusion. “There isn’t a reef or sandbar within forty

 miles.”

 “It was fifty to sixty feet long, sir,” the operator said with certainty,

 wondering why Harddacker didn’t believe him.

 “Must be debris or the hull of a ship broken up by the hurricane,”

 Haddacker reasoned. “Maybe from the *Marie‑Galante*.” He turned and saw

 Larkin’s hopeful expression then assured him, “But there can’t be any survivors.

 Not in this Cat-5 storm.”

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