**CHANTEUSE** ©

 a Tom Larkin

 international thriller

 **by**

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  **Episode Two**

 **CHAPTER 4 – TRIPLE THREAT**

 Resident-Agent-in-Charge, Jim Riley, peered down from the Kingston

 DEA office at the courthouse on the square below. Forty-five, clean-cut, and

 ambitious, he put himself on the fast track to upper-level government authority

 from the first day out of Basic twenty years ago. Holding a photo of an attractive,

 young Jamaican woman, he studied her alluring expression with scrutiny. The

 phone ringing from his secretary’s outer office turned his immediate attention

 back to business at hand.

 Straightening his tie, Riley passed his desk where he’d draped his tan

 suit jacket over the back of his swivel chair. Behind the desk, a photo of Riley

 with the President on the golf course was centered among other photos of him

 with renowned politicians and celebrities. The wall-length mantel displayed

 many commendations from his DEA career. He peered through the half-open

 door to see his shapely Jamaican secretary, Mona, answering a phone call.

 “Kingston Imports, may I help you?” Mona nodded, listening and

 seeing Riley’s questioning glance. Covering the phone with her hand, she

 rolled her big brown eyes and whispered, “Foreign Office Chief, Timothy

 Barnes, is calling from Quantico. He asked to speak to you.”

 Riley waved, closed the door, and picked up the receiver at his desk.

 “Chief Barnes, thanks for sending me Tom Larkin to fill the new spot that

 opened in Montego Bay. Since Agent Franklin disappeared on a deep‑cover

 assignment in Negril, the enemy has practically castrated my office.”

 “I can personally vouch for Agent Larkin’s field experience, Jim,”

 Barnes assured him. “We served together in Mexico and Latin America on

 three assignments, all with commendations for me, thanks to Tom.”

 “With all due respect, sir, this is no kick‑in‑the‑door operation. It’ll take

 finesse. Guy Jasparre is elusive, like a goddamn phantom, no law enforcement

 agents have ever seen the bastard. His avoidance of arrest is legendary among

 the locals”

 “Ever since her daughter’s cocaine overdose, the Attorney General has

 had her feather duster up my ass on this case. Our contacts traced Jasparre’s

 pipeline operating Stateside directly back to your realm in Jamaica. Jasparre

 may be invisible, but he’s got heavy backing both in and outside the States.

 We’ve got to find him and cut off those financial and trafficking sources ASAP.”

 Riley fanned his face with the Jamaican woman’s photo. “Larkin’s

 got to get to Jasparre’s soft spot, his mistress, an entertainer called *Chanteuse*.

 She’s our best lead. Agent Franklin went into deep-cover attempting to join

 Jasparre’s posse. He was the only African-American agent Headquarters could

 spare outside our domestic inner city offices, but he may have gone over to

 the enemy—unless Jasparre has already killed him. So far, at least Franklin’s

 head hasn’t shown up on a pike yet—that’s been Jasparre’s calling card

 whenever anyone gets in his way.”

 Barnes thought, *all the more reason to send Larkin to Jamaica and*

 *make them pay the price for Vera’s head.*

 Then he explained, “There will be special perks for anyone contributing

 to Jasparre’s demise. Tom Larkin is the ideal choice for this case. He’s hungry

 for the fast tracktowards becoming a special-agent-in-charge, like you,” Barnes

 lied, knowing Larkin’s repulsion for any desk job.

 “If he wants to become a SAC, why is he still in the field after fifteen

 years service?” Riley grumbled.

 “He pissed off Headquarters once too often.”

 “He sounds unsuited for a management job.”

 “Maybe, but if I know Tom, he’ll have that Chanteuse woman playing

 right into his hands—but to *our* benefit.”

 “I dunno,” Riley grumbled. “Besides being a popular night club singer

 on the island, she also happens to be the only daughter of a once powerful

 Jamaican politician—shipping magnate, Simon Rabelle. She’ll chew up Larkin

 and spit him out if he gets cute with her. Others have tried and paid heavily for

 their misguided efforts.”

 “Tom Larkin can look out for himself and even terminate Jasparre,

 if that’s the only way to stop him.. He has that sharp edge needed for this

 crucial assignment,” Barnes said. “That’s all that counts.”

 “I don’t like Larkin’s *personal* profile. The rum pours sweet and easy

 here. Larkin’s liver wouldn’t have made it through Jamaican Customs if you

 hadn’t pulled strings. You’re out on a limb for Larkin. I don’t get it. What’s in

 it for you?”

 “Nine years ago, he saved my life in Mexico. I owe him this opportunity

 to score on this high-priority case before he retires, especially after the tragedy

 of his wife’s recent murder.”

 “OK. If you say so, Chief. Larkin hasn’t reported to me this week, but my

 sources tell me that he’ll be making contact with Chanteuse Rabelle soon.”

 “What did I tell you? Larkin’s your man— Hold on a moment.” Chief

 Barnes pressed his phone’s hold button and took from his file a duplicate photo

 of the one Riley held, labeled *Chanteuse Rabelle*. He reconnected with a third

 party listening in on his exchange with Riley. He asked that party, “Did you get all

 that? It’s working.”

 “Let’s hope so, “the deep gravelly voice replied on the other end. “Keep

 me apprised of Larkin’s progress, Tim….”

 “Will do,” Barnes, said, hanging up on the third party and going back

 to Riley still on hold. “That will be all for now. Keep me posted, Jim….”

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 In the Caribbean one hundred yards offshore behind a Georgian mansion

 set on a former sugar plantation, a white, 60-foot sea skiff called *The* *Sea Bitch*

 rocked on the turquoise wake. Tanned and sober for thirty days, Larkin checked

 his scuba gear as burly Constabulary Major, Theo Witt, assisted him with his air

 tank. Theo’s Constabulary whites emphasized his dark skin as Larkin noticed

 Theo’s weathered hands from his fifty years of fishing in the Caribbean since

 age three.

 “Everything’s set, Tom,” Theo confirmed. “My nephew, Norman, is

 Chanteuse Rabelle’s gardener. He says she won’t return to the mansion for

 at least an hour.”

 “How did she respond when you told her that I wanted to meet her?”

 “Poker‑faced, always in control. She’s the only one outside of

 Jasparre’s inner circle to see his face and live to tell about it. The only reason

 she still lives is because she hasn’t told anyone what she knows about him.”

 “I don’t understand. If Jasparre and his posse murdered her mother,

 why would she become his mistress? That’s too kinky, even for me.”

 “The scars run deep,” Theo sighed with a pensive look. “That’s why

 Chanteuse might cooperate with you to nail him. It’s payback. Her father,

 Simon Rabelle, would’ve won Jamaica’s election as Prime Minister, but

 Jasparre’s posse slaughtered his wife, Carmen. Happened right there on

 the estate. Jasparre and his backers made Simon withdraw from the election

 when he saw what they could do. He wanted to protect his daughter,

 Chanteuse, from any further violence. He’s been a recluse ever since.”

 “I saw the Constabulary photos of the murder scene. They made

 some mess of his wife. Jasparre may’ve left a trail no one else has been

 able to pick up, but new evidence could nail him with DNA samples.

 Will Chanteuse talk about her mother’s death? Or is that subject still

 too sensitive?”

 “It happened ten years ago. That’s between you two and the

 ghosts that haunt that family.”

 Larkin chuckled. “*Ghosts?* Gimme a break.”

 “Don’t take her lightly. I warn you, Chanteuse is a triple threat—

 unpredictable, cunning, and a sex trap.”

 “Just my type.”

 “Be careful, Tom. You’ve been sober for the past thirty days, just a

 few bottles of Red Stripe beer a week. Yes, I know about the few beers

 you’ve had, but you’ve had no rum or vodka since you’ve come to Jamaica

 a month ago. I also know you want to keep it that way, especially if you

 get your niece back safely. She’s gonna need you, mon.”

 “What’s your point, Theo? Are you just my backup, or my guardian

 angel, too?”

 “Chanteuse is not some island booty you can bully, charm, or buy off,”

 Theo warned. “Her mother, Carmen, was a legend on this island before she was

 murdered. Chanteuse has a long legacy tainted with vengeance and violence.”

 “What more are you holding back, Theo?”

 “The longer you’re in Jamaica, the sooner you’ll learn to leave certain

 issues alone. The avenging spirit of Chanteuse’s murdered mother lives within

 her.”

 “Whoa! I’m shaking.”

 Larkin jumped into the water then surfaced.

 “I’ve delivered you to the devil’s door!” Theo shouted, “but I can’t be

 responsible once you’re inside!”

 “From your lips to my ears, consider me warned, Theo. But when all is

 said and done, no matter how many traps she sets for me, Chanteuse is just a

 woman.”

 “There are mysteries about this island you can’t understand in a lifetime

 let alone in a bloody month,” Theo cautioned.

 As Larkin swam underwater towards the Rabelle mansion, Theo went to

 the skiff’s cabin to turn on the surveillance and tracking equipment where he

 followed Larkin’s path to shore on screen. By iPhone, he alerted his nephew

 of Larkin’s arrival.

 Larkin emerged at the rocky shoreline and hid his scuba gear in the shrubs.

 Drying off with a towel from a waterproof kit containing casual clothes, sandals,

 a 9 mm pistol, and his phone, he called Theo for clearance.

 “Chanteuse has already left,” Theo replied. My nephew’s keeping the

 housekeeper occupied. As far as a security system goes, only Chanteuse is

 privy to that. Since Carmen Rabelle’s murder, my nephew, her housekeeper,

 and the cook have been the only Jamaicans to enter the Rabelle estate.”

 “I’m going in, Theo.”

 He entered the rear kitchen door and heard the cook snoring in her

 room. On the central counter was the lunch the cook had prepared. Lifting

 the lid off the steaming pot on the stove, Larkin smelled the spicy pepper

 pot soup. He stirred it with a wooden ladle and saw leafy, spinach-like

 callaloo, okra, and conch bubbling in coconut milk. Unable to resist, he

 savored the taste.

 

 On the counter were stamp-and-go fish fritters and scone-like

“johnny cakes” ready to be deep fried. A tray of patties and pickled

herring on a tray attracted him. He snatched a strip of herring and

sucked it down. Rearranging the tray so the fish wouldn’t be missed,

he recognized the popular dish and mumbled the tune of its namesake,

“Solomon Gundy born on Monday.” He recognized the main dish of

salt fish with the yellow, egg-like fruit called ackee, a Jamaican mainstay.

 

 He checked his blueprint of the mansion on his iPhone and

proceeded through the plush, Georgian motif brightly sunlit as he went

towards the dining room. Pausing with curiosity, he studied the dining

room table settings. On a long table were settings at each end, but there

was also a setting for a third person to the left of one end’s setting.

Lifting a plate, he saw a wet ring on the placemat. He found the other

two placemats had wet rings, too.

 “Three fresh settings,” he said. “Who else could be joining­ us,

 Chanteuse? Perhaps Guy Jasparre? Do you work *that* quickly, Chanteuse?”

 Larkin sniffed the upholstery on the top of the end chair and

 approved of the scent, then pulled out the end chair to see an indented

 cushion. He knelt, brushing his hand around the concavity of the velvet

 seat cushion at the head of the table then smiled, saying, “Fine booty,

 one out of three ain’t bad so far. Triple threat, huh?”

 Suddenly, reflected in the full wall mirror at the sideboard, he saw

 the same image of Chanteuse he’d seen in Riley’s photo. Thinking Chanteuse

 had caught him spying, he quickly turned towards the opposite end of the

 long table to face her and said, “Sorry, Ms. Rabelle, I thought—”­

 But the chair was empty. Sweating, he wiped his neck with a hand-

 kerchief. Uncertain what he’d just seen, he went upstairs to a main bedroom

 which appeared disused, but well kept. On the wall, were oil portraits of

 Chanteuse’s parents, each flanking the canopied, king-sized bed. On a

 dresser were many framed photos of Chanteuse at various ages. He picked

 up one with her posing in a bikini on a beach. Sultry, her expression was

 surly and defiant.

 He thought, *two for two, Chanteuse*.

 Comparing Chanteuse’s face with that of her mother, he said, “This

 apple hasn’t fallen far from the tree. Mama has an evil eye, but Chanteuse?

 Triple threat? Hmm” He whistled. “You got that right, Theo.”

 As he turned towards the mother’s portrait, he was startled and dropped

 Chanteuse’s photo on the floor when he saw the same image behind him in the

 dresser’s mirror that he’d just seen in the dining room. Whirling quickly, he

 saw no one and wondered if the image was of Chanteuse or her dead mother.

 He picked up Chanteuse’s photo. Broken, the glass frame distorted her face.

 He compared her photo to her mother Carmen’s painting again. Her mother’s

 expression was harsh, judgmental, while that of Chanteuse was alluring.

 “Chanteuse doesn’t take after you at all, Papa,” he told Simon’s

portrait.

 He put the cracked glass frame with Chanteuse’s photo inside his shirt

 as he entered the open balcony through the bedroom doors above the columned

 façade of the mansion. There he found seven patio tables with umbrellas and

 six chairs at each. He saw a teacup at one table. Examining it, he found tea

 leaf dregs at the bottom and a lipstick smear on the brim. He swiped a finger

 inside the cup and tasted it.

 “She takes it light and sweet. Maybe we can slow dance after all,

 Chanteuse.”

 He wiped the lipstick smudge onto his white handkerchief and put it

 in his pocket. He picked up the *Daily Gleaner*, and saw that it was folded to

 the editorials, where someone had cut out an article. Part of the article

 remained:

 Caribbean exploration, treasure hunting, and tourism

 expands in the Cayman Islands with the innovation of

 mini-submersibles.

 Turning back towards the house, he saw the bloodied white bricks

 on the mansion’s façade and recalled that Carmen had been murdered on the

 estate, yet Chanteuse had become Jasparre’s mistress.

 *Very strange*, he thought.

 Touching the white, blood‑stained wall, he visualized Carmen

 drinking tea on the balcony. He imagined the Jamaican posse loyal to her

 husband’s adversaries coming onto the balcony as she ran towards the wall.

 He saw her handprints, now in dried blood, but at the time it happened,

 streaking bright red down the bricks.

 *The scars run deep*, he thought—*Theo’s words*.

 In his mind, Larkin saw Carmen as the same woman reflected in the

 dining room mirror, but as a younger version of the woman in the bedroom’s

 painting. She shrieked in terror, the gunfire deafening as it explosively lifted

 her off her feet and suspended her against the wall with the force of multiple

 rounds of Uzi gunfire, a horrific sight to imagine.

 All went quiet as he envisioned Carmen’s limp, bloodied hands streak-

 ing down the wall. He smelled gunpowder as he watched someone’s hand

 touching the wet blood, then turning her body over to see her face untouched

 by gunfire, staring wide-eyed and looking more like the painting—older and

 withered.

 As Larkin scraped some dried blood from the bricks with his pocket

 knife into a sandwich-sized plastic baggie, he imagined a Constabulary siren

 bleating from a distance and coming to assist at the crime scene.

 Fixed on the murder scene, he envisioned how it might have happened:

 A hand reached out to Carmen’s hypnotic, glassy-eyed stare and pried open

 her mouth to remove her gold-capped incisor tooth with a knife. As the siren

 continued bleating, the sweltering heat on the balcony made Larkin woozy.

 In Larkin’s mind, he saw Carmen suddenly bite that hand, followed

 by flashes of Vera defending herself against her murderer with her teeth.

 He’d read that account in the newspapers and knew that Vera, like Carmen

 Rabelle, must have put up a fierce fight to stay alive. The FBI continued to

 withhold from him that Vera had been decapitated with a machete, ironically

 *his* machete—a souvenir from his South American assignments that he’d

 hung decoratively above the mantle of their home in Arlington, Virginia.

 He thought he could hear their violators, both Carmen’s and Vera’s,

 crying out painfully from the bites on their hands and in three-part harmony

 with the Constabulary siren in the background.

 Shaken from his perception of the murder and knowing he’d made it

 past noon for another day without a drink, Larkin peered woozily over the

 balcony railing. He saw Chanteuse at a distance below, beeping her horn to

 alert Theo’s nephew, Norman, to let her pass through the security gate. The

 young Jamaican housekeeper sneaked from the tool shed and got back to

 the mansion before Chanteuse could see her.

 Norman stumbled towards the gate and pulled up his pants before

 coming around the gatehouse into Chanteuse’s view. He called loudly to

 her through the front gate to warn Larkin of her return. “Your guest is

 waiting in the parlor, Ms. Rabelle!”

 Leaving the balcony to enter the upstairs hallway, Larkin headed

 towards daylight beaming at the end of the hall, but stopped at the top of the

 the stairs when he saw an obese Jamaican woman in the foyer below. He

 avoided her by continuing quietly down the hall to the rear of the mansion

 where he descended a fire escape’s rusty ladder. Passing an open window,

 he looked down and saw he still had a ten-feet drop to the ground.

 Turning his head back to the window, Carmen Rabelle’s image

 startled him with a grin that sparkled from her gold incisor in the midday

 sun. He fell backwards, groping for the ladder and looking up. He saw no

 one, though the curtains blew freely in the breeze. He was certain she’d

 been watching him a moment ago, because he could smell her scent and

 almost taste her essence in the torrid heat of a floral Jamaican breeze.

 He lay flat on his back watching the curtains at the open window

 on the second floor, flapping loudly in a sudden gust from the sea.

 Like the tentacles of an octopus, Jamaica’s dark mystique, grabbed

 him firmly. Its black ink engulfed him, darkening his vision with no hope of

 setting him free—not until he’d found Dawn and avenged Vera violent death.

 

 **CHAPTER 5 - DUPPIES**

 Seeing his lacerated hands after falling from the rusty ladder, Larkin

 wondered how he would explain them to Chanteuse. With bloodied palms, he

 removed the cracked photo frame of Chanteuse from under his shirt and shook

 off the glass fragments, then he dumped the broken frame into a garbage can

 outside the kitchen door.

 Putting her photo inside his shirt, he came into the mansion through the

 kitchen where he rinsed his injured hands with cold water. Wincing with pain,

 he went to the bright, sunny parlor adorned with many tropical plants and

 various colorful birds cackling and chirping in cages as he sat down on a soft,

 suede love seat. The musky scent of the huge plants in black soil and the

 pungent, near-sweet aroma of feathers and guano reminded him of the South

 American rain forest from his past DEA assignments.

 He concealed his injury by crossing his arms and tucking his hands

 under his armpits. He heard Chanteuse’s voice for the first time as she entered

 the mansion with her mellow tone echoing off the high ceilings and white marble

 floors from the foyer.

 The British lilt to Chanteuse’s diction reflected a higher education as

 she called to the cook, “Zeena! Is everything ready? Our guest is early!”

 “Yes, Ms. Chanteuse. I’m so sorry. I never heard your guest come in.”

 “No harm. Norman took care of him,” Chanteuse said softly, as if she

 were listening for sounds coming from Larkin over the chatter of the birds.

 He heard Chanteuse’s high‑heeled footsteps clicking as they came

 towards him across the marble floor. When she appeared, her face entranced

 him with her natural, unadorned beauty. Her pursed, full-lipped smile with

 dimples accenting her high cheekbones seemed a preamble to a kiss. Then

 her smile bloomed, revealing her perfect teeth. Her cat-like, ocher eyes

 against her dark face gazed through him hypnotically.

 Under thirty, she wore stylish garb reflecting her wealth and fine

 taste, but her dancer’s athletic figure made her clothes incidental to her

 seductive stride. She extended a graceful, long-fingered hand to Larkin,

 more as if she were about to gently remove a cinder from his eye than

 firmly grasp his hand.

 “Forgive me,” she said. “I hope you haven’t waited long. I’m

 Chanteuse Rabelle.”

 Keeping his arms folded, he said, “I’m Tom Larkin, Ms. Rabelle.”

 “Call me, Chanteuse. We’re going to be friends, are we not?”

 “Sure. Call me Tom if you like.”

 When he didn’t extend his hand to her, she frowned and withdrew hers.

 “No. I’m going to call you *Thomas* just to show my respect for a man

 of your experience.”

 “You’re the only one to call me *Thomas* since first grade and sent to

the principal’s office for kissing a girl.”

 “I like being the *only* one, in everything I do. Let’s get directly to the

point. I have something you need.”

 They exchanged subtle glances, each uncertain of the other’s innuendo

 until Larkin broke the ice with his direct approach as he looked her up and down.

 “From where I stand, I’m sure you have all that any man could ever need.”

 “American men are all alike. You assume too much. You must have

 heard the rumor that I’ve been Guy Jasparre’s mistress. Assuming that’s true,

 you would have much catching up to do. You’re miles behind.”

 “All business then, so be it. I’d shake your hand, but I had a problem

 with my car on the way here, so my hands are not a pretty sight.”

 “What have you done? I my goodness! Come with me. I have the

 remedy for that. Zeena! Bring herbs to me from *Maman‑chere’s* garden!”

 As Chanteuse led him to the kitchen, Larkin caught mistrusting glances

 from Zeena, her cook, shaped like an iron diving bell and maybe just as heavy.

 “May I offer you a drink, Thomas?” Chanteuse asked.

 “If you’d done your homework, you’d know I shouldn’t drink. Water

 on the rocks, please. Did you say *Maman‑chere’s* garden? Is that what you

 called your mother?”

 “I don't know you well enough—yet—to talk with you about her,

 Thomas.”

 “I saw her at an upstairs window before you arrived,” he admitted.

 Chanteuse frowned doubtfully and added ice to a glass. “There’s

 no one upstairs when I’m not home. Only you and Zeena were in the house.

 My domestic, Lydia, takes every opportunity when I’m away to give herself

 to my randy gardener, Norman, and in the tool shed of all places.” Seeing

 his smirk, she added, “Nothing gets by me. Remember that, Thomas—

 *nothing*.”

 “I saw this other woman twice downstairs, too. Sorry, I peeked into

 your dining room. I guess I can’t break the old habits of a narc. She was

 sitting at the end of the dining room table for a moment, but she left before

 I could speak to her.”

 Chanteuse gave out a musical laugh. “You must have seen a *duppy*.”

 “A what?”

 “A ghost. Restless spirits from the past haunt this house and others

 like it in Jamaica. Don’t be shocked if you see the ghost of Henry Morgan

 here. Be warned, Thomas. He’s a very distant relative of mine and he watches

 over me day and night. If you know your history, he was a ruthless pirate

 before King Charles II made him Lord Governor of Jamaica, his reward for

 driving the Spanish off the island.”

 Paying no mind to her history lesson, he told her, “The woman I

 saw didn’t look old enough to be your mother, but maybe your older sister.”

 “If you’ve done *your* homework, Thomas, you’d know I have no

 sisters—or brothers. I’m an only child, and quite spoiled, in case you haven’t

 figured that out yet. I know what I want . . . and how to get it.”

 He ignored her retort and told her, “This woman I saw looked like

 a news photo I’d seen of your mother, Carmen.”

 “The only news photo of my mother ever published was the one

 showing her lying face down in a pool of blood—her own blood—which

 still flows through my veins,” she stammered. “There’s only one existing

 likeness of my Maman‑chere.It’s upstairs in my parents’ bedroom. How

 could you possibly have seen it?”

 Reaching for her trembling hand, he said, “Steady, Chanteuse. I

 didn’t mean to upset you. Maybe I was wrong about the news photo.”

 “They murdered her in this house, an act of political terrorism,”

 she told him as she gazed about the room. Maman‑cherestalks this

 mansion, just like Henry Morgan. She won’t rest until she’s avenged.

 That’s the only reason I’ve agreed to help you.”

 “I haven’t asked for your help,” Larkin said abruptly.

 “You need me to set up Guy Jasparre for a drug bust that will

 extradite him to the United States for trial. That’s if you don’t kill him

 first.”

 “I’m glad we have such a clear understanding.” He laughed.

 “Imagine, I thought I’d have to sweet‑talk you into helping me.”

 “I’ll give you exactly what you want, Thomas, perhaps much more,”

 she purred seductively with those cat’s eyes beaming at him as if he were an

 unwary bird.”

 “I’ll settle for Jasparre,” he said, ignoring her advances. “But how

 and when?”

 “Not until *after* you avenge my mother. You’re the only one I can trust,

 because we’re so much alike—loners to the core.”

 “What do you expect *me* to do? I’m a DEA agent on an overseas tour.

 I think you’ve misjudged me. I’m the wrong guy for *that* sort of venture.”

 Zeena entered holding a handful of herbs, which she rinsed in a colander

 at the sink.

 “Thank you, Zeena,” Chanteuse said. “Come here, Thomas.”

 Larkin stood beside Chanteuse at the sink. Her closeness and scent

 stirred him.

 Before offering his hands, he asked, “This isn’t some kind of voodoo,

 is it?”

 “A natural cure,” she said with amusement. “Cup your hands together

 and rub the herbs into your hands until they crumble.”

 “*Crumble?* My hands or the herbs?”

 Playfully bumping his hip with hers, she tittered. “Trust me. Just do it.”

 Complying, he stopped when the herbs dissolved into his palms. He

 sniffed his hands and made a face. “Whew! This stuff reeks.”

 “Yes, but it works quickly, especially if exposed to moonlight.” She

 blew her warm, breath on his palms. He found her pursed lips exciting to

 watch and he fantasize about touching them with his.

 “I react to moonlight, too,” he quipped.

 “I’m sure you do, Thomas.” She raised an eyebrow. “Your reputation

 has preceded you to our island.” She nodded to the cook. “You may serve us

 lunch now, Zeena.”

 The cook nodded, still distrustful of Larkin as he sat in the dining

 room to Chanteuse’s left near the end of the long table where he faced the

­ wall-length mirror. The empty setting remained to Larkin’s left at the far

 end of the table. Zeena brought platters of Jamaican food to the sideboard.

 Larkin acted surprised by the food, as if he hadn’t already sampled

 some before. “I’ve been in Jamaica for a month, but I haven’t seen this dish

 before. Looks like scrambled eggs and fish. What is it?”

 “Not eggs, Thomas. Ackee. It’s a fruit brought to Jamaica by Captain

 Bligh on *The Bounty*. It was meant as a food staple for slaves…*my ancestors.*

 I grow ackee on this plantation.”

 As Zeena served him, Larkin blurted, “The woman I saw earlier was

 sitting right down there at the other end of this table.”

 Zeena stopped serving and glared at him.

 “That will be all for now, Zeena,” Chanteuse said with a nod.”

 Begrudgingly, the cook left in a huff.

 “Something I said?” he asked, tasting the soft, yellow ackee and

 nodding his approval.

 “Don’t mind her. She’s been with my family since my birth. You

don’t want to get on her bad side, Thomas. If she didn’t wait until the red

skin of the ackee fruit had popped open from its own ripeness, that creamy

yellow spoonful you just ate would kill you before you could walk to the

door. It’s a deadly poison if not properly prepared.”

 He pushed his plate aside and sampled the pepper pot soup.

 “Zeena’s reaction is explainable,” Chanteuse said. “She knows you

 saw a *duppy* of Maman‑chere’s restless spirit.”

 “I don’t believe in ghosts,” Larkin said with a grimace.

 “Apparently, they believe in you. At least one does. I admire Maman-­

 chere’s choice of the man to avenge her.”

 “Let’s cut to the quick,” he said with a frown. “You have a better handle

 on what goes on in Jamaica than I ever will. How do you expect me to return

 your favor?”

 “There’s one place in Jamaica where I have no access,” she said with her

 lips apart and the tip of her tongue touching her front teeth. “The U.S. embassy in

 Kingston has a detailed file on my family. I want it and need you to get it for me.”

 Standing and tossing down his napkin, he said, “Stop right there. I don’t

have access to classified files, but even if I did, I’d never show them to you

 or anyone else, especially anyone who’s not an American. That’s treason!”

 Calmly reaching for his hand, she said, “Please sit, Thomas. At least

 hear me out.”

 Reluctantly, he sat and glared at her.

 “When they murdered my mother, they stole invaluable documents,

 official letters of great worth, but only to Maman-chere when she was living,

 and now only to me as her sole surviving heir.”

 “What about your father? By law, wouldn’t he have some claim to the

 letters?”

 “We have some rare Jamaican laws when it comes to my ancestors,”

 she explained. “My mother and I are *maroons,* Blue Mountain people who

 escaped from Spanish slavery when the Spanish fled from the British invasion

 of Jamaica. We have special inherited rights. Our ancestors negotiated their

 own freedom in return for capturing runaway slaves. My father is not a *maroon*.”

 “Where’s Papa Simon, now?” Larkin asked.

 “He went into an emotional decline after my mother’s death. He’s

 confined to an institution,” she said with a sigh. “I visit him, but it’s hard

 to bear. He was so strong before. They destroyed both of my parents when

 they killed my mother. That was obviously their intent. He might have been

 a powerful Jamaican Prime Minister.”

 “How does your mother being a *maroon* and her loss of these docu-

 ments effect your staking a legal claim?”

 “I’m her only blood heir. British royalty honored the property rights

 of *maroons* and still do with a legacy that can’t be broken until there are no

 genetic heirs left.”

 “If you wanted Caribbean beachfront property that belonged to your

 mother, why didn’t she just stake her legal claim when she was alive?”

 “Though clever and strong‑willed, I’m sorry to admit it, but my mother

 was illiterate. She held those letters all of her life, handed down through gener-

 ations since the seventeenth century. Until recently, no one knew their meaning

 or great value.”

 “What do the letters say?”

 “I don’t know, but the British do. If they know, so do the Americans.

 Your CIA network in the Caribbean is pervasive. During the Grenada invasion

 they even knew when Fidel Castro broke wind.”

 Standing abruptly, he said, “It’s been swell, Chanteuse, but treason

 is too high a price for me to pay just for a DEA promotion.”

 “I’d hoped you’d see this *my* way, Thomas. Perhaps *this* will

 persuade you.” She showed him a photo of his niece, Dawn, standing in

 front of Dunn’s River Falls in Ocho Rios, Jamaica.

 Larkin angrily grabbed the photo and turned it over to see that the date

 was three weeks ago, a week *after* he’d arrived in Jamaica.

 Chief Barnes’s words came to mind: “*If you don’t follow their*

 *lead, they’ll have to make Dawn visible as a lure to get your attention. Let*

 *them come to you, Tom. Follow my logic. If they knew where Vera worked*

 *and how to get to Dawn, they sure as hell will know your next assignment is*

 *Jamaica.”*

 Tasting the lure, his adrenaline pumped as he grabbed Chanteuse’s

 wrist and jerked her from the chair to her feet. She tried to scratch her hand

 free, but he grabbed her free hand with his. As their fingers interlocked, her

 long nails dug into his knuckles and drew first blood.

 “My mother taught me *never* to take ‘no’ for an answer,” she said.

 “You have to trust me. If you won’t help me, I could send this photo to many

 who would prefer to sell her to the white slave trade just as payback, or maybe

 to—”

 He twisted her hand and forced her to her knees. Despite her pain, she

 didn’t cry out.

 He made her kneel before him, her beautiful face glaring at him as he

 finished her threat for her with: “Maybe to *El Commandante de Los Federales*

in Guadalajara? The Mexicans want to even the score with me, too. Would you

 throw my niece to those wretched animals?”

 From her knees, Chanteuse saw that she had aroused him. Her dark skin

 glistened with perspiration as she glared at him, and his nostrils flared inhaling

 her provocative scent.

 “Not without regret, Thomas, but you leave me no choice if you won’t

 help me,” she reasoned. “I must have those letters. Nothing else matters to me.”

 He jerked her back to her feet and shoved her with his elbow. Falling

 back onto the table, she scattered dishes shattering onto the floor. He slammed

 his fist against the table, rattling the dishes that remained.

 Zeena stormed in from the kitchen with a butcher knife, but Chanteuse

 waved her off. Reluctantly, Zeena left with eyes aglow.

 Chanteuse seemed to be enjoying their rough physical exchange, getting

 to her feet without bothering to adjust her dress or to cover one of her breasts

 inadvertently exposed after their vigorous tussle. Unshaken, she moved towards

 Larkin. He glared at her as she covered his fist with her soft, caressing hand.

 “You must begin to help me at once, Thomas, because I’ve already

 begun to help you.”

 “How?”

 “I’ve got my excuse now to spend more time with you, so Jasparre

 won’t suspect we’re working together against him.”

 “You take a lot for granted,” Larkin warned. “Get cute with Jasparre,

 and he and his posse, more than likely, will kill us both,”

 “I know Jasparre like the back of my hand. I have nothing to fear

 from him if you play along. We need to spend much time together in order

 to succeed.”

 “What excuse could we have for being together?” he asked.

 Seductively, she rubbed the back of her hand against his tense neck.

 “Jasparre thinks you’re giving me inside information about DEA operations

 in the United States that could open up new pipelines for him.”

 “For all I know, maybe that’s precisely your game.”

 She pursed her lips and shook her head.

 “How can I possibly justify our relationship to my DEA peers?” he

 protested.

 “Your reputation as a womanizer precedes you. Obviously, you’re

 grieving for your wife, and lonely in Jamaica, so it will be apparent to

 everyone that we’ve become lovers.”

 Larkin’s eyes widened as she nuzzled his ear.

 “That won’t fly,” he objected. “My boss in Kingston is a hump-and-a-

 half and he’ll never buy it.”­

 “Your niece’s fate depends on your resourcefulness. Aren’t you a

 resourceful man, Thomas, enough to get us both what we want? What you

 want most, your niece, is safe for now. One of the files in James Riley’s

 office contains precisely what I need—get it for me. Quickly!”

 “You’re out to hang me six ways to Sunday. He’s my boss—the

 bastard who’s already got it in for me.”

 She shrugged without emotion, “Just get rid of him.”

 “If only I could,” he said, pondering that possibility with a grin.

 “Riley is in collusion with your CIA against my family,” she said.

 “How’s that possible?” Larkin argued.

 “Riley is on their payroll, and so is his flunky, Agent Trini Paino.

 “We’ve had CIA moles in the DEA before, especially overseas.

 Why Paino?”

 “They offered Riley a bounty to retrieve or destroy my mother’s letters.

 Paino gets a small percentage—still worth twenty-five thousand dollars.”

 “Can you prove that?” he demanded.

 “You’ll find the proof in Riley’s files,” she assured him.

 “Suppose I believe you. I get your letters, and you deliver Jasparre to

 me with all the evidence I need to put him away—big time. Won’t Jasparre’s

 posse come after you as a traitor to their leader? Won’t they do to you what

 they did to your mother?”

 “When you cut off a snake’s head, its coils become harmless. Most of

 his posse are loyal to me already. With my mother’s letters, I’ll have even more

 to offer *my* followers, and to you.”

 “How do I know you won’t just take over Jasparre’s cartel at my expense?”

 “Trust me. The wealth from my mother’s letters will be greater than all

 the narcotics cartels combined, now, and in the future.”

 “Trust you? With Dawn’s safety at stake, what choice do I have?”

 “None.”

 “Tell me how you were able to enter Jasparre’s inner circle when the

 DEA doubts he even exists?”

 “Guy Jasparre is real and extremely dangerous. Like me, he’s a *maroon*.

 When they killed my mother, he offered me his protection as consolation. By

 mutual necessity, we became intimate.”

 “Why betray him now?” Larkin charged.

 “I was a teenager at the time. Years later, I learned that he’d killed my

 mother. I entrenched my emotions with him back then, but I’ve waited ten

 years for my revenge. Jasparre is someone to reckon with. His influence grows

 worldwide, even as we speak.”

 “How?”

 “He’ll take Jamaica by terror, changing it from a drug-transporting

 haven to a drug-production center. His posse network runs deep into your

 cities assuring his ease of mass distribution for his products.”

 “OK. You’ve got my attention,” Larkin perked. “What’s his timing?”

 Zeena poked her head into the room, and Chanteuse nodded. “When I

 have my mother’s legacy in hand, Jasparre’s timing won’t matter if I deliver

 him to you personally. But, unless you agree to help me, Thomas, I have

 nothing more to say to you and the chance of getting your niece back will be

 nill.”

 Chanteuse walked towards the foyer. Larkin followed, but for a second

 he looked in the mirror and saw Carmen’s reflection again seated at the end of

 the table. When he turned, he saw only an empty chair. Distracted, he stumbled

 into Zeena.

 “Ms. Chanteuse says, you go!” she snapped at him.

 “Lighten up, Zeena-honey,” he said with a frown. “I’m on my way out.”

 Chanteuse waited for Larkin at the front door, opened it to the steamy,

 lush English garden to the security gate, where Norman waited.

 “Where’s your car?” Chanteuse asked.

 “As I said, it broke down, so I—”

 As he tried to stall for time, the beat‑up station wagon that served as

 the DEA’s company car, nicknamed “The Battlewagon,” pulled up at the gate

 with a screeching halt and its engine knocking under the hood. The young

 Jamaican driver got out and opened the door for him.

 “I had it repaired during our meeting,” Larkin told her. “When can I

 reach you, and where?”

 “I’ll be in touch. But I have something special for you, just so you won’t

 forget the terms of our agreement.” She stepped closer with one of her high-heeled

 sandals wrapping around his shoe, heel-to-heel. She gave him a lingering, open-

 mouthed kiss and a surprising, parting swirl of her tongue with a muffled yummy

 sound.

 Caught off guard, he broke from her embrace and licked his lips, savoring

 her sweet, unvarnished taste. “What if someone saw us?” he warned her.

 “That’s the idea. The trees have eyes.” She nodded to a distant hill thick

 with tropical vegetation, where a sunburst gleamed off a telephoto lens. “If not

 the CIA, it’s British Intelligence, an oxymoron if they are stupid enough to believe

 they can steal my property without a fight. Find my mother’s letters, Thomas. Do it

 quickly. I can protect your niece, but only for so long.”

 Larkin frowned and got into The Battlewagon. As she turned back

 towards the mansion, he wiped his lips with a finger and saw Chanteuse’s

 lipstick on it. Wiping off the rest of her lipstick with his handkerchief, he

 noted the smudge on it from the teacup on the balcony was the same color.

 Watching Chanteuse walk away, he gave a low whistle.

 Norman grinned. “Did you get what you came for, Mr. Larkin?”

 He took a deep breath and winked. “Yes, but much more than I’d

 bargained for.”

 As they sped away from the Rabelle estate, Larkin’s rearview mirror

 caught another flash from the distant hill. He wondered if Chanteuse was

 right, that it was the CIA or British Secret Service watching their moves,

 or could Guy Jasparre be verifying her claims that she could persuade him to

 provide inside information to help him bypass the DEA’s law enforcement

 network. The chance of saving Dawn was slim, and his tour in Jamaica felt

 like a no-win situation—except for Chanteuse and her kiss that would keep

 him awake all night hungering for more.

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