**CHANTEUSE** ©

 a Tom Larkin

 international thriller

 **by**

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  **Episode Three**

 **CHAPTER 6 –OLD HABITS DIE HARD**

 Larkin drove The Battlewagon to his office on the second floor above

 the local Constabulary precinct on Sam Sharpe Square in Montego Bay. He

 parked beside his red Porsche convertible, then greeted several Jamaican

 constables clad in white uniforms and helmets as he entered the building at

 the rear. He perspired as he ascended the stairs and met Major Witt on the

 landing.

 “Norman said you had a close call when Chanteuse returned early.

 Was I exaggerating, mon? She’s a triple threat, right?”

 He nodded. “You’d better get my scuba gear off the estate, I don’t want

Chanteuse to know how I found access to her mansion in case I have to go back

there the same way again.”

 “You were lucky the first time. I wouldn’t try it again. Have you seen

 your face, Tom?”

 “My face? Why?”

 “You have the *duppy-eye*, mon. Tell me about it sometime. You must

 have seen something at the mansion you’ve never seen before, maybe a ghost.”

 “Nothing a stiff drink couldn’t cure. I believe only in what I can touch.

 Whatever the other stuff was, I don’t care. I believe in Chanteuse Rabelle.” He

 took the lipstick-stained handkerchief from his pocket and sniffed it. “That’s

 one extremely tangible woman.”

 “Be careful. Where Chanteuse goes, what you saw there today goes with

 her. Her mother is part of her, just like a remora suckerfish clinging to a shark.”

 “Thanks for the warning, Theo, but I have no choice.”

 “We all have choices, but sometimes we make the wrong ones. Good

 luck, mon.”

 They parted, then Larkin went up another flight to his DEA office

 where he paused and quietly listened outside the door to Agent Trini Paino

 talking on the phone:

 “Jim? It’s Trini. Larkin met Chanteuse at the mansion. He could

 lead us right to the letters. I’ve recorded Larkin in a clinch with her.

 Chanteuse must know where her father hid the letters. She’s waiting until

 she thinks it’s safe, but it’ll never be safe for her. Larkin has another agenda.

 “I don’t buy his buddy‑buddy crap with Chief Barnes. We can’t let

 him screw up our deal. I overheard Larkin talking to Major Witt of the

 Constabulary’s Narcotics Division. He’s trying to pass off Chanteuse as his

 informant on the Jasparre case. Major Witt has never collaborated with us

 before. It stinks. OK, Jim. I’ll tell Larkin to report to Kingston tomorrow

 for your meeting with the ambassador at nine AM.”

 Larkin heard Paino pacing, so he rattled his key in the door as if

 he’d just arrived and hadn’t heard a thing. The small, cluttered office had

 two desks, a water cooler, gray file cabinets, and certificates on the walls.

 A large photo showed Larkin with two Americans, Tim Barnes and Billy

 McCann, Larkin’s deceased partner. The three DEA agents posed in

 Guadalajara with six Mexican *Federales*. With no air conditioning, only

 a huge ceiling fan circulated the muggy air above Larkin’s desk. Sliding

 glass doors to a small balcony overlooked the bustling square, but it was

 always too hot to go out there.

 Paino turned to Larkin. “You just missed Riley’s call. He wants you

 to report to the Kingston office tomorrow morning—ten o’clock sharp.”

 Larkin shuffled through the mail on his desk. “Ten? That’s an odd

 time for Riley. The Foreign Service Report is due soon. Something’s up.

 Hell, good chance to schmooze the Ambassador and kiss ass. I could take

 lessons from you in that department, Paino.”

 “Sharing this office with you wasn’t my idea.” Paino said with a frown.

 “You’re an open book, Paino. If you tell me ten o’clock, Riley must’ve

 said nine. Keep it up. It’ll backfire in your face soon enough.”

 “Like your partner, Billy McCann? Blew up in his face in Mexico,

 didn’t it? Or was it Ecuador? Wherever?” He pointed to the photo on the wall.

 “Don’t ever talk shit to me about my partner,” Larkin warned.

 “I heard that McCann put a nine-millimeter Glock down his throat and

blew his brains all over you, Larkin. Tough act to follow. That’s the word on

you, Larkin. McCann couldn’t live up to your standards, could he? Just a kid

out of Basic, and the Mexicans scared the fucking life out of him, huh? Or was

it the Serranos in Quito? Somebody scared McCann. I think it was you, Larkin.

You scared that kid to death.”

 “Pressure from Headquarters drove him over the edge, not me. No

 complaints from me. I couldn’t have asked for a better partner than Billy

 McCann. He was practically my clone. We were a team . . . until he got

 carried away with some crazy-ass scheme cooked up by one of his

 confidential informants. He let himself get emotionally involved with

 her. She was what did him in, his CI, not me.”

 “Only he didn’t have buddies at the top at Quantico, like you did, to

 cover his ass whenever he screwed up. You’ve always been a loner, from what

 I hear, Larkin. You leave a stack of body bags in your wake on every assignment.

 McCann must’ve made the mistake of thinking your friendship was genuine. No

 wonder he cooked up his own gig and went off the deep end.”

 Larkin huffed “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

 “Keep working alone for all I care. You want backup? Call on Georgie

 Franklin, not me,” Paino said. “You’re as screwed up as he was, setting himself

 up in deep-cover in Negril then disappearing in a cloud of ganja. Why don’t

 you join him and become one of the enemy? You probably know where he is

 and you’re keeping it to yourself and not sharing that information with Riley.”

 “Finding Franklin is *your* assignment, Paino.”

 “Since when?”

 Larkin handed Paino a cable.

 “Since now. Your official orders on Special Agent Franklin are to

bring him in from deep-cover, arrest him, and send him back to Quantico for

a hearing.”

 “On whose authority?” Paino balked. “I don’t take orders from you.

 “Read the bottom line.”

 “Timothy Barnes? He’s the new Foreign Office Chief. So you’re really

tight with this fat cat after all.”

 Pointing at the photo on the wall, Larkin said, “Mexico. Tim owes me.”

 “How nice for you. What’s the beef on Franklin if he’s still in deep-cover?”

 “He began as a minority golden boy the DEA needed to put on the fast

 track. Now he’s AWOL and a liability. I have my own inside source on the

 Jasparre case. Franklin’s no longer needed. Bring him in for debriefing.”

 “Riley says Jasparre’s a myth. He put you on the case only to prove it.

 It’s a decoy just to waste our man power. The only real *dope* involved in the

 Jasparre case is you, Larkin. You’re following false information from an

 untrustworthy source.”

 “We’ll see.”

 “Who’s your informant?” Paino inquired.

 “You don’t need to know. If Jasparre is out there, I’ll nail him. Meantime,

 you track down Franklin in Negril. One source spotted him at the Great Morass

 three days ago.”

 “What if I do find him?”

 “Shoot him, for all I care.” Larkin shrugged. “Just be sure to put every

 detail in the monthly Foreign Service Report. Remember, *paper* seems to be

 more important than arrests to the brass at Headquarters. Apparently they

 have a shortage of toilet paper at Quantico and need us to fill their quota.”

 After Paino left in a huff, Larkin answered Chief Barnes’s call from

 Headquarters in the States. “Montego Imports…Larkin speaking.”

 “It’s Tim. How’s Jamaica?”

 “I’ve got a good lead on this Guy Jasparre character.”

 “I knew you would. If you need any pull from Headquarters, just call

 me. Any luck rounding up Agent Franklin?”

 “Got my assistant on it, thanks to you. If my informant is for real, I’m

 sure I’ll be crossing paths with Franklin soon—if he’s still alive.”

 “Watch your back, Tom. The Kingston office is a bed of vipers. I’m

 counting on you to get the job done. I have no new information on Dawn.

 When I do, you’ll hear directly from me. DNA and fingerprints at your

 house in Virginia were negative, except for Vera’s yours and Dawn’s.”

 “What about Vera’s real estate office?”

 “Lots of DNA there, including sperm from the office manager,

 Sam Lowery, on Realtor Susan Kirkwood’s blouse. Apparently, they’d

 been amorously engaged when they were attacked in Lowery’s car outside

 the office. The perpetrator killed them in the parking lot just to get to Vera.”

 “No DNA on Vera? Nothing under her fingernails from the struggle?”

 “The Feds found some foreign DNA in Vera’s mouth, but it was

 saliva. We figured she might have kissed the boss goodnight, but the

 sample doesn’t match Lowery’s or Kirkwood’s DNA. It had to have

 come from her killer, maybe someone she knew well enough for a good-

 night kiss. We’ve put a run on it to no avail. If it’s from her killer, someone

 might have a hired an assassin with no criminal record.”

 “Any chance Vera had a boyfriend that I didn’t know about?”

 Larkin asked with pain. “Maybe that’s why she wanted the divorce.”

 “No indications of that, “Barnes tried to assure him. “Everyone

who’d seen her since you’d left for Thailand said she was always with

Dawn when she wasn’t at work. Sorry, Tom. So far, that’s all we’ve got.”

 “OK, Tim. I’ll concentrate on the Jasparre case until you have more.”

 “Are you sure you’re OK, Tom?”

 “Off the booze for over a month, right as rain, and keeping lean and

 mean.”

 “At least you won’t need to worry about any Mexican hit squads

 finding you there.”

 “If you think so, Tim, but I know better. I’ll be in touch.”

 Larkin hung up and took a framed photo from his desk drawer of Vera

 with Dawn and her mother taken months before Vera’s sister died of breast

 cancer. He stroked Vera’s face with his thumb and swallowed hard, then he

 turned to look over his shoulder at Billy McCann’s broad grin in Mexico

 months before he died.

 The fan whirred overhead like a swarm of bees, and he longed for a

 drink to fill the sudden void in his life with no one to come home to again—

 as if he ever took the time to come home, unless Vera had one of her games

 planned. If he didn’t come home on those special nights, his ass was grass.

 He had enough games at work, but Vera’s role playing beat the alternative

 cure—some expensive, mind-altering drug to keep her mentally balanced

 between the extremes of euphoria and the deep depression that made her go

 off in violent rages that were more harmful to her than to anyone else. She’d

 bang her head against a wall and try to pull her hair out by the roots and he’d

 have to hold her close all night as she whimpered and wailed with no way

 for him to console her.

 Maybe with him gone, she’d decided to take the prescribed drugs.

 They would have kept her stable for her guardianship interview for Dawn,

 but had he known that Vera’s sister had died, he’d never have left Vera

 to raise Dawn on her own without him around to provide some balance,

 even as off balance he could be. Now, none of that mattered. He just had

 to get Dawn back safely, no matter what it would take. That was a given,

 for Vera’s sake, if not his own.

 With a deep breath and long exhale, he phoned Theo. “I’m putting

 Jasparre on hold till Monday and going to my house in Ocho Rios for the

 weekend. I need some time alone to sort things out. Meet me five o’clock at

 Calico Jack’s—just for *one* beer. If you’re with me, Theo, I can be sure that’s

 all I’ll drink tonight.”

 “You’re putting the burden of your drinking on me, now, Tom.” Theo

 protested.

 “One beer, Theo—Calico Jack’s at five. Please, be there.”

**CHAPTER 7– CALICO JACK’S**

 Smoky with loud reggae music, Calico Jack’s was a strip bar.

 Wearing off‑duty casuals, Theo entered a side door to the club with

 Larkin. His high Constabulary position and the protection he provided

 for the club’s owner gave Theo special treatment. Most of the clientele

 were white male tourists barely over twenty-one, but the Constabulary

 controlled Calico Jack’s as a front for a high‑class call‑girl service for

 rich businessmen, politicians, and diplomats. It had been the same under

 the Brits, so the native powers-that-be took over with their independence.

 A waiter with dreadlocks led them to a prime corner table that had

 the best view of the room. He set two chilled bottles of Red Stripe beer

 before them. The two men clicked their bottles with a nod, then Theo

 chugged his while Larkin poured his into a frozen glass and stared at the

 foamy head.

 “Why here, Tom?” Theo asked.

 “George Franklin hung out here. From reports I’ve read, he found

 access to our mystery man here. Jasparre and his posse, too.”

 “His posse imports the most-attractive women from all over the

 Caribbean,” Theo told him. ”What you don’t know is that this is one of

 Chanteuse Rabelle’s many *silent* partnerships. She personally selects each

 woman procured for Calico Jack’s. Chanteuse inherited this place from

 her mother. Before she was old enough to realize that Jasparre had killed

 her mother, she found herself attached to him at the hip with no way out.”

 “I figure these young American tourists provide leads to supply

 product to the States, Canada, and Europe,” Larkin assessed as he surveyed

 the clientele.

 “Could be a profitable by-product, I’m sure,” Theo agreed.

 “Does Chanteuse ever come here?”

 “She’s a hands-on kind of girl. She probably already knows you’re

 here.”

 “How so?”

 “You’re about to get her *special* treatment usually reserved for high-

 end executive types,” Theo nodded towards two topless Jamaican dancers

 gyrating to the reggae beat as they came from the bar towards them.

 Both women put their hands inside Larkin’s shirt as their bare breasts

 quivered in his face. Their eyes widened when they reached down his pants

 and felt his arousal.

 “Want to give me dee big bamboo, mon?” the taller, darker stripper

 whispered, probing his ear with the warm tip of her tongue laced with the

 sweet aroma of 150 proof Jamaican rum, a two-jigger blinder, even for a

 seasoned drinker like Larkin.

 “Sorry, love,” he said winking, “but I already gave at the office.”

 Petite with caramel skin, the other stripper firmly squeezed his crotch.

 “Enough here for dee two of us. You like dee *ménage* *à trois*, mon?”

 “She’s too small, mon,” the tall one said with a frown. “You give her

 an inch, but I take dee mile.” She shoved the smaller dancer off Larkin’s lap,

 and his glass of beer fell to the floor with a crash.

 The waiter apologized, quickly setting a fresh bottle in front of him

 and motioning for the strippers to leave. Larkin eyed the cold bottle with beer

 foam oozing down its side. He took a long pull, savoring the taste of brew

 that he’d missed for over a month. He quickly downed the rest and wiped

 the yeasty foam from his lips.

 Glumly, Theo watched him. “That’s it for you, Tom. While you’re in

 Ocho Rios for the weekend, I’ll keep an eye on the Rabelle mansion and give

 you a full report when you’re back at your office on Monday.”

 “Thanks. I haven’t been home in a week,” he realized, having slept at

 the office or in The Battle Wagon staking out his leads on Jasparre.

 As the two men stood to leave, two other strippers stopped Larkin by

 the side door.

 “Hey. Don’t leave, mon. We’re just getting warmed up.” She grabbed

 his wrist and slid his hand inside her G‑string, unhooking it on the side where

 patrons had stuffed twenty dollar bills. Putting the money in her hair clip, she

 let the G‑string slip off into the palm of his hand while the other stripper

 displayed her Caribbean treasures up close and personal—*for his eyes only.*

 “We won’t bite you, mon. You’ll see. Caribbean women are dee

 hottest. Once you’ve had Jamaican, you’ll know what’s shakin’.”

 “I’ll take a rain-check.” He slipped each stripper a twenty as he

 clenched the fragrant G‑string in his teeth. Putting his wallet back in his

 pants, he tossed the delicate G-string back to the stripper it had come from.

 He nodded good‑bye to Theo and walked towards the exit just as

 the cigar girl called to him. Recognizing her as Tuti, an informant he used

 when he first arrived in Jamaica, he walked towards her.

 Slight and vivacious, she was twenty-five with a figure that looked

 like a heart reflected in a pond, top to bottom. One heart was upright, swelling

 at her breasts, and the other upside down, swelled at her firm buttocks. The

 two hearts met at her eighteen inch waist, which was small enough for him

 to put both hands around with fingertips touching. The image of the pond

 came to him as his vision wavered. He felt dizzy for a moment, as if he were

 underwater.

 “Tuti? I forgot you work here part-time,” he said, kissing her warm

 cheek, dimpled with a grin.

 “Just three nights a week,” she said. “You promised to call. We have

 unfinished business. I’m still waiting for you to give me the business.”

 His vision distorted, and the sound of the reggae music wound down

 to a slow speed. His judgment faltered as he followed Tuti to the parking lot

 but, when he saw two men grab her and take her away, he was powerless to

 stop them. He imagined her attackers were Mexican hit men come to settle

 the score from his Guadalajara days.

 Then he saw Billy McCann committing suicide in fear of the Mexicans

 catching up with him. Moving on wobbly legs, Larkin stumbled.

 Two men carried him to his Porsche and dumped him in the passenger

 seat. Glaring, female eyes peered at him fiercely from the rear‑view mirror.

 Seductive and threatening, they looked like Chanteuse’s, only darker. He saw

 them before—in the portrait of her mother.

 That was the last image in his mind before he blacked out and his

 mind whirled in a hallucinogenic kaleidoscope of emotions and memories

 that seemed to sweep him away towards Death’s door….

 **CHAPTER 8 – WET DREAMS**

 He’d paid ninety grand for his brilliant red casket months before some-

 one planned his sailor’s wake. His coffin cruised at 120 mph with its dash lit up

 like a jet’s cockpit, The key indicator glowed on his red Porsche convertible’s

 digital clock—3:00 AM—the darkest moment before dawn, but he had other

 plans. Reckless, his Porsche hydroplaned northbound on Manhattan’s flooded

 FDR Drive through sheets of pouring rain.

 His drive home would take an hour with minimal visibility in the torrential

 downpour. The flooded Harlem River Drive leading to the George Washington

 Bridge concealed potholes rattling the fine suspension of his German-made wet

 dream. His greater problem—DUI—a given his killers must have counted on.

 They must have drugged his last whiskey at Rao’s, just to raise the

 prelude’s tempo to his evening dirge. With the bad weather, his inebriation,

 and hallucinations from a subtle drug gradually taking hold of his senses, the

 distance to home lengthened as time became his enemy.

 Vera had warned him she’d kill him the next time he stumbled in after

 3:00 AM, especially when she made special plans. It was no idle threat. He

 knew she might kill him in a fit of passion. From start to finish, death lurked

 in the shadows as he raced homeward to quell her fear and fulfill her ardent

 thirst for him. Larkin already had two strikes against him, but only he could

 fathom the third—his bent on self‑destruction.

 If all went as planned, Harbor Patrol would find Tom Larkin dead

 behind the wheel after hitting the muddy bottom of the East River, or any

 other river. The place wasn’t important. Someone just wanted him gone,

 Stateside or overseas, no matter what.

 He still felt sharp as a tack an hour after downing his third

 double Maker’s Mark. In his mind, past, present, and future were clear.

 Remembering his hat size, Social Security number, and the measurements

 of a dozen bimbos was no problem, even if he couldn’t remember their

 names. He could read his driver’s license number from three paces,

 backwards, upside down, with either eye or both—no glasses needed

 for dead-eye Larkin.

 He was sharp-shooter classified with the Marines and could hit

 the heart in the center of an ace from twenty yards with an automatic

 pistol seven times in four seconds—but never after a fourth whisky,

 that was too much to expect, even of himself, unless someone’s life

 depended on it. Maybe for once, it was *his* life that depended on it

 rather than some strange femme fatale who piqued his worst primeval

 instincts to charm and possess.

 He’d been sharp for two hours before he started driving, but an

 hour after his last belt of Jack Daniels, the first whiskey kicked in with the

 drugs compounding his usual buzz. Seeing Vera as more dangerous than

 the road, he sped recklessly despite the hazardous conditions. He had no idea

 anyone wanted to kill him for anything more than his flagrant infidelities.

 To his right, the black depths of the East River were a fatal attraction.

 He could be a loser on two counts, but there was a third alternative, the

 loser’s hat‑trick—call‑strike-three without even taking a swat back at his

 killers just to stay alive for one more hour. He was his own worst enemy and

 knew from the start of the ignition that he might be found dead by dawn on

 all three counts.

 “Bastards,” he grumbled, cursing his so‑called buddies who’d let

 him get behind the wheel after he’d been pumping drinks for hours. Their

 names escaped him, thinking: *So much for clarity. Sharp as a rose thorn?*

 *My ass!*

 Where were those faceless phantoms? They were friends enough to

 buy his last whiskey in a dingy saloon, yet, they’d turned their backs when

 he squinted to read the address on his parking stub. Had they callously

 watched him stumbling to his Porsche trying desperately to get home

 alive to Vera? Even if only for one last time.

 *So much for twenty-twenty fucking vision*, he thought. *Vera will kill*

 *me if I’m not out of here. What time you got, Pal? I can’t even read my*

 *damn watch.”*

 His mind and car sped out of control at a mile a minute as the East

 River beckoned. Who could ever see clearly in this dim twilight between

 Happy Hour and an untimely death?

 He shrugged as he imagined seeing his hands clutching the steering

 wheel, but without flesh—only bone. In the rearview mirror, he caught the

 malicious grins of three Mexican banditos who’d cut out his heart as soon

 as spit.

 “Fuck off!” he shouted, shaking their image from his mind. Adjusting

 the mirror to be sure they were gone, he saw his own reflection as a skeleton

 and swerved towards the river. More than just a nightmare, with new depths

 of horror, this recurring dream had begun during his first overseas gig in

 Guadalajara when he was green, right out of DEA Basic.

 *Some wet dream*, he thought, eyeing the black river’s treacherous

 currents, and knowing his propensity to let booze make him think with his

 dick regardless of any threats to life and limb. In the past, he’d often relied

 on his dark sense of humor to carry him home through this mental mire.

 As blinding rain pounded against his fogged windshield, the Porsche

 fish‑tailed sporadically against the torrents. His reflexes jolted with puddles

 gushing under the floorboards. Every wave jerked the steering wheel from his

 hands. Clenching his jaw, he felt his neck knotting. He needed a smoke, but

 that had to wait till he got home to Vera. How many hours of their volatile

 marriage had he spent trying to get home to her? How few hours had he

 actually spent with her? The black hooded specter of his guilt reaped grimly

 towards him.

 As a federal narc, he’d never faced his drinking problem early on.

 He’d been in this same danger before, but each time, it was worse than the

 last. He often tried to blame it on his personal limbo. Stuck on that endless

 plateau called Government Service Level-13, he saw his destiny—ever to

 labor, never to manage—a constant sore point with Vera. If he couldn’t

 reach government management level with its stepped-up benefits and a

 better chance to get off the streets to run a city office, Vera wanted a

 divorce.

 “Fat fucking chance,” his words hissed between his taut lips. He

 decided years before that management level was a status more readily

 attained by minorities, women, and an assortment of assholes and ass

 kissers. Just thinking about it pissed him off.

 He hammered the dashboard with his fist and cursed the pulsing

 wipers. That faulty blade he’d forgotten to replace obstructed his view with

 an oily, horizontal streak at eye level. The wipers squeaked ineffectively

 against the deluge. Exasperated, he turned them off and focused, peering

 through the huge magnifying glass the rain made of his windshield.

 “Prescription windshields!” He huffed. *Should’ve applied for the*

 *damn patent years ago. Get out of this shit racket for good. Keep the mind*

 *working. Don’t black out. Damn, that river looks black. At least the water*

 *won’t be cold in August. Hang onto that comforting thought.*

 His heaving breath smelled foul with garlic from the seafood

 special he’d eaten at…. Where had he been all day? The burn in his

 chest came from two, maybe three Irish coffees? That was earlier at

 O’Lunney’s. He was sure, because the coffee was strong and the cream

 didn’t sink*.*

 *Not a girly drink with cream from a can and green fucking*

 *sprinkles on top. Where am I heading again? Home? Got to find the*

 *GWB and get to Jersey. Get home to Vera before it’s too late.*

 Suddenly, he faced a line of red taillights. Smack in front of him

 were ten cars stranded in two feet of water, all casualties of the Upper

 Eastside regatta. He tried to tune in Shadow Traffic reports but forgot

 what time it was and found only Spanish-speaking stations. Confused,

 he toyed with the idea of meandering through Spanish Harlem to find

 higher, drier ground.

 *He thought. Screw it! Why the fuck not?*

 Instinctively, he slid his right hand down to his right calf to the

 Velcro ankle holster to make sure he hadn’t been careless with anything

 other more his liver. He felt his .38 five-shot pistol, a reminder of his

 professional responsibilities. His holstered piece honed the sharp edge of

 his avoidance of home, mostly the shortcomings of Stateside assignments

 versus overseas tours where an agent could live like a prince on foreign soil,

 especially tropical gigs.

 *There’s something great about rum at noon, women in thongs under*

 *swaying palm trees, and a houseful of servants to pick up after you*..

 As he drove deeper into Spanish Harlem, the billboards and store

 fronts in Spanish reminded him of his first days in South America. He let

 those pleasant memories blot out his fear of getting a flat or some fine *puta*

 fingering him as an undercover narc to the cartel, because he’d busted her

 brother for possession with intent to distribute.

 Lyle, his DEA boss in Cali, had taught him how to play the game.

 “Forget all you’ve learned in language school. After a couple of

 months, these Colombian women will have you speaking like a native, and

 you’ll curse the day you have to go home. Welcome to fucking paradise.”

 Larkin remembered the file drawer in Lyle’s office with its neat row

 of envelopes filed alphabetically—Anita, Carmen, Dolores, Elena, Fatima,

 Gloria, Helena, Inez . . . Zenobia. At first, he hadn’t understood when he

 watched Lyle removing his wedding ring, watch, and gold neck chain,

 then replacing them with other jewelry from one of the tagged envelopes.

 “These women are grateful, and they want to stake their claim on

 you. Let them know up front that you’re married. Having kids helps. As long

 as they each believe, besides your wife, that she’s your main squeeze, then

 everything’s copasetic. The tricky part is keeping all the jewelry organized.

 It helps to have a system, because the real challenge comes with trying to see

 each one every week without any of them realizing the others exist. That

 takes stamina and guts, but keeps you fine-tuned. By comparison, dealing

 with the drug traffic’s a picnic. ”

 At 3:30 AM, he came to a squealing halt at a red light. Seeing more

 wind than rain, he lowered his window and lit a cigarette. He watched for

 oncoming traffic from the left and considered shooting the light. If stopped

 by a cop, he’d flash his federal shield to his fellow *brother of the spear*.

 Before he could go through the light, a young woman darted in front

 of his car and struggled to hold her bright-red umbrella against the wind. He

 watched her lithe figure pass in front of him, then she suddenly turned back

 towards him.

 “Take me with you,” she said in Spanish.

 Had she spoken, he wondered, or was it the wind? Did he imagine

 she’d spoken to him? Was it just some libidinous wishful thinking? His

 focus was clear, but could he trust his perceptions?

 The wind blew her umbrella inside out and wrenched it from her

 grasp. She stepped closer to his open window. Her dark eyes and child‑like

 expression tore at Larkin’s soul and conjured a thousand passions, each

 unique and more irresistible than the last.

 “*No es possible, mi amante*,” he said to her. How many times had he

 told each woman whose name he’d printed on the neatly filed envelopes in

 Cali: “That’s not possible, my love. You can’t go Stateside with me.”

 *Déjà fucking vu,* he thought, shaking his head and shuddering. Was

 he really returning home to the States? Home many times would he have to

 relive that day in his mind? Could he ever leave paradise behind? Had he

 already left? Could he ever get past that day?

 As the alcohol and hallucinogen partied in his head, the woman startled

him, placing her hand on his arm. She leaned over to speak to him with her

cleavage close to his face, he couldn’t raise the window.

 *Why hasn’t the light changed to green?* *I’ll be late. Vera will kill me.*

 The young woman moved around to the passenger door and slid beside

 him. Her bright pink dress revealed her supple anatomy within each fold. The

musky scent of her flesh beneath her translucent, rain‑soaked garment wafted to

his nostrils and piquing his desire.

 “I live a few blocks from here,” she said, removing the bright red kerchief

 from her long, black hair, then she faced him with a smile.

 He lost all sense of time. Was he trapped in the *barrio* of Spanish Harlem?

 Had he come home, or was he locked into the fantasies of overseas gigs forever? He

 brushed his fingers across the dashboard, something tangible to bring him home from

 South America and support his mercurial sense of self‑esteem.

 With the rain suddenly pouring down again and the woman close beside

 him, his dim view of store windows and billboards in Spanish made him wonder

 if he was still in Cali. Her scent and the firmness of her warmth in his grasp made

 him doubt he’d ever escape this recurring dream.

 “We’ll go to the spot.” His voice resounded in his head like an abysmal echo.

 Soon they were crossing a bridge, but with the gale of relentless rain, he

 couldn’t see how high they were above the river. Were they driving to New Jersey

 across the GWB, or crossing Rio Cauca from Cali to Palmira? When they arrived,

 he relaxed and gave in to his passion, riding on a telepathic stream towards what felt

 like a safe rendezvous.

 Too aroused for caution, he threw his clothes onto the floor in a tangled heap

 and played the shell game with her bra—two black lacy shells, his hands covering both.

 Towards the bed behind him, he pulled her back on top of him. Oblivious to the .38 still

 holstered to his ankle, he nuzzled her warm breasts, sweet with a hint of salt from her

 perspiration. Her blood boiled just below the surface of her smooth brown skin. She

 hovered playfully on top of him, then slid down until he felt her warm breath, a light

 kiss, and the lap of her silky tongue repeating with a rhythm that quickly set him straight.

 “*De seguridad*?” she asked, her voice sounding as if reverberating from a deep

 well.

 “Safety?” he repeated. His face hurt when he frowned, the morning‑after head-

 ache laying the foundation for a hangover, like a twenty-foot piling driven into sand as

 he wondered, *Why is she worried about safety?*

 Orally occupied, she tapped his ankle holster with her thumb.

 He carefully removed the holster and gun.

 “What did you touch on your gun?” she asked. Her expression tantalizing as she

 fluttered her long tongue with a serpentine gesture. “Show me how your gun works.”

 “I misunderstood you. It has no safety. It’s a custom job. I thought you were

 asking about condoms, not guns. Even with a safety, guns, like women, are never safe.”

 “*Claro*.” She smirked with agreement.

 Larkin returned the revolver to its holster and draped it over the headboard.

She coaxed him down beside her, stroking his neck and shoulders.

 Peaceful and comfortable, he dozed off, hearing her say with a whisper,

 “You’ve had too much to drink. Sleep first. We’ll play later . . .”

 Drifting, he recalled that final day in Cali. He’d sent ahead all their belongings,

 including his Porsche, to his next assignment. Vera had been so eager to return to the

 States. Bored with the social life at the Consulate, she would’ve gone anywhere that the

 natives spoke English. He had agreed, but that alphabetical file and the faces and figures

 that went with each name beckoned him to stay. He knew he needed to purge himself,

 make it up to Vera for his liaisons, make a fresh start with sobriety and even a futile

 attempt at faithfulness. It all swirled in his aching head from the Mickey in his beer at

 Calico Jack’s, but he wasn’t sure, even if he wanted to, if he’d ever wake up. . . .

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