**CHANTEUSE** ©

 a Tom Larkin

 international thriller

 **by**

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  **Episode Four**

 **CHAPTER 9 – COYOTE DATE**

 The ringing of his iPhone jolted Larkin from his dream.

 *I got lucky with this rose from Spanish Harlem,* he thought. *The sheets*

 *feel crispy clean, no roaches in the bed, and I don’t hear rats scampering in*

 *the walls.*

 He felt her body beside him in the darkness as he answered his phone.

 “Who is it?” she asked softly from behind him.

 He lay on his side in bed. In the darkness, her nails clawed at his lower

 back, then came from behind and around to his chest. Her mouth nuzzled playfully

 behind his ear.

 Annoyed, he shook his head to shush her, then to the caller he said, “I’m

 sorry. I can’t help you tonight. Just do what we did last time.”

 He covered the mouthpiece and said over his shoulder, “It’s Miller. That lady

 judge in Miami again. Putting the Delgado brothers up for twenty-five years wasn’t

 worth this continued attachment. Her cat ate her diaphragm, so she asked for a quorum

 of DEA agents to come to her home and make the kitty cough it up” Then to the caller,

 he said, “You take care of it, Miller. No need to tie up more than one agent on that

 bogus judicial emergency. Maybe you’ll get lucky with the MILF.”

 He hung up and took a deep breath.

 “Where were we?’ he asked, reaching behind to touch her hair as she nibbled

 at his shoulder. Then he pulled her to him, immersing himself in her essence with a

 timeless vigor climaxed by her extended shriek, leaving him with a vision of her

 exploding into minute particles of ancient Incan pottery. Like a kaleidoscopic night-

 mare, she fragmented into oblivion before he fell into a black void as deep as eternal

 death . . . .

 Whatever spiked his beer was heavy duty. He opened one eye in the dark

 and saw the glowing digital numbers on the bedside clock showing 7:00 AM. The

 taint of spices and booze remained on his breath. The air in the room hung around

 his face like a hot towel, but musky and redolent of sex. The silk sheets felt damp

 from sweat. When he tried to move, he realized the woman facing away from him

 was lying on his left forearm.

 *Damn. I’ve done it again . . . awaking with a coyote date?*

 Like a coyote with its leg caught in a trap, he’d preferred to chew off his arm

 than wake this strange woman, whoever she was*.*

 *I remember most of last night, but all in the dark. She seemed hot in my car,*

 *but at times like this, the only difference between a pig and a fox is three stiff drinks.*

 With her face covered by Medusa-like, tangled strands of long hair, he dared

 not try to see her face for fear he’d turn to stone.

 Sound asleep, she was breathing heavily. With his free right hand, he felt for

 his shoes and socks on the floor. Fortunately, they were with his clothes, left in a pile

 beside the bed. He slipped his left arm from under her weight and she didn’t stir.

 He swung his feet to the floor. With his pants and shirt clenched in his teeth, his

 jacket draped over his shoulder, and his shoes tightly grasped in one hand, he tip-

 toed towards the door in the dark.

 Taking quick inventory, he couldn’t locate his boxers or socks. No matter.

 Then he sensed with relief, a crumpled ball in his jacket sleeve—*a tie Vera had*

 *given him for Christmas*, *but which Christmas?* Putting his hand on the cool, metal

 doorknob, he saw the morning light as a laser-like sliver glowing from beneath the

 door.

 The moment he turned the knob, her voice croaked from the darkness behind

 him, “Where the hell do you think you’re going?”

 Out of slick responses, he said, “*Lo siento, mi amante.*”

 This time there would be no looking back, no last good-byes to end an affair.

 He fought the temptation to turn around and grabbed the doorknob instead.

 In English, he said: “Last night was the best I’ve had, but if I’m not home soon,

 my wife will killme.”

 With the turning of the doorknob, he heard a clickbehind him. The door swung

 open, and the intense glare of the morning sun sent a sharp pain to his temple like a bullet

 through the head. Then he realized the woman behind him had his .38 pistol and he had

 landed neither in Munchkin Land nor Kansas.

 As the glare of the morning sun subsided, he was able to see into the room.

 Afraid to move, he saw his own den decorated with a machete, a blowgun, and his

 ancient Incan pottery collection still intact on the mantel. He was in Cali and saw an

 open telegram on the coffee table with news that the DEA had postponed his return

 to the States and were sending him to Thailand.

 Larkin realized that the previous night had been a jumble of his past, troubled

 present, and his uncertain future, now in serious jeopardy. He turned and saw that it

 was Vera pointing the gun at him.

 “You’ll never see the fucking light of day, you prick!” she rasped in a tone,

 which in the past, had merely warned him to duck. She held the .38 with both hands

 the way he’d taught her in case of a prowler. The barrel was aimed steadily at his heart.

 He swallowed hard as he tried one last bluff. “The gun’s empty, Darlin’.”

 “Really? Let’s see, you lying bastard!” She pulled the trigger with a hollow *snap!*

 Larkin blinked and held his breath.

 “Some damn joke!” she barked, pulling the trigger several times.

 With each repeated hollow *snap*, Larkin’s right cheek twitched.

 They stared at each other for a moment then Vera slowly lowered her aim with

 the gun at his crotch. Neither batted an eye until she dropped her aim to the floor.

 “Get the hell back in bed, you son of a bitch,” she rasped.

 As he returned to bed, he had no recollection of unloading the gun the previous

 night. He wondered if he was slipping as he felt the warmth of Vera’s cheek against his

 chest. His heart still pounded as the top of her head rested under his rough cleft chin.

 He inhaled the fresh scent of her long, red hair and tried to assemble the pieces of

 last night’s puzzle. Clusters fit, but the total picture was a jumble.

 *Were the three Mexican* *hit men* *real?* He wondered. *Would their threats*

 *follow me forever? Did the Cali cartel slip me that farewell cocktail last night?*

 *Why’d I dream I was in Manhattan when I haven’t been to New York in years?*

 *Is that where they’ll finally catch up with me? A fatal premonition?*

 He stroked Vera’s long silky hair. Even if he were slipping, losing control,

 his thoughts never lingered on his shortcomings, but rather drifted to his next over-

 seas assignment in Jamaica. He slowly smiled, considering the possibilities. Then he

 saw Vera seemed amused.

 “What are you grinning about?” he asked.

 Vera wrinkled her nose, and said, “You knew I unloaded the gun when you

 pretended to be drunk coming in the door.”

 He shrugged, wondering where she was going with this.

 “Yeah, you did,” she said. “Next time I’ll be the one coming home late, and

you can try to shoot *me,* Tom*.*”

 He smirked, nodding his head, but his mind was elsewhere, wondering if what

 he’d heard about Jamaica’s pristine beaches, heady rum, and beautiful women could

 be true.

 Then a sudden darkness clouded those bright images with the realization that

Vera was dead, would always be dead, and he had only brief clips of their intimate

moments left to sustain him. That, the booze, and the drugs in his drinks last night

had taken him down Memory Lane, but to a dead end with no barrier to keep him

from falling off the cliff at the end of that dark road. His heart ached with his need

to hold Vera just one more time. Without her, he felt vulnerable, empty.

 **CHAPTER** **10 – LIFE OF RILEY**

 Stirring, Larkin woke up in a dimly lit bedroom, wondering if his dream was

 continuing. Feeling hungover, he winced with pain. Guilt over having one beer and

 the physical consequences of drinking alcohol pulled at his limbs like heavy chains.

 Part of him wished the woman in bed beside him was Vera and he was just waking

 from a bad dream. That would mean she was alive. He couldn’t see her face in the

 dark, so he slithered out of bed without waking her and gathered his clothes left in a

 trail, just like in his dream, from the door to the bed.

 Shoes in hand, trousers over his shoulder, and keys clenched between his

 teeth, he tiptoed to the door and speed-dialed Major Witt.

 “Theo?” he whispered. “You’ve got to help me. I don’t know where I am

 or how I got here.”

 “What are you taking about, Tom? I drove you home myself when you

 blacked out in the parking lot at Calico Jack’s. It’s three in the morning. Go back

 to sleep.”

 The creak of a door startled him as a dark figure came into the kitchen from

 the backdoor.

 “Mister Tom, you OK?” His domestic, Lucea, stared wide-eyed at him.

 “Missy got loose when you came in tonight, so I tried to get her back into the

 house. I think she sneaked back in when I wasn’t looking. Sorry I woke you.”

 “Missy?” He went back to the bedroom and turned on the light.

 His German shepherd yawned, jumped out of bed, and stretched.

 “Good girl.”

 He patted her head as she panted and licked his hand.

 “Thanks, Lucea. Please wake me by seven so I can get to a meeting

 in Kingston by nine.”

 “Certainly, Mister Tom. Missy was acting strangely tonight. Must be

 that *duppy* moon. When the moon is full, those duppies walk out from their

 graves.”

 He took a deep, impatient breath and said, “Yeah. Sure they do.”

 “I think Missy saw one tonight. They can sense’m even if they can’t see’m.”

 “Hmm. Have a good night, Lucea.”

 “Sleep well, Mister Tom. Bacon and eggs good for breakfast?”

 “Fine.” He put Missy on the enclosed porch and gave her some fresh

 water. Turning out his bedroom light, he went to the window, where the

 moon’s bluish light beamed onto his pillow. He sat on the bed and hung his

 head in his hands. As his rough beard touched his palms, he lifted his head

 back and held out his hands in the moonlight. There were no signs of the

 lacerations when he’d fallen from the Rabelle mansion’s rusty fire escape

 yesterday.

 “Chanteuse and her damn voodoo,” he muttered, falling back onto

 his bed and hoping desperately for just one hour of dreamless sleep.

 \* \* \*

 Later on that hot sunny morning with the top down, Larkin pulled his

 red Porsche into the U.S. Embassy parking lot in Kingston. His powder-blue

 suit with white shirt and navy tie enhanced the caramel tan of his face and

 hands. His green eyes squinted in the bright morning sun. Shading his eyes

 from the sun’s glare, his face relaxed, revealing the crow’s-feet wrinkles at

 his eyes and deeper character lines on his forehead and cheeks that reflected

 his fifteen years of hardcore field service for the DEA. Each line was a trench

 from a dozen war stories.

 As he got out of the car, he saw the black Mercedes 450 SL convert-

 ible with license plate *RILEY 1* parked beside his, but in the shade of the

 only tree in the lot. When bird guano suddenly splattered onto the shiny black

 hood, Larkin grinned, then noticed Jim Riley staring down at him from his

 window on the third story of the Jamaican Mutual Life Centre.

 *Nice shot*, Larkin laughed to himself.

 He went to the lobby elevators where he showed his security ID. On the

 third floor he entered the door labeled *U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration*,

 where Riley’s secretary, Mona, looked up from her laptop.

 “I’d rather be in Mo’ Bay than Kingston,” Larkin said. “I hate wearing

 a tie. You’re looking mighty fine this morning, Mona. Where’s the boss?”

 “Mr. Riley is with Ambassador Smythe. Have a seat. Coffee’s fresh,”

 she said with a dismissing air, accustomed to Larkin’s brisk flirting manner

 within the four weeks since they’d met. Though she thought of Special Agent

 Larkin as a hunk on first sight, and had even described him as such to a gaggle

 of her Jamaican girlfriends, she also had him tagged as “bad news.”

 “I’ll just sit at Georgie Franklin’s desk. Don’t imagine he’ll be

 dropping in anytime soon?” Larkin posed his statement as a question,

 knowing Mona had dated the AWOL agent before he’d vanished into deep-

 cover. Her silence made him delve further, asking her, “When did you last

 see him, Mona—precisely?”

 Mona frowned and folded her arms impatiently. “I’ve told you, I

 don’t have anything to do with Special Agent Franklin anymore. He hasn’t

 reported to this office in months. Precisely? He took me out to dinner two

 months ago in Negril.”

 “Just dinner?”

 “That’s really none of your business, Tom,” she huffed.

 “Just asking. He was a fool to let you get away. My offer still stands.

 We could take all the money and run Venezuela, just like in that Harry Belafonte

 song, *Matilda*, from the Fifties. Who’d miss us?”

 Rummaging through Franklin’s desk, he found a matchbook from The

 Green Parrot Club under the desk blotter. He examined it closely.

 “Save the sweet talk, Tom,” she huffed. “What do you want?”

 “Information, sweetheart—have you ever been to The Green Parrot Club?”

 He held up the matchbook with a wave of his hand like a fish caught on a line.

 “Hardly. The Green Parrot Club is *exclusive* to British patrons and their

 guests. It’s not likely that I’d ever be in­vited there—unless I was sleeping with

 someone at the British High Commission. It’s a British gentlemen’s club—a

 throwback to pre‑Jamaican independence. I haven’t lowered my standards

 yet to allow myself to become *eye candy* for some limey in search of jungle

 fever.”

 Larkin enjoyed Mona’s spunk and grinned with a nod of appreciation,

 asking, “Then how could Franklin get in?”

 “I heard him telling Mr. Riley that someone was entertaining there,

someone George wanted to get close to for information on his case.”

 Her phone flashed, and she answered: “Yes, Mr. Riley. I’ll tell him.”

 She hung up and reached under her desk for a bottle of wine.

 Larkin winked. “Does this mean Riley’s a no‑show, and we’re gonna

 party, maybe with home videos? And I thought you didn’t care, Mona.”

 “Mr. Riley wants you to go to Ambassador Smythe’s office. Bring

 this bottle of Argentine wine. It’s evidence in a California case, so don’t

 drop it. The bottle contains distilled cocaine.”

 Holding the bottle up to the light, he asked, “What’ll the bastards

 think of next? I suppose Riley wants me to shoot a video of him presenting

 the Ambassador with this evidence?”

 Mona nodded with a smirk.

 “Swell. See ya later, Mona.”

 With his iPhone and bottle in hand, Larkin entered Ambassador

 Smythe’s plush office. He exchanged a handshake with the tall, lanky senior

 statesman with a Yale alumnus aura about him that was as elegant as the

 office décor.

 “I see you have the evidence tagged for transport,” Smythe said.

 “Good work, Jim.” He nodded to Riley, then crooked his chin towards Larkin

 for a profile, straightened his club crest tie, and buttoned his white Panama suit

 jacket.

 Riley motioned to Larkin. “Tom, take some video of us. Pan the office,

 then I’ll present Ambassador Smythe with the evidence.” He looked at Smythe.

 “Perhaps you could say a few words in praise of the agency.”

 “Certainly, Jim. Is my tie straight?”

 Smythe fussed with his tie then shook Riley’s hand as Larkin recorded

 them. Smythe commended Riley for his diligence in the case then he sat down.

 Leery of Larkin’s unpredictable nature, Riley positioned himself between Smythe

 and Larkin to maintain control of any forthcoming conversation.

 “Apparently, Jim, your idea to put a DEA office in Montego Bay has already

 paid off, ” Smythe commended him.

 “Yes. If the Castro hold loses footing in Cuba, the drug cartels will waste no

 time filling any gap there. We believe that some Jamaican posses are already dealing

 with a contact in Havana as a go-between for distribution to the States.”

 Larkin peered around Riley to ask Smythe. “Perhaps, even Guy Jasparre.”

 Smythe furrowed his straggly, white brow. “In the seven years I’ve served

 in Jamaica, I know of no one who has ever actually seen that phantom scoundrel.”

 “Agent Larkin will be concentrating all of his efforts on that case,” Riley

 said quickly. “We’ll have a full run‑down for the Attorney General in September’s

 Foreign Service Report.”

 “Splendid!” Smythe said with a clap of his hands. “I’m sure Agent Paino’s

 assistance in Montego Bay will be a great help as well.”

 “A good man,” Riley said. “He served under me in Colombia. Trini was

 my best field agent there.”

 Larkin intervened. “Frankly, I fear the work load has Agent Paino stressed.

 A Stateside R and R leave of absence might be in order for him.”

 A flicker of red came to Riley’s eyes the, “With Agent Franklin still AWOL,

I don’t think so. We need all the help we can get. Agent Paino will be ideal at your

 side.”

 “I hope so, Jim,” Smythe said. “With your taking this recent evidence to

 Los Angeles, and my going Stateside for the UN conference on Caribbean eco-

 nomic aid, we’ll be depending on Agent Larkin to keep the peace here in Jamaica.”

 “Agent Paino will cover for me in Kingston in my absence,” Riley said.

 “Agent Larkin will have his hands full in Montego Bay.”

 “Our purposes conflict on this, Jim,” Smythe said. “I had a special reason for

 asking Agent Larkin to meet us here this morning. With both of us out-of-country,

 Tom will act as Resident-­Agent‑in‑Charge, because he is your senior agent.”

 Riley fumed silently as Larkin smirked, saying, “Thank you for your

 confidence, sir.”

 “Yes, gentlemen.” Smythe grinned proudly. “It is the perfect time for me

 to pay back a favor to the President.”

 “The President?” Riley repeated with a near gasp.

 “He’s appointed Richard Ludlow as our Honorary Consul in Montego

 Bay. He’ll be arriving here while you and I are out-of-country, Jim.”

 Larkin’s interest piqued. “Richard Ludlow, the famous writer? I thought

 he was a recluse? There had been rumors he died and someone had even ghost-

 written his last novel.”

 “See, Jim.” Smythe perked. “I knew Tom was our man. He knows even

 more about Richard Ludlow than I do. Tom, you must see that Honorary Consul

 Ludlow doesn’t run into any rough waters while he’s in Jamaica.”

 “How so, sir?” Larkin asked with bewilderment.

 “Mr. Ludlow needs this tropical climate for his health. What’s worse—

 writer’s block has stifled his creativity. Maybe keeping company with a ruffian like

 you will inspire him to write again.”

 Larkin was dumbfounded, but Riley seemed to relish the idea of Larkin being

 responsible for Ludlow and out of Agent Paino’s hair.

 Smiling, Riley said, “That’s some honor, Tom. The President’s choice no less.”

 “Good luck in court, Jim,” Smythe said. “When I return from my UN conference,

 I trust I’ll find U.S.—Jamaican relations intact and the Honorary Consul content in his

 new home.”

 Larkin sighed as he followed Riley to his office. They passed Mona at her desk.

 Riley pointed sternly at Larkin and motioned for him to enter his office.

 He told Mona, “Hold all my calls till were done in here.” Riley slammed his

 door behind them then snapped, “Keep your goddamn opinions about my staff to

 yourself, Larkin! The Ambassador told you what you’re expected to do for him. Now

 I’m telling you what to do for me. I’ll be back after Labor Day weekend, which is

 less than a week from now. Richard Ludlow can crawl up your butt for all I care, but

 when I return, I expect to see George Franklin at his desk for debriefing, and our

 Foreign Service Report for the AG better be thorough and up-to-the-minute.”

 ­Larkin tried to object. “But, Jim, I—”

 “No, buts! Get it done. Your Foreign Service Report better include a complete

 account of Guy Jasparre’s every move.”

 “I’ve got an informant on the inside, Jim. I’m close, but I’ll need more than a

 week to get to Jasparre.”

 “Leopards can’t hide their spots, Tom. If you go around screwing with the

daughter of a renowned Jamaican politician on government time, there’ll be hell to pay!”

 “Chanteuse Rabelle is—”

 “Oh, I know exactly what she is. She’s trouble, especially for a drunk with his

 brain between his legs. She’ll have you on the booze again. She’s taboo. Off limits.

 That’s an order.”

 Riley shuffled angrily through the papers on his desk as Larkin backed up to

 leave.

 “Check with Mona later today,” Riley said. She’ll have Richard Ludlow’s

arrival schedule. Remember, Franklin is your priority. A black agent in Jamaica

should’ve been a major asset to us. When he doesn’t report in, he’s a liability to

our entire operation. Take care of it!”

 Larkin exchanged glances with Mona as he left.

 “As acting Resident‑Agent‑in‑Charge,” he told her. “I’ll be in touch with

 you daily, Mona.”

 “Now there’s a thrill,” she said sarcastically with a smirk. “Good luck in

 the field, Tom. Or with whatever the hell you you’re trying to do.”

 “I’ll need it,” he said.” Do you have a copy of yesterday’s *Daily Gleaner*?”

 She pulled the newspaper from her trash basket and handed it to him then

 asked, “Since when are you interested in Jamaican news?”

 “Just catching up on the cricket scores. Got a bet with a chum at the British

 High Commission.”

 He mimicked her smirk and departed for the elevator. Inside the periodical

 was an article confirming that Chanteuse Rabelle was interested in mini-submarines

 in the Cayman Islands. Satisfied, he turned to the entertainment section, where he

 saw an ad for The Green Parrot Club showing a photo of the club’s star attraction in

 voodoo headdress and painted face with the caption—now headlining, impressionist

 Jamaican torch singer—*Chanteuse.*

 **CHAPTER 11 – INSIDE INFORMATION**

 After Larkin left, Riley came out of his office and said to Mona, “I

 don’t want anyone in my office while I’m away, especially Larkin. Don’t

 let him pull any acting-resident‑agent‑in-charge bullshit on you.”

 “Certainly not, sir.”

 “Remember, even though *we*take off next Monday for our U.S.

 holiday, it’s not a Jamaican holiday, so I expect you to put in a day’s work

 on our monthly Foreign Service Report—a *full* day.” He handed her a set

 of office keys. “Put my keys in your hidden drawer until I return. We’ll

 put the final draft of the Foreign Service Report together next week when

 I return to dot the *i*’s and cross the *t*’s.”

 “As you wish, sir.”

 He closed his door, and Mona saw from her control board that he was

 making a call, so she muted the volume at her end in case anyone came into

 the office. Riley, having no technical savvy, didn’t know that Mona could

 hear his conversation:

 “Trini? It’s Jim. Tell Franklin that Larkin took the bait. I told him

 Chanteuse was off limits. Larkin can’t help himself. Whatever I forbid, he’ll

 try to do. He’ll lead us to the letters like a bee to honey and disgrace himself

 in the process.”

 “Great, Jim. When do you leave for LA?”

 “Tonight. When you see Franklin, tell him I expect the Rabelle letters

 on my desk when I get back.”

 When Riley left the office, Mona put his office keys in the hidden drawer

 of her desk and locked it with the key Riley had given her for emergencies.

 Watching Riley depart from the parking lot from a distance, Larkin

 phoned Mona from The Battlewagon. “Hi, Mona. Do you have any news on

 Richard Ludlow’s arrival?”

 “There’s been a delay. The airline left his luggage in Panama City. He

 won’t be arriving until Friday morning.”

 “I need a round-trip plane ticket to Grand Cayman.”

 “Heavy date, lover boy?” she razzed him.

 “Official business, but I need a big favor from you, Mona.”

 “You haven’t made good on the last one yet,” she chided.

 “All I need you to do is keep the record of my trip to the Caymans

 off the official log until *after* Riley returns from LA.”

 “Yeah, right,” she huffed. “We both know what a bastard he can be,

 but I happen to like my job here just fine.”

 “I’m not asking you to *lose* the records,” he bargained. “Just let them

 *float* for a few days. It’s crucial to my case that no one knows where I am for

 the next forty-eight hours.”

 “You’re a big boy, Tom,” she jaunted. “If you want the flight off the

 blotter then just pay for it yourself, out of pocket.”

 “The trip has got to be *official*, but not until after Riley’s out of my

 hair. Name your price.”

 “We both know I’m priceless, Tom. Still, two weeks in New York

 City, all paid, would be glorious for the Christmas holiday. Never been to

 Rockefeller Center to see the big tree all decorated.”

 “At the close of the Jasparre case, consider it done,” he assured her.

 “I don’t know, Tom. I might have your word, but….”

 “You need collateral? Sure thing. If I don’t take you to New York

 myself before my tour ends here, my Porsche is all yours. I’ll even put that

 in writing.”

 “Hmm…your Porsche, huh? OK, Tom. It’s a deal.”

 “Put my flight vouchers to Grand Cayman in your hidden desk drawer.

 You know, the one Riley thinks I don’t know about. I’ll get them tomorrow

 morning.”

 “What do I tell Agent Paino when he calls asking for you?”

 “Tell him I’m in the field and can’t be reached till Friday, and remind

 him that I want Georgie e*ffing* Franklin—dead or alive.”

 “Tom, I…. Are you sure about the Porsche? I mean, what’s it worth?”

 “Ninety grand, love. When I pick up my vouchers, I’ll leave my marker

 in the hidden drawer.”

 “Since you’re being so generous, I think you should know something

 I overheard Riley saying on the phone.”

 “Overheard? My ass. You delightful little sneak. What did you hear?”

 “Riley spoke to Paino about some letters. They’ve both been in touch

 with Franklin, but they’re keeping that a secret from you—and apparently from

 everyone else. I think that’s why George broke off our…whatever it was. He’s

 somehow in league with them on something clandestine, something outside the

 DEA’s official business.”

 “Thanks for the heads up, Mona. I wouldn’t have put those three blind

 mice together on a whim. I was warned that the Kingston DEA office was a pit

 of vipers before I arrived, but I always try to give other agents the benefit of the

 doubt until I see otherwise.”

 “What’s this I overheard? Riley and Paino were talking about you and

 Chanteuse Rabelle?”

 “A *private* matter, sweetheart.”

 “I’ll bet. Riley figures you’ll ignore his order to stay away from her.

 He’s counting on your bucking him and thinks you’ll lead them, including

 Franklin, to some important letters Chanteuse may have. Riley wants to jam

 you up, big time, Tom.”

 “The only surprise is Franklin. If he’s out there, we should be meeting

 for the first time soon.”

 “Be careful, Tom, at least until I get your marker. I can already feel

 my hair blowing in the wind with the top down on . . . *my* Porsche.”

 “Hmm. You’re such a love, Mona.”

 Mona sighed and hung up. After staring into space for a thoughtful

 moment, she grinned. Then she went to the window to admire Larkin’s red

 Porsche convertible parked in the lot below. She took out her iPhone from

 her Louis Vuitton knockoff bag and booked Larkin’s round‑trip ticket to

 Grand Cayman on the first morning flight—off the record until Riley

 returned after Labor Day.

 **CHAPTER 12 – THE GREEN PARROT**

 Larkin read the directory in the lobby of the British High Commission

 and found the floor number for the International Currency Department. Getting

 off the elevator, he followed the arrows to Criminal Investigations and knocked

 on the door with the nameplate that read, *Under Secretary, Peter Quigley*.

 On the phone, Quigley waved Larkin in and motioned him to sit. Long

 in the tooth and with thinning hair, the fifty-year-old Brit gave Larkin a thumbs

 up and a wink. Quigley in Jamaica’s scorching August heat was what Larkin

 called “a mad dog out in the midday sun,” a working-class Brit in a gentleman’s

 government position.

 Quigley nodded to Larkin as he spoke with his Liverpudlian accent

 to the party on the phone: “Chanteuse will be performing at teatime in the

 backroom. Thanks, Stinky. No—definitely *not* a front-row table. We don’t

 want anyone to see us. Capital.”

 He hung up then stood to shake Larkin’s hand.

 *“Stinky?”* Larkin frowned. “Who the hell is that?”

 “Stinky Snipes,” Quigley said. “He owns the The Green Parrot Club.

 He’ll set us up perfectly. Good chap. You’ll see.”

 “I appreciate your help on this, Quigs,” Larkin told him, setting a casual

 tone between them to get as much out of him as he could.

 “Hey, chum, I still owe you for tipping me off on that counterfeit scheme

 in Bermuda. Scratch my back, and I’ll scratch yours.”

 “I need a big favor in return.”

 “Name it, Tom, but the crown jewels belong to milady.”

 “This involves the Rabelle family—Simon Rabelle of political

 fame; his wife, Carmen, assassinated; and their daughter, Chanteuse, my

 confidential informant on a priority case.”

 “That’s a bloody lot to chew at once, Tom. Let’s see—the mother’s

 dead—old news. Simon Rabelle isn’t in Jamaica to my knowledge. He’s on

 some other island and he’s been emotionally unstable since his wife’s murder

 —a recluse. The daughter, Chanteuse, sings at The Green Parrot Club. Just

 slumming, I guess. She’s filthy rich, in case you didn’t already know that.

 Her father was a shipping magnate in his prime, old wealth and political

 power. Her mother was a clever business woman, but with questionable

 ties to prostitution before Simon made her clean up her act with the potential

 with him as Prime Minister’s, of making her his First Lady of Jamaica.”

 “Why would Chanteuse sing in a British gentlemen’s club where she

 wouldn’t be accepted as a patron? I’ve met her—humility is *not* her style.”

 Quigley laughed. “Why? She’s damn good—unique in fact. You

 obviously haven’t seen her act, or you wouldn’t have asked?”

 “I’ve caught her act, Quigs, but she wasn’t singing at the time.”

 “Then you’ve got a great treat in store. Come see for yourself.

 We’re off. Let’s go.”

 \* \* \*

 Larkin and Quigley pulled up to valet parking in a circular driveway in

 front of The Green Parrot Club. The façade was bright green stucco. A flashing

 neon sign shaped like a parrot gave the strobe-light effect of flapping wings and

 a talking beak. A uniformed Jamaican constable in dress whites worked the front

 gate of the driveway entrance.

 “Your friend Stinky must have some diplomatic pull,” Larkin observed.

 “Seems like the High Commission’s annex from the diplomatic hierarchy

 I see assembled here.”

 “Stinky is a retired commander from the Royal Navy. Since Jamaica’s

 independence, Stinky made The Green Parrot a last oasis of Jamaica as it once

 was, but will never be again.”

 “Essentially a hangout for snobbish Brits,” Larkin concluded.

 “Almost exclusively, Tom. Without one of us, you couldn’t get past

 the front gate.”

 A Jamaican dressed like a buccaneer with an eye patch, a peg‑leg, and

 a huge green parrot on his shoulder opened the door for them. A circular sky-

 light lit the main dining room, which was otherwise dim and filled with

 private, candlelit booths. An aviary of tropical birds surrounded the dining

 room, reminding Larkin of the sunroom at the Rabelle mansion.

 Lush tropical plants provided an authentic Jamaican atmosphere.

 Packed, smoky, and raucous, the club bustled with British chatter. The

 headwaiter led them to the backroom, where Stinky Snipes sat waiting.

 They passed through the main dining room to the more intimate, dimly

 candlelit cabaret in the rear. Above a small stage, a spotlight beamed on

 a single barstool beside a keyboard, drums, electric guitars, and amps.

 The ten curved booths seated four patrons each.

 All of seventy, Stinky extended a liver-spotted hand and smiled

 with jagged, tobacco-stained teeth, a pleasant distraction from his craggy,

 pocked face. “You’re an all-right bloke by Quigs, so I’m glad to help, Mr.

 Larkin.”

 Larkin showed his concern about the room’s layout. “If Chanteuse

 strolls around the audience with a mike, she’ll see me.”

 Quigley and Stinky exchanged knowing looks and smiled.

 “She never leaves that stool,” Quigley explained. “She can’t see

 more than a few feet in front of her nose from there. The lighting is an

 integral part of her act.”

 “Her performance is unusual—developed in London where she

 studied Fine Arts. That’s why I’ve booked her here. My crowd loves her

 —a full house at every performance.”

 “Don’t spoil it for him,” Quigley urged. “Let him see for himself.”

 “I hope you’re not going to put the pinch on my prize act, Mr. Larkin.

 The way Chanteuse packs’m in, I’d hate to lose her. What’s she done?”

 “Nothing,” Larkin said with a shrug. “But I want to keep it that way.

 I need to be sure she’s working *with* me—not against me. Our relationship

requires that assurance.”

 Stinky frowned. “Relationship? If the apple hasn’t fallen far from

the tree, you’d better watch yourself. Her mother, *Maman‑chere*,was a true

man‑eater.”

 “You knew Carmen Rabelle?”

 “My fourth wife was a *maroon*, a word that comes from *cimarron*,

 Spanish for *untamed*. Carmen was that.”

 “That makes Chanteuse a *maroon*, too. Tell me something I don’t

 already know. Where was Chanteuse when they killed her mother?”

 “In Europe if I recall. Simon sent her abroad to study. Got some

 expensive schooling in Paris. She was just an innocent kid then.”

 “Innocent? How about now?” Larkin queried.

 Stinky shrugged. “Who am I to judge?”

 “If you cut through the mystique of her mother and the prestige of

 her father, what’s your bottom line assessment of Chanteuse Rabelle?”

 “If I told you too much, Mr. Larkin, it still wouldn’t be enough.”

 “Please, Stinky, skip the innuendo and bullshit. Either you know or—”

 Stinky cut him short and raised his boney hand. “I enjoy my little

 club in the Caribbean and hope to live long enough to enjoy it for many

 more years to come.”

 “If you were that worried, you wouldn’t even be talking to me.”

 Larkin raised a brow. “Let me spell it out for you, Stinky. I need to

 know about the legacy Chanteuse expected from her mother. Seems

 there were some valuable letters that were stolen from Carmen Rabelle

 when she was murdered.”

 Stinky took a deep breath. “Simon never told Chanteuse about her

 mother’s legacy. He hid the letters, whatever they were, and took ill before

 revealing where. Some say he’d claimed the letters were worthless and

 destroyed them to protect Chanteuse from anyone who thought otherwise.”

 “That’s just hearsay,” Larkin said with a frown. “You strike me as

 a man who knows much more than he’s willing to talk about. What do you

 think happened to the letters?”

 “Carmen didn’t know their value until after she married Simon. He

 must have read them to her, because Carmen had no schooling and was

 illiterate. Simon charmed her with his wealth and political prestige. He

 married Carmen Jasparre when she was sixteen and eight months pregnant.”

 “*Jasparre?* As in Guy Jasparre?”

 “Yes. The mysterious posse leader you’re after is Chanteuse’s cousin

 from somewhere down that bloodline. Who knows, what with their slave

 heritage and—” Stinky hesitated.

 “What else?” Larkin asked.

 “The Jasparre’s are rooted in seventeenth-century piracy,” Stinky said.

 “Chanteuse’s ancestors were pirates,” Larkin said. “She told me casually

 that she was a distant descendant Henry Morgan.”

 “Yes, but then combine that heritage with a blood thirsty lot of maroons

 on the distaff side of the family, and what’ve you got? Bloody fucking trouble.

 Many *maroons* think Guy Jasparre murdered Carmen to lay claim to the letters,

 which might be deeds to land in the Caribbean.”

 Larkin shook his head. “Why would Simon destroy deeds?”

 “They’re worthless to him, because they went to Carmen’s next of kin.”

 “I know for a fact that Chanteuse doesn’t have the letters,” Larkin said

 with conviction. “Do you think Simon really destroyed them? Do they even

 exist or are they just an island myth?”

 “I can’t see that it matters.” Stinky shrugged. “I think the legacy ended

 with Carmen’s murder. That’s why they killed her, to end the claim.”

 “If she were alive, she’d be forty-three,” Larkin assessed. “Can we be

 certain that she’s dead?”

 “She’s dead, but her spirit is very much alive in her daughter.” Stinky

 nodded to Quigley.

 “In what way?” Larkin frowned. “I don’t buy any of that voodoo crap.”

 “With that same untamed nature, Chanteuse is the spitting image of

 *Maman‑chere*, a name you couldn’t use to Carmen’s face without getting

 into her bloody breach,” Stinky grimaced. “Simon Rabelle is the only one

 to survive Carmen, and I hear he isn’t half the man he once was.”

 “When does Chanteuse start her act?”

 “Any minute.” Stinky checked his watch. “Care for some food?”

 “Just a beer for me.” Larkin said, feeling the need for something to

 calm his nerves. He concealed his shaking hands beneath the table as the

 band came onstage to tune up before Chanteuse Rabelle’s performance.

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