**CHANTEUSE** ©

 a Tom Larkin

 international thriller

 **by**

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  **Episode Eight**

 CHAPTER 22 – HAIR OF THE DOG

 Larkin ran to the pond, pulled out his air tank from the shrubs where

 he’d left it, and quickly strapped it on. Reaching into the shrubs again for his

 face mask, he pulled it over his head just to his forehead so he could see clearly

 before jumping into the pond. Then he tugged the flippers on and started for

 the pond to escape. Several paces short of the pond, he froze when he saw the

 glowing red eyes of a snarling Doberman. As the dog leaped at his throat, he

 drew his gun and fired killing it with one shot through the head.

 Suddenly, another Doberman came out of the dark just as he turned

 and dived into the pond. In midair, the dog clamped its jaws on his foot.

 Larkin fought to swim with the weight of the dog hanging on and its fangs

 piercing through his flipper deep into his flesh. Knowing his air tank was

 nearly empty, he kept looking back at the dog holding onto his foot. The

 pain from the bite and the strain of the dog’s weight shortened his breath

 as he headed through the underwater tunnel towards the churning turbine

 ahead.

 *Churning?* he thought.

 Chanteuse must’ve figured out how he’d entered the research facility

 and wanted to keep him from getting out the same way—alive.

 A trail of bubbles behind him indicated that the dog was exhaling. He

 tried to pull his foot free from the dog and saw its face frozen in a snarl. When

 he forced its jaws apart, his blood clouded the water. The dog’s jaws still

 snapped relentlessly, but its lungs quickly filled with water. Finally succumbed,

 its rigid carcass floated away.

 Larkin tried to think clearly, but his air supply felt as if he were sucking

 at the dregs of soda through a straw.

 Jasparre is coming, he thought, so his arrival will have to be unseen

 through a similar tunnel wide enough for a mini-sub to pass through. Chanteuse

 will have to be in the control room to let Jasparre enter while attempting to

 drown me. She won’t stop the turbine, so I can’t pass through to escape, he

 reasoned just as he realized he was out of air and wished he’d taken one last

 deep breath.

 He unfastened the empty air tank, waited as if timing a curve ball to hit

 out of the park, then jammed the empty tank between the turbine’s blades with

 a screeching, metallic sound that pained his ears.

 Frantic, he squeezed through the turbine’s halted blades and searched

 for the spare tank he’d left behind for his escape. With no light on the far side

 of the turbine, he groped blindly.

 Suddenly, a mini-sub like the *Neptune* shone a light as it came towards

 him. Its water displacement kicked up the sandy bottom of the tunnel, revealing

 his spare air tank. Larkin grabbed it and began breathing.

 The sub took up most of the tunnel and would crush him against the

 wall, so he put on the tank and swam to a round, metal door to his right.

 When it opened, he took the space behind it and held onto its huge, protruding

 outer latch which kept the door from crushing him against the wall or, with the

 sub’s water displacement, sucking him back into the tunnel

 Trapped by the door, Larkin took out his infrared camera and waited

 for the line of windows to go past, but the force of the sub’s propulsion

 sucked off his face mask. With his vision blurred, he couldn’t see what he

 was photographing, though he took a series of photos until the sub was out

 of sight down the tunnel. He held onto the latch until the door shut and the

 water’s pull subsided, letting him swim towards the mouth of the tunnel

 where he’d first entered.

 Weak but with a fresh tank, Larkin swam underwater towards the

 reef , hoping his bleeding foot wouldn’t attract sharks once he reached open

 water. Exhausted, he saw a flashlight just on the outer edge of the reef.

 Surprised that it wasn’t one of Chanteuse’s security guards, he was relieved

 to hear Ludlow’s voice calling out to him.

 Ludlow picked him up in a speedboat and they headed for Little

 Cayman. When they looked back, they saw a commotion on Owen Island.

 A spotlight aimed at the lagoon inside the reef showed a shark frenzy

 obviously meant for Larkin.

 “Thanks, Your Honor.” Larkin winked. “They think that’s me

 back there, but it’s just *the hair of the dog*.”

 As the sharks devoured the Doberman’s carcass, Larkin passed out

 in the boat from exhaustion and shock from the blood loss of his deep wound

 from the dogs sharp fangs.

 **CHAPTER 23 – A MAN OF LETTERS**

 Larkin awoke with a start as he lay in a hospital bed. Seeing Ludlow

 at his side, he asked, “Where am I? What happened?”

 Ludlow grinned. “You’re in an infirmary on the island Cayman Brac.”

 “My foot?” Larkin strained to see his injury.

 “Two dozen stitches, but you’ll live, Tom.”

 “I’ve got to get out of here.” Larkin threw his legs over the side of the

 bed to leave.

 “Slow down,” Ludlow warned, putting a hand on Larkin’s shoulder.

 “We leave for Jamaica in an hour.”

 “Where’s my camera? My camcorder?” Larkin asked excitedly, but

 stopped when he heard a knock at his hospital room’s door.

 A red‑faced Brit of the Cayman Constabulary entered the room

 in dress whites. Captain Bevins was about fifty, but his bushy, graying

 mustache made him look older and authoritative.

 “You won’t be taking those with you, Mr. Larkin,” Bevins said.

 “You’re guilty of illegal entry, a crime punishable by mandatory imprisonment

 in the Caymans.”

 “I’m an agent of—” Larkin started to say.

 The high-ranking Constable snorted, “We know *exactly* what and

 who you are. If your consul hadn’t vouched for you with the governor,

 you’d already be in jail. As a courtesy to His Honor, we’re sending you

 back to Jamaica where your own people will deal with your offense. Your

 camera and camcorder will remain here.”

 “It’s evidence in a—” Larkin stopped when he saw Ludlow shaking

 his head behind Captain Bevins’s back.

 “Next time you try a stunt like this, you’d better have Consul

 Schwartz consult with the governor to get a Constabulary warrant.” We're

 the law here.”

 When Bevins left, Ludlow whispered, “I replaced the disc and SIM

 card with blanks. They’re safe.”

 Larkin stared at him with amazement. Accepting Larkin’s nod of

 approval, Ludlow left to sign out Larkin for release. Alone, Larkin called

 Barclays in George Town to stop payment on his check to Blue Horizon

 then transferred the one hundred thousand dollars to Jim Riley’s Swiss

 bank account with the number he’d memorized from Riley’s secret file.

 \* \* \*

 When Larkin and Ludlow deplaned at Manley Airport in Kingston,

 Chief Barnes met them on the tarmac.

 Larkin nudged Ludlow. “There’s the first friendly face I’ve seen

 in a while. I’m glad Riley’s still away.”

 Ludlow grimaced. “He doesn’t look so friendly to me.”

 In a rented car, Barnes drove with Larkin beside him and Ludlow

 in back. Frowning into the rearview mirror, Barnes said, “I’m sorry for

 your unceremonious arrival in Jamaica, Consul Ludlow.”

 “It’s been invigorating. Tom has opened my eyes. This is no job

 for the faint of heart. Great stuff for my next book, though.” He winked at

 Barnes’s reflection eying him from the rearview mirror.

 “If it weren’t for the Honorary Consul, I might be shark chum by

 now,” Larkin said. “Double‑o Ludlow saved our evidence, too.”

 “What evidence?” Barnes asked with a curious glare.

 “I have a recording of Simon Rabelle’s last words before he shot

 himself, also underwater photos of the interior of Jasparre’s submarine.”

 “Slow down, Tom,” Barnes grumbled. “Where’s the DEA’s one

 hundred Gs?”

 “Tom, had to sign it over to Blue Horizon Sub-Aquatics,” Ludlow said.

 “There was no other means for us to enter their research facility on Owen Island,

 Chief Barnes.”

 Disturbed, Barnes turned to Larkin, “No Jasparre arrest and apprehension,

 and not even a narcotics confiscation—that won’t fly with the AG when she hears

 the money’s gone without success or proprietary accountability for the cash.”

 “Sorry, Tim,” Larkin said. “I guarantee we’ll get it all back with interest

 when we bust Jasparre.”

 “When might that be?” Barnes huffed.

 “Soon, Tim. I can almost taste it.”

 Barnes shook his head. “How can you be so sure?”

 “I have something Chanteuse Rabelle needs. She’ll have to turn over

 Jasparre now.”

 “What do you have?” Barnes asked.

 Larkin grinned. “I know where her mother’s letters are.”

 Barnes’s eyes caught Ludlow’s for a second in the rearview mirror, but

 Ludlow quickly averted that questioning glance as he stared out the window.

 \* \* \*

 At the Kingston office with Ludlow present, Larkin told Chief Barnes

 most of what he knew. “Jasparre got to Chanteuse’s father, Simon. He tortured

 him, starved him, anything to make him tell where he’d hidden Carmen’s letters.

 Chanteuse knows much more about Jasparre’s drug trafficking than she’s said.”

 Barnes shrugged. “What are these letters? Why do they matter?”

 “Simon Rabelle called them *lettres des marques*.”

 Ludlow nodded, telling Barnes, “They were common in the seventeenth

 century. King Charles II of England bequeathed lands to the pirate, Henry Morgan,

 in return for his loyalty. Morgan forced the Spanish out of Jamaica, and the king

 made him Lord Governor of Jamaica.”

 “These letters have the words *le roi le veut* with the royal seal stamped

 on them,” Larkin explained.

 “*Le roi le veut* may have granted Morgan and his heirs certain rights of

 passage and property,” Ludlow said. “An authentic document with the royal seal

 proclaiming *the king wills it* could hold up in the World Court, even now, over

 three centuries later.”

 “You talk as if you’ve seen one of these letters, Tom,” Barnes said.

 “Just a fragment. Our renegade agent, Franklin, burned it. He’s in

 league with Riley and Paino for a heavy bounty paid by the CIA and the

 British Secret Service to destroy the letters.”

 “That’s a serious charge and an improbable conspiracy,” Barnes

 balked. “Do you have any *hard* evidence?”

 Larkin showed Barnes what he’d found in Riley’s files.

 “Without monetary evidence of the transaction, the DEA will take

 Riley’s word over yours, Tom, on rank alone,” Barnes assessed the situation

 with a shake of his head. “This contract is circumstantially incriminating, but

 hardly substantiating. I see an agreement, but no money. We’d have a zero

 chance of ever getting a Swiss bank to verify Riley’s deposits, and we’d never

 be able to trace the source. You’d have to catch Riley with his hand in the till

 to make this charge stick.”

 “Riley may be out-of-country, but he’s got his stooges, Paino and

 Franklin, to take the fall while he cashes in. We’ve got to get him back here

 in Jamaica where we can bait a trap for him.”

 “We’ll get him back here, but to supervise the bust on Jasparre.”

 Barnes shook his head. “Even with this signed CIA contract, I can’t assume

 it’s true. It could be a frame by a third party. You’d expect the same benefit

 of the doubt from your DEA peers, Tom, and you’re only a G-13 while Riley’s

 a G-15—no contest.”

 Larkin grimaced. “Rub salt in my wounds while you’re at it.”

 “Tom, you’re my only source of information on those letters. We

 have no assurance of their legitimacy. They could be a ruse to divert your

 attention from Jasparre. Chanteuse Rabelle might be blowing smoke up your

 ass while Jasparre continues business as usual. The most believable issue

 is Riley’s report that Chanteuse could be fronting a deal with Cuba. It

 makes sense. Linking you with Chanteuse—that’s absurd. Right, Tom?”

 “Listen, Tim. Riley wants to use my reputation against me. He

 made Chanteuse off limits to me, but he already knew she’d sucked me

 into a deal with her because she promised to give me Jasparre head on

 a silver platter.”

 Barnes shuddered at that image, glad that Larkin still knew nothing

 about his wife Vera’s decapitation.

 Larkin griped, “Heads Riley wins. Tails I lose. I thought you had me

 covered this time, Tim. I guess not. Same shit, different assignment.”

 “Give me something, Tom. If they’re genuine, what could make

 these letters worth bounty money from the CIA?”

 “Simon Rabelle listed the letters by name, *la brac, la petite,* and *la*

 *grand.* He referred to them by their archaic name from the seventeenth

 century as *Las Tortugas*. He wasn’t referring to turtles, but rather a billion

 clams if Chanteuse Rabelle can make legal claim to the Cayman Islands by

 a decree from the king of England hundreds of years ago.”

 Barnes and Ludlow exchanged shocked expressions.

 Barnes shrugged in halfhearted belief. “Fine for her, but a financial

 disaster for the Brits. Even if they wouldn’t return the land to her, the courts

 could make them pay Chanteuse dearly for them.”

 “For the United States, too.” Ludlow frowned in thought. “That could

 upset the balance of power in the Caribbean, especially if she allies with Cuba.

 Big bucks buy big weapons.”

 “You said you have photos and a DVD,” Barnes said. “Let’s watch the

 DVD and send the film to Quantico for security.”

 “There’s nothing on the DVD that I haven’t already told you,” Larkin

 assured him.

 Ludlow shook his head. “You’ve left out the most-important fact, Tom

 —where are the letters?”

 Larkin saw the anticipation in their eyes. “They’re in safe keeping,

 gentleman. I didn’t record that part of the conversation. I’ve kept that

 in my head in anticipation of this negotiation.”

 “The CIA and Brits will kill you if you stand in their way.” Barnes

 warned. “I’d be powerless to stop them. They’ll say you’re a rogue mercenary. ”

 “Those letters are my life insurance, Tim. They’re all I’ve got.”

 “Maybe for you, but what about your niece, Dawn? Assuming,

 she’s still alive, the CIA or the British Secret Service could negotiate with

 the party holding her just to manipulate you to give up the letters.”

 “That’s where Chanteuse holds all the cards,” Larkin explained. “You

 were correct with your hunch to send me here, Tim. You told me don’t interfere

 with the FBI’s investigation of Vera’s murder and Dawn’s abduction,. It’s too

 personal. Let the professionals find Vera’s killer and Dawn’s kidnappers.”

 “That’s by the book, Tom, and you know it!” Barnes insisted.

 “According to Chanteuse, she has Dawn in safekeeping as long as

 I come up with her letters.”

 “You buy that from her?” Barnes protested. “She’s the damn enemy,

 and sleeping with Jasparre no less!

 “She showed me a photo of Dawn taken just weeks ago, here in

 Jamaica. The letters are all I’ve got to get Dawn back safely. Chanteuse

 knows her father wouldn’t have killed himself unless he’d told me where

 the letters were hidden. He wanted me to destroy them for him, because

 he was powerless to do it himself. I don’t care who gets the damn letters,

 but Chanteuse is more likely to return Dawn safely in exchange for them

 than any other deal I can make. Jasparre’s arrest is secondary now. Whatever

 works to get Dawn back is fine with me.”

 “You know the agency’s policy. You can’t stay on this case if your

 family’s involvement might influence its success. You’re compromised and

 too vulnerable.”

 “Fuck you, Tim! Take my promised pension and stuff it. Independent

 contracting may be all I can do after this, anyway, assuming I come out of

 it alive. I’ve got all the cards to negotiate for Dawn. I’m doing this my way—

 with or without your help.”

 Ludlow remained neutral in anticipation of Barnes’s response.

 “Talk to me, Tom,” Barnes said. “Better be good or my ass is grass

 over this. What’s your plan?”

 

 **CHAPTER 24 – THE BLOODY BREACH**

 Pensive, Larkin eyed Ludlow then Barnes. “There’s nothing on the

 DVD I haven’t told you,” he assured them. “Proof they held Simon captive

 on Owen Island is valuable, as well as his belief that his wife, Carmen, might

 still be alive. Though that’s possible, I need proof. The film I took may also

 show Jasparre on the mini-sub, so we’ll at least know what he looks like. I

 couldn’t see with my own eyes because I’d lost my face mask. The film

 could tell us a lot, but I don’t want to take the time to send it to Quantico.

 Except for Major Witt, I don’t trust anyone in Jamaica.”

 Barnes looked puzzled. “What then?”

 “To avoid the Brits and the CIA, I want Consul Ludlow to take the

 film to Hedley’s Pharmacy and develop the photos inconspicuously. Then

 I want Your Honor to disappear.”

 Ludlow frowned. “How do you mean *disappear*?”

 Barnes smiled with a nod. “I get it. You want Riley to believe Jasparre

 has kidnapped Consul Ludlow rather than someone from your family. That way

 you can stay on the case.”

 “Right, Tim. We’ll set up our meeting with Jasparre at sea and coordinate

 with the U.S. Coast Guard cutter to intercept him after the safe exchange of the

 letters for my niece. Then we’ll charge Jasparre with kidnapping on the high seas.”

 Ludlow shook his head. “I don’t know, Tom. You make it sound routine,

 but it will be very dangerous.”

 Larkin handed Ludlow the SIM card from his camera. “You get the easy

 part, Dick. Can’t have our writer-in-residence bloodying his hands. At sea will be

 another story with all our lives at stake. You can’t go there.”

 “I can put together the logistics we need with the Coast Guard,” Barnes

 offered. “How will you get Jasparre to take the bait?”

 “It’s a waiting game. When I tell Major Witt that I know where Simon hid

 the last two letters, he’ll see that Chanteuse gets wind of it. It’ll be her move then.”

 He stretched painfully and limped towards the door.

 “I’m going home to sleep. I’m exhausted and need my strength for the

 rendezvous. I hope by morning, we’ll have our meeting set up with Jasparre.”

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 As he drove home to Ocho Rios, Larkin called Major Witt.

 “I know where Simon hid the last two letters, Theo. Let Chanteuse know.

 Tell her I’m waiting to set up a meeting—the letters in exchange for safe return

 of my niece. If Jasparre is a bonus, so be it. You can reach me at home.”

 “OK, mon,” Theo agreed.

 When he got home, Larkin searched his medicine chest for a

 painkiller to ease his throbbing foot, but found only one pill in the bottle.

 He swallowed the pill and tossed the empty bottle across the room into the

 waste can.

 *I’ve been good too long*, he thought. Then he went to the wet bar

 and made a Tanqueray martini with an olive. It seemed like a decade

 since he’d had a martini. It was less than a year. Standing with his weight

 on his good foot, he opened the sliding glass doors to the terrace overlooking

 the Caribbean. A breeze blew the drapes. He flared his nostrils and frowned,

 turning to Lucea as she cleared his dinner dishes from the table.

 “Do you smell that, Lucea? There’s a stench of dead fish in the air.”

 “No, Mister Tom, I don’t, but I have allergies and my nose is stuffy.

 Maybe you have *the* *sense*, like my mama.”

 “What sense?”

 “The hurricane season is almost here. Mama had the sense. She

 always smelled dead fish in the air, several days before a big storm, before

 any weather report warned about it on the radio. When I was a child, our

 house blew away. We left our home days before it hit, because Mama

 could *smell* the hurricane coming. She had the sense to feel it was coming.”

 “I heard nothing about a storm on the weather report tonight.”

 She nodded and pursed her lips. “Trust your sense, Mister Tom.

 If you can smell it, storm’s comin’.”

 “I wish I had that much sense about wo­men,” he said, watching

 Lucea’s eyes widen. “You seem upset, Lucea. What’s wrong? You look

 as if you’ve seen a ghost.”

 “That duppy’s been back, Mister Tom. She wandered in here while

 you were away.”

 “Who, Chanteuse Rabelle? She came back here to my house?”

 “No, Mister Tom. It was the duppy, Carmen Jasparre, back from the

 dead.”

 “Not a duppy, Lucea. He grimaced. “She probably didn’t die.”

 “Duppies can always tell who’s scared of ’em. I’m the only one

 who could see her—except for Missy. Your dog knew she was here, but

 Major Witt acted like she wasn’t here at all.”

 “That’s interesting,” Larkin said. “But you know, nothing could

 scare that tough, old Major Witt. That duppy must’ve know that, so she

 tried to scare you instead, Lucea.”

 “That must be it, Mister Tom.” She rolled her eyes and exhaled.

 “If you sense a storm is comin’, better lock up everything tight before

 you leave in the morning.”

 He nodded with a grin, but not giving any weight to this *sense*

Lucea urged him to heed.

 “You need anything else tonight before I go home?”

 “No. I’m fine, Lucea. I’ll see you in the morning.”

 As Lucea left, Larkin whiffed the sea breeze and frowned at the taste

 of dead fish on his palette. He let Missy out through the sliding glass doors

 for a run in the yard as he poured another martini to remove the bad taste

 of the sea from his mouth.

 The taste of a martini was long missed despite its threat to undo

 him as it had in his past. He sat in his recliner with his feet up and was

 asleep in a few minutes.

 \* \* \*

 Larkin woke later when a strong breeze from the open doors

 gave him a chill. When he got up from the chair, he saw Chanteuse in

 the doorway dressed seductively in a sheer, mauve silk shift that clung

 to her curvaceous anatomy and fluttered from the breeze at strategic

 zones, like a fly fisher’s lure. *Jiggle—quiver—jiggle*.

 “What took you so long?” he asked.

 “If you were expecting me, Thomas, you must know what I’ve

 come for. Give me my letters.”

 “Sorry, love. No letters until my niece is safe.”

 “Would I dare come here if she wasn’t safe?”

 “It has to be a *fair* exchange,” Larkin said with assurance.

 “Fair, but on Jasparre’s terms. You need not worry once the letters

 are in my hands. Dawn will be free, and Jasparre will be yours. That’s why

 we must let him believe that he is in total control. I always keep my word.”

 “Arrange the swap, but make it soon.”

 “I’ll pass the meeting information on to your friend, Major Witt, but

 we can’t do anything about this until the morning. We have time to ourselves

 tonight, Thomas.”

 “Time for what?” he asked with a frown.

 “To finish what we’ve started. I know how much you want me.

 Your eyes can’t betray your stifled feelings. Tonight could be the last

 chance for us.”­

 “*Us*? Get real. There is no goddamn us.”

 “You’d always wonder what you’d missed. I’d haunt you forever.

 Take me now, Thomas—if you dare.”

 She poured the last martini from the frosted metal shaker and handed

 it to him. He sipped as she came closer, her essence draping over him like a

 heavy veil. She took the martini and scooped the olive into her mouth then

 balanced it between her upper teeth and the tip of her tongue. They exchanged

 the olive in a volley from one mouth to the other until she surrendered it to

 him. Tugging him by the arm, she led him to the bedroom and pushed him

 back onto the his waterbed. His injured foot throbbed, but he helped her

 balance as the bed ebbed and flowed.

 She lay on top of him and created a wake on the waterbed with her

 silky, musky warmth. Whispering in his ear, she said, “I’ve lied to you only

 once, Thomas—about Guy Jasparre.”

 “He doesn’t even exist, does he?” he asked, sure of her answer.

 As usual, she surprised him: “Jasparre exists, but he’s *never*

 made love to me. No one has bloodied my breech—not yet. I’m still a

 virgin, Thomas, and I’ve been saving myself for my *one love*—for you.”

 Their tongues entwined and their hands probed each other. His

physique was as hard as a sharp piece of steel, hers like a ripe piece of

 fruit sliced open with its sweet juices flowing.

 Suddenly, Missy barked in the yard, interrupting their passion.

 “*Coitus interruptus.”* He sighed. “I’d better bring her in.”

 “Hurry, back, Thomas,” she purred.

 He put on a robe and went to where Missy was clawing at the door.

 He let her in, saw nothing in the yard, and went to the bathroom. He stared

 at his reflection in the mirror with disgust. Images of himself passed before

 his eyes. He saw Dawn held captive while he made love to Chanteuse. He

 was repulsed that he could.

 *A means to end*, he thought. *Jasparre’s end.*

 Rubbing his eyes, he felt his rough beard. Ritualistically, he shaved

 with a straight razor as if to cleanse himself of his lust for Chanteuse. He toyed

 with the razor at his throat and saw images of his father, of Billy McCann,

 of Min, and of Simon Rabelle, all dead by their own hands. He understood that

 temptation to end it all, much too well. The alcohol didn’t help and often felt like

 a nudge towards that eternal black hole.

 He splashed cold water in his face, then drying off, Chanteuse’s lipstick

 rubbed off as a red blotch on the fluffy white towel, a reminder of her claimed

 virginity offered ritualistically to him tonight. That temptation, and his mixed

 emotions about her, tugged at his mind and soul.

 Leaving the bathroom, he called to Missy, but she didn’t respond.

 “Come to me, Thomas!” Chanteuse called from the dark bedroom.

 “Never mind the dog. She’ll be fine.”

 He looked around the living room, but didn’t see Missy. When he

 heard the waterbed sloshing with Chanteuse’s weight, he turned out the hall

 light and went to her. In the dark void, he slipped off his robe and slid between

 the soft sheets. Her warm, supple loins wrap around his muscular legs.

 “Just the two of us at last, Thomas. Show me how you truly feel.

spare me nothing.”

 When they kissed, he licked his lips. “What’s that sweet taste?

 Besides you, of course.”

 “A love potion passed down to me,” she whispered against his face.

 You’re tasting the passion of all my ancestors’ womanhood over four hundred

 years. Now you’re mine forever, Thomas. Now make me yours.”

 He heard drums in his head, and the swaying waterbed made him

 woozy as he mumbled incoherently, “I feel . . . so . . . so strange.”

 “Now you can add *my* passion to that potion,” she said, but her

 voice and his consciousness faded into a calm serenity despite the heated

 writhing all around him in a quintessential orgy of minds and spirits from

 past and present . . . .

 \* \* \*

 Daylight through the bedroom window’s blinds cast a grid of shadows

 across the waterbed that waved like serpents whenever Larkin moved. He felt

 groggy from the love potion Chanteuse had passed from her lips to his. He

 stirred, confused by the horizontal pattern of light and shadows that made

 him feel caged behind bars, virtually a prisoner of love. He rolled to the center

 of the waterbed and saw her long black hair draped over both pillows with

 her face covered by the sheet.

 His phone rang. Larkin turned away from her and reached for the

 phone on the night table. Chanteuse remained motionless beneath the sheet.

 Turning on his side away from her, he said, “Larkin here.”

 With Larkin’s deep, morning-tone voice making Chanteuse stir, he felt

 her arms slip around his hips from behind. Playfully, she aroused him beneath the

 sheet, burying her face into the hollow beneath his shoulder blade. She continued

 playfully under the sheet as he turned onto his back. She kissed his navel and

 fluttered her hot tongue across his abs.

 All he could see was the shape of her head under the sheet as she

 began a slow, rolling motion gradually increasing the cadence. He felt the

 drapes of her long hair swishing across his chest and the sensation of her

 warm, slippery tongue like a butterfly’s fluttering wings.

 Her ardor pleasurably distracted him for moments that seemed like

 hours until he heard the voice on the phone:

 “My potion was too much for you. When you fell asleep, I left to set

 up the time and place to meet with Jasparre. Major Witt will contact you.

 Till then, Thomas, my darling . . .”

 Larkin’s body tensed with the click at the other end of the line.

 As he slid the night table drawer open and quietly took out his revolver,

 he said into the phone, “OK, Theo. That works for me.”

 As he stroked the top of her head with the other hand, the sheet

 slipped back enough to reveal a white streak in her hair. He jerked away

 from her oral contact and threw back the sheet. *Maman‑chere’s* glaring

 faceshocked him.

 She shrieked and bared her teeth, one gold incisor flashing. Glazed

 like a zombie’s, her wild eyes stared through him,. Her ashen skin was corpse-

 like. She knocked the gun from his hand, and it skidded across the floor away

 from the waterbed towards the door.

 She pulled a knife from behind her wild, frizzed hair. He wrestled

 with her, but her sinuous strength shocked him.

 “Babylon pig!” she screamed. “You dare defile my bloodline!”

 Veins bulged in her neck, and her face glistened with sweat as she

 tried to stab him. “When Jasparre hears my Chanteuse be wit’ you, she be

 good as dead. He’ll take yo niece for his own! How you like that, Babylon

 man? You get my letters soon, or you all gonna die!”

 With a hissing snarl, she sank her teeth into his wrist. He shook free

 from her grasp and punched her in the left eye, knocking her out. Larkin

 removed the knife from her grasp and set it aside. His vision was blurred

 and he struggled to see where he was going. He got off the waterbed and

 limped towards the door for his gun as he heard Carmen moaning from the

 bed behind him. He hurried towards the gun, grabbed it, and aimed at her

 but couldn’t focus to see where she knelt on the bed.

 “Don’t move or I’ll shoot!” he warned.

 “You can’t see me clear. *Maman‑chere* got dee bite of dee snake.

 You be soon dead, Babylon pig!” she shrieked with laughter.

 Through his distorted sight he heard her scrambling across the sloshing

 waterbed towards him.

 “Stay where you are! I see good enough to shoot you!” he bluffed.

 Carmen kept laughing hideously with the knife hid behind her back.

 Crawling across the waterbed, she came towards him. His vision was just a

 whirl of color and light as he fired and missed her but hit the waterbed. A

 tearing, sucking hiss followed like a whale surfacing from the deep.

 Carmen shrilled, raising her knife as the contents of the waterbed

 gushed towards Larkin, knocking him off his feet and the gun from his

 grasp. Riding the crest of the water, she wielded the knife. Her naked body

 slammed into him. On the floor, she held the knife to his throat, but all he

 could see was her blurred face hovering over him as the morning sunrise

 reflected off her gold tooth.

 “Ah!” she rasped, spraying spittle in his face. “You gonna be soon

 dead from my venom. Welcome to hell, Babylon man!”

 Her shrill laughter echoed in his head as he blacked out . . . .

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