**CHANTEUSE** ©

 a Tom Larkin

 international thriller

 **by**

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  **Episode Nine**

 **CHAPTER 25 – THE MORNING AFTER**

 Larkin sensed others gathered around him, but although he opened his

 eyes, all he could see was a crimson swirl with a central yellow glow expanding.

 He felt it must be sunrise, but he experienced an out-of-body sensation when

 he saw an old stone fortress and gallows with six empty nooses silhouetted

 against the red sky. From above, he witnessed the hanging of six bound and

 hooded figures—the slam of the trap door, the snap of their necks, then the

 sudden stillness of death. In the early morning breeze, the ropes creaked

 against gallows with the dead weight from those who’d been executed.

 His view came from an upper window in the fortress where he saw

 a navy blue flag with the words *Port Royal* in bright yellow script blowing

 from a pole in the morning breeze. Above it flew the Union Jack.

 Turning to look inside the fortress, he saw a physician, a magistrate,

 and a weeping wife all wearing seventeenth century garb. They gathered

 at the bedside of a dying man with a graying beard. Larkin expected to see

 himself in the bed and was relieved to see another’s face. The physician

 woke the old man with a prod. The old man fluttered his glazed eyes open

 and coughed with phlegmatic wheeze as if he were drowning.

 “Lord Governor Morgan,” the physician said, “I can do no more for

 you. I’m sorry but, within the hour—”

 The magistrate interrupted the physician, “Some wish to pay you their

 last respects. Among them is a prisoner from the captured pirate ship. He’s old

 and will be hanged this morning.” Embarrassed, he whispered softly so the

 governor’s wife wouldn’t hear. “Your dark past is well known, Your Honor.

 This pirate refers to you as, ‘the king of all buccaneers.’”

 The dying Morgan spoke in a hoarse whisper. “You know my stand

 on piracy. Even if I knew him, I’d not pardon him, not even with my dying

 breath. I shan’t dishonor the king.”

 “But he asks a pardon, not for himself, Your Honor, but for a young

 woman, formerly a slave to the Spanish. She is a *maroon* from the Blue

 Mountains.”

 “What woman is this?” Morgan tried to sit up, but lacked the strength.

 “She’s one of them,” the magistrate said. “A dark‑skinned wench,

 and wretched as any man among them.” He whispered softly, adding, “She

 is eight months with child.”

 “Once I was the best among them,” Morgan rasped. “I used my strength

 to rid these seas of Spanish galleons and to claim the island Jamaica for the

 British crown. I stood trial for my crimes, but was pardoned by the king,

 knighted for my loyalty, and appointed lord governor of this island.” Angry

 and coughing, he growled, “How dare this wench think I could revert to my

 past disgrace by freeing one of them now when I have this rare chance to

 rid the world of two of them with a single noose—this despicable wench

 and her evil spawn.”

 “But Your Honor, the pirate said to show you *these*—that you would

 understand when you saw them.” He unrolled three sheets of parchment

 showing the royal seal of the King of England, Charles II.

 Shocked, Morgan demanded, “What name does this wench go by?”

 “Carmen Jasparre, Your Honor.”

 Morgan’s wife turned her head to glare at her dying husband.

 The magistrate whispered so only the governor could hear, “The old

 pirate claims this woman is your daughter by Emanuella. He said to tell you—

 remember *Venezuela*. If you condemn this unborn child, you’ll be killing your

 only heir, your grandchild.”

 Morgan frowned as he looked at the three letters. He appealed to his

 bereaved but unyielding wife. “This happened so long ago, before I ever

 dreamed of becoming governor, and long before we met. I was Henry

 Morgan, King of all Pirates. Emanuella fought by my side. I knew she

 bore my child, but when I was appointed governor, I couldn’t return to

 her. Instead, I gave her these letters of marque granted to me by King

 Charles as a gesture of his gratitude.”

 “What is the meaning of these letters?” she asked with a frown.

 “They grant to me and my descendants unrestricted travel by sea

 and *le roi le veut,*  as the king wills it, each letter serves as a deed to property

 which my descendants will own forever.”

 “You can’t give this harlot and her bastard this land!” she shrilled.

 “She is my sole heir. This land is rightfully hers.”

 “How could you, Henry? Hang her and be done with it!”

 “My decree is a matter of honor, my dear wife. But these islands,

 *Las Tortugas*,are worthless strips of mosquito-­infested marsh. They are of

 no value—except as a safe port for pirates on the run and in hiding.”

 “What is your last wish then, Your Honor?” the magistrate asked.

 “Let the record show that I pardoned, Carmen Jasparre, but only

 because she was with child, and I took pity on her. Show no evidence that

 she was my kin. Release her in the Blue Mountains, where she might find

 refuge in the jungle among her own kind, those untamed marauders the

 Spanish call *maroons*.”

 “What if she and the child survive?” his wife asked with agitation.

 “If this pirate wench is truly of my blood, her descendants will use

 these letters of marque to give them power and influence over the high

 seas.”

 “What about these islands, *Las Tortugas*?” she demanded.

 “They will be more of a curse than a gift. Surely over time, hurricanes

 will erode them into oblivion.”

 In the courtyard below, British soldiers led the next six condemned

 pirates to the gallows with their hands bound behind their backs and hoods

 over their heads. The guards put nooses around the six, and they were hanged.

 Then the guards put nooses around the necks of six more, only to be stopped

 by the magistrate as he went to one pirate among the group. He lifted the

 black hood covering her face, revealing a black woman’s defiant expression.

 Beautiful in Larkin’s mind, he saw the familiar face of—Chanteuse

 Rabelle.

 “Carmen Jasparre, you are hereby pardoned by His Honor, Henry

 Morgan, Lord Governor of Jamaica. You will be released in the interior of

 this island, where you will be less likely to resume your pirating ways.

 Well, woman? You ought to be thankful. What do you have to say for

 yourself?”

 Her expression changed from defiance to glaring anger, then she

 spat in the magistrate’s face, shouting, “Curse His Honor! But long live

 Henry Morgan, King of the Pirates!”

 As the sound of her defiance rang from the courtyard below and was

 joined in chorus by the remaining pirates to be hanged, the physician closed

 Morgan’s eyes and pulled the sheet over his lifeless face.

 The shrill of Carmen’s declaration faded into the trill of tropical birds

 in the Blue Mountains jungle at dusk. The magistrate helped Carmen dismount

 from a horse. She was still bound until he released her from the chains and

 handed her the three letters of marque.

 “My instructions from His Honor were to personally escort you here

 and remind you to keep these letters safe. Whenever you show them to an

 officer of His Majesty, you will be granted immunity and will answer to

 no higher authority than your own and the king.”

 “My father mocks me, even in death,” she hissed. “What use will

 these letters ever be to me in the jungle? My mother, Emanuella, said they

 are deeds to worthless islands.”

 The magistrate grinned. “You’ll be lucky to survive. You thought

 you’d lived a hard life on the high seas, but your mother’s people, these

 *maroons* that make these mountains their habitat, are untamable savages.

 But since they are of your breed, perhaps they will spare you and your

 unborn child, if such a thing as mercy exist in their black hearts..”

 Reverting to innocence, Carmen pleaded, “I can’t read. Tell me

 exactly what these letters say? Where is my land?”

 As he reached for the letters, she caught him off balance and

 knocked him to the ground, then grabbed the pistol from his belt and

 aimed it at his head.

 “Don’t shoot!” he begged. “I cannot tell you what they say if you

 kill me.”

 “These letters will do me no good,” she said fiercely. “I’ll save them

 for my child and descendants until one can read this language themselves

 with no trickery from the likes of you English bastards. Then one of ours

 will avenge our mother for our father’s rejection by taking what’s rightfully

 ours.”

 “Please, don’t kill me. I have a wife and children,” the magistrate

 begged.

 “Poor slob. There’s a thing or two I can teach these *maroons* about

 savagery. I won’t alert them with gunfire, but they’ll respect me when I

 deliver your head to them.” She reached for the machete strapped to the

 magistrate’s saddle.

 Without ceremony, she beheaded him and took his valuables, along

 with the letters of marque. Putting her hand on her swollen belly,” she said,

 “Whether you be a boy or girl, you’ll take only the name Jasparre with

 respect for Emanuella, our first mother, our *Maman‑chere*.”

 She mounted the horse and rode into the dark, mountainous jungle,

 where shadows seemed to have eyes. She held the magistrate’s head in

 clear viewas her offering of her new loyalty to the *maroons*. The last beam

 of setting sun gleamed off her gold incisor as Larkin’s view blurred . . . .

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 Peter Quigley slowly came into focus as he covered Larkin’s naked

 body with a robe and said, “If I’d known you throw such wild parties, I’d have

 asked you to invite me, Tommy-boy.”

 Chief Barnes peered at Larkin over Quigley’s shoulder. “Lucky for

 you Peter found you in time. Someone poisoned you with a mushroom tea,

 but Quigley made the call, and we gave you the antidote.”

 “Psilocybin mushrooms, Tom,” Quigley explained. “Did you have

 wild dreams? Works like LSD, but can be brain damaging or lethal if

 overdosed.”

 Flashes of Vera strung out on peyote mushrooms in college confused

 Larkin as he tried to stand. “Carmen Rabelle is alive and she tried to kill

 me.”

 “Slow down, Tom. You need to take it easy,” Ludlow spoke with a

 comforting tone.

 Larkin turned and saw him.

 “Slowly, Tom,” Ludlow repeated. “What can we do?”

 “Take a mold from this bite wound.” He showed them his wrist.

 “Match it with any dental records we can obtain on Carmen Rabelle and

 get the coroner’s report on her murder. It was her bite that gave me the

 psilocybin. She must’ve coated her teeth with it.”

 “Sure, Tom,” Barnes said with concern. “We can do that.”

 “Quigs, get the handkerchief from my dresser with two lipstick

 smears. One is from a teacup on the balcony the day I met Chanteuse. The

 other is from when Chanteuse kissed me at the front gate the same day.

 You’ll find a lipstick smear on a white towel in the bathroom, too. I need

 DNA matches on everything, even a saliva test from my wrist wound and

 a blood test from anything you find on my sheets.

 “You *wounded* her?” Quigley asked with interest.

 “No, but Chanteuse was a virgin before last night, and I don’t remember

 much.”

 Barnes and Ludlow exchanged concerned looks, while Quigley’s eyes

 narrowed as he shook his head.

 “You say, Chanteuse Rabelle tried to kill you?” Quigley asked.

 “Not Chanteuse—her mother. Chanteuse is on our side. Major Witt

 will tell me this morning how to meet Jasparre for the exchange.”

 “I need a private word with you, Tom.” Barnes motioned for Quigley

 and Ludlow to leave them alone. “Agent Fredericks finally got back to me

 about your inquiry. Your buddy, Theo, was the snowbird with the Constabulary

 cooperating with the drug cartel ten years ago. Major Witt is not your friend as

 he pretends to be.”

 “That’s ancient history. I figured it was him, but I needed to keep him

 in sight. He holds the key to this bizarre connection between Chanteuse, her

 mother, and Guy Jasparre.”

 Barnes cautioned him, “That’s a long shot, Tom.”

 “Don’t try to hold me back now, Tim.” As usual, Larkin tried to make

 light of the impending danger with a distraction. “I can see that PI office in

 Manhattan clearly in my near future. Maybe a loft in Soho will draw an

 interesting clientele.”

 “If you pull this off, Tom, I’d rather reinstate you, maybe as my foreign

 office deputy chief.”

 “Forget it. We have an agreement. After this, it’s solo for me as a PI

 with real money. Done deal.”

 “Sure, if that’s what you want,” Barnes sighed, looking around the

 room. “What else do we need from this crime scene?”

 “Carmen had a knife. If she left it behind, we need her fingerprints.”

 “Bad news on that count,” Barnes said with a grimace.

 “No knife?” Larkin asked. “I was sure she’d dropped it.”

 “Quigley found the knife, Tom, but it was in your dog.”

 “Bitch! That wasn’t necessary.” Setting his anger and grief aside, he

 tried to clear his mind. “Test the knife for prints and get a blood type from

 Missy’s teeth. Maybe she bit her killer in the struggle.”

 “What does this mean for Dawn’s chances?” Barnes asked with concern.

 “As long as I know where to get the last two letters, no one will hurt

 Dawn. The prize is too great. What still remains the question, who’ll be left

 standing?”

 **CHAPTER 26 – BAIT ‘N’ SWITCH**

 At the Kingston office, Jim Riley paced as Larkin and Barnes

 explained the setup.

 “Ambassador Smythe will have your head for letting Jasparre get to

 Richard Ludlow,” Riley said. “How could this happen? We’re all in a jam

 with this fiasco. Christ, Tom, couldn’t you stop sniffing around Chanteuse

 long enough to watch out for Ludlow?”

 “There’s nothing we can do now but go with Jasparre’s demands,”

 Barnes told him. “Tom has arranged the switch, the letters of marque for

 Consul Ludlow.”

 “With all due respect, Chief Barnes, how can we trust Tom any

 longer?” Riley argued. “He’s making us play right into Jasparre’s hands

 because he’s tied to Chanteuse at the hip. This is no protocol to execute a seize

 and arrest. Not by my standards.

 “How you feel about Tom is your business, Jim,” Barnes returned. “He’s

 been my man from the get-go, so listen to his plan.”

 Larkin explained: “I’ll wear a tracking monitor, because Major Witt

 is the only one Jasparre will give the coordinates to for the exchange. At sea,

 we must maintain radio silence for twelve hours on Theo’s skiff, *The Sea*

 *Bitch.* My hunch is that we’ll meet Jasparre somewhere along the Cayman

 Trench southeast of Little Cayman.”

 Unable to contain his anger, Riley balked. “How do we know you’ve

 even got the damn letters? You can’t try to bluff Jasparre with Consul Ludlow’s

 life on the line.”

 “I *don’t* have them, but I know where they are. If I had them, I’d be a

 CIA target. Wouldn’t I, Jim?”

 “Cool it! Both of you!” Barnes said. “I’m overseeing this case, and I

 don’t give a crap where the letters are. But if anything happens to them, we’ll

 have nothing left to bargain with for Ludlow’s safe return.”

 “We’ll cast off from Ocho Rios under radio silence,” Larkin continued.

 “I’ll obtain the letters and rendezvous with Jasparre at coordinates known only

 to Major Witt. The U.S. Coast Guard will intercept us in this general area along

 the Cayman Trench.” He pointed on the nautical chart. “That’s where I believe

 the exchange will take place, somewhere within that ten-mile radius.”

 “We couldn’t hope for better backup than Captain Harddacker of U.S.

 Coast Guard cutter *Flamboyance*,” Barnes said. “I’ll be there with the FBI to

 arrest Jasparre on the high seas with the charge of kidnapping a minor.”

 “I see you’ve been very busy in my absence,” Riley said to Larkin.

 “Your plan seems well‑thought out. Maybe too much so. Agent Paino will

 be your first mate on Major Witt’s craft. With Franklin still unaccounted

 for, who’s your choice for second mate?”

 “I want Peter Quigley from the High Commission, so we’ll serve the

 interests of Great Britain, Jamaica, and the United States.”

 “Fine, Tom,” Barnes agreed. “We leave for Guantanamo in an hour,

 Jim. Captain Harddacker expects us aboard the *Flamboyance* by fifteen hundred

 hours.”

 “First I need to stop at the bank to cash my paycheck from last week,”

 Riley said.

 “This takes priority over your Foreign Service Report, Jim,” Barnes

 said, taking control. “Have Mona cash your check, then she can meet you at

 the airport with your money.”

 Riley shrugged without objection, since he was often too busy to go

 to the bank himself and trusted Mona, at least that much. He filled out a

 deposit slip for his bank account and gave it to Mona.

 “I’ll call Paino and finalize the details with Chief Barnes before Mona

 meets you at the airport, Jim,” Larkin said.

 When Riley agreed and left, Larkin turned to Barnes and grinned.

 “We’ve got the son of a bitch.”

 Barnes sighed and shook his head. “I don’t want to know anything

 about that . . . not yet.”

 Larkin intercepted Mona leaving for the bank. Barnes watched from

 the office window as Larkin executed his plan with Mona in the parking lot.

 She shook her head at first, but Larkin handed her a set of keys, and she

 finally nodded, before slipping behind the wheel of his Porsche. Barnes

 had seen enough to get the picture. *Quid pro quo*.

 Mona admired the Porsche and put down the top, telling Larkin,

 “Chief Barnes has agreed to send a new company car to replace the defunct

 Battlewagon, since it disappeared in the quicksand. The new car has something

 with dual air bags as standard equipment, so you won’t break your stubborn

 neck when you stick it out too far. ”

 “So after all you do care,” Larkin jested “Here’s another fair exchange.

 I’ll do the banking for Riley while you take the car for a trial run.”

 She hesitated. “What are you up to now, Tom?”

 He shrugged. “Hey, if you don’t want to test the car—”

 “I guess I can trust you with a few thousand dollars if you trust me with

 a car worth ninety grand.”

 “I’ve got you covered, love. You can give the boss his money at the

 airport.” He gave her his own cash. “I’ll put Riley’s deposit receipt on his desk

 for when he returns from his pleasure cruise with the U.S. Coast Guard. Oh,

 just in case they ask me, what’s his mother’s maiden name?”

 “Pierce.” she said, looking at him accusingly. “This won’t cost me my job,

 will it?”

 “No way, Babe. *My* job, maybe, but you’re fine. Enjoy the ride.”

 She peeled out from the parking lot, leaving Larkin in the dust.

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 At the bank, Larkin used the bank numbers he’d obtained from Riley’s

 files to transfer the one hundred grand from Riley’s Swiss bank account into

 Riley’s personal account. He hoped he’d stay alive long enough to see

 that final execution of justice.

 **CHAPTER 27 -- TURNABOUT**

 For three hours along Jamaica’s north shore, Major Witt’s sea skiff,

 *The Sea Bitch*, maintained radio silence. By sunset, the crew of Larkin, Paino,

 and Quigley were becoming edgy.

 “This is a cruise to nowhere, Larkin,” Paino complained. “How about

 telling us where we’re headed to get these damn letters?”

 “It’s not an unreasonable request, Tom,” Quigley agreed.

 “They’re right, Tom,” Theo said. “It’s my skiff. The captain should

 always know where he’s going.”

 “Not yet,” Larkin said, but having remained pensive and quiet for the

 first few hours, he suddenly shook his head. “Does the air smell strange to any

 of you? Was there any mention of a storm in the weather forecast before we set

 out?”

 Agitated, Theo said, “Nothing close as of yesterday, but I don’t like

 being at sea without a radio and floating like driftwood for hours. Winds get

 unpredictable in these waters this time of year. But my instructions were to

 maintain radio silence until we’re contacted, so we have to play by Jasparre’s

 damn rules if you hope to see your niece again Tom.”

 “Your *niece*?” Paino balked. “What’s he talking about? I thought

 Jasparre had Consul Ludlow? Damn! I knew this plan was fucked up.”

 Larkin shrugged. “So now you know, but it doesn’t change anything.”

 “I’m sorry, Tom, I slipped up,” Theo said. “This waiting is getting to

 me, too.”

 “We’ve still got to rescue a hostage in exchange for the letters. No

 one will destroy those last two letters before I get my niece back. You got

 that? No one!” Larkin pumped a round into his automatic rifle.

 Quigley threw up his hands. “No need to heat the pot, Tom. I’m with

 you on this.” He clicked off the safety on his automatic pistol. “We’re all with

 you . . . right?”

 Theo nodded.

 “OK, guys,” Paino said, staring at them in turn. “I’ll play your silly

 little game for now, but when bullets start flying from the bad guys, it’s

 every man for himself.”

 “Fine.” Larkin nodded. “Theo, head for the Rabelle mansion

 south of Green Island towards Negril.”

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 Within an hour, the skiff anchored offshore from the Rabelle

 mansion. Theo received an all‑clear signal from his nephew, Norman,

 by cell phone. Larkin rowed a dinghy to shore with Paino as his only

 passenger. Theo and Quigley remained aboard T*he Sea Bitch* and

 tracked them electronically from the cabin.

 Once inside the mansion, they used flashlights and went upstairs

 to the main bedroom.

 With reluctance, Paino ascended the stairs behind Larkin. “This place

 gives me the creeps, like it’s haunted.”

 “It is,” Larkin taunted. “So watch your back.”

 In the bedroom, Larkin shone his flashlight on Carmen’s portrait,

 then he set down his rifle. He motioned to Paino. “Hold a light on Carmen’s

 portrait while I look behind it.” He took it down from the wall where it

 left a dark rectangle where the paint hadn’t faded. He used a knife to

 remove the backing. He stripped away the aged parchment of a letter and

 carefully unfolded it.

 Paino looked over his shoulder as Larkin read the letter: “This royal

 proclamation grants to Lord Governor Henry Morgan and his heirs, the island

 of Cayman Brac.”

 Larkin said to Paino standing behind him, “Henry Morgan’s bloodline

 is linked to the Jasparre’s, but it doesn’t say why?”

 Larkin’s dream of Lord Governor Morgan’s deathbed remained in

 his subconscious, like a moth fluttering around an unobtainable light.

 “Who cares why?” Paino squawked, taking a step back and aiming his

 automatic rifle at him. “Hand it over, Larkin. Now!”

 “You’re wasting your time, Paino. Headquarters has enough evidence

 on you and Riley to put you away for a long time. Franklin was part of your

 scheme with the CIA, but apparently Jasparre made him a better offer. We’ve

 already got a lock on Riley’s Swiss bank account. Whatever percentage he

 promised you won’t matter now, you’ll both come up empty.”

 “Fuck Riley! I can cut my own deal. I’ve got a British contact. Get

 the other letter and hand me that one, real easy.”

 “That letter is all I’ve got to trade for my niece’s life.”

 “Get real.” Paino laughed. “After all those months with a Jamaican

 posse, if she’s not dead already, she wishes she were. But where you’re

 going, that won’t matter. The agency thinks you’re the one making all the

 deals with the enemy. It’ll look like I killed you in self‑defense, and I’ll

 still collect my finder’s fee from my Brit.”

 “A finder’s fee?” Larkin asked with puzzlement. “To destroy the

 letters?”

 “Hardly. They’ve got to be in mint condition, or he won’t pay.”

 “Who won’t pay?”

 Before Paino could answer, Zeena, the cook, burst from a wardrobe

 with a machete. Paino shot her in the head before she reached him. Larkin

 tried to take advantage of the distraction, but Paino was too alert.

 From the shadows, Franklin called, “Don’t move, Paino! I’ve got

 you covered!”

 Paino went to shoot Franklin, but he saw a reflection of *Maman-*

 *chere* in the mirror, and the distraction made him miss. Franklin shot him

 through the head then stepped out from the shadows.

 “Out of the pan and into the fire,” Larkin said, glaring at him.

 “He outgunned me with that rifle, Larkin. I had to shoot to kill. I

 thought I saw Chanteuse a moment ago. Where is she?”

 “Not Chanteuse, her mother. There’s a security setup with holographic

 technology to make you think she’s here. It works with mirrors and lasers, just

 like her act at The Green Parrot Club.”

 “I heard Paino’s confession,” Franklin said. “He and Riley had me

 convinced that you were working with Chanteuse to take control of the

 Cayman Islands and form an alliance with Cuba for drug smuggling and

 money laundering worldwide. It was Riley’s idea to keep me in deep-cover

 just to follow you since you arrived in Jamaica.”

 “What happens, now, Georgie? Do we stroll into the fog like Raines

 and Bogie?”

 “I need you to clear me, to vouch for me with Headquarters that I

 shot Paino in self‑defense and acted under Riley’s orders to pursue you.

 You need me, too.”

 “What for?” Larkin shrugged. “I’ve already got Riley right where

 I want him.”

 “I’m another gun to help get your niece back. I overheard the

 coordinates for the exchange when I was on Owen Island. I can text

 ahead from here to your backup without Jasparre monitoring the

 message.”

 Larkin agreed then removed the other letter from Simon’s portrait

 while Franklin called Barnes to give him the coordinates for the meeting

 at sea.

 “What about Paino?” Franklin asked.

 “He’s not going anywhere, Georgie. Let him rot.”

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