

DEVIL'S PUZZLE
LOVE, SEX & ESPIONAGE

Leilac Leamas

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THE DEVIL'S PUZZLE: LOVE, SEX & ESPIONAGE

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To all the women I loved...

Prologue

My name is Leilac Leamas, although those who truly knew me understood that even that identity was just a mask, a façade behind which lurked a more complex figure. By trade, I was a corporate consultant, operating at the intersections where commerce, politics, and influence coalesced. But beneath the surface of that seemingly innocuous professional label, I was an operative. My currency was the clandestine information that could either build empires or bring them tumbling down.

As I lowered myself into the plush expanse of my airplane seat, the cabin enveloped me in a hushed stillness. Only the muted roar of the engines and the distant, furtive mutterings of other passengers broke the silence. There, within the confined space of the cabin, ninety precious minutes of contemplation stretched ahead—a fleeting respite to untangle the complex web of my forthcoming mission.

This was no ordinary endeavor, no pedestrian bout of corporate subterfuge or international political maneuvering. Rather, it promised a descent into the very bowels of organized crime, under the banner of *Sacra Corona Unita*. This syndicate's history was a dark quilt of familial oaths and criminal legacy, stretching back through the annals of time.

Previous missions had me face-to-face with power brokers and kingmakers, men and women whose machinations could topple governments. But that journey was a different breed of monster. I was to tread into a realm where legality held no court—a sphere dominated by criminal factions like the Camorra and the 'Ndrangheta, their dominion vast and menacing. My task? To procure documents so incendiary they could shatter the judiciary, rocking the very pillars upon which the law stood. Risky?

Indubitably. Yet from the perspective of my unique expertise, a vital expedient to uncover greater monstrosities.

To further muddy the waters was the Nemesis—a shadowy, enigmatic force. A phantom presence felt chiefly through abrupt disappearances, their machinations seemed particularly focused on commandeering telecommunications in Portugal and Brazil.

But these were just some of the formidable and feared adversaries that I would face on a mission lasting several years—perhaps love, with its many nuances, curves, countercurves, ups and downs, was the most fearless and unexpected of adversaries.

My squad had been instrumental in digging up those volatile files. We operated in the twilight zones of legal ambiguity, offering our expertise to the highest bidder—not merely in terms of wealth but in pledges toward a loftier morality. Although our tactics often danced on the knife’s edge of ethics, we saw ourselves as a counterbalance in a world rife with systemic imbalances.

As the plane commenced its descent, a gnawing unease wormed its way into my consciousness. That mission loomed as a transformative force, one with the power to alter not just my career but my emotional landscape. There, at that critical crossroads, love could evolve from a fleeting diversion to a vital element in a devilishly complex puzzle—a test of not just my skill set but the fragile human fibers that make me who I was.

So steel yourself, for a roiling journey into a sphere where criminal empires and human frailties collide; where loyalty is a two-faced coin, and each move ripples through a tangled network of bonds and duplicities. At stake was more than my life’s work—it was the very essence of who I am, and perhaps, who you might become.

Secure your seatbelt. We descend into a maelstrom of chaos—a piece of the Devil’s puzzle, waiting to be fit into the heart.

§1

Natural Selection

Lisbon, Portugal

He was the puppet master, pulling strings from the shadows, waiting for his next move. His network, a web of deceit and corruption, had ensnared the most powerful figures in the European Union's finance and political spheres. It had taken years of cunning and devious tactics, but we had finally cracked his seemingly impenetrable facade, revealing the chinks in his armor.

Every tremor, every weakness was exploited, and doors once shut were now unlocked. Yet still, he remained elusive, hiding behind layers of protection, preferring to send his high-powered attorneys to do his dirty work. But this time, he emerged from the shadows, stepping into the light alone.

Like the goddess of vengeance, we operated on the edges of society, remaining anonymous, and communicating only through secure channels. We reveled in the chaos we created, spreading rumors of his personal quirks and idiosyncrasies, pushing him further towards the brink of a breakdown.

Our plan was to continue to chip away at his ego until he had no choice but to meet with us. And when the time was ripe, we set the meeting in motion. I was chosen as the face of our team, my brazenness and fearlessness making me the perfect fit for the job.

As I parked my car near the courthouse, I couldn't shake the feeling that this was a game of everything or nothing, where the winner takes it all. I walked towards the Ritz hotel, taking in the city's iconic architecture, and the glint of the sun bouncing off the pavement. Suddenly, a black Mercedes-Maybach S600 Pullman

pulled up, and he stepped out, buttoning his coat. I couldn't help but notice the *rouge* Hermès tie he wore, our agreed code.

As he slipped euro bills to the doorman, I held my breath, waiting for the moment to strike. And then, he nodded towards a van parked nearby, its windows tinted, and I knew that the trap had been set. The tension was palpable as we continued to ignore each other, both aware that the fate of our respective worlds hung in the balance.

With a sense of unease creeping up my spine, I stepped into the grand lobby of the opulent five-star hotel, basking in the warm glow of the golden lighting that bathed the lavish decor. Despite the luxurious surroundings, I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being followed, a persistent sensation that made me glance over my shoulder at every turn. My senses were immediately heightened by the unusual chatter emanating from a trio of unexpected stockbrokers. At first glance, they seemed innocuous, but my trained eyes recognized them for what they truly were—yet another surveillance team, most likely undercover cops keeping a vigilant watch on the meeting.

After what felt like an eternity, I finally stood face to face with the man I had been meticulously profiling for two long years. He sat before me, an impenetrable fortress of confidence and composure, as I studied him intently. Despite my extensive knowledge of his every move, I had to tread carefully around him, as if he were a complete stranger. It was all part of the dangerous game I played, an essential aspect of my job profile.

As we talked and negotiated, the air thickened with suspense and tension, each passing moment revealing more intricate details of his involvement in the nefarious scams under investigation. The secrets he divulged were like Pandora's box, unleashing a chain reaction of explosive revelations about the people involved and the illegal activities they had committed.

But I knew that this was only the beginning of a treacherous journey, fraught with danger at every turn. The man before me was a master of manipulation, and I could feel his calculating eyes watching my every move. I knew that from this moment on, I would be relentlessly pursued, my every step shadowed, all in the hopes of bringing us down as we worked tirelessly to bring him to justice.

And all the while, the luxurious hotel around us seemed to add to the sense of danger, an insidious presence that lurked in the shadows, ready to pounce at any moment.

With each step forward in my dangerous mission, I was driven by an insatiable desire for love. The words of the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, whose literary works are infused with an unyielding passion for love, echoed in my mind. His belief that “only creatures who never wrote love letters are ridiculous” is a reminder of the profound power of love.

But as I pondered his words, I couldn't help but question my own place in this grand scheme of love. Am I the one who indulges in fleeting, ridiculous loves, or am I the one who hasn't experienced enough love to craft a love story worth telling?

The weight of my thoughts hung heavily upon me, a constant reminder of the perils that came with my line of work. Each mission was a step further into the unknown, a perilous journey fraught with danger at every turn. And yet, amidst the chaos and uncertainty, the longing for love persisted.

I was caught in the throes of a tumultuous inner conflict, torn between the fiery passion that drove me and the gnawing fear that threatened to consume me. Would I ever be able to lay claim to the kind of love that Fernando Pessoa so eloquently extols in his poetry? Or was I doomed to an eternity of fruitless pursuits, forever grasping at a love that remained tantalizingly out of reach? The answer to this riddle eluded me, a mystery waiting to be unraveled in the unpredictable twists and turns of my life as an assassin.

“Love, when it reveals itself, doesn't know how to disclose...” These profound words of Pessoa reverberated within me, their deeper meaning stirring a sense of both desire and unease. For while poets could wax lyrical about love and all its mysteries, I was not a poet but an assassin, who sought to solve the Devil's *puzzle*. Can an assassin truly know love? Was my life a tale of love or merely a fleeting moment of passion? Or was it neither, but something else entirely?

The elusive nature of love, with its potential to make us look ridiculous, haunted me at every turn. Whether I love or not, I risked

being seen as a fool. Love can be the foundation of a lifelong romance, but it can also be nothing more than a series of fleeting sexual encounters. It is a slippery slope, a dangerous game with no guarantees. But despite the risks, I couldn't help but wonder if love was truly within my reach, or if it would remain forever beyond my grasp.

My heart thudded in my chest, betraying my innermost secrets. Love, for me, had always been a fleeting, physical encounter, and the depths of true affection remained a mystery. As an assassin, I had learned the hard way to keep my love life shrouded in secrecy; any deep attachment could endanger both my work and the woman involved.

As I made my way to collect an old friend from the hotel where she worked and head to lunch at the prestigious Darwin restaurant, I was on edge. I had known her for two decades, and her presence in Lisbon, though fleeting, was a welcome distraction from the dangers of my profession.

But as I arrived at the hotel gate, I was stopped dead in my tracks. Barbara was waiting for me, a vision of beauty in a form-fitting red dress that highlights every curve. The crew neckline suggested hidden depths, a dangerous allure that threatens to unravel my carefully crafted world. She was a discreet executive, a devoted mother, and happily divorced.

As we set off towards our destination, I was consumed by a sense of impending danger. Would that lunch be a simple reunion of old friends, or would it ignite a spark that threatened to consume everything in its path, including my carefully guarded world? We conversed like old companions, but beneath the surface, unspoken desires and hidden dangers lurked, threatening to tear us apart. Only time would reveal the true intentions of this fateful meeting.

As we sat on the terrace at Darwin, sipping sparkling sangria and taking in the stunning view of the river, my mind was a flurry of thoughts. I couldn't help but feel that something was about to happen, something that could change everything.

Our conversation started innocently enough, with talk of relationships and the complexities that come with them. But then

my friend Barbara spoke up, her words laced with a hint of something more provocative.

"People like us are never alone, you know? There's always someone willing," she said, her eyes locking with mine in a knowing gaze.

I was taken aback by the suggestion, but also intrigued. Who were we, exactly? And what did she mean by "people like us?" As the conversation continued, I found myself increasingly drawn to her words, and to the idea of an "us" that could exist in some dark, shadowy world.

My mind should have been focused on the important details of the mission—the signatures, the terms of confidentiality, and everything else that needed to be ironed out before we could proceed. But all of that seemed to fade away in the face of the pleasant atmosphere, the good food, and the alluring company of that beautiful woman.

As the conversation turned more intimate, I couldn't help but feel that something was about to happen. There was a tension in the air, a sense of euphoria that crackled gently between us. And as the meal drew to a close, I couldn't help but wonder what the future held—for us, for the mission, and for the dangerous game we were about to play.

We left the restaurant and made our way back to the hotel. The conversation in the car took a sultry turn as Barbara regaled me with details of her body, including her surgically enhanced breasts. The desire to capture this moment in time was overwhelming, so I stopped the car along Liberdade Avenue and grabbed her cell phone.

As I snapped the picture, I couldn't help but marvel at the sensuality of the scene before me. The heavily tinted windows cast a seductive glow over the car's interior, where Barbara's form-fitting dress was now unbuttoned, revealing her exquisite collarbone and perfect breasts. The curves of her body were a work of art, and I couldn't help but feel grateful for the friendship that allowed me to bear witness to such beauty. The image captured was nothing short of sensually exotic, a keepsake that would forever be etched in my mind.

With a sudden surge of passion, I reached out and grasped her breasts, relishing in their softness and fullness. Our lips met in a fiery kiss, both intense and delicate at the same time, sending shivers down my spine. My body was immediately ignited with desire, and I could feel the flames of passion burning within me.

I accelerated down the entire length of Liberdade Avenue, the world around me a blur as I focused only on the woman beside me and the unbridled desire that consumed us both. My heart pounded in my chest, my body alive with the fervor of lust. The flames of passion surged within me, growing stronger with every passing moment, until everything around me was consumed in the *inferno* of desire.

I left Barbara at the entrance, ensuring her public facade remained immaculate, for her position demanded nothing less. As for me, my desires were far less noble, and discretion was my only armor. With practiced ease, I weaved my way through the labyrinthine twists and turns of the hotel's underground car park, my movements calculated to lose any unwanted company. But in this shadowy dance, I was no stranger to unsavory partners.

Once inside the bedroom, I wasted no time in shedding my dark gray coat and white shirt. Her red dress was the next to go, the buttons easily undone, and I reveled in the sight of her luscious form, bare before me. As our lips locked in a fiery embrace, her breath exuded a heady warmth, filling my senses with her intoxicating scent. Her independence was an aphrodisiac, a reflection of all her beauty and charm.

She pushed me away, eager for more, and I obliged by removing my pants, kneeling before her. Her legs draped over my shoulders, and I set to work, savoring every inch of her flesh. Her clitoris was a marvel, swollen and red with arousal, the perfect size and shape for my skilled tongue. I worshipped her body, relishing the taste of her juices and the feel of her firm breasts in my hands.

With her inner flame stoked, I flipped her over, eager to continue my explorations. My tongue flicked around her smooth-shaven mound, invoking ancient Greek pleasures that only a select few would understand. Her moans grew louder, her hips gyrating in

pleasure as my fingers joined in the dance, plunging into her inviting pink cocoon.

My thoughts were a frenzy of desire, a desperate yearning to have her in every way possible. But for now, I contented myself with the sweet taste of her nectar and the soft moans of her pleasure.

When her hand reached back to grip my hair after the third finger had joined the others, gently buffing her inside, I understood her craving. Withdrawing my fingers, I slid my body across her back and thrust my slippery cock against her moist, warm pussy lips. My fingers caressed and massaged her anus, already moistened by my tongue. A poised finger then plunged into her ass as my eager cock poked into that other welcoming carnal union.

With my other hand on her hip, I gave in to instinct and fucked her in the style of canines, stroking in rhythm to Maurice Ravel's Bolero: first in a movement so slow, then in an *adagio*, the *tempo* progressively increasing until it reached a most vivacious *allegro*.

As my fingers slithered up her satin skin, her body trembled in anticipation. The grip on her hair made her spine arch and allowed me to thrust deeper inside her. Her arms reached back, grabbing and squeezing my buttocks, making me straighten up and lifting her off the bed. With her legs twining against mine, I was compelled to stand and drive my cock deeper inside her.

As we continued our frenzied rhythm, her hands guided my buttocks towards the balcony, matching the pace of each step we took. Suddenly, she reached forward and yanked the heavy curtains wide open, pressing her body against the closed door. Her breasts squeaked on the transparent glass, accentuating the intense and powerful thrusts of my pumping.

With no tall building to block our view, we were open and exposed, and anyone could see us if they were looking in the right direction. Her exhibitionist streak risked her professional reputation within the hotel industry, but it only served to ignite the adrenaline that was coursing through our veins, driving us recklessly towards several shattering climaxes.

It was a breathtakingly wonderful fuck, filled with intensity and animalistic desire.

Barbara had to get ready for dinner, and I watched her with rapt attention: letting me revel in the sight of her as she sensually stretched out on the couch while smoking a cigarette. Her *lingerie* was a masterpiece, clinging to her curves like a second skin. I couldn't help myself—I snapped another photo and saved it to my phone, unable to resist the allure of this goddess before me.

At almost forty, she was in enviable physical shape, and our earlier escapades had proven her to be a magnificent fuck. But as she stubbed out her cigarette and began to dress, her face transformed into the steely, professional visage that I knew so well.

With a few deft strokes of smoky eyeliner and a bold shade of red on her lips, she transformed into an even more ravishing version of herself, as if preparing for a moment of mesmerizing allure. But even in that moment, beneath the surface of her charm, she was resolute and determined. I couldn't help but admire her as she took a last look in the mirror and gave me my marching orders.

“Stay as long as you want,” she said, her voice cool and collected. “Go have a shower. When you leave, just close the door. And be careful not to let the staff see you.”

I watched her go with a sense of awe, grateful for the privilege of knowing such a powerful and inspiring woman.

Alone in the room, I took the opportunity to catch up with Tocsin, my trusted advisor. As she updated me on the status of our mission, I turned on my specially designed phone app, which wiped out any trace of hacking or cloning codes.

We had anticipated that the Nemesis would be watching, and they had not disappointed. Three vehicles had tracked my movements, but I had managed to evade them. One had stayed at the restaurant, waiting to search for any evidence I might have left behind. The other two had followed me to the hotel, but had missed out on the show we put on for Barbara's pleasure.

As I thought back on the day's events, I couldn't help but feel a sense of triumph. We had outsmarted the Nemesis once again, and I had experienced the pleasure of Barbara's company. What a woman, what an attitude, how resolute she is. I'm grateful to have her as my friend, and I can't wait to see what adventures we'll have in the future.

§2

Short stories

Milan, Italy

In Milan's storied lanes, where cobblestones have eavesdropped on countless stories, the fabric of time was sewn not with the mundane ticking of a clock, but with unimaginable confidences and the volatile currency of betrayal. Once set to converse with Cristiana, a financial *maestro* in Italy's convoluted opera of economic orchestrations, I found the stage of our meeting shifted from the glaring scrutiny of daylight to the hushed tones of twilight. It seemed destiny, or some unseen puppet master behind the plot where life unfolded, to have dinner at Deus—a divine nomenclature for a location where the affairs of mortals were to be negotiated.

My consciousness remained entangled with masquerade in Lisbon the day before. A *soirée* where Nemesis, that grandiloquent magician of corporate legerdemain, filled the atmosphere with an unsettling aura that still lingers around me like the residual scent of a potent elixir. He was a man entranced by his own indestructibility—a notion I found as delightful as observing an unseasoned gambler continue to roll dice, heedless of the looming house edge.

Nemesis: the man who saw himself as a reincarnated icon of Wall Street, armoring himself in tailor-made suits, as if sewn by the Fates, those three sisters from Greek mythology who governed over the destinies of both gods and mortals. This was a man who had survived a near-fatal road accident, and who had, since then, opted for the fortress of bullet-proof limousines. While it was difficult to conceive a connection between this larger-than-life *persona* and my deferred engagement with Cristiana, the board game of corporate

life, influence and intrigue seldom allows us to see more than a move ahead.

Just two days before, a digital dalliance with Cristiana had oscillated away from ledgers and quarterly reports into the sparking and volatile territory of raw, human desire. The electronic back-and-forth was an intense joust of innuendos and subtle allusions that consumed hours—a mesmerizing Venetian masquerade as inebriate as an old fine wine. Surprisingly, the focal point of our contention had been the selection of stiletto heels—those humble yet potent archetypes of seduction—that would grace her feet as we submitted to our more animalistic impulses.

I had championed the refined Italian artistry of Giuseppe Zanotti—a domestic tribute to an affair set against the backdrop of Milan itself. But Cristiana had her preferences, her own set of tastes, leading her to the crimson flames of Louboutin’s iconic soles. Each of us had our vulnerable spot, Achilles had his heel and ours, it seems, was shrouded in patent leather and couture.

As I found myself wedged between these two distinct universes, each veiled in its complex motives and subterfuge, a mirthful realization struck me. If existence itself were an opera written in Italian *libretto*, I pondered upon the act we were currently ensnared in and, more crucially, who would deliver the culminating soliloquy—that introspective aria revealing the soul’s innermost yearnings and dilemmas.

The milieu was primed, the forthcoming night pregnant with potential revelations or perhaps further enigmas. And thus, with a sense of duty, albeit a dramatic one, that felt both exhilarating and sobering, I prepared to take the stage.

Upon the first blush of dawn painting the skies over Malpensa Airport, my aircraft skidded against the Italian tarmac. Ah, Italy! Land of artists and poets, yet today, the land of an entangled web where Cristiana, a top executive, held the other end of the string. Fresh from the prior night’s covert dealings in Portugal, I hastened to the Meliá Milano Hotel—a gilded cocoon that would metamorphose me into the version I needed to be for the evening.

I entered the hotel lobby and was met by a young receptionist whose enthusiasm to know me felt excessive, almost insidious. Her eyes lingered too long; her chest heaved in a manner that insinuated more than mere professional interest.

“Are you alone in your room?” She inquired.

I offered her a disinterested glance, severing the unspoken tension, and retreated to the solitude of my room.

Inside my sequestered quarters, I turned my attention to my armor for the evening’s expedition: a pristine white shirt harmonizing with a tasteful coat and, the *pièce de résistance*, brown Louboutin shoes. A facade suited for Deus Ex Machina, a fashion heaven not just of cuisine but of roaring engines and avant-garde craftsmanship, churning out motorcycles, bicycles, and surfboards as if they were roman sculptures birthed in the forges of Vulcan—the Roman god of fire, metalworking, and craftsmanship.

Finally parked after what felt like an odyssey around Deus, I surrendered my vehicle to the security personnel. The atmosphere inside was electric, a cauldron of creative verve that Italians eloquently dubbed as *templi dell’entusiasmo*. Among that vibrant array of humanity stood Cristiana—Aperol Spritz in hand, radiating a luminescence that outshone the chandeliers.

Without hesitation, our lips met in a searing kiss, as if each of us were staking our claim on the moment. Her turquoise dress clung to her like a second skin, revealing more than it hid. Yet even amid our fervent connection, an undercurrent of suspicion marinated the air—trust, that elusive sprite.

As we dined, small talk and laughter glossed over our inhibitions, slowly uncorking her more audacious self. The tension grew thick, an electric cloud awaiting release. Our glasses continuously refilled, *bicchieri di prosecco* for me, Amarone di Valpolicella for her—a Venetian libation as complex as the woman imbibing it.

Later, our rendezvous transmuted into a deeper escapade as we retreated to her car. Every tactile sensation seemed heightened, every stolen kiss an affirmation. In a bolder moment, she divulged her unfulfilled fantasies, inflaming my imagination with the prospect of a thrilling, plural liaison—a threesome with another woman.

The first rays of dawn signaled a curtain fall on our nocturnal sexual adventure. Promises of “next times” and her bewitching grin accompanied her departure in a sleek, silver-gray Maserati Modena. Yet, life’s darker chords resumed their melody. Back in the world of subterfuge, Tocsin apprised me of the events in Lisbon. With calculated malevolence, we initiated a deceptive transaction under Cristiana’s account, a ruse to render her temporarily incapacitated within her banking citadel, in which she was a top director.

As I sank into the plush mattress, the aftertaste of Amarone—a liquid kiss from the Veneto region—still lingering on my lips, an amalgam of emotions converged within me. Like a proficient chess player contemplating his next moves while relishing a hard-won checkmate, I marinated in a complex blend of satisfaction and curiosity. To Nemesis, the unseen rival whose motives were as shrouded as a Caravaggio painting, our actions must have resonated loud and clear: we were architects of our destiny, orchestrating events beyond his keenest perceptions.

And so, while bathed in the dim light of the hotel room, I realized this encounter with Cristiana was but a prologue—a mere first act in a story to be told and which had a series of crossed paths. The question was not of if but when our paths would cross again. Would it be under the romantic haze of a Venetian sunset or amidst the ruins of ancient Rome, its Colosseum a stoic witness to human yearnings for millennia?

As my eyes grew heavy, I felt as if I were floating in a nebulous realm between reality and the theater of my mind. The play was far from over, the next act concealed in the foggy annals of tomorrow. The suspense of life’s unknown paths lay before me. With this final thought, sleep claimed me, a temporary oblivion before another day of human complexities.

As I drifted into unconsciousness, my thoughts meandering like the ancient Tiber. If Rome wasn’t built in a day, then surely the tangled webs we weave require more than a night to unravel. And as sleep wrapped me in its insensate arms, I looked forward to the day where act two would unfold, in whatever city, under whatever circumstances that might be. It was a comforting thought, a hidden smile in the dark labyrinth of endless possibilities.

As dawn unfurled its golden fingers across the Milanese sky, my stomach beckoned for sustenance, yet I knew that my appetite for answers far outweighed my physical needs. A mere handful of sleep had been my lot before the siren call of duty pulled me back into the puzzle of intrigue. A swift ablution and a morsel or two of breakfast bread—more ritual than repast—were all I needed to brace myself for Tocsin's latest communique.

As her voice reverberated through the secure line, each syllable delivered its own weight of cold dread. The Lisbon narrative was not unlike a Renaissance painting—deceptively calm on the surface, with chaos lurking in the details.

The fangs of peril had not fully retracted and seemed increasingly sharp. Barbara's opulent *suite* in Lisbon hotel had been violated, its sanctity shattered. Despite our best efforts to sieve the sands of evidence, the malefactor had mastered the art of obfuscation. Even the watchful eyes of CCTV had been foiled; a face-diffusing mechanism had rendered their visage a blur.

Moreover, Milan's labyrinth had its own minotaurs. Cristiana, the banker with whom I'd shared stolen hours, had been living on a razor's edge. Her life had become a series of alarming threats, each one more unnerving than the last.

That night, a shadowy figure tried to break into her apartment. If it weren't for the quick action of our operative keeping an eye on her, who knows what might have happened? The intruders vanished, slipping away into the urban jungle as though they were phantoms.

It was unmistakably clear: a cryptic adversary—no doubt Nemesis—hounded us with unyielding resolve. The safety of our clients, allies, and key players hung in the balance. It was a unanimous decision among us: We would bring in additional protection to safeguard them and their homes.

As I severed the connection with Tocsin, my intellect swirled like a stormy dam channel, awash with a torrent of suspicions, questions, and conjectures. Why target those women? Was it Nemesis, or someone even more sinister? My resolve crystallized, akin to a Medici pope's conviction in his divine authority.

As I boarded the plane to Barcelona, my mind was honed in on the job that awaited me. Being a hitman isn't all glitz and glamour. To cope with the professional stress, I often found myself seeking temporary romantic encounters—never anything serious, always just a fleeting distraction.

But here's the thing. The woman I'd crossed paths in Milan had ignited something in me—a swirl of emotions I couldn't decode, as though she'd spiked my usually stoic bloodstream with a bewildering blend of necessity, love, and confusion.

For the first time, those stolen glances and sweet-nothings felt woefully inadequate or, to put it more accurately, simply not enough. They were fleeting moments, ephemeral like the foam on a freshly poured *cappuccino* or the last rays of a Milanese sunset. Tempting, beautiful, but gone in an instant.

Fleeting moments were the currency of my profession; consumable experiences to be spent and forgotten. But in that moment, the notion of permanence, of something—or someone—lasting began to take root in my mind. It was as if my internal compass, which had long navigated the unpredictable terrains of corporate influence and romantic entanglements, was now veering toward an unexplored territory: love.

I chuckled to myself, thinking how Dante Alighieri had journeyed through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise only to find love at the end of it all. There I was, considering the virtues of domestic bliss over the adrenaline rush of dodging metaphoric bullets and stealing real hearts.

But maybe, just maybe, in this chaotic mess we call life, there comes a point when even people with professions like mine need to find their own slice of Paradise—a home in the form of a lasting relationship. A love strong enough to make even a seasoned operative entertain the idea of a different kind of commitment.

There I was, seated and ready to review my mission dossier when she walked by. I'd spotted her earlier—a flight attendant—and now, our eyes locked once again. In a cabin filled with the usual airplane chaos, our glances found each other like magnets. Yeah, she was definitely checking me out, too. Who was she, and what was her story?

The plane landed, and I felt myself pulled toward her. The buzzing airport crowd was the perfect smokescreen for a casual chat, yet our conversation hinted at something more than just courtesy. Her voice was sweet as sugar, her eyes twinkling with a playful sort of daring. And in that moment, I felt like I was playing with fire, in the best possible way.

"So, Uber is banned in Barcelona, and I have no clue where the taxis are. Any tips?" I asked, taking advantage of the moment to get some advice.

"Just follow the signs; they'll get you there," she replied. Her eyes seemed to hold more than her words, as if coded with an insider's advice.

"Where are you going?" She couldn't hide her curiosity.

"At the SB Hotel," I said, playing it cool.

"Oh, near the Canal Olímpic de Catalunya? I live around there. Need a lift?" She offered, grinning like the Cheshire cat from Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.

My gut churned with excitement and a touch of danger. I agreed. As we walked to the parking lot, she put on a sleek black coat that made her look even more striking. Her name was Cris, and she was a midnight mystery I was more than willing to explore.

"I'm Leilac. Leilac Leamas," I added, throwing caution to the wind and disclosing my full name.

"So, Leilac, what brings you to my city?" Her eyes never stopped searching mine.

"I've got a job to do," I kept it vague.

"And that job is?" She wasn't letting up.

"I'm an assassin," I said, looking her dead in the eyes.

Her expression didn't change. She even seemed a bit amused. "Ah, the SB Hotel—a classy venue for some job of professional assassin, huh?"

As we chatted, a shiver ran down my spine. I was standing at the edge of a precipice, the outcome unknown. A complicated dance had just begun, and Cris was my unpredictable partner. Had I simply met another transient love interest, or was she something far more challenging? I couldn't shake the feeling that my Barcelona

assignment was about to become much more complicated, and a heck of a lot more interesting.

The elevator door clanged shut, and I was instantly enveloped in her perfume—a blend that hinted at the unknown yet I felt as comfortable as a familiar tune. We stood there, shoulder to shoulder, my senses alert, as if catching the scent of something extraordinary yet elusive.

We slipped into her glaringly red Audi A3. It was a color that would normally offend my sensibilities, but right now, it was the stagecoach to whatever awaited us. As she drove, she motioned to various landmarks—mere backdrops to the escalating sense of what was yet to come between us.

As we approached the blocked hotel entrance, she showed off her local know-how, guiding us through a workaround—right through a grocery store’s parking lot.

“A nightcap, maybe?” I asked, the night still young and full of possibilities.

“Sure, sounds good,” she beamed. We made our way to the dim bar of the hotel. She asked for a glass of La Rioja, praising its wine with the fervor of a homegrown enthusiast—it was a product of her native land.

“So, what do you do when you’re not dazzling strangers in bars?” She asked, eyes twinkling.

“Ah, I’m a fixer of sorts, so to speak. I eliminate less ethical managers from companies. I’m in the business, I’ll say, of corporate cleaning,” I quipped, grinning. The details weren’t important; it was the growing tension between us that was truly intriguing.

She refilled her glass, and I followed suit. The night was too promising to let her drink alone.

“We’re closing up,” the bartender announced, glancing at the clock.

“How about we move this little party of ours upstairs?” I ventured.

“Lead the way,” she winked.

Back in the steel cocoon of an elevator, we succumbed to the crackling tension. It was like two magnetic forces finally giving in.

As we crossed the threshold of my *suite*, the door closed behind us with an echo of will, amplifying the palpable tension in the air. Our eyes met, and in that intense moment, words became superfluous. Garments were not just removed; they were eagerly discarded, each piece falling to the floor like a curtain descending after a tantalizing act. Our movements synchronized in an unspoken choreography, as deliberate as it was spontaneous, fueled by an insatiable hunger only we could satiate. Cris, the enigmatic stranger whose touch had already set my soul aflame, approached me with a feral grace. Our lips met, and I was consumed by the blend of her perfume and natural scent—a heady cocktail that only heightened my desire. Our hands explored the unfamiliar landscapes of each other's bodies, each touch a voyage into the depths of our most primal cravings. As I felt the silky texture of her skin against mine, all pretenses were shed; we were now ensnared in a dance of pleasure, a energetic *ballet* of lust that would settle for nothing less than complete immersion in the ecstasy of that moment.

The unwelcome morning sun peered through the window, hinting at her forthcoming exit.

“Breakfast before you go?” I suggested.

“If you make it quick,” she agreed, stepping into the *ducha*. We shared a moment there, enveloped in the comforting warmth of water.

A reluctant kiss signaled our goodbye as she dashed off to work. Later, a message popped up on my phone. She was later to work than she'd ever been, she said. But she punctuated the confession with: “Totally worth it,” and a flurry of digital hearts.

My lips curled into a smile, already keen for the next chapter awaited us was still shrouded in delicious uncertainty—like the final scenes of an unfinished novel, teetering on the edge of revelation and revolution. The characters had been set, the scenery expertly drafted, and the plotlines ripe with twists and turns, just like the windy roads we'd navigated the night before. Ah, but that's the captivating thing about beginnings; they hold within them the kernel of countless possibilities, each one more promising and perilous than the last.

Could she be a fleeting affair, her aroma lingering in the air long after her departure, a ghost of an adventure that could have been but never fully was? Or might she be the intricate puzzle piece that I didn't even know was missing, a challenge and complement in equal measure?

And as for me—what was I to her? A diversion, a rogue, a prospective co-adventurer in her ever-expanding quest for life's experiences? It's said that in chess, the outcome can often be determined within the first few moves. Yet that was not chess; it was far more elaborate, played not on a board but within the fickle theaters of the human spirit.

The text messages would continue, each digital character a breadcrumb on that winding path we were venturing down. Plans would be made, calendars consulted, and stolen moments treasured. But as I stared at that chain of *emojis*—those whimsical symbols standing as modern hieroglyphs for timeless human emotions—I was reminded that life's most gripping tales don't often come with a roadmap.

No, the most riveting stories unfurl in the most unexpected ways, bending and swerving like a river finding its way through a canyon, shaped by the indomitable forces of passion, chance, and, perhaps, a touch of fate. As the poet, playwright and director Bertolt Brecht said, "the river that everything drags is known as violent, but nobody calls violent the margins that arrest him."

Ah, fate—that ever-mischievous playwright, eternally scribbling in the margins of our lives. It leaves us in perpetual suspense, forever guessing what pen stroke might come next. But isn't that uncertainty where the true spice of life resides?

In the end, only time would unravel the complexities of human emotion on the wide spectrum of the human experience. All I knew was this: I was more than ready for the next act. And so, firmly, I tapped out a reply, hitting send like a playwright setting quill to parchment, eagerly penning the next act of a story yet to be told.

As I prepared to grill the board of directors at the shareholders meeting, I found myself ironing out the last details with my colleagues over WhatsApp. We were strategizing on how to tackle

these directors of one of the largest Iberian banks, but my focus was suddenly interrupted by a message from my new friend. It was a picture of her luscious breasts reflected in a bathroom mirror, with a message daring me to reciprocate.

Despite being in a room full of people, I excused myself to the bathroom to send my own picture. The exchange quickly became more sexually charged, but my exhaustion caught up to me. I was sleep-deprived and mentally drained from the intense pressure of the upcoming meeting.

As I was lost in this raunchy reverie, a colleague's reprimand via WhatsApp jolted me back to reality. I was up next to speak at the shareholders meeting. I stepped up to the podium, where the bright lights made it difficult to see anything beyond the giant screen with my projected image. I struggled to read the Spanish text I had chosen, realizing too late that it was in Catalan, which I couldn't pronounce correctly. Eventually, I switched to English and managed to say what needed to be said.

As I finished speaking and left the podium, I was approached by a familiar face—one of the senior lawyers who worked for the Nemesis. I pretended to be angry, trying to hide my true emotions as he began discussing a misunderstanding. As the conversation continued, it became clear that he was alluding to the deal that the Nemesis and I had made in Lisbon, and my anger flared.

The lawyer suggested that my client review and revise agreements related to the telecom company in Brazil, which would essentially nullify our Lisbon deal. As the lawyer walked away, I knew that the Nemesis had shifted targets and was looking for a new way to apply pressure. It was clear that the stakes had been raised, and the tension was palpable.

After dealing with our immediate tasks at the hotel, I took a moment to reflect on the whirlwind trip of the past few days. It was time to assess what we had achieved and where our objectives no longer aligned with the Monks' commissioned study and job. They were the representatives of a highly influential businessman, our

client, and it was imperative that we remained steadfast in our approach.

That 68-year-old tycoon, a man of vast wealth, had earned his place among Forbes'richest. He covertly funded numerous conflicts, driven by his pursuit of ideals and the thrill of a challenge more than money. The source of his unrelenting drive remained a mystery, but I held a deep admiration for his unwavering commitment.

I respected that businessman immensely, for he dared to confront the mightiest adversaries in the world of corporate finance.

So, when the 68-year-old magnate approached me through the Monks with a daring mission to bring down the infamous Nemesis, I was wholeheartedly dedicated. With the Monks channeling millions of euros into Luxembourg, my team and I were determined to use every resource at our disposal to thwart the transatlantic mega-deal the Nemesis had been crafting. We were determined to derail his plans, and nothing would deter us from this goal.

Tocsin's voice came through the secure line, thick with a tension that prickled at my senses, "Nemesis is not just shadowboxing anymore—he's coming out into the spotlight. Not only is he aping our moves, he's one-upping us. Worse, he's trying to sabotage the funding for our graphene venture."

A shiver raced up my spine, as if ice water had replaced my blood, "you mean to say he's flaunting his moves? He's the master of backstage manipulation, not front-and-center bravado." My eyes narrowed, thoughts racing, while my finger instinctively hovered over the touchpad, ready to review our financials. "Just how compromised could our graphene funding be? I never thought he would find out. I never planned protection."

Tocsin let out a low chuckle that rumbled through the line, "worry not, Casanova. While you were out charming your way into the hearts of women, we've been busy fortifying our castle walls. Our investment in graphene is more secure than you think. We transferred the loan to a hedge fund months ago when our research team hit a bottleneck; we were running low on both time and funds. They needed a little more runway to break through to a more cost-effective method for mass production." Tocsin paused, letting the

words settle, “and it’s paying off. The researchers are onto something big, and our hedge fund partners are sufficiently impressed. For now, we’re sitting pretty.”

“Thank you,” I replied with gratitude. “I knew I could rely on all of you. Does this mean our work at this bank is coming to an end? We’ve already exposed the corrupt dealings of Angola and China using our inside access. Let the authorities taken action, so what else is there for us to handle?”

“The paperwork is on its way to the regulator. No one can trace us back to the leaks, as we’ve always maintained the appearance of independent shareholders. Any investigations into the whistleblower will lead them elsewhere,” Tocsin assured me.

“By the way,” I continued, “I met someone in Barcelona yesterday who could prove to be a valuable ally. She works as cabin crew, giving us another avenue for tactical deployments.”

Tocsin’s interest was piqued. “Interesting! Share her details with me, and I’ll follow up on that.”

I provided Tocsin with the necessary information, allowing our team to plan for a future meeting with this potential asset. As I did so, I couldn’t help but ponder the significance of this encounter. Could this woman be more than just a useful associate? Was there a chance for love, for a meaningful connection that went beyond the shadows in which I operated? The questions weighed heavily on my mind, as the next step could either lead to my salvation or my downfall.

I wondered if this moment held the power to change everything, to break free from a life of transient and empty encounters, and to dare to seek something deeper and more profound. The gravity of those questions loomed large, and the decision I was about to make would shape the course of my destiny in ways I couldn’t yet fathom.

§3

Intrigue Rendezvous: The Kong Conspiracy Paris, France

The Kong restaurant in Paris exuded an air of clandestine romance, as though it held secrets whispered only to those seated at its prime table. Positioned strategically, it offered an alluring vista of the Pont Neuf and Henri Sauvage's Art Déco warehouses, framed by magnificent curved glass windows that directed one's gaze towards a ceiling fresco painted by the otherworldly brushstrokes of Ara Starck.

"It's beautiful here," my friend said as she took in the view.

"Yes, I always love coming here," I replied; my eyes fixated on the bewitching scene before us.

Kong, with its youthful sophistication and refined aura, ranked among my cherished Parisian haunts. And that day, the privilege of securing the finest table in the restaurant was bestowed upon me, for I was accompanied by an old friend, a renowned French actress.

"So, what have you been up to?" She asked; her gaze penetrating, as if searching for hidden truths.

"Just the usual, working and traveling. What about you?"

A radiant smile graced her lips, revealing a glimpse of the passion that burned within her. "I have been consumed by the creation of my latest *opus*," she confessed, her voice bright with excitement. "The labor has been arduous, yet I am enraptured by the promise it holds. My new movie."

"But amidst the toil, you remain beautiful," I murmured, my words wrapped in awe.

With a graceful motion she gave me a sweet and soft kiss on the cheek; her delectable scent of subtle musk with floral overtones enveloped me. Those were the smells I always associated with Paris,

synchronized memories swirling in *crescendo* as I tried not to gasp at the arresting sight before me.

“I’ve missed you,” I confessed, my eyes locked onto hers, seeking solace in the depths of her gaze.

“I’ve missed you too,” she replied, a soft smile gracing her lips, as though hinting at the unspoken desires that lingered between us.

Her flawless beauty, her captivating eyes, and the harmony of her features—perfectly sculpted brows, a delicate nose, and lips that invited adoration—drew the attention of all who beheld her. Her elegance and radiance set her apart from mere mortals, a regal blend tempered by a warmth that melted hearts. And there she sat, a vision of captivating allure, captivating my every thought, as our conversation danced between words and meaningful silences.

“I have to say, you look more stunning than ever,” I breathed, endeavoring to resurrect the *enchantement* between us.

“Thank you,” she replied, a subtle smile playing upon her lips, her composed demeanor hinting at the countless admirations she had received.

Lost in her enchantment, I failed to notice the backpack resting against the back of her chair, or the precise selection of dishes she ordered—a white wine, a tantalizing “*tartare de thon*”, “*avocat hot and spicy*”, a delectable “*ceviche de bar*” with “*concombre et oeufs de saumon*”, served alongside a rustic *baguette* on a wooden board.

“These dishes all look amazing,” I remarked, admiring the tantalizing feast before us.

“Yes, the food here never fails to astound me,” she murmured, her attention diverted to the delicacies that adorned our table.

These intricacies and her lyrical descriptions of each dish whispered faintly in the recesses of my mind, for my gaze was ensnared by the captivating vision of the woman before me, my dear friend.

I was also caught up in recalling how she had once smiled impishly at me and invited me into her world, life, and her sex. It was such a harsh contrast to the brittle frigidity that seemed to have descended over this luncheon, and everything felt different. She was a little distant and quite unlike those days of May in Cannes, amid

the bustle of that time of year punctuated by the spring glow of her hedonistic parties.

"I can't believe it's been so long since we last saw each other," I said, hoping to rekindle the magic that once bound us together.

"Yes, it has been a while," she replied, her expression tinged with solemnity, refusing to yield to my attempts to resurface the beguiling memories of our past.

I touched on that *débauche* of ours in May, hoping to thaw her disposition with memories of that lusty and wanton sex in the *jacuzzi* on the hotel terrace where we hadn't been alone.

"I am different now," she remarked, brushing aside my appeal to resurrect the past; her words tinged with a hint of mystery.

"Have you changed your perfume?" I inquired, diverting the conversation to safer shores.

"Éclat d'Arpège, by Lanvin. You like it?"

"I'm trying to figure out if I like it," I replied enigmatically, refusing to divulge the truth hidden beneath my ambiguous words.

The conversation meandered, a river flowing with purpose obscured, the clandestine nature of our meeting veiled by aimless words. Though flirtation danced in the air, passion merely brushed the surface of our minds. With the last sip of my coffee and the delicate taste of her herbal tea on her lips, time whispered the impending revelation that awaited us in the opulent bar below, where a verdant spiral staircase or a swift elevator led the way.

In moments like these, time twisted and turned, urging us to seize the day, reminiscent of our wild and carefree escapades exploring the depths of passion. I shared this thought with her, but her response remained wordless, save for the seductive twinkle in her eyes, promising untold desires.

My breath hitched as her hand, concealed beneath her dress, removed the black thong with a delicate grace. She guided my hand to rest upon her silken thigh, placing the intimate fabric within my palm, enveloping it with my fingers.

Without a single word, she rose, beckoning me to follow her into a hidden alcove, shielded from prying eyes. Pulling me close, her lips crashed upon mine in a fervent and lingering kiss. With a deftness born of longing, she loosened my belt buckle and unzipped

my pants, igniting a growing fire within me. Her hand slipped inside, expertly caressing me and leaving me breathless.

With her back to me, she wiggled her derriere, her arms braced against the wall. Raising her dress just enough, I entered her without hesitation. She was already completely wet, and I couldn't help but fuck her with wild abandon, yet mindful enough to prevent any attention-grabbing noise.

Her climax surged through her, fierce and consuming, as she trembled with pleasure. On my knees before her, I savored her essence, craving another round of shared delight. She remained open and exposed, and as I tasted her, my own desire swelled, yearning for further indulgence.

I was filled with an immense sense of joy. Every sensation seemed to be heightened, every touch, every sound, every breath. It was as if time stood still in that moment, and all that existed was our pleasure. I felt the joy emanating from her body as she shuddered and moaned, and I couldn't help but smile in response. As we basked in the afterglow, I knew that this was a moment that I would always treasure.

Yet, the demanding world encroached upon our ecstasy, intruding with the vibration of her cell phone resting on a recessed wall shelf. Duty called, and we had to proceed to the meeting. Her friend had arrived, waiting on the floor below, disrupting the fervent desires that had consumed us moments before.

With her backpack clutched tightly, we descended the stairs, embarking on a *rendezvous* with destiny. My enchanting actress friend, brimming with eagerness, inquired, "what are you drinking?"

"Cosmopolitan," her friend responded, sliding the glass with a delicate touch. The vessel glided across the surface, finding its place in the world of libations.

My actress friend gracefully accepted the proffered drink, moistening her lips with a gentle sweep, then placing the glass back on the table. As I stood between them, she rested her hand upon my shoulder, introducing me with a hint of mystery, "this is the friend I told you about."

“Hello!” I sat and beckoned to a waiter. Kong did not have Aperol Spritz, so I ordered the “Cougar Puritaine,” a non-alcoholic cocktail, “and two more Cosmopolitans for the ladies.”

Over the next half hour, amidst shared sips and whispered conversations, nuanced details unfurled, entangled within the essence of our intentions. Another round of Cosmopolitans, fueling the intrigue that coursed through our veins. Finally, my friend’s friend, her eyes flickering with intrigue, summarized her role, “so, you want to seduce me and then make me your spy.” Then she pursed her lips thoughtfully, “I need a cigarette.”

I could see incidental thoughts of horizontal yoking already painted on her face, but we needed to focus on business first.

“We want you to be our eyes and ears within the company,” I replied.

Her voice dripped with curiosity as she countered, “And what do I stand to gain from this?”

I leaned forward with a touch of conspiracy in my eyes. “Word has reached me that your deepest desire is to become the CHRO [Chief Human Resources Officer]. Should our plan unfold flawlessly, with the demise of the entire board, the chosen successor will undoubtedly grant you that very position,” I revealed.

My actress friend had already presented this enticing proposition, but she required my personal assurance. She locked her gaze upon mine, her predatory instincts awakened, weighing the offer dangling before her. After a moment’s contemplation, she extended her hand in agreement, sealing the pact that would shape our associated destiny.

At Kong’s grand entrance, beneath the watchful gaze of the majestic Louis Vuitton building, we bid farewell. I escorted my friend to Châtelet—Les Halles, where her homeward journey awaited. Our parting was bittersweet, marked by a tender kiss, a lingering embrace, and a promise to reunite in the Algarve within a month’s time.

Fate, with its intricate web of circumstances, conspired to delay my arrival at the Louvre Museum. A persistent shadow had trailed me since the early hours, a harbinger of unsettling maneuvers.

Though initially dismissing this pursuit as insignificant, that decisive moment beckoned, plunging me into the depths of concern. My actress friend's friend's espionage skills were no longer a mere luxury, but a necessity in our complex and winding plan. It was not treachery I sought, but the creation of a grand illusion, weaving paranoia into the minds of those across the divide, orchestrating their own downfall.

With the dawn of a new day, or at the very latest, the day thereafter, my actress friend's acquaintance would find herself entrapped in a dossier of queries, tempted by the allure of becoming a double agent. Like a puppeteer, I would supply her with elaborate details and covert instructions, an artful collage of deliberate misdirection, designed to steer their next moves.

Within the hallowed halls of the Louvre, a clandestine meeting awaited, shrouded in secrecy. The weight of my actress friend's backpack rested upon my shoulder, a subtle reminder of the pivotal role it played in my plan.

To evade my pursuers' watchful eyes, I launched my rehearsed charade, making a desperate dash for the departing train. Mounting a bicycle, I embarked on a mesmerizing escape down the enchanting Rue de La Cossonnerie. Through vibrant terraces and bustling crowds, I navigated, passing captivating restaurants that teased the senses. As I approached the illustrious Pont Neuf, the grandeur of Notre-Dame Cathedral graced the sublime island. Finally, crossing the river's edge, I traced the meandering path until the majestic Pont des Arts revealed itself. With calculated cunning, I retraced my steps, discreetly abandoning the bicycle at the foot of the bridge's steps. Swiftly, I slipped into the depths of the Louvre, resolute in the belief that no pursuer lingered in my wake.

As the intoxicating allure of Paris' streets enveloped me, a melancholic tinge colored my thoughts. The imminent solitude that awaited me at day's end threatened to sway my resolve, but I refused to yield. The mission demanded unwavering dedication if triumph were to be mine.

Instructing my actress friend to bring the backpack to our lunch meeting was not a mere gesture of goodwill. It held a secret purpose,

unbeknownst to her. Within its confines lay the key to our clandestine exchange.

I had orchestrated a stealthy switch, employing my contact within the Louvre. He possessed an exact replica of the backpack, a crucial piece in our intricate puzzle. With a swift exchange, we inched closer to our elusive goal.

Yet, as I walked through the Parisian streets of the *Belle Époque*, a gnawing intuition alerted me to the presence of my shadow once more. Suspicions solidified into certainty, urging me to act with swiftness and precision.

Within the confines of my hotel room, I packed my belongings with renewed determination. Safely secured within the depths of my bag were the precious documents I required. As for the mysterious boombox, concealing the item essential to my next destination, Warsaw, its tale remained veiled, reserved for a future chapter.

Leaving the duplicate backpack with the hotel *conciierge*, I entrusted the final piece of our puzzle to fate. The actress, my loyal friend, would soon receive the backpack adorned with gym attire, unsuspecting of the covert exchange that had taken place. But what truly mattered was the completion of my mission, even amidst the twists and turns that beset our path.

With a newfound sense of purpose and the weight of victory upon my shoulders, I bid farewell to the City of Lights. The secrets I carried would soon find their purpose in the larger tapestry of events yet to unfold. Warsaw awaited, its buildings pulsating with the whispers of intrigue and clandestine meetings.

As the plane carried me away from Paris, my thoughts turned to my actress friend, the woman who had become entangled in this convoluted scheme of falsehoods. I hoped she would navigate the treacherous waters of her newfound role with fortitude and resilience, for the shadows that danced around her would only grow darker.

In a month's time, the Algarve beckoned us with its sun-kissed shores and hidden coves—at least that was the plan and the desire. A promise of respite from the cloak-and-dagger world we inhabited,

a chance to revel in stolen moments of solace amidst the ever-encroaching danger.

But for now, my focus remained unyielding, locked onto the path ahead. The secrets of the Louvre and the consequences of our actions loomed large, a web of mystery waiting to be unraveled.

For in this realm of intrigue and subterfuge, where alliances were forged and broken like fragile porcelain, the stakes were high, and the consequences dire. And so, with a mind sharpened by expectation and honed by the challenges I faced in Paris, I embarked on the next chapter of this gripping tale, eager to uncover the truth hidden amidst the shadows.

§4

Bridal Veils and Judicial Scales

Warsaw, Poland

The moment my feet made contact with the warm asphalt of Frédéric Chopin Airport, I was acutely aware of a stark absence—my trusty entourage of subterfuge artists and data wizards. They were the oil to my machinery, and without them, the air felt thicker. But, distraction was a luxury I couldn't afford; I had an assignment to fulfill. Under the guise of being a plus-one to a matrimonial ceremony, I was there to play a part in a much bigger story. Warsaw!

As the sun sprinkled gold across the ancient buildings, I remembered Nemesis and Lisbon. He had kept his side of the bargain, yet, the balance between us resembled a house of cards—one wrong move, and it would all come crashing down.

Ever vigilant, my eyes flicked around for signs of unexpected players on this chessboard of secrets. My people had ensured that I would not be walking into an ambush, yet there was one wildcard—Napoléon. A Corsican who'd cut his teeth in the underworld of Unione Corse; that was the man tasked with being my local guide in that vibrant city.

There he was, stationed next to a UAZ Patriot, that utilitarian steel beast favored by those who've had a love affair with danger. It was my first time seeing that Russian off-roader in the flesh.

"You Napoléon?" I ventured.

Nodding, he gestured toward the open vehicle door, "Sir Leamas, hop in. I've got that intel you wanted."

Inside the car, curiosity bested me, "so, Napoléon—what's up with the name? French or Italian heritage?"

“French, obviously. Like the man himself,” he returned, his voice immediately marked with annoyance.

Ah, the banter! How could I resist? “Always thought Napoléon Bonaparte’s French creds were up to debate. Corsica was an island in the Republic of Genoa, which is now Italy, and it was at the end of the 18th century that Genoa gave it to France,” I pointed out.

“Maybe. But Napoléon was French, a Corsican,” he insisted, still not noticing my belligerence.

“Yes, but Napoléon was born in 1769. Corsica was then still a Genoese territory until it was annexed by France a little later. Truly, his parents were Italian,” I persisted.

His expression hardened, a simmering stew of vexation and disbelief. Clearly, he was not one for historical trivia. Time to shift gears.

With a magician’s flourish, I produced a small black magnetic box from my travel bag. Camouflaged as a wedding gift, it had bypassed the prying eyes of airport security. Would that the rest of that assignment were that easy!

A sly grin formed on my lips, “ready to jump down the rabbit hole?”

His eyes met mine, fraught with both suspicion and, dare I say, a glint of excitement. Together we sped into Warsaw’s streets, each twist and turn teeming with uncertainties and hidden truths. It was like sailing through a storm with no compass; the outcome was anyone’s guess.

As the car maneuvered through the bustling city, the lingering aroma of street food and old architecture filling the air, I felt alive in a way that only the imminence of danger could elicit. I was entranced by the limitless paths that unfurled before me, each choice fraught with its own unique perils and promises. The allure of the unknown—it was, as always, irresistible.

“Listen, Napoléon, these potent magnets,” I indicated the twin disks at the bottom of the box, “allow it to adhere to any metal surface that’s not aluminum. With this, we can trail our quarry no matter where they scurry off to.”

“I know how it works,” Napoléon replied curtly.

“Just keep in mind, the battery lasts only five to six days after activation,” I informed him, wanting to make absolutely certain he understood the battery’s limited lifespan.

“If we execute this flawlessly, the wedding will be our closing curtain,” he rejoined sharply.

“Noted,” I replied. Then, in a steady tone, ensuring each word was crisp, I said, “Napoléon, this SIM card is untraceable. But I need another layer of anonymity—an extra phone without IMEI registration, yet capable of accepting any SIM.”

I didn’t think it was necessary to explain to him that our SIM cards had been configured to reject pings or simulated bridges. These are techniques often employed by intelligence agencies at airports. They trick newcomers into believing their phone is connected to a nearby cell tower while monitoring their location. A simulated bridge is a virtual link between mobile devices or a device and a network element like a base station, made using software. It can intercept and monitor communications. A simulated ping measures round-trip time between devices and can be used to track someone’s movements by identifying the cell towers they connect to.

Napoléon didn’t reply immediately. His fingers clenched around the steering wheel, knuckles whitening momentarily before he seemed to make a conscious effort to relax them. It was as if he was wrestling with something inside him, a storm of thoughts battling for prominence.

“Open the glove box, please,” he finally said, his voice laced with a tension he couldn’t mask. “There’s a Beretta 418 in there, identical to the one James Bond uses.”

He paused, looking at me as if measuring the weight of his next words. “After, I’ll help you get a cell phone. I don’t have one prepared as you’d like at the moment; I wasn’t aware it would be needed.”

“I’ll pass on the pistol,” I demurred.

Napoléon’s voice held an edge, “you might regret it. The judge may come armed.”

“We’re not *desperados*, Napoléon. Words will serve as our weapons,” I rejoined.

“You’re playing with fire. I have a black powder gun you can use, no paperwork needed,” he persisted.

“Do you have a cowboy pistol? A Wild West relic? Perfect for a showdown at high noon, I presume!” I quipped, a hint of amusement in my voice. “I know that since 2001, a regulation has been passed that allows these cowboy pistols.”

“I’ve got a 36-caliber Uberti Hege, made in Italy. It’s cumbersome but could get you a smaller one. In restaurants there is no problem, but on public transport it is forbidden to carry one,” he responded, not missing a beat.

I couldn’t help but shake my head at his absurdity.” A chuckle escaped my lips. “And do you also have the boots and the cowboy hat to complete the look?” I paused for a moment, then added, “I appreciate your concern, my friend, but I have no need for a pistol.”

With a final glance at him, I picked up the mysterious documents beside me and inquired, “is this the judge’s file?”

Napoléon was quick to reply, but his answer veered off the expected path, “no, it’s your hotel booking at the Polonia Palace and info on your rented cars.”

“Very well. It’s in a good spot, though, right? How far from the Supreme Court?” I focused on the nitty-gritty.

“It’s a four-star hotel, right opposite the Palace of Culture and Science. A survivor of the war, it is the solitary hotel in Warsaw where General Eisenhower rested,” Napoléon spilled, dropping knowledge like a pro.

My mind circled back to the original point, “cool history lesson, but what about the judge’s info?”

“Up here, buddy,” he tapped his forehead, all smug. “No one’s cracking this safe, no matter how hard they try.”

“I trust you on that,” I replied, wondering about the person we were dealing with. “So who is that judge? The one we should be watching?”

“Ah, so the president of the Supreme Court is a lady, Małgorzata. But she’s not the big cheese,” Napoléon said, lowering his voice for emphasis on the plot.

“That’s what I wanna know. Who’s got the real juice? The European Court has already said its piece, but there’s wiggle room.

We gotta make sure they only chuck the bad parts of these contracts, not the whole thing,” I said, my mind racing with the possibilities.

Napoléon gave me a heads-up, “look, don’t underestimate this judge, okay? Here, the ones calling the shots are the politicians.”

“That’s what we’ve gotta dodge, man, even if the Economy Minister seems like he’s on our side. Can’t leave anything to chance. Got any dirt on this judge?” I pressed, my thoughts zooming a mile a minute.

Napoléon took a beat before speaking, “you know Poland’s super Catholic, right? Like, way more after Pope John Paul II. Opus Dei’s big here. Huge, actually.”

“So is our judge part of Opus Dei? How’s that a problem? Or is it?” My mind was working overtime, putting pieces of the puzzle together.

Napoléon didn’t mince words, “Opus Dei’s HQ is just a short walk from the hotel. And it’s opposite the Supreme Court, a 15-minute drive. Members of the Law and Justice party hang there sometimes. And yeah, our judge has been seen there, too.”

The stakes had just ramped up. It was as if we were sifting through a complex web of motives and alliances, the final outcome hanging in the balance. Unpredictable variables, like a summer storm rolling in without warning, could sway our destiny.

Every revelation thickened the plot, as if adding spices to an already complex stew.

Who held the reins of this shadowy operation? With each passing moment, another mask was lifted, revealing yet another layer of pretense. The dance went on, and I found myself even deeper in its clutches.

As the car screeched to a stop, Napoléon gestured toward the Polonia Palace, which glowed like no other. However, his ambush scheme had me boiling with ire. “An ambush? Are you out of your mind? Whose harebrained idea was that? We can’t go around setting traps for a Supreme Court judge!” I exclaimed, my voice cracking with disbelief.

“It was my brainchild,” Napoléon shot back, defiant. “That’s why I said to pack the Beretta. I’ve got wind of the wedding, see. And around here, truckers often barricade the exit for newlyweds

until they hand over bottles of vodka. I thought, why not turn tradition to our advantage?"

But his argument fell on deaf ears. "Napoléon, this scheme is riddled with holes. The wedding's near Modlin airport—escape routes are limited. If things go south, getting out of there discreetly will be a challenge. Put the judge in a potentially compromising position... it's risky. This plan is a disaster waiting to happen!" I retorted.

"I did what I could with what I had," Napoléon replied tersely, his demeanor turning frigid.

Stifling my aggravation, I interrogated him further, "what's our actual leverage here? Where's the evidence?"

His voice weighed heavy with unspoken gravity, "our man is both devoutly Catholic and gay. In Poland, either label has its hardships. Throw in some Russian influences whipping up intolerance, and you've got a powder keg. If this judge's secret got out, it could destroy not just him but his family."

"Now you're speaking sense," I acknowledged, finally seeing the picture he was painting.

"Tomorrow, at 10 a.m. sharp, you need to be under the central station, next to the Hard Rock Cafe. There's a kiosk selling electronic cigarettes. An unidentified woman will hand you an envelope containing a flash drive, some pictures, and that burner phone you asked for," he revealed, his voice thick with resolve.

"And how do I know who she is?" I queried.

"You won't have to. She'll find you. The magnetic box will already be planted on the judge's car by the time you get the envelope," he said, his eyes shimmering as though concealing hidden vaults of secrets.

As Napoléon melted into the obscurity of the day, my feet carried me towards the welcoming lights of the Polonia Palace Hotel. My stomach growled, reminding me of its neglected state. So, fueled by that more primal need, I ventured out, looking for something to satisfy my appetite. Yet, my mind raced with thoughts about the convoluted plan laid before me. Tomorrow promised to unveil whether this intrigue would be my downfall or the masterstroke that would solidify my standing in this complicated affair.

Escaping the seclusion of my hotel room, I found myself immersed in the electric atmosphere of Warsaw. The city seemed to be buzzing with life, its rhythm pulling me in. Soon, I found myself in front of a Starbucks, its warm glow and the smell of coffee too inviting to resist. The café was conveniently situated at the corner of an old building, wedged between two significant roads and not far from where I was staying.

As I waited for my order, I felt the familiar vibration of my phone in my pocket. It was a text from an old friend who would soon be joining me in Warsaw. The prospect of meeting her filled me with a sense of joy, so I quickly replied: “can’t wait to see you!” Almost instantly, my thoughts shifted to Ruben, a friend who worked in the trading room of a nearby bank. I texted him next: “fancy grabbing dinner at the Hard Rock Café? I’m bringing some friends.” His positive response arrived in no time. Dinner at 9 pm, he confirmed, with plans to meet up beforehand at my hotel’s lobby.

With my social calendar sorted, I took my steaming cup of coffee and found a quiet corner to sit. I looked around and let the aroma fill my senses. For a brief moment, all seemed right with the world. Yet, in the back of my mind, questions lingered like mist over a river. What hidden surprises did tomorrow hold? Would my dealings unravel, or would I manage to navigate through this intricate web of politics, power, and moral compromises? For now, all I could do was wait. Time, the ultimate arbitrator, would soon reveal all. But until then, I would take in the beauty of this fascinating city, a place steeped in history and buzzing with modern life. It was a brief respite, perhaps, but a necessary one, allowing me a moment to gather my thoughts and steel myself for whatever lay ahead.

As I entered the vast hall of the Polonia Palace, she stood out like a lone gem against a sea of mundane stones—a living testament to grace in her straightforward ensemble. She sat upon a corner sofa, its blue leather surface becoming a throne beneath her. She wore basic jeans, a plain white tee, and a desert camel coat that draped her with regality.

Advancing towards her felt like progressing through chapters of a live epic and a narrative of poetic elegance. On her feet, she wore

white Gucci sneakers, their iconic golden bees and traditional red and green stripes echoing her distinct style. Our greeting was a kiss fueled with simmering passion, followed by a playful rubbing of noses, as if our very beings had their own magnetic pull.

“I’ve been missing you like crazy,” her voice trembled ever so slightly, and her eyes were like wildfires—burning, passionate, and impossible to contain.

“You’re looking like a million bucks, as usual. How’d the flight go?” I was genuinely interested in knowing if she was good, although it was also my way of inviting her into the present moment with me.

“Two hours in the sky, but I need a shower. Gotta freshen up for you. Flew back to this country for someone’s wedding,” she said, a mischievous spark flashing in her eyes.

“Oh, a wedding, huh! Well, buckle up. We’re gonna have ourselves a good time. Promise you that,” I responded, grinning like a man who knew a secret.

That phrase was more than just a light comment; it was my guiding *motto*, a principle in both my professional and intimate relationships. Trust served as the cornerstone upon which I built everything—the enterprise of my life, so to speak. I injected a blend of risk and thrill into every undertaking, transforming mundane tasks into spirited ventures—a series of dares that either strengthened or broke us.

Our endeavors were painstakingly organized, allowing room even for unplanned elements to seem as if they were part of the grand design. Physical force was never our style, but the potential for sudden peril was a given—like the ever-present chance that a gun might be pointed at us. Even that, however, would be seen as just another level in the game of life, a thrilling scenario we were meant to survive and surmount.

My team found an intoxicating blend of thrill and peace in our high-stakes operations, as if each moment of risk was followed by a moment of sublime satisfaction. It was psychology at its finest, tailored to make people not only endure but thrive under extreme circumstances.

But right then, standing near her, every stratagem and cunning plan seemed to fade away into nothingness. She was the core of my world, and being near her made every other thing seem insignificant.

"Your bags all settled upstairs?" She asked, with a tone that suggested a silent invitation for something more.

"Yep, we're all set. Let's head up," I replied, yearning to stay close to her for as long as possible.

As we left the lobby, its warm light casting a golden glow that framed her face like a halo, we stepped into the elevator bound for more secluded quarters. The doors closed behind us, isolating us from the world below. It was in that moment, suspended between floors, that a thought seized me: In a life filled with calculated risks and unfathomable stakes, could this raw, unfiltered love be the grandest venture of all?

In a bedroom spacious enough to host a council of feudal lords, adorned in lavish details one would associate with aristocracy, I found myself caught in a spell as compelling as a bard's ballad. A window revealed Warsaw's towering jewel—the Palace of Culture and Science, an architectural colossus. There stood Boguslawa, shifting the wispy curtains like an alchemist transmuting base elements into gold. Each motion of the cloth seemed to rewrite the scene before us, and the city's skyline became a story yet to be finished.

"Two thirty-seven," she murmured, eyes anchored to that awe-inspiring structure. "Bet you didn't know it's the fifth tallest skyscraper in the European Union."

I couldn't resist her cultivation; it pulled me in as surely as gravity tugs a fallen apple to Earth. Stepping beside her, my thoughts took flight: "this woman is a wellspring of wisdom, each droplet yet to be discovered." Such was the deep awe she inspired in me.

But like the wind shifting directions, Boguslawa's mood altered in an instant. Her face, once glowing, knotted up in internal conflict. "Look, I don't even feel Polish anymore. This place, its inward-looking mindset—it's just not for me. Getting out was the best decision I ever made."

I sought to comfort her, as one might try to bottle the essence of a fleeting aroma. My hands began to lower her belt, eager to explore territories marked by the cartography of love. Yet, she stopped me, “hold up. I need a shower. I feel kinda gross.”

She departed for the bathroom, like a snake-bitten Eurydice retreating to her underworld, leaving me stranded between a rock and an emotionally complex place. A torrent of emotions flooded me, not unlike the sensation one feels when a cliffhanger leaves us desperate for resolution.

As the sound of the shower enveloped the room like a *crescendo* in a passionate opera, I disrobed, leaving behind garments that felt like unnecessary constraints. Naked, I ventured into the humid atmosphere, a steamy mist that would have made even a Roman bathhouse seem tame. It was a land where water morphed into air, where boundaries blurred, and I was its silent invader.

Boguslawka stood there, blissfully unaware—or so I thought. Her form, graced by the cascading water, transmuted into a living sculpture. I marveled at the way water traced the contours of her back, each droplet a tiny pilgrim navigating the terrain of her skin. And then, an unspoken recognition: she shifted her shoulders in an almost serpentine manner and extended the shower gel toward me without turning her head, a wordless command from a queen to her subject.

With a sense of religious duty, I took the offered elixir. Starting at the nape of her neck, I commenced the sacred rite of soap and touch as if I were an artist and she were my grand *oeuvre*.

Continuing her bathing, her silence served as permission for my hands to map out her contours, her edges, her undulating valleys. My fingers circled her breasts, each touch elevating her sensitivity to new heights, each gentle pass eliciting a firmer response.

“I always wondered what it’d be like to be painted by an artist,” Boguslawka mused, her voice a soft whisper over the sound of the shower.

“Well, consider this my masterpiece then,” I quipped, my fingertips skirting her increasingly sensitive nipples, underscoring each touch with a promise of love and complexities yet unfathomed.

She halted, becoming a statue of vulnerability and latent power. Interpreting her stillness as unspoken agreement, I drew myself closer, the press of my erect cock against her butt cheeks was unmistakable. I sensed a shiver ripple through her frame as my hands narrowed their focus on her nipples, my fingers moving in ever-tighter circles. Suddenly, a vocalization of pleasure escaped her lips, her body tensing and then relaxing in a rhythm of desire and fulfillment.

After a few minutes, in a cadence in which the bodies, leaning, clinging to each other, danced under the water falling furiously from the shower and then disappear down the bathroom drain, she grabbed my rigid rod and asked, “aren’t you going to come into me yet?”

Smiling silently, I bent forward against her back, took both her hands, and placed them on the shower wall, causing her to hunch slightly as I brushed my cock, hard, between her legs and up through her firm, round buttocks. I withdrew my hands to her butt cheeks, pulling them apart in massaging motions with each palm. My thumbs circled gently around her rear entry, but that was only a feint as I twisted my palms till I was able to follow the warm flowing water with my fingers and then slipped one into her pussy. She gasped as I found her clit, then another finger joined the first to slowly gloss her wet channel. In seconds, another shudder ran through her, and I felt her warm juices around my fingers.

Moaning, her right hand reached behind to grasp my thickened rod and pulled me in closer. I let her guide me, pulled my fingers out of her vagina and my hard cock replaced them.

“Fuck me. Fuck me now!” Boguslaw’s voice, imbued with urgency and desire, echoed within the humid chamber, ricocheting off the tiles and imprinting itself into my very marrow.

I needed no further urging. I was like a dog enraptured by a bitch in heat, pistoning wildly and deeply. Both of us were making sounds resembling the soft *slop-slop*, in harmony with the shower water that continued to fall upon us. She was shuddering almost continuously. I felt her grip tighten around me, until she stilled momentarily as waves of orgasmic heat rippled out from her core. I slowed as she went slack, my arms providing extra support till she could recover.

The unyielding sound of water crashing around us seemed inconsequential, a mere backdrop to the passion that unfolded between two bodies lost and found in each other.

Feeling steady again, she unsheathed herself and turned around. As she stepped into my embrace, I sidestepped and leaned back against the shower wall. I picked her up as she lifted a leg and straddled me. With legs wrapping us close, she pressed her feet at the tub's edges for leverage and started pumping her groin as I matched her stroke for stroke with my hands, crushing her ass against me. The shower continued to splash onto our faces and between our chests, water sliding along every curve, adding further sensations to our already heightened passion.

The rate of her panting rose as she kept saying, over and over, "don't stop. Don't stop now. I'm about to come again. Don't stop. Don't stop... ahhhh! I'm coming... I'm coming!"

I couldn't think of any better words than these from a woman while we're fucking. This set of words triggered all the lustful hormones in me.

I was still hard as she got off my cock, winding down from her orgasm under the sprinkling water. I led her left hand to wrap around my throbbing, allowing her to feel its hardness and how ready it was to explode. She smiled wanly, then crossed her legs as she lowered herself into a sitting position that placed my dick right at her face. Her fingers tapped against my rod as she moved them to caress my balls, while her lips opened to enfold my hardness. I could only last mere moments as her tongue swirled around my cock, as her continuous sucking tipped me over the edge. I exploded in her mouth and continued to spurt onto her eager breasts as she kept on milking me...

In my breast, a complex cauldron of emotions brewed—a curious blend of pride and foreboding, each vying for supremacy—as thoughts of Boguslawa commandeered my innermost recesses of the mind. A friend like no other, she was a mere score of years when she bid farewell to her Polish homeland, a crucible that had molded her lineage with both valor and shades of torment. Her grandfather, a secret ally to the British during the World War II, wore the mantle

of a hero until he met his tragic finale within the grim walls of a concentration camp. And then her father, a man cast in a similar die, traded in the currencies of espionage, serving his native Poland while secretly shuttling invaluable intelligence to the American Central Intelligence Agency, CIA.

Professor Ian Cooke, a luminary in the realm of international relations, once opined that propaganda serves as governments' invisible sword, deftly shaping the narrative to sway the collective consciousness. In this clandestine arena, Boguslawka excelled as a *maestro*, her masterpieces compelling even the most jaded journalists to reevaluate their entrenched positions.

Yet, her prowess in the delicate art of persuasion did little to veil her fervent dedication to the causes of social justice. Rooted in feminism, her spirit was fired by an intense ardor for women's rights—an enthusiasm ignited by the painful history that etched its scars on her familial saga. Her sister had teetered on the brink of mortality itself, nearly succumbing to the horrors of domestic violence, and this grim chapter had steeled Boguslawka's resolve to battle every manifestation of gender inequity.

So, when destiny cast her in the challenging role of refurbishing the tarnished reputation of a CEO mired in allegations of sexual harassment—a case that she later discovered to be void of substance—she didn't merely perceive it as another task on her professional agenda. No, she was incensed, viewing this endeavor as a sacred quest to rectify an unforgivable injustice.

But it was our friendship—indeed, more than professional acquaintanceship—that served as the true cornerstone of our relationship. In joy and sorrow, through thick and thin, we stood steadfastly beside one another. This reality weighed heavily upon me as we beheld the descent of the sun below the horizon. Its golden fingers caressed the contours of the urban landscape, suffusing it with an almost divine glow. Yet, as the sun bade its daily farewell, an inexplicable sense of dread seized me. I felt as though that visible departure was stealing away some fragment of my inner stability, as if whispering ominous portents of trials yet to come.

“Awake and—shall we say—thoroughly fulfilled, aren’t we?” Her voice danced through the serene quiet that had wrapped around us like a warm blanket after our afternoon dalliance. Even as we lay there, devoid of clothing, the atmosphere was dense with a mutual sense of satisfaction, devoid of any awkwardness. “So, where are we going for dinner?” She asked, a playful curiosity edging her words.

“As for dinner, we’re off to the Hard Rock Cafe—just around the corner,” I replied, my smile broadening at the thought of the unfolding evening. “And we’ll be joined by a friend at nine.”

“A friend? Anyone I should be warned about?”

“Name’s Ruben. Works with numbers and risks at State Street Bank.”

“State Street? Is that some Polish bank?”

“Nope, all-American. Hails from Boston, and has its fingers in a financial pie worth more than 30 trillion,” I clarified.

She playfully tossed her hair back and quizzed, “this Ruben guy—Polish, or...?”

“Nope, Portuguese, from Madeira, to be exact.”

“Ah, a man of wine! Flying solo?” She clarified at my puzzled glance, “is he coming alone?”

“Yeah, just him. What about it?”

“Thinking of adding a plus-one on my end,” she said, her eyes narrowing into a mischievous grin that both intrigued and unsettled me a tad.

“The more the merrier,” I replied, hiding my curiosity behind a playful tone. She feigned irritation with a theatrical sniff.

As she reached for her phone to arrange this sudden twist, I used the opportunity to freshen up. When I returned, she was assembling her evening attire, clearly with purpose.

“Care to join me? We’ve got time,” I beckoned, motioning to the empty spot next to me on the bed.

“Love to, but can’t. My friend’s nearby, we’re meeting in the lobby in about fifteen,” she responded. She then slipped into a turquoise bra with flair, obviously foregoing any other undergarments as she donned a pair of black leather pants. A bold, black sweatshirt stamped with “BING” in striking red lettering