

LAST DISGUISE

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*To the Don Pablos of this world
those who refuse to bow,
even with a knife to their gut.*

*To the Francescas
who bite down on blood and spit fire,
even when their hands tremble.*

*To the Mariangelas
who break inside and return by will alone,
for only there lives the freedom of love.*

Prologue

It rained all night. Not a decent, head-on rain, but a kind of damp breathing that seeped through the cracks in the balcony and got into my bones. The stone is still dripping. And me, sleepless, without remorse, just that quiet restlessness of someone who doesn't know if they survived the night or simply didn't die enough.

Yesterday, at the table, the silence was thicker than the wine. Francesca spoke little. Her eyes, always a bit clouded, searched for something in me as if looking for a flaw, a tremor, or an answer I never promised to give. She told me she'd be back today. Or maybe she didn't say anything. I can't tell anymore what was said from what I wish had been said.

Mariangela didn't show up. Not a message. Not even an explicit absence. Just her emptiness—always punctual, almost elegant. Her absence has a scent. A dry perfume, with notes of irony and basil—a trail that backs me into what I never knew how to be.

I left before dawn. Took the brown jacket, the one for cold nights in Ferrara, the one she once tore off me in the hallway of a nameless hotel. It was hot, but I needed it. As if the fabric knew things the skin has already forgotten.

I sat on the rock where the sea breaks crooked, at the bottom of the old staircase. Listened to the gulls lying to the sky and felt the salt on my ankles, like being kicked by a childhood lost between

airports. I had the paper in my pocket. The letter I wrote for her and never had the guts to send. Stupid. Beautiful. Raw.

"If you come, I have wine and all my silence. If you don't, let the wine shut me up. Francesca has the night, you have the doubt. Choose. Or let me fall."

I threw the paper into the sea inside a bottle. A postcard gesture, I know. But I needed it. Needed to pretend there was still fate, a current... chance. That something would bring me back to myself. Then I heard the sound of a car coming up: an old engine; a smell of diesel; and wet earth clinging to the wheels. I didn't turn around. I learned that what comes, comes only when you're no longer waiting. Or when it no longer matters.

Today I know: there are no more disguises. Only what's left. The body, the memory, and the exhaustion. The name Leilac doesn't protect me anymore. Everyone knows who I am. I let them know—lawyers, judges, spies, lovers... all of them.

Maybe the last disguise is writing.

Or pretending that I still know how to love.

1

The Weight of Don Pablo's Bricks

Scopello, April 18, 2025

Don Pablo was dragging himself around. Literally. His feet, which had once danced on the trading floor like someone stomping grapes for old wine, now dragged like heavy bricks through the clay of Vinagra. You could see the marks in the dust, like the furrows of a tired ox. Sometimes, he'd kick chickens. Other times, stray dogs. But it was more anger at himself than at the animals—I knew that. Because I felt it too. The difference was he didn't hide it anymore. I still tried to cover it up with short sentences and long walks.

What burned him wasn't just the money. It was over a million, yes. But for Don Pablo, that was like losing a gold tooth in a river: you dive, you search, and you come back with another—or with two. It wasn't the money. It was the fucking injustice. The scam. Having believed in someone—one of those slick bastards in pinstripe suits, hair slicked back with tuna oil and a conman's pitch—and having been betrayed from the very first conversation. That's what fucked him up. Trust, like barbed wire around his neck, still kept him from swallowing the result—and me too.

And me... I couldn't protect him. That eats me inside. Because I tried. I made calls at indecent hours. Played by the rules, which is like trying to tame a bear with sweet words.

To save him, I would have had to jump the fence. Go in and blow everything up from the inside. Mess where I shouldn't. Break codes and violate human and legal firewalls. Shut people off with the same coldness you shut off machines. Sacrifice the last shred of legality I still had left.

But I hesitated. And in that hesitation, he burned.

I didn't do it. And now I wonder if I failed out of prudence or cowardice.

Mariangela didn't show up. That didn't help. Not a message, not a sound in the night. I was left with the wine poured, the candle lit, and the face of someone waiting for a miracle in an abandoned bar. Her absence stuck to what I was already carrying from Don Pablo and together they formed a thick, bittersweet paste that clogged my stomach.

What saved me was being in Scopello.

Because here, even failure sounds like the sea.

And that, somehow, still reminds me I'm alive.

The phone rang with that dry, retro, almost insulting sound that always catches me mid-thought. In those two seconds before I saw the name on the screen, I wished it was her, Mariangela. Not with explanations—I'm sick of those—but with a simple, firm, concrete gesture: "Late. I'm here. I'm home, in Scopello. Opened a bottle to breathe. Come."

That image—her with her hair loose and messy, the bottle on the solid wood table, and that look of someone who knows coming back is harder than leaving—was my only unwritten request to the universe.

But it wasn't her.

It was Francesca.

I answered with that half-swallowed tone, somewhere between broken hope and automatic politeness.

— "*Vieni a pranzo. Voglio che conosca una persona,*" she said, straight to the point.

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It wasn't an invitation. It was a summons. Francesca doesn't invite, she decides. And if you don't show up, you're seen as someone who's given up.

I didn't ask who. But I imagined. Maybe it was that guy, the Sicilian who emigrated to America, ran from Trump's madness and came back to grow tomatoes and spread sarcasm in Palermo's bars. From Francesca's talk, he seemed like someone who'd survived three coups and two botched marriages.

Of course I'd go.

What else was I supposed to do? Sit there chewing over Mariangela's absence, imagining dialogues that never happened, or rewriting the letter I never sent?

The judicial holidays were ending, yes. But thanks to the absurd web of national holidays, April 25th—when Portugal puts carnations on its shoulders and pretends it still believes in freedom—gave me a small miracle: a few more days of suspension, a bit more nothing before the world started judging me again.

I took a deep breath, looked at the sea with the face of someone who knows he's going but expects nothing.

I realized the world owed me nothing. But justice, that, still owed Don Pablo.

And I still haven't decided if I'll collect with a receipt or with gunpowder.

I put on the gray linen shirt—the one Mariangela hated—and left with the walk of someone who's lost more than he wants to admit.

Because sometimes, the only way not to drown is to walk toward the next absurdity.

2

Lunch with Francesca

Palermo, April 18, 2025.

The garden hid behind a wrought iron gate, twisted like a thought on the eve of betrayal. The entrance was discreet: a cracked step, two bougainvilleas at war with the wall, and the impossible smell of burnt thyme. Inside, time had teeth. It didn't devour, it gnawed, spat, and licked the leftovers. Osteria dei Vespri was an old mouth, sophisticated on the outside and with the gums of a tamed beast on the inside. It didn't speak, it chewed. It was a place, civilized only on the surface. Two tables occupied. Three waiters in ghost mode. And a late April light that leaned on the objects as if apologizing for being born beautiful and ashamed of its own transparency. It was a light that didn't want to be noticed, but revealed everything, from the worn nail on the corner chair to the wine stain someone tried to forget on a napkin folded with anger.

Francesca was already seated. Leg crossed with that performative boredom she always used when she wanted to seem absent. The cigarette unlit between her fingers—only the ash still alive.

— “You're late.”

— “The world doesn't end when you feel like it,” I said, sitting down without hurry.

She didn't smile. She lifted her chin. And that's when I saw the man.

Tancredi Lo Presti.

He was standing, leaning against the pillar as if he were part of the restaurant's structure. Tall. Sharp bones, as if his skull wanted to pierce the world. Skin burnt by sun and sorrow. A beige linen jacket, as wrinkled as souls that have crossed too many borders. And those eyes—fuck, the eyes—as if someone had thrown two stones of lava into the sea and they'd learned how to look.

— “This is Leilac,” Francesca said, not looking at me. “The man I told you about.”

Tancredi didn't reach out. He gave a barely perceptible nod, as if accepting my existence, but not my presence.

— “And you're the Sicilian who talks to Californians.” — I pointed to the chair. — “Sit. Francesca only invites monsters or allies. I haven't decided which one you are yet.”

He sat. Sideways. Like someone ready to get up at any moment. The waiter approached. Francesca ordered a *Passo del Lupo*, *Nero d'Avola*, without consulting anyone. Her arrogance was the same as always, but adorable. She chose wine like picking a battlefield.

— “Francesca told me enough for me to come,” Tancredi finally said. His voice was deep, but with a kind of sand in the pauses. “But not enough for me to trust.”

— “I don't trust either,” I replied. “But I'm here.”

Silence.

The wine came. The bread came. The looks came. No one touched anything.

— “The X algorithm, the old Twitter, doesn't respond to code anymore. There are loose pieces, entropy in the system. Your friend here has experience infiltrating labyrinths.” — He nodded at Francesca. “And I have the map.”

Francesca raised her glass. She drank as if sealing a pact. Then leaned back, let the sun sketch her profile, and spoke.

— “He has documents. Some came from Oakland. The rest is on a shady cloud he's used for years. If what he says is true, X is being manipulated from the inside.”

— “I see,” I murmured.

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Tancredi leaned forward. His face now a hand's breadth from mine. He smelled of old lemon and sleeping gunpowder.

— "You want justice, money, and maybe some help attacking Ambezzo. I want payback. Francesca wants survival. If we put the three wishes together, maybe we can make a beautiful mess."

The waiter brought the antipasto—Sicilian pecorino, prosciutto, and homemade pickled artichokes. The cheese was hard, like Tancredi's stare. Francesca cut a piece and offered it to me with her fingers, not the fork. I refused. Tancredi accepted and licked her fingers without asking.

There were codes at play there. And none of them were etiquette.

— "What's your price?" he asked me.

— "My price? I don't have a price."

He smiled. Or almost. A smile with teeth still closed, like someone who doesn't open gates before hearing thunder.

— "Everyone has a price."

He drank. Then wiped his mouth with the cloth napkin like erasing an answer.

Francesca didn't react. Not an eyebrow. Nothing. Just shifted position, crossing her legs the other way.

— "Mine is not having anyone boss me around. That's it," I replied, without much thought.

Tancredi bit the corner of his lip. He wasn't trying to intimidate. He was measuring.

— "I don't want to boss you."

— "Good. Speak plainly."

— "I want you to help me destroy X. Nothing more."

— "Tell me how."

He picked up the napkin, wiped his mouth. Then spoke with a studied coldness.

— "I have access to internal documents. Corporate email, moderation logs, scripts that should never have been used, a lot. They came from inside. From a former employee in Oakland."

— "Are they in your possession?"

— "They're on a private cloud. Encrypted. I'll give you access. Read-only."

— "I trust clouds as much as finance ministers."

— “I don’t want you to trust. I want you to read. You’ll see right away what you’ve got in your hands.”

Francesca put down her glass. She wasn’t there to pretty anything up.

— “The material is solid. Not conspiracy trash. It’s technical. And organized. Direct links to paid moderators, trend manipulation, interference in the EU. Especially in environmental campaigns.”

— “With proof?”

— “Yes. Names, dates, payments. Some in crypto. It’s all there.”

— “What do you want from me, exactly?”

— “I want you to use what you have. You have access to legal teams. To foundations, associations, you get along with the doctrine, you know judges, especially in Spain. You have contacts in Belgium. I need you to set up class actions, influence MEPs, and expose this as a scandal.”

— “You’re counting on the Court of Justice of the European Union to judge a platform?”

— “I’m counting on pressure. Scared politicians, hungry journalists, and regulators who don’t want to look useless.”

— “And you think that’s enough to bring X down?”

— “No. But enough to weaken them. To force them to sell assets. To make them cut their losses. To get them slapped with a multimillion-euro fine from the European Commission.”

— “And then?”

— “Then it’s up to you.”

We fell silent. Francesca stared at her plate like it was all normal.

— “You know if I do this, I’m in all the way.”

— “That’s what I expect.”

— “And your role?”

— “Get data. Cross sources. Pass you everything. Disappear at the end.”

— “And you, Francesca?”

She looked at me without hesitation.

— “I make sure they don’t bury us alive in the process.”

— “You two trust each other?”

— “No,” she said.

— “No,” he said.

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I took a deep breath. I knew what this was. I knew what they'd ask next.

— "I need to see the documents. I need to talk to my people. I need guarantees that what I'm about to do isn't a shot in the dark."

— "You'll get them today. At 8 p.m. Temporary link. Three hours to see everything. Then it disappears."

— "And if it's a trap?"

— "Then it's a very well-made trap."

— "And what do you get out of this, Tancredi?"

— "Nothing you can buy."

— "Someone paying you?"

— "No."

— "Who are you working for?"

— "For someone. Someone who wants to see X bleed."

I stood up. Left a hundred euros on the table.

— "If what you say is true, I start tomorrow."

— "And if it's not?"

— "You'll never hear from me again."

I left without looking back.

The Palermo light hit the walls, reminding me it was still daytime. The world was rotten. But at least there was still a way to open the right wounds.

I stepped outside and the sun hit me like gut punch.

Palermo smelled like... Palermo, with its own scent of limestone and rotten fruit. Palermo is always more honest on ugly, stinking days. Beauty there has dust in the corners and that comforts me.

The streets vibrated with the noise of old cars, with the voices of even older people, and with the hurry of those who never had time to be young. I walked without thinking about the way. The body went, the rest didn't.

I crossed the street, not with the hurry of someone wanting to get anywhere, but because I didn't want to stay there.

I thought of Mariangela. Again. She's a plague. She doesn't show up. Doesn't warn. Doesn't say a fucking thing. Just dissolves slowly like a pill in water, leaving a bitter taste and bubbles at the bottom of my chest.

I took out my phone. Nothing.

Messages? None.

Did I call? No.

I never call those who leave me talking to myself. It's a simple rule. Maybe a stupid one.

I heard footsteps behind me.

Francesca was running up. Her heels hit the cobblestones like she were in the war.

— "Leilac."

I stopped. Didn't turn right away. Waited for her to lean into me with her body, not words.

— "I need you to think about this," she said, breathless.

— "I'm already thinking."

— "Not as an operator. As a man."

— "Not sure I'm that anymore. What do you want?"

— "I want this. This project. This whole mess."

— "Why?"

She grabbed my arm. Squeezed. Her nails were short. There was anger there.

— "Because I'm dying inside. And you know what that is."

— "Go to Rome. Ask for reinstatement at DIA. They'll take you back. You wrote me yourself to say so."

— "I don't want to. Rome's rotten. And I've already given everything I had to give. I want to work like you. With my people. No uniform. No official dossiers."

— "And you think this is different?"

— "No. But at least I choose. At least I'm alive. You get it? I need to be alive. I need to wake up and have to decide if I'm lying or not. If I'm helping or fucking someone over. I need that. I need to get my hands dirty again."

We went silent. The traffic made noise in the background, as if it were respecting her kind of despair.

— "And if this goes wrong?"

— "If it goes wrong, at least I burned with it inside. I can't watch life from the outside anymore. I don't want to go back to being a spectator at the orders of others, of a State, of bureaucratic bosses. I want to move, I want to push, I want to tear."