

**THE PAWN'S
GAMBIT**

Leilac Leamas

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THE PAWN'S GAMBIT

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To the Dons, Never Pawns,

Dedicated to you—the dauntless few who craft their own destinies and lead with conviction against all odds. Like dons, you maneuver through the battlegrounds of life, not as pawns, but as masters of your own fate. May your courage and resolve inspire a legacy of change.

Prologue

In a world where power dresses in secrecy and treachery, the stakes are as vertiginous as the heights reached by the quiet elite, I play my part. To the casual observer, I am Leilac Leamas, a mere business consultant dealing with trade and finance. But beneath this facade, a different truth stirs—a truth known only in the clandestine circles where fortunes are made and empires crumble.

In the understated elegance of my study, I am a figure of unusual resourcefulness on the edge of a complex web, the threads of which stretch into strategy, finance, litigation, and seduction. The invitation that slipped into my email inbox—a dinner at Le Olivo, set against the backdrop of Mallorca's luxury. Yet within this simple proposal lies a chessboard of implications, a dance of masks and motives where nothing is as altruistic and simple as it appears.

The mission that called me involved a subtle guise of social and hedonistic parties, yet it pulsed with an undercurrent of strategic ferocity. On the grand chessboard of corporate intrigue and the courts of law, Mallorca was more than just a picturesque retreat; it was a stage for a meticulously choreographed ballet of espionage and influence.

My adversaries, titans clad in great wealth and influence, included Nemesis—a formidable figure whose long-standing enmity had its genesis in the downfall of a telecommunications giant in Portugal and Brazil, for which he was a key contributor.

Although we occasionally formed strategic alliances, he always hated me for all the defeats I inflicted on him, like tattooed scars impossible to ignore.

Rooted at his core was a relentless drive for my utter destruction. His influence, stemming from connections to former Spanish and Portuguese secret services, was fueled more by a thirst for vengeance than by any desire for financial gain. He meticulously plotted to undermine my missions, whatever they were. Nevertheless, his keen acumen never overlooked the opportunity for profit; even in the midst of his personal *vendettas*, Nemesis skillfully capitalized on each confrontation, turning strife into financial success. His maneuvers were a masterclass in the dual pursuits of gain and my ruin, playing out through pawns in a shadow game where true intentions are veiled by everyday facades.

Here, every smile concealed a strategy, every polite exchange a carefully laid plan. The opulent parties were my battleground, the murmurs of the elite my cues. In this game, knowledge was both weapon and shield, wielded with the precision of a master strategist.

As the pieces of our silent war aligned, the chessboard of reality shifted subtly. Soon, in this story, I would step onto a plane, my outward calm belying the storm of activity beneath. The game had been set; the pieces were in motion, and the pawns were ready for a gambit.

And in the whisper-soft closure of my study door, a truth resonated—a pawn can topple kings and queens, but only if it dares to step beyond its prescribed path and sometimes make the ultimate sacrifice. On the chessboard of power, every move counted, and the most innocuous façade could mask the most lethal of intentions.

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Albin Countergambit

Mallorca, Spain

A silent message signaled my ProtonMail, a service with strong end-to-end encryption based in Switzerland, known for its strict privacy laws. The email's words were composed with the meticulous care of a spider weaving a web that was both an invitation and a trap. It proposed dinner at the picturesque Le Olivo cradled within the luxury of Hotel La Residencia, where elegance and *nonchalance* meet—a gem in the Belmond crown. This was no mere dinner, but a covert assignment draped in the trappings of a social *soirée* and a cunning marketing ploy.

Mallorca was now both my destination and my agenda.

The mandate was crystalline: secure the support of an investment fund to dethrone a European airline. A key piece on the chessboard, a Swiss national, would be accompanied by an Italian woman at the dinner and subsequent party. They would remain on the island for several days. My task was to infiltrate their circle and ensure their financial backing for certain public and highly scrutinized activities.

Logistics were meticulously arranged. The electric Fiat 500 was ideal for navigating the picturesque streets of Mallorca, while the Vespa provided a touch of Italian flair that Camilla would surely

appreciate. The boat, a sleek and luxurious model, was reserved for more intimate encounters, should the opportunity arise. We could then discuss business away from prying eyes, surrounded by the glamour and crystal waters of Mallorca.

In the days before departure, my life became a flurry of precision and strategy. I would adopt a new skin for this masquerade, crafting a persona polished to perfection, capable of merging with the affluent shadows of high society without a seam showing.

I plunged into the depths of my targets' worlds. Heinrich Baumann, a titan in the financial arena, enriched his life with the spoils of art auctions and rare vintages. Camilla Ricci, a siren in silk and philanthropy, fluttered through gala nights and cultural puzzles. Their profiles—digital and otherwise—were my scriptures.

Toscin and my crew carefully planned our operation. I posed as a cultural envoy, portraying both an espionage and erotic fiction writer, as well as a consumer rights advocate with deep connections to the European Commission. This provided me with the perfect cover for infiltrating the exclusive party. I carefully curated my wardrobe, with each garment being a choice designed to conceal my true intentions.

Navigating Mallorca required more than mere transportation; it demanded an intimate knowledge of its landscape. I studied every byway and retreat, memorized the menu of Le Olivo, and prepared to dazzle with culinary acumen or weave my narrative into the tastes shared at our table.

Ongoing dialogues with Toscin ensured no detail was overlooked. We crafted a lattice of potentialities, each scenario a sequence of moves on the grand chessboard of our objectives. We rehearsed exits and entries, the dance of an operative playing a part on a stage set for high stakes, with behaviors designed to raise no suspicion.

Toscin's voice crackled to life through the encrypted line of my Purism Librem 5, a phone known for its security features. The SIM card, specifically designed to prevent tracking and eavesdropping, ensured our conversation remained a ghostly whisper in the digital world.

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“Hey, have you been living under a rock or something?” She asked, skipping any formalities as usual. “Got your flight sorted on the low-cost airliner—no frills, to keep your trip as low-profile as possible.”

I smiled, recalling the countless times we had shared secrets over the years. Our exchanges had become so casual and direct that they often felt more like banter than serious discussions. I chuckled, my eyes scanning the *dossier* spread across my desk. “How’s the hideout?”

“Ratxó Retreat. Quiet, out of the way—perfect for your *rendezvous* and plotting sessions. You’re tucked away from Deià and the posh noses of Hotel Belmond La Residencia.”

“That’ll do, Toscin. It’s good to have terrain that speaks more of olive trees and less of prying eyes. What about the car and the Vespa?”

“All lined up,” she confirmed. “The Fiat for your day trips and the Vespa for that local charm—imagine you, zipping around like some Italian film star, but, less dramatic.”

My laughter was a soft rumble. “And the yacht? That’s where the magic needs to happen.”

“Secured and stocked. It’s classy, discreet—the perfect setting for your little dance of seduction with Camilla and Baumann. And don’t worry, Paloma’s in on the plot. She’ll play her part.”

“Good,” I mused, already plotting our next moves. “She’s the brushstroke in our painting, needs to blend seamlessly.”

“Exactly. And she’s sharp, Leilac. Got a good head on her shoulders. Spoke with her yesterday to iron out the specifics. You two will make a convincing pair,” Toscin added, her approval evident in her tone but with a hint of provocation in her voice.

I felt a warmth spread through me, a trace of the years and the miles we’d navigated together. “Thanks, Tosc. I know you’ve got the logistics down, but keep an eye out. We’re threading a needle.”

“Don’t I always?” Her voice was light, but the steel in her words was unmistakable. “Listen, everything’s encrypted, off the record, off the radar. They won’t see you coming. You’ll only appear when you need to, and in grand style, with Paloma.”

I nodded to myself, buoyed by her confidence. “Keep the home fires burning, huh? And Toscin—be safe.”

“Always am. You do the same. And Leilac?” She paused, the line charged with silent.

“Yeah?”

“Knock ‘em dead. Metaphorically, of course.” Her chuckle was like the crackle of dry leaves, a sound that warmed me against the chill of my task.

“Of course,” I replied, a slight smile at the corners of my mouth.

We ended the call, the line’s hum fading into silence. The mission lay ahead, bathed in Mallorca’s golden glow, a land promising both peril and pleasure. It was a chessboard of sunlit traps and shadowed opportunities, where each move mattered. There, amidst the July heat, we—along with Paloma—would either showcase our mastery or sacrifice our first pawn in the inevitable gambit.

I touched down at Palma de Mallorca airport at midnight and twenty minutes. Even at that hour, tourists swarmed like bees around honey. The only car rental open was Ok Mobility, and I rented a FIAT 500 electric, ice white.

I shot off a message to Toscin, “landed, already on my way.” Another to Paloma, “30 minutes and I arrive.”

The drive from the airport to the Ratxó Retreat hotel took half an hour. The FIAT’s electric motor hummed softly as I wound my way through the roads through olive groves and almond trees. It felt like I was slipping away from the world, the moon casting a silver glow over the serene landscape.

Entering the Reserva Park, the road narrowed into a paved path snaking through a dense forest. Tall trees stood like silent sentinels, overgrown shrubs and wild grass carrying the scent of the Mediterranean night. It was secluded, peaceful—a perfect hideaway.

The Ratxó Retreat Hotel appeared like a magical oasis, its stone buildings glowing warmly against the night. The pool shimmered like a sapphire under the starry sky, and the lantern-lit paths created

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an inviting atmosphere. It was a place designed for romantic moments and relaxation.

Paloma stood at the entrance, her silhouette a delicate shadow against the glowing stone. She wore a white dress, simple yet elegant, her dark hair cascading over her shoulders. Her eyes, intense, met mine in a welcoming gaze.

“You made it,” she said, with the musical lilt of her Spanish accent.

“Of course,” I replied, stepping out of the car. “I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

She smiled. “How was the flight?”

“Long, tedious, and filled with screaming children. But the drive here made up for it.”

She laughed softly, like a gentle breeze rustling through the trees. “Come, let’s go inside. We have much to discuss.”

“Tomorrow. Now, I just want a good shower and a comfortable bed. I’m exhausted,” I said.

We walked through the hotel grounds, the soft light guiding our way. Inside, the lobby was a blend of rustic charm and modern elegance. Stone walls, wooden beams, and plush furniture created a cozy and refined atmosphere.

Our room was a harmonious blend of rustic charm and modern comfort. Thick, dark wooden beams held up the ceiling, adding warmth and character. White-painted walls created a clean, bright backdrop, while terracotta tiles lent a traditional Mediterranean touch. The centerpiece was a large four-poster bed with a white canopy and high-quality linen bedding. A comfortable seating area with two armchairs and a coffee table invited relaxation.

“One room, and one bed?” I asked.

“Yup. Remember, we’re a couple,” Paloma replied, smiling.

“We’ll sleep in the same bed,” I replied.

“Yes, but if you prefer, there’s the floor or the armchairs,” she laughed.

“Toscin, always controlling the costs. This is the Suite Junior Singular. They have one with a private pool—larger, and cooler,” I lamented.

“Come on, this is really cool,” she said, adding, “and after, we’ll move to the Belmond.”

“We have dinner there,” I replied.

Paloma leaned forward, “so, Toscin told you everything?”

“Not everything,” I said, sinking into an armchair, crossing my legs. “But enough to know we’re in deep. This chair is comfortable; I could sleep here.”

She nodded, a wry smile playing on her lips. “Deep is an understatement. We’re in the middle of a chess game, and every move counts. You can sleep there if you want.”

“Who’s the king in this game?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

“That’s the question, isn’t it?” She replied. “We’re all pawns until we find out.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. “Pawns with delusions of *grandeur*.”

“Exactly,” she said, her smile widening. “But pawns can become queens, given the right circumstances. But never kings.”

I rose from the chair, unpacked my things, and chatted with Paloma. My goal was a relaxing shower. The night was still young, the Mallorca summer air warm and fragrant, promising rest and dreams woven with the day’s thoughts.

Lying in bed, under the soft sheets, my eyes wandered around the cozy suite. The ceiling of dark wooden beams, so typical of Mallorca, loomed above me. To my left, through the partially open shutters, I glimpsed the bathroom. Paloma was showering, her naked and tanned body a vision through the glass. Her dark hair flowed down her back, cascading with the streams of water. The open door of the bathroom invited me to enter and join her, but in that moment, I was content to simply enjoy the view. The room felt like a timeless bubble, a perfect marriage of rustic charm and modern comfort, where terracotta tiles met white walls in a Mediterranean dance.

The sound of the water ceased, and Paloma emerged, wrapped in a white towel, another turbaning her hair. She moved with an easy elegance, the kind that made my heart thump a little harder.

“Are you awake? Did you sleep well?” She asked.

“Like a baby,” I replied, stretching languidly. “You?”

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“Unfortunately, yes,” she sighed.

“Unfortunately?” I raised an eyebrow, puzzled.

“Yep. My new husband ignored me all night, even when I dressed in my sexy *lingerie*,” she said, pouting dramatically.

I laughed, shaking my head. “Are you talking about your pajamas? That was not *lingerie*, even though it’s pretty. And I must admit, it was sexy.”

“I’m playing my role, man. And we need to discuss this better. I already studied Baumann, but not Camilla. Did you?” She asked, her tone shifting to business with a playful edge.

“More or less. She’s Italian,” I said, rolling out of bed and stretching again, feeling the pull of muscles that had longed for rest.

“She’s really beautiful,” Paloma said.

“Toscin sent me a *résumé* in PDF. I opened it on my mobile, but the images didn’t upload well. So, I don’t know who she is, but it doesn’t matter. In a couple of days, I’ll see, and if necessary, improvise. This is Mallorca,” I replied, walking towards the window. The morning light filtered through the shutters, casting a warm glow on the room. “And Paloma, I recently ended a relationship, so don’t push me too much. In fact, if that hadn’t been the case, you can be sure that last night, that glass of wine after my shower would have turned into a night where we couldn’t sleep.”

“Promises,” she laughed.

I turned back to her, taking in her radiant smile, and felt a twinge of something I couldn’t quite place. “I’m going for a swim in the pool. I’ll catch you at breakfast.”

She nodded, a teasing glint in her eyes. “Don’t take too long. I might find myself another distraction.”

“Good luck with that,” I smirked, heading towards the door. “You know, you remind me of Cleopatra, luring Antony away from his duties. Just don’t start a war in the process.”

“Only if you bring back Egypt,” she shot back, her laughter trailing after me as I made my way to the pool.

The water was cool against my skin, washing away the last remnants of sleep. I floated on my back, staring up at the blue sky, thinking of the days ahead. The sun climbed higher, and I knew it

would be another blazing day. Mallorca in July was nothing if not scorching.

I thought about Camilla, the unknown beauty whose name now floated in our conversations. Toscin had a knack for finding the right people. Paloma's mention of Baumann wasn't lost on me either. Even if we were talking about different Baumanns, I thought about Zygmunt. Zygmunt Baumann's theories on liquid modernity had always fascinated me—the way relationships, identities, and global connections were fluid and ever-changing. It was an apt metaphor for the world we navigated.

Climbing out of the pool, I toweled off and headed back to the suite. Paloma was already dressed, a light summer dress clinging to her in all the right places. She looked up from her phone, a smile playing on her lips.

“Ready for breakfast?” She asked.

“Always,” I replied, pulling on a shirt. “And after that, let's talk about the plan. Camilla, Baumann, and everything in between.”

“Deal,” she said, slipping her arm through mine as we walked out. “But first, let's enjoy the morning. We're in paradise, after all.”

One hour before sunset, we arrived at Le Olivo, the renowned restaurant within the luxury Hotel La Residencia, a Belmond hotel. The setting was nothing short of magical. The sun hung low in the sky, casting a warm, golden glow over the stone-paved terrace. The evening air was comfortably cool, carrying the gentle rustling of olive trees that bordered the dining area, their leaves flickering softly in the fading light.

“Leilac, this place is a postcard,” Paloma said, as we took our seats. The wicker chairs were a charming touch, blending rustic tradition with the elegant sophistication of our table setting. Crisp white linens, delicate glassware, and the subtle murmur of conversations filled the space around us.

“I wonder if Baumann and Camilla will appreciate the view as much as we do,” I replied, a hint of sarcasm lacing my words. The couple we were here to observe had yet to arrive, and the irony of our situation was not lost on me.

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“Maybe they’re fashionably late,” Paloma suggested with a wry smile. Her eyes sparkled under the golden light, and I couldn’t help but be drawn to her easy elegance. Her dress, a flowing silk number that moved with the breeze, complemented the tranquil ambiance of the restaurant.

The staff moved gracefully among the tables, their movements almost choreographed. It was like watching a well-rehearsed *ballet*, each step purposeful and fluid.

Our waiter arrived, his demeanor as polished as the glassware on our table.

“Would you care for some wine to start?” He asked, his Spanish accent lending a distinct authenticity.

“Something local, please,” I said, glancing at Paloma for her approval. She nodded, her smile never faltering.

As the waiter left, Paloma leaned in closer. “Leilac, have you thought about how we will introduce ourselves at the party tonight?”

“We will play the game,” I said quietly, then added, “we’ll make ourselves so desirable that they will invite us.”

“How?” She asked.

“Easy, you are already desirable,” I said with a wink.

Paloma’s expression softened. “We’ve spent the last couple of days planning this night, and...”

I reached across the table, taking her hand in mine. “Paloma, we didn’t really need to plan anything for tonight. We didn’t need those days in Ratxó. This mission is easy, nothing special. We spent those days only to get more into the characters we are going to assume... Baumann and Camilla will arrive any moment.”

As if on cue, the couple we were waiting for stepped out, their presence commanding immediate attention. Baumann, tall and imposing, exuded an air of authority, while Camilla... well, Camilla.

“Hey, don’t look at them like that,” Paloma whispered, her eyes narrowing slightly as she watched them approach from the corner of her eye.

Baumann and Camilla were shown to a table not far from ours, their arrival seamlessly blending into the sophisticated ambiance of the evening. As they settled in, I couldn’t help but feel... stunned, amazed, astonished!

“She is equal to Mariangela!” I thought. “Seems her twin.”

I watched her as she stood there, her green eyes, like jade caught in sunlight, piercing through the haze of my memory and reminding me of Mariangela. Her skin, bronzed from countless days spent under a merciless sun, held the lingering warmth of summers long past. Her blonde hair, interspersed with natural light brown streaks, flowed in gentle waves, catching the light and gleaming like spun gold—so reminiscent of Mariangela. Her legs, which seemed to stretch forever, were toned and poised, carrying her with the effortless elegance of a dancer. The angles of her face, sharp yet soft, framed a beauty as striking and genuine as a rare gem. Here was Camilla, a mirror image bearing another name, standing beside another man. And there I was, struck mute.

“Do you think they’ll notice us?” Paloma asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

I was mute.

The waiter returned with our wine, pouring it with a flourish.

“To a beautiful evening,” I said, raising my glass to a toast.

We clinked our glasses, the sound a delicate chime that echoed in the twilight.

“To a beautiful evening,” Paloma repeated, “and to our mission,” she adds.

As the first stars began to appear in the darkening sky, I couldn’t shake the feeling that we were on the brink of something monumental. The game was in play, and every move from here would shape our fate. Camilla’s striking resemblance to Mariangela only heightened the intensity of the moment. As the evening unfolded, we moved to the pre-party in the hotel bar. Having already exchanged glances with Camilla—perhaps too many—each of her responses seemed more intense than the last. I was ready to play a role far beyond the one assigned to me.

As I watched Paloma execute our meticulously laid plans, I was always thinking of Mariangela—Camilla’s similarity sparked that in me. The hotel’s terrace bar, where we then found ourselves, was steeped in the kind of opulent calm that only places untouched by time can offer.

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Paloma, with a tactician's grace, had taken the chessboard from the main lobby and set it up between the entrance of the terrace and a low stone wall overlooking the village. The moonlight draped over her, spotlighting the chess pieces she meticulously arranged—a set up on d4 and d5 that lay like a challenge to the gods of fate and strategy.

She glanced at me before focusing her attention on the board.

As planned, Baumann appeared, his path toward Camilla intercepted by what appeared to be Paloma's clumsy mishap—a pawn tumbling to the ground. The sound it made as it hit the stone seemed unnaturally loud in the momentary silence that followed. He paused, his attention shifting from the chessboard to Paloma, and then to the piece on the floor.

Bending down, Baumann retrieved the pawn, his movements deliberate, as if every action were part of a grander game. He handed it to Paloma, his eyes narrowing slightly in recognition—or was it appreciation?

“The Queen's Gambit,” he remarked.

“It's all about sacrifice,” Paloma responded smoothly, a sentence full of strategy and subtext. Her fingers danced lightly over the chessboard, her touch almost reverent as she set the pawn back in its place.

Baumann chuckled, a sound that seemed to rumble from deep within his chest. “Indeed, it is,” he said. “A bold move, sacrificing a pawn for greater control. A metaphor for life, perhaps?”

“Or perhaps it's a lesson in futility,” Paloma quipped, her gaze locked on his. “Sometimes, the sacrifice is far greater than the gain. Please, take a seat—I need someone to play with me since my usual partner isn't willing to make the necessary sacrifices.”

The Queen's Gambit, is in fact a bold move where the whites sacrifice a pawn early to control the board's center and force the game forward.

Paloma smiled, watching Baumann move a black pawn to e5 in response—an aggressive and daring move.

“An Albin Countergambit. A double-edged sword,” she observed. “You've certainly elevated the game.”

Away from the chess intrigue, I approached Camilla on the terrace with a Negroni for myself and an Aperol Spritz for her.

“Seems we’ve been abandoned,” I noted, nodding towards Paloma and Baumann engrossed in their game.

“Your wife is stunning. Really *bella*,” Camilla remarked, accepting her drink with a warm smile.

“Thank you, but Paloma is just a friend,” I clarified, subtly showing my hand, free of any wedding ring, momentarily stepping out of the roles we had planned. “And you? Enjoying the evening?”

Camilla’s gaze followed mine back to the chess table. “Yes, but it’s always more interesting with a bit of competition, isn’t it?”

“Sometimes,” I replied, still puzzled by her beauty and the similarity to Mariangela, causing my words to falter.

“Are you on holiday?” Camilla asked. “With a friend?” She added.

“Yes, true. I am getting inspiration for my new book,” I said.

“Are you a writer? About what?” She asked.

“Yes. About love, sex, and espionage,” I revealed.

We sipped our drinks, chatting about trivial matters. From time to time, I looked over at Paloma, watching her from a distance. Her gestures were meticulously chosen to captivate and control. Baumann was no novice to the game, either. His gaze on Paloma was sharp and calculating.

Then, suddenly, Camilla said, “I need to go; we have a party to attend, and I need to change.”

As I escorted Camilla to the chessboard, the game was still in progress.

“Good night,” she said to Paloma, who nodded with a polite smile.

“Good night,” Paloma echoed.

“*Tesoro*, we must go. I need to change clothes,” Camilla said to Baumann. Camilla treated Baumann as “*tesoro*” just as Mariangela treated me. How it all affected me.

“Yes, darling,” Baumann replied to Camilla. “You have been registering all the moves in your book notes. Please keep it. Tomorrow, we will spend the afternoon on my yacht. It is anchored