

LIFE GAMES

Leilac Leamas

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*To the Players of Life,
Not Mere Pieces on the Board*

This book is dedicated to the strategists of their own destiny, to those who refuse to be mere pawns of chance. To those who face challenges as if making a decisive move—calculating risks but never fearing to advance. To those who understand that losing a round does not mean losing the game and that every fall is just another move toward victory.

To those who play with passion, with courage, and with the unwavering belief that life belongs to those who dare to participate—not just watch.

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 El 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 *vendette*, 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 were veiled by everyday facades.

There, 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.

1

Albin Countergambit

Mallorca, Spain

A 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 as much an invitation as it was a trap. It proposed dinner at the picturesque El Olivo, a luxury restaurant in the Hotel La Residencia, where elegance and *nonchalance* meet. 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 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 blending seamlessly into the affluent fabric of high society without revealing a single seam.

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 El 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.

“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 be away from 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 danger but also 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 silent, while overgrown shrubs and wild grasses carried 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 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, welcomed mine with a smiling sparkle.

“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 offered a perfect mix of traditional warmth and contemporary 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 rural elegance and sophistication, 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?”

“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 lived.

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 El Olivo. 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 metal chairs with ornate, curved backs and beige cushions were a charming touch, blending rural aesthetics with the elegance 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 arrive in time to appreciate this magnificent sunset,” 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.

“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 enter 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 Raxó. 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.

Paloma, with a tactician’s sharpness, 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 setup on d4 and d5 that seemed to challenge fate itself.

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.

Baumann leaned forward, picked up the pawn, all with noticeably calculated movements, 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 in Sa Foradada. Appear there, both of you, in the middle of the afternoon, and we will continue this game.”

Camilla, looking directly into my eyes, said, “until tomorrow.”

Paloma, standing with her purple bikini bottom contrasting her sun-kissed bare breasts, was gesturing towards me with urgency, tapping her wrist where a watch might have been.

“Hey, we gotta go,” she called out impatiently.

We had spent the whole morning at Cala Llombards, a slice of paradise. The sun blazed in a cloudless blue sky, warming the white sand that stretched across the cove. The water, clear and shimmering in shades of turquoise and emerald, reflected the sunlight, creating a breathtaking display of colors. The gentle waves merely kissed the shore, continuously inviting me to swim.

It was during my last dip in those crystal-clear waters that I noticed Paloma’s urgent gestures.

“Come on, it’s almost an hour and a half drive back to the hotel,” she insisted, standing at the edge of the sand, the sea caressing her bare feet, “and I still need to shower for the meeting with Baumann.”

“But you look and smell amazing already,” I teased, leaning in to sniff her neck as I climbed out of the water, splashing a few drops from my hair onto her. The scent of sunscreen mixed with the salty sea air created a fresh, natural fragrance that screamed summer—a scent I loved.

We’d enjoyed a perfect beach lunch—fresh whole wheat bread with Manchego cheese, a handful of peppery arugula drizzled with olive oil. I’d devoured a juicy, fragrant peach while Paloma had nibbled on sweet, succulent grapes.

“Want some leftover carrot and cucumber sticks?” She asked as we drove past the Mercadona supermarket in Campos. “Or do you want to stop and buy something?”

“Nah, let’s just keep going. I need to shower too and finish that report for Toscin. I have to explain that our plan to enter the party failed, but we were invited to Baumann’s yacht, so we won’t need the boat Toscin rented for us,” I replied, my gaze lingering on the MA-19 highway stretching before us. “But I could use a sip of water.”

Without a word, Paloma handed me the water bottle, already uncapped. The water was warm from the sun’s heat but still quenched my thirst. As I drank, the landscape rushed by—red earth

punctuated by scattered shrubs, the quintessential backdrop of Mallorca, leading us to our hotel.

The afternoon sun was fierce as it cast golden flares across the tiled floor of our hotel room. I sat at my laptop on the terrace, the keys clicking under my fingers in a steady rhythm. Mallorca's summer breeze was like a gentle thief, stealing away the remnants of cooler mornings. I had been absorbed in my work, oblivious to the passage of time, until the sound of the shower ceased. Moments later, Paloma emerged, her presence commanding my attention like a sharp intake of breath.

She paused at the entrance, the sunlight haloing her dark hair.

"Wow! All that for Baumann?" I asked.

Paloma just twirled lightly, her white linen sundress swirling around her ankles.

"I'm going there to lose the chess play, but to win the big game," she replied. "Do you like my earrings?" She asked, tilting her head slightly, the gold hoops catching the sun in a playful dance.

"Beautiful," I affirmed. "You are stunning."

"And this strand of pearls, is it too much?" Her fingers brushed the smooth beads at her throat as she posed the question, a delicate arch of her brow challenging my honesty.

"No. Not at all. It gives you a touch of timeless elegance," I replied, knowing well the game of balance she played with her wardrobe—enough to dazzle, never too much to overwhelm.

"And you, in your beach shorts?" She teased. "Come on, it will be late."

"Go ahead. Take the FIAT and I'll finish this, take a shower, and meet you at the Baumann yacht," I said, my fingers hovering above the keyboard, already planning the final sentences of my report. "I'll drive the Vespa there. We rented a cool Vespa, and I need to use it," I added with a grin.

"Okay. Wait for you there," Paloma said.

She left the room with her woven straw bag in hand, her sandals clicking a muted rhythm against the stone floor.

The door clicked shut behind me, and I let out a sigh. I saved my document, typing the last few words as if sealing my fate along with my sentences. After a quick shower, I swapped my shorts for

something more yacht-appropriate, but less formal than a suit. The Vespa was waiting for me outside.

Upon boarding, I discovered Paloma on the deck, a chessboard set before her, her opponent none other than Baumann himself. Her smile was a confident curve, and her eyes blazed like fire.

“Making your move?” I asked, leaning close to whisper.

“Always,” she responded, not taking her eyes off the chessboard as her hand moved a bishop with lethal precision.

“Baumann,” I greeted him with a nod.

Baumann rose from his seat, shook my hand, and said, “Leilac. Please, make yourself at home.” He then returned to his game, fixated on the battle unfolding before him.

The game played out with the slow tension of a predator’s stalk, each move measured and precise.

No sign of Camilla, until she emerged from the turquoise sea of the Mediterranean, stepping onto the swim platform in a white bikini that contrasted sharply with her sun-tanned skin. Her appearance was a striking vision against the backdrop of Mallorca’s azure waters. Camilla’s green eyes sparkled like emeralds under the sun, her blond hair flecked with natural light brown tones that caught the light and shimmered like threads of gold. Her body was a masterpiece, sculpted by nature and kissed by the sun, with long, graceful legs that seemed to go on forever.

I watched, utterly transfixed, as she moved with the effortless grace of a dancer. She was a vision of elegance, so reminiscent of Mariangela that I was momentarily speechless. Her presence was magnetic, as if she were the queen of that floating palace. The yacht seemed to come alive with her arrival.

“Leilac, welcome aboard,” she said, her voice warm. “Anyone need a drink?”

The simple act of her speaking heightened the spell, the enchantment deepening, a testament to her beauty. In that moment, with the sun casting a halo around her and the sea shimmering in her wake, she became the epitome of summer itself — radiant, vibrant, and irresistibly beautiful.

It was as if the world had paused to admire her, and I couldn't help but feel a pang of envy for Baumann while simultaneously missing Mariangela. Camilla was much more than part of that idyllic scene; she was its crowning jewel, the high note in the siren song of our Mediterranean sojourn.

"I'm good," I replied.

"Want an Aperol Spritz?" She offered, her tone light.

"Actually, I'd prefer a Negroni," I said.

"And you, Paloma?" Camilla turned her attention to her.

"I'll stick with lemonade," Paloma replied, placing her hand on her empty glass.

"You, Baumann? A Gin and Tonic, right?" Camilla inquired with a knowing smile.

"Yes darling, please," Baumann replied, his mind still on the chess game.

"Alright, I'll whip them up," Camilla said. "The crew's off today, they won't be back until tomorrow."

"I'll help you," I offered, and we made our way to the galley.

Camilla began gathering the ingredients. "Ice, Campari, Gin, Vermouth... more ice... Aperol, Prosecco..." she listed, her hands deftly moving about. "Can you slice an orange, please?"

"Sure," I replied, picking up an orange and a knife.

"Done. Gin and Tonic, your Negroni, my Spritz... and now for the Lemonade," she announced, then paused, frowning at the empty basket. "We're out of lemons. *Porca miseria.*"

"I can go get some," I offered.

"There's nowhere nearby that sells lemons. You'd have to take the boat to land and drive to Deià, it's about 7 km away," she said, smiling.

"I came on my Vespa, and you'll need lemons for more than just lemonade," I pointed out.

"For vodka?" She joked. "You're on a Vespa?"

"Yes, Paloma drove the car, but I was running late, so I took the Vespa," I explained.

"Alright, let's go get the lemons, but I'm coming with you," she decided, her tone leaving no room for argument. "I love Vespa rides. They remind me of my childhood. You know, I'm Italian."

“I had a hunch,” I said with a grin.

“Baumann, here’s your gin. Paloma, if you want a Spritz while you wait for the lemonade, here you go,” Camilla offered, placing the drinks before them. “We’re getting lemons in Deià,” she added.

“Are you really going to get lemons just for me? No need, I’ll stick with the Spritz,” Paloma responded.

“No darling, I really need lemons, and I adore a Vespa ride,” Camilla replied.

Baumann looked up briefly, glanced at Camilla, then returned his focus to the game, like a grandmaster eyeing his next move on a chessboard.

Camilla slipped into a light, breezy dress that had been resting on a chair, buttoning it up the front. She slipped on her Aquazzura Vilette slides, the curved canvas straps forming subtle cutouts.

We called the small boat that ferried us between the yacht and land, then headed to the Vespa. The journey promised to be as exhilarating as a well-played chess game, each move calculated, yet filled with the thrill of the unknown.

The warmth of Camilla pressed against my back was the only certainty I had in that moment about my mission as we zipped through the winding roads of Mallorca on our rented Vespa. The sun, a relentless observer, cast a golden glow over everything, the rocky cliffs of Sa Foradada fading behind us as we rode.

Suddenly, Camilla’s grip loosened. “Stop, stop here. Stop,” she commanded.

I pulled over, the gravel crunching under the Vespa’s tires. “Why, is there a problem?”

“No, there’s a lemon tree over there,” she said, pointing toward a solitary tree, vibrant with ripe lemons, defiantly rooted behind a low stone wall in a barren field.

“Do you want to steal lemons?” I chuckled, dismounting the Vespa.

“Why not? If no one picks them, they’ll just rot,” she replied with a mischievous glint in her eyes, as she swung her leg over the wall.

“Wait, I’ll help you,” I offered, reaching her side and gently lifting her by the waist to help her over the wall.

Once we were both on the other side, she sprinted towards the lemon tree with a childlike glee.

“Help me reach that lemon, can you lift me up?” She asked, jumping slightly to point at a particularly lush fruit hanging just out of reach.

I wrapped my arms around her slender waist again, hoisting her up into the air. She stretched, fingertips grazing the rind of the lemon. But her sudden laugh threw us off balance, and we tumbled backwards into the soft embrace of the earth.

Now, with Camilla lying atop me, the sky framing her in a halo of sunlight, our laughter subsided into a profound silence. Her eyes, a mirror of the Mediterranean, locked onto mine, and I felt the edges of our separate existences blur. She leaned down, her lips found mine, and then the world narrowed into the single point of her kiss.

Before logic could intervene, our clothes became casual casualties strewn about the ground, our bodies melded, moving with an urgency that only those who have tasted the brink of fiery passion understand. The lemons above us bore witness, their citrus scent saturating the salt of our sweat.

In the bright glow of the afternoon, the sun high and shadows short, we lay in the afterglow, our breaths regaining their rhythm. Camilla propped herself on an elbow, looking down at me with a smirk.

“Leilac, *tesoro*, what a fine mess we’ve gotten into,” she said.

The word “*tesoro*” rang in my ears again, stirring memories of Mariangela. She used to call me that too, her voice carrying the same endearing tone. For a moment, the past and present collided, and I saw Mariangela’s face superimposed over Camilla’s. The memories were bittersweet, a reminder of love lost and found again.

“You know, Baumann, Leilac is a writer. Maybe he’ll get inspired by today for his new book,” Camilla said with suggestive undertones as she looked at me.

I caught her gaze and raised an eyebrow, understanding the subtext.

“Inspiration comes from the most unexpected places and people,” I replied. “Today might just be a chapter in my book,

perhaps the first one of a pawn's gambit, considering how much Baumann and Paloma love chess."

Baumann turned his sharp eyes on me. "Paloma told me you were a business consultant and involved in various class actions for consumer associations," he said, his tone skeptical.

I nodded, taking a sip of my drink. "Writer is a new facet I'm discovering, a hobby," I explained, "because what pays for the life I have is consulting. Class actions are just a way to do good, for a better and fairer world."

Baumann's eyes narrowed slightly, calculating.

"Darling, you could finance it. After all, you have a fund, a company, that invests in that," Camilla interjected.

Baumann smiled thinly, as if considering the chessboard before making his move.

"We finance more cases of high-value business arbitrations and sovereign debt executions," he said, "but yes, we may be interested. Let's schedule a meeting for you to talk to Luccas."

"Luccas is my husband's wingman when it comes to these issues," Camilla added.

It was the first time I had heard Camilla refer to Baumann as her husband. And it was after our torrid afternoon. Could this be a subliminal message? There was something in her tone—a calculated casualness—that made me wonder what she was truly aiming at. The ambiguity of her words was unsettling, almost as if she was playing a game of chess where only she knew the rules.

As I pondered her possible motives, the soft clink of ice against glass broke my concentration. Baumann was watching us, his expression unreadable. Did he sense the tension?

The offer hung in the air, a potential pawn moved forward, testing the waters. Paloma, sitting quietly beside me, placed her hand on my leg, a gesture of silent support. With that simple touch, she seemed to say, "mission accomplished."

2

Legal Edges and Liaisons

Lisbon, Portugal

I leaned against the cold wall of the Humberto Delgado Airport terminal in Lisbon, allowing the rush of travelers to flow around me like water parting around a stone. My mind, as restless as the crowd, involuntarily drifted to thoughts of Mariangela—whose memory lingered like the scent of rain on dry earth. The clarity of our separation still wounded me, a perennial wound in my mind.

It was on that deceptively tranquil Mallorcan night, within the rustic charm of El Olivo, and the next day aboard a yacht moored against the backdrop of a calm, translucent sea, that I met Camilla. A meeting that should have been a mere footnote in my mission chronicles became a chapter of its own. The striking similarities she bore to Mariangela shattered the composure of my emotions, introducing chaos where reason once ruled. And to think, this fascinating woman was Baumann's wife—of all the tangled threads of fate, this one entangled the most.

Her resemblance to Mariangela was more than superficial; it was profound, resonating with a visceral intensity that stirred affections and regrets I was fighting to bury. Each smile from Camilla, every nuance of her elegance, mirrored my lost love so faithfully that she seemed almost like a specter cloaked in her form.

Walking through the crowded terminal, the chessboard of my thoughts grew ever more complex with the implications of this unintended attraction. Baumann's wife, a pawn of conflict, now stood at the heart of my mission's success or failure.

In Lisbon, my task was to coax financial backing from Baumann for a scheme targeting the instability of listed companies on the stock exchanges in London, Portugal, and Spain.

Orchestrated under the cloak of a consumer association, the funding of class actions and the crafted negative propaganda against these companies promised substantial returns for my contractor, a titan among global hedge funds. This contractor manipulated market volatilities with the finesse of a *virtuoso*—holding short positions in some firms while maintaining long ones in others, thereby setting a chessboard of financial arbitrage designed to harvest fortunes. My role was to ignite this strategic turmoil.

I needed the endorsement of Luccas, Baumann's Brazilian legal advisor, whose approval was pivotal. Our mission, in its shadowiest aspect, was funded and richly rewarded by our North American contractor, a vulture soaring through the financial markets' skies, preying on the ruins of companies we meticulously dismantled. Yet, the capital needed to underwrite these class actions must not trace back to our benefactor. The funding of those class actions was under the keen eye of public scrutiny—watched closely by courts, public prosecutors, and the well-endowed opposing factions. However, these adversaries, despite their financial clout, were like novice players on a chessboard, lacking our strategic *finesse* in maneuvering the pawns, kings, and dons of covert operations. Baumann's investment would thus act as both our smokescreen and our facade of legitimacy.

Amidst the constant flux of departures and arrivals, I found myself ensnared in the haunting echoes of Mariangela. There, within the chaos of the airport, I grappled with the specters of our past, pondering whether I could navigate the perilous currents of my mission, my entangled affections, and the lurking betrayals without losing grasp of the true stakes at hand. With each step across the crowded terminal, the weight of these burdens grew, each footprint heavier than the one before, burdened with a pressing quandary. I realized I needed a diversion, no matter how transient, to insulate myself against Camilla's unsettling presence and, more urgently, to extricate myself from the lingering shadows of my history with Mariangela.

As we navigated the picturesque sprawl of Lisbon, Rodrigo Madrigal Ferreiro—my steadfast lawyer and confidant in legal battles and covert operations—accompanied me to Estoril on a detour to visit Natália. The distractions of the journey briefly dispelled the anxieties I had harbored since the airport.

Upon arriving, I phoned Natália; she descended the building's staircase with an elegance that belied the simplicity of our acquaintance, greeting me with a kiss and a strong embrace.

She presented a Salvador Dalí painting, which I had asked her to safeguard—a relic of another mission of mine, obscured by a simulated art auction. This painting was my payment.

Her tempestuous blue eyes offered a respite from my twisted contemplations of Mariangela and my disturbing intrigue with Camilla.

When she hugged me, her touch, light against my abdomen, and the spark in her blue gaze left an imprint on my senses. Her presence served as a potent balm to the emotional chaos stirred by Mariangela and Camilla.

“You look great,” she murmured, her hands tracing contours over my chest.

Drawn irresistibly closer, I reciprocated, exploring the soft fabric of her sweater. But as our closeness bordered on indiscretion right there on the street, she hesitated.

“Wait, we are right here on the street, my house is here, my son is inside. The neighbors...” she cautioned, her voice fading into a whisper.

Her eyes, however, betrayed a longing that echoed my own. “Then let’s go inside,” I proposed, driven by a yearning to escape the eyes of the world.

We paused at the entrance of the building; our mutual attraction palpable. Yet, she held back. “My dear, my son is studying inside; we can’t go to my apartment.”

“The stairs then,” I suggested, leading her to a more secluded nook by the staircase.

The Salvador Dalí painting, resting on the porter’s table, served as a surrealist spectator to our audacious encounter. Nearby, in the secluded corner of the stairwell, our lips met with a hunger that defied reason. Waves of desire lapped at our shores, a silent storm brewing between us. Her body, a vessel adrift in the tumult, responded with fervent eagerness to each of my advances.

I gathered the straps of her black sweater at the center, revealing her perfect breasts for the first time. They stood firm, voluptuous mounds that commanded my deepest desires.

As we folded into the narrow confines of that half-hidden space, I began the delicate task of unwinding her layers. It was a slow, deliberate peeling back, each fold dropped to the floor like a shed skin, revealing not just flesh but the more concealed depths of her — those parts whispered about but seldom seen.

“You are a vision,” I murmured.

Natália, breathless, tilted her head to meet my gaze. Her seductive voice, which seemed to caress my skin, replied, “and you, a tempest in which I long to lose myself.”

Surrendering to the desire consuming me, I indulged in the pleasure of tasting and caressing her supple, inviting skin. My lips closed over her succulent nipples, licking and sucking them greedily.

“You feel so incredibly good,” I whispered. “I want to touch every inch of you, memorize every curve, as if it were the only map I’ll ever need.” My fingers, deliberate, traced the smoothness of her skin, drawing a gasp that filled the charged air.

Her delicate yet firm hand traced the lines of my trousers, feeling the hard truth of my arousal with a kind of bold intimacy. This stirred sensations that rattled up my spine, setting off echoes in the attic of my soul, as if all along we'd been whispering secrets in a crowded room.

"Show me the storm," she challenged, her touch igniting a fire that threatened to consume us both.

I reciprocated, my fingers exploring her already moist depths, eliciting immediate moans of ecstasy.

I pressed her against the cool wall, its coarse texture a stark contrast to the smoothness of her skin.

"I want to fuck you," I declared, my lips inches from hers.

"Then take me," she breathed, "where no one can see, yet everyone can imagine."

Guided by an unerring determination, I turned and claimed her from behind as she clung to the stair railing. Her buttocks, firm and perfectly rounded, offered a feast to my senses, a divine perfection of pure sensuality.

In perfect rhythm with the accelerated tempo of our desire, I thrust deeply, powerfully, each stroke a surrender to the ecstasy engulfing us. Each pulse was a *crescendo* of pleasure, our bodies entwined in a forbidden dance on the stairs of a building, where boundaries melted away and passion flared.

With a swift movement, I guided our bodies into a new position, finding myself on my knees between her spread legs, like a worshiper before a sacred altar. With my tongue, I teased and explored every inch of her essence, her moist, dripping core, driving her to a state indescribable between desire and delirium.

However, the sound of doors opening abruptly forced us to halt our fleeting delight, and we reluctantly parted. My litigation partner waited impatiently by the car. The meeting with Luccas was imminent, and we still had a lengthy drive to the Bertrand Bookstore in Chiado, where we were to meet.

After a tense 50-minute drive, I entered Bertrand alongside Rodrigo, where Luccas was already waiting, idly thumbing through a law book.

My personal phone vibrated—a message from Natália. “A second more, and I would have come,” she teased, stirring me toward a promise of another, more enduring *rendezvous*. I knew we would meet again, to lose ourselves in the prolonged, passionate throes of lust. The allure of every curve of her body demanded far more than a brief encounter in the dim stairwell of a building. Natália could be the distraction I needed or even the one to help purge and atone for my lingering thoughts of Mariangela and my desires for Camilla.

Rodrigo and I exchanged a glance, a silent code between us before we turned our attention back to Luccas. His eyes were sharp, probing, as if trying to decode something beyond mere words.

“I’m trying to understand the functioning of class actions in Portugal and Private Enforcement,” Luccas said, his gaze boring into me. “I’m going to take this book. I know the work of these two professors, Carolina Cunha and Maria José Capelo.”

“Hello, Luccas! Good choice,” I replied, acknowledging the names. Both Rodrigo and I were well-versed in the works of Cunha and Capelo.

The Bertrand bookstore, with its puzzle of shelves and the musty scent of old pages, seemed the ideal setting for our *rendezvous*. Thrillers like Daniel Silva’s “The Collector” sat prominently on a central table, a subtle reminder of the intrigue that permeated our conversation.

“I suggest we walk a bit,” I proposed. Conversations on the move, amidst the hustle of life and the noise of the city, were harder for eavesdroppers to catch. What I had to discuss with Luccas, while not overtly compromising, could still endanger the broader strategy if overheard.

We walked at a brisk pace, the uneven pavement of Lisbon resonating under our steps. Bertrand had been merely the starting point for a more intricate dialogue. Rodrigo walked beside me, his gaze occasionally drifting to shop windows, but his attention never wavered. Our path led us toward the arch of Rua Augusta, about ten minutes away.

Luccas's questions began probing beyond the superficial, seeking the core of my motivations. "But I want to know more than just your *résumé*," he pressed. "What really drives you in these lawsuits? There has to be more than simple activism."

I maintained my narrative with practiced sincerity. "There's nothing more than the desire to contribute to a fairer world," I replied. "Where consumer rights are upheld and respected." My years of activism were a shield and a testament, cloaking other truths.

Luccas chuckled, his eyes not leaving mine. "But let's be honest, Leilac. It's rare to find someone so dedicated without some form of personal gain. Do you really expect me to believe you get nothing out of this?"

"Of course, I gain nothing," I said calmly, having anticipated this line of questioning. "My satisfaction comes from knowing I'm contributing to the common good."

A group of tourists passed us, their laughter and chatter a temporary distraction. Luccas paused, studying my face. "And your other financiers? Do they share this noble vision?"

"The other financiers," I said slowly, selecting my words with care, "like you, see this as an investment and seek a return. But they also believe, as I do, that justice should be accessible to all. That's why they engage in third-party litigation funding instead of other ventures."

Luccas nodded, though skepticism lingered in his expression. "In my world, no one does anything for nothing. Everyone has a price or a hidden motive. What's yours?"

His question was a sharp blade poised to pierce the veil of my true identity. I did earn a fortune, but not through the means he suspected. My funding came from sources that demanded absolute secrecy, paying me to lead collective actions and propaganda while keeping my true role concealed.

"My only price," I continued, "is the peace of mind knowing I'm doing the right thing. That I'm on the right side of history."

Luccas smiled, though skepticism still remained his smile. “History, huh? Well, I hope your story is as clean as your intentions claim,” he said, a hint of irony in his voice. “So how do you make money? What do you really do?”

Luccas’s mind was a storm of doubts, his mistrust a thread that tightened with each of my words.

“I’m a business consultant,” I responded, truth wrapped in a layer of obfuscation. “I deal with commerce and finance. Investment funds, like yours, but focused on the capital market.” It was close enough to reality, yet far enough to protect my mission.

Our dialogue was a chess game, each move revealing more of the board. I had to balance between sharing sufficient information to remain credible and concealing details to safeguard my true objectives.

As Luccas and Rodrigo delved into discussions about processes and strategies, my mind, restless as a caged bird, soared towards Camilla. Hidden behind the cloak of their conversation, I plotted my approach to unearth what Luccas knew of her, considering his close ties with Baumann.

“So, Luccas, how did your paths cross with Baumann’s?” I ventured, tossing the first pebble towards my true quarry.

“I met Baumann in Monaco,” Luccas began, with a hint of pride in his voice.

He averted his gaze, focusing on some distant point as I attempted to decipher the subtext of his words. Baumann, like many billionaires, wielded an influence that stretched far beyond the visible horizon.

“And Camilla? She seems quite involved in the business, at least that was my impression from our encounter in Mallorca,” I probed, veiling my true interest in Camilla under the guise of professional curiosity.

“Camilla is... different,” Luccas said, his caution barely masking the edges of my growing curiosity. “She has a vision beyond the ordinary—Baumann trusts her implicitly.”

Rodrigo shot me a fleeting glance, a silent admonition to tread with care. My relationship with Camilla was deeper than he imagined.

I recognized the perilous terrain I was treading. Past entanglements—with Chiara and Mariangela— had created a devil’s puzzle of intrigue and challenges.

“It’s remarkable,” I remarked, “how some couples seem perfectly aligned. Camilla appears to be an exceptional woman, ever present by Baumann’s side.”

Luccas nodded, his focus momentarily drifting to the ebb and flow of the street. “Indeed, sometimes her ideas frighten Baumann. She can foresee outcomes that elude the rest of us and maneuver the necessary levers with the deftness of a puppeteer.”

His words struck a chord. Camilla—the elegant, vibrant woman who had once clung to me on the back of my Vespa as we meandered through Mallorca’s quaint streets, purchasing lemons— what part did she play in this intricate lattice we were unpicking? And more importantly, was I merely a pawn in her hands? Was my judgment clouded, ensnared by her echoes of Mariangela?

Each tidbit Luccas divulged was a chess piece shifting across a grand board, yet these moves did little to illuminate the path to victory.

Beneath it all, I understood that the game we were entangled in was layered in ways Rodrigo and I could scarcely foresee. And at the heart of this maelstrom stood Camilla, a beacon capable of illuminating but also leading toward disaster.

“Come on, let’s head up to the top of the arch,” I urged, leading them towards the Arco da Rua Augusta, seeking higher ground both literally and metaphorically.

Atop one of Lisbon’s most magnificent viewpoints, we stood enveloped by the *grandeur* of statues where Glory crowns Genius and Valor, far removed from any prying ears. Above the city’s clock tower, I spoke with frank assurance to Luccas, “you can rest easy; your investment in our class actions carries no risk. Baumann has nothing to worry about.”

“But the lawsuits in Portugal take a lot of time, the courts are very slow to decide, and sometimes it feels like the cards are marked,” Luccas countered, the skepticism clear in his voice. “We must consider the opportunity cost.”

“In our cases, we strictly debate legal principles, rarely grappling with contentious facts. This paves the way for direct appeals to the Supreme Court of Justice—the *per saltum* appeal,” I explained, ensuring clarity in my response. “It’s true that in the lower courts the cards may seem marked due to the sheer number of judges, it’s a statistical possibility, but such a possibility is extremely rare, very unlikely, at the Supreme Court level,” I concluded confidently.

“I’m familiar with the *per saltum* appeal from my practice in Brazil. It bypasses a level of jurisdiction,” Lucas noted, bridging both Brazilian and Portuguese legal landscapes.

“Furthermore, since December 2023, the introduction of Decree-Law 114-A/2023, particularly Article 10, has explicitly allowed for third-party litigation funding,” I added to bolster his confidence.

Lucas nodded, his earlier reservations visibly softening. “I’m aware of your contributions to that legislation and your advocacy. I’m impressed by your answers. Let me consult with my team and lawyers back in New York, and I’ll relay my final decision to Baumann,” he said, as we began our descent to Rua Augusta. “I’m confident that we will collaborate effectively.”

Our conversation culminated in a firm handshake, a symbol of potential future alliances. Lucas then melded into the throng on Rua Augusta, disappearing among the bustling crowd of tourists and street vendors.

With Lucas’s departure, Rodrigo and I resumed our walk, the mood lightened yet laden with the weight of the mission. The breeze carried the brine of the Tagus River mixed with the sweet aroma of *pastéis de nata* from nearby bakeries. It was a day marked by clarity, almost mockingly so, juxtaposed against the complex chess game of our mission.

“New York?” Rodrigo broke our contemplative silence. “It looks like you’ll be juggling multiple fronts.”

I nodded, thinking about our contractor, Paul, and the strategic *nuances* that lay ahead. “Each move must be meticulously planned. This goes beyond the lawsuits; it’s about global strategy. And there’s Paloma in Valencia... I hope she’s assembling the allies we need.”

Rodrigo gazed skyward, pondering the global scale of our operation. “And Miqueias Mordomo with his conspiracy theories,” he chuckled, shaking his head in amusement before a more genuine laugh escaped him.

“Sometimes, his theories veer dangerously close to reality. Our Israeli support is essential, and it’s a matter of time before we can no longer conceal their involvement,” I remarked soberly.

Rodrigo exhaled deeply. “I’d rather not know.”

“It’s a calculated risk,” I reassured him. “But remember, Rodrigo, whatever the underlying motives and interests, our actions are fundamentally righteous and serve the public good.”

We reached Lumi Rooftop, a tranquil restaurant amidst the urban chaos. The restaurant, perched atop a historic edifice, offered a breathtaking panorama of Lisbon, where ancient and modern elements clashed in beautiful discord. I inhaled deeply, absorbing the tranquility before re-immersing in our turbulent mission.

Rodrigo settled into a chair, his eyes sweeping the cityscape below. “And after New York?” He queried, signaling the waiter for a glass of white wine.

“Then, we regroup,” I murmured, my eyes fixed on the city’s red rooftops. “We resume building, fighting, and hoping that, in the end, we win—that we were indeed on the right side of history.”

“To the right side of history,” Rodrigo echoed, raising his yet-to-be-filled glass in a toast to the saga that lay ahead, little knowing just how complicated it would be.

3

The Espionage Author

New York, United States of America

Under the dappled shade of an ancient tree at a quintessentially green kiosk on the streets of Lisbon, I watched the city stir into morning. The breeze carried the promise of a sweltering summer day, and the sun tenderly warmed my skin, casting a charming glow on the slightly worn facade of a tile-covered building. Clutching a strong, unsweetened coffee, my phone vibrated, slicing through the tranquil dawn. It was Toscin.

“Leilac,” her voice came through clear and direct, “change of plans for your trip to New York. Paul’s private jet is out of the question. Too conspicuous.”

“Good morning to you too,” I responded, my tone serene, watching two children with small school backpacks dart across the garden in front of me. Their carefree romping, in contrast to the machinations of the world, pulled me momentarily into the innocence of childhood. “So, what’s the move now?”

“You’re taking a commercial flight,” Toscin explained. “It’s less noticeable, and we’ve got the perfect cover—a meeting with a publisher about your new book.” After a brief pause, perhaps expecting some remark from me, she added, “since the *Devil’s Puzzle*, you’re officially an author.”

I smiled, appreciating the veil of fiction that would camouflage my movements. “The espionage writer using his own thriller as a facade. Almost poetic.”

“Exactly. And while everyone thinks you’re hashing out plot lines, you’ll be strategizing with Paul’s legal team and fund managers. The real discussions will be about manipulating markets, not fictional characters.”

“Life does indeed imitate art,” I mused, my gaze wandering across the view to Palácio Galveias, part of the esplanade’s panorama.

“Regarding Paloma,” Toscin continued, “she’s already in Valencia. Her mission is to sway others to join our cause.”

“They can’t even imagine our true aim. But their alliance is interesting—they have data, studies on our target,” I noted, absorbing the complexities of our operation.

“Exactly,” Toscin confirmed. “They only know we’re up against their competition in court. If there’s relevant information they hold, Paloma will extract it.”

“Perfect. And about the ‘Ndrangheta? Any news from Illaria?”

“I’m on it. The ‘Ndrangheta, obviously, dominates in Colombia, but it’s in the drug trade. It will be delicate, but necessary.”

“It always is,” I murmured, recalling my last encounter with the mafia in Puglia, Italy, and considering the chess pieces that continued to move even as we spoke. “Keep me updated, Toscin. And be careful with the trails we leave.”

“Always,” she replied, “you already have the documents for the New York trip on the VDR,” and the connection ended with the efficiency of one who understands the weight of every spoken word.

I embraced the irony of my situation, smiling into the void. I would depart for New York as an up-and-coming espionage thriller writer, but the real thriller was being written then and there—a true pawn’s gambit. With the phone still in my hand, I gazed out at the garden before me, a chessboard where every move required meticulous calculation. It was time to play.

As the TAP Air Portugal Airbus A330-900 climbed into the sky from Lisbon at 5:05 PM, I settled into my seat, feeling the familiar surge of takeoff as we climbed above the Portuguese coast, which stretched beneath us like a mesmerizing fractal landscape, its jagged edges and hidden coves endlessly repeating in ever-smaller scales. The horizon yielded to a vastness of blue and clouds as we set our course for John F. Kennedy Airport in New York. With eight hours of flight ahead, I had ample time to immerse myself in the preparation for my upcoming meetings in the city that never sleeps.

The first item on my agenda was to review the business strategy for the meeting with Paul's team. I opened my laptop and began to pore over the documents that outlined our class actions, the planned propaganda, the third-party litigation funding disclosures to be made in court if necessary, and those funding sources that could never be disclosed but supported all other clandestine operations. I adjusted the key points, mentally simulating the dialogue we would have, bracing for every objection and rebuttal Paul's team might launch.

After fortifying my strategy with Paul's team, I turned my attention to the manuscript of my book that would be discussed with the publisher. Reviewing the original draft alongside the revisions by the ghostwriter and the final touches by the editor, I noticed that, though polished, the text retained the essence of my authentic experiences.

"Maybe I really do have a knack for writing," I mused, a rough pride marking this reflection as I made minor edits on the document, as if I were a *bona fide* writer. It was amusing how one could embed the most piercing secrets into a book, reveal the minutest details of strategies, and yet no one took heed because the narrative bore the stamp of fiction.

I recalled a conversation with Paul Verhoeven about one of my favorite movies he directed, “Basic Instinct”. Verhoeven spoke of Catherine Tramell’s interrogation, that iconic scene where she crosses and uncrosses her legs, revealing she wore no underwear. He told me that although he had assured Sharon Stone they wouldn’t film in a way that showed her vagina, he ultimately decided to include it to underscore Catherine’s enigmatic and seductive nature—a woman who weaponized her sexuality as a tool of manipulation.

I posited that Catherine’s most captivating maneuver lay elsewhere. In the thick of police interrogation, she coolly defended the notion of her novel—mirroring an actual crime—as merely a coincidence rather than a confession. This declaration became her shield, suggesting the absurdity of using one’s own crimes as literary fodder. Yet, this very denial entangled her deeper in intrigue, her charm interlaced with the mystery, much like a pawn advancing boldly in a gambit, protected yet pivotal, her fate undetermined.

This paradox not only wrapped Catherine in suspicion but also draped her in an ambiguity that permeated the film.

Viewers found themselves in a perpetual state of flux, constantly assessing and reassessing Tramell’s innocence as the story progressed.

At times, I felt like Tramell, in the book I was writing, about to present the first chapter to the publisher, set in Mallorca, detailing the moment I met Camilla.

It was then that my thoughts of Camilla dominated most of my journey.

There were the moments in Mallorca, followed by Luccas’ observations of her—the way her ideas sometimes frightened Baumann, her knack for anticipating outcomes and manipulating situations with the finesse of a puppeteer. All of this starkly contrasted with the woman I had met in Mallorca. Remembering our Vespa ride, the dive into the blue sea, the carefree and radiant way she surrendered to the moments, I began to wonder if I had underestimated her depth and cunning.

LIFE GAMES

Camilla and Mariangela, in my mind, merged into a fascinating duality of similarities. Both displayed an elegance that transcended the material, a joy for life's simplicities that seemed to defy their fortunes and social standings.

As the hours passed and the plane sliced through the Atlantic sky, these reflections became almost torturous, steeped in nostalgia and woven into an emotional and physical journey.

As the plane neared New York, and the darkness of American airspace enveloped the cabin, I closed my laptop and allowed myself a few moments of visual rest, gazing out the window at the cloud sea below. Every thought about Camilla, every strategy for Paul, every line of my book seemed to converge, readying me for the intense days that awaited.

When the wheels of the Airbus finally touched down at John F. Kennedy Airport, a firm resolution formed within me. Gathering my belongings, I prepared to disembark, ready to navigate the complexities of New York with a full agenda and a mind brimming with thoughts that had crossed oceans. The game of power was about to begin, and I was more than ready to make my move.

The fluorescent lights of the JFK terminal emitted an impersonal, incessant buzz—a stark contrast to the soft, comforting glow of the Lisbon sunset, now relegated to memory. I, jet-lagged and disoriented, walking through the crowd with the weary inevitability of a man who had crossed time zones but hadn't yet landed in them mentally. My eyes, rimmed with the red of too many sleepless hours, scanned the sea of unfamiliar faces, searching for something that felt like home in that strange *tableau*.

Outside, a black car slid to the curb like a predator, its windows tinted dark, shielding its interior from the probing eyes of the city. The chauffeur, uniformed and detached, held up a sign bearing my name, "LEILAC LEAMAS," in bold. Everything was arranged by Toscin—remotely, but precisely. With a curt nod, I handed over my well-traveled Samsonite to be stowed in the trunk.

Inside the car, the chaos of New York was held at bay by glass and metal. The vehicle glided through the streets, an island of calm in the nocturnal frenzy of the city. I sank into the plush leather, letting exhaustion permeate my being as the skyscrapers and neon lights blurred past. This was a realm of sharp contrasts—vertiginous architecture and ceaseless motion, a far cry from the quaint, cobbled streets and azulejo-tiled facades of Lisbon.

The Public Hotel soon loomed on the horizon, its facade a minimalist statement in concrete and glass that spoke of understated luxury and elegant frugality.

Created by Ian Schrager, the man behind the chaos and glamour of Studio 54, it connected me to a piece of cultural history—a time of decadence and disruption—offering me a slender thread of continuity in my disjointed life.

Ascending the wide set of stairs that led to the hotel's entrance, each step illuminated by a soft light that seemed to emanate from within, I felt the weight of fatigue dragging at my limbs. The rhythmic click of my shoes on the polished concrete marked my slow progress through the night, like a lone king methodically moving across a chessboard.

Inside, the hotel's corridors stretched long and silent, the soft carpet muffling my footsteps as I made my way to my room. There, in that temporary refuge from the complexities of my existence, I could allow myself a moment of respite. The vibrant energy of the city waited outside, a muted backdrop to my need for rest.

In my room, simplicity reigned—clean lines and soft lighting created a space designed not to overwhelm but to soothe. I bypassed the temptation to order food, my body too spent to appreciate anything after the bland meal served on the plane. Instead, I sought the immediate comforts of a hot shower that washed the travel from my skin, a deep, massaging release for my tense muscles.

Finally, the bed beckoned—a swath of crisp linens and soft pillows that seemed the most inviting sight after the long hours in transit. I yielded to the exhaustion, my body sinking into the mattress, my mind unwinding the tightly coiled threads of all the confusion and the enduring image of Camilla.

As sleep claimed me, it was with the knowledge that tomorrow would demand much, but for now, I drifted in the rare luxury of stillness, my battles temporarily at bay.

The sunrise flooded my small room at the Public Hotel, its relentless rays piercing through the glass wall beside my bed. From this vantage point, the garden sprawled below, a verdant breath in the city's morning bustle.

Rising without delay, I did some inverted push-ups, with my feet braced against the small table in the room, undoing the knots of a lengthy flight within the cords of muscle that underpinned my physique.

Emerging from the shower, I felt a sense of rebirth, a renewal that starkly contrasted with the cramped, albeit immaculate, confines of the bathroom. The small space held me, but it was the water that set me free.

I descended to the street for a serene stroll, reaching Good Thans Cafe on Orchard Street in a mere ten minutes. The cafe welcomed, bathed in a wash of light that animated the whole space with a soft, luminous glow.

At the counter, I ordered, "a coffee and a bowl with banana, pineapple, oat milk, spirulina, kiwi, coconut, blueberries, strawberry, and granola, please."

The attendant's smile crept up, amused by the specificity. "Sure, coming right up. It's an energetic combination to start the day," he remarked, his vowels echoing from another country.

"Your accent isn't local," I noted, drawn to the unfamiliar lilt.

"Good ear," he chuckled, "Australian."

"Australia! It must be quite a shift, swapping that climate for New York's," I bantered, using a bit of Australian slang, "but, as always, no worries, mate, right?"

His grin broadened. "Exactly, mate. No worries at all. Perfect day for a coffee," he gestured to the sun-drenched café.

As I awaited my eclectic breakfast, clad in a dark blue suit and pristine Italian shoes from Bocache & Salvucci, I contemplated the day ahead. The sunlight streaming through the café's ample windows promised interesting hours.

Stepping out of the café, the vivid air of New York City closed around me like the pages of a well-thumbed novel. I opted for an Uber, forsaking the driver who had ferried me from the airport—a small act of subterfuge on my part. My finger, deliberately, selected Central Park on the screen of my phone—every precaution was necessary. Digital footprints were to be avoided at all costs.

As I arrived, the park offered a brief reprieve. The squirrels, in their ceaseless scurry, provided an unexpected form of meditation. Yet time pressed on, and soon, I advanced towards the towering glass monolith that housed Paul’s firm. In New York, *grandeur* is not just expected; it is demanded.

I tapped my phone to life, calling Toscin, the architect behind the precise scheduling of my days. “I’ve arrived,” I announced, the sunlight glaring off the building’s glass facade like a pin on a map.

“How was the trip, Leilac?” Toscin’s voice came through.

“New York greets me with warmth, 21 °C,” I replied, adjusting to both the city’s pace and its unexpected mildness at 70 °F.

“21 °C and so early,” she noted quietly. “Wait by the entrance. You’ll be met shortly.”

Within moments, a figure approached—a man dressed in the severe lines of a black suit and white shirt, his tie a dark slash against the starched brightness. “Leilac Leamas?” His voice was low, modulated, but efficient.

“Yes, that’s me.”

“Please, follow me.”

He ushered me into an elevator reserved for select individuals only.

We ascended silently to one of the highest floors. He guided me into a room, its vast windows offering a commanding view of Central Park, now miniature in its vast sprawl.

Minutes later, the door swung open to admit eight individuals—five men and three women—each cloaked in the palpable certainty of power, the kind accustomed to steering the world’s great corporate leviathans.

“Leilac, welcome,” one of the women said, extending a hand. “We hope your stay in New York proves fruitful.”