
THE PALM READER
GILLETTE FOREVER
DEFINITIVE EDITION

THE PALM READER – SEQUEL II

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I’d made my plans to head back to Miami.

Six months.

Enough time to rest, sharpen my Spanish, and study the Cuban women up close.

They’d always been my favorite prey.

I walked into a supermarket, and fate got there before the cart.

A woman appeared in front of me.

Cuban.

I recognized her instantly.

She recognized me.

She stared at me for a few seconds.

Then she said:

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“Grocery shopping.”

“No. I mean on Earth. Shouldn’t you be in hell by now?”

I complimented her on her English.

Flawless.

The best women always manage to be two people at once:

sweet when they want information,

merciless once they’ve got it.

She asked how I was.

How my health was.

How I was even still alive.

Where my wife was.

And, above all:

“How did you manage to stay young and beat the devil himself?”

I told her I had a bus to catch.

That part was true.

I didn’t say where to.

I said goodbye and vanished.

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Back home, I fell asleep instantly.

In the dream, I saw someone climbing the stairs of my house in Italy.

I knew him.

Or maybe I didn’t.

Then it hit me.

It was him.

The Indian from Cincinnati.

The one with the signed dollar bill.

He reached the top step.

Hugged me.

Smiled with that British aplomb some Indians wear better than the British ever could.

Then he looked at me, serious.

“Frega, please — where’s the bathroom?”

I woke up with a start.

Went looking for the bathroom door.

Then realized I was still inside the dream.

I turned around.

The red armchair was occupied.

Him again.

The ghost of Boston.

Laughing.

“I knew you weren’t scared. You’re a man with balls.”

Then he pointed at someone beside him.

“Look who I brought.”

• • •

A tall woman.

Elegant.

American.

Around forty.

The posture of an executive.

The gaze of someone who signs the documents that end other people’s lives.

She held out her hand.

“Copyright Office. Washington D.C.”

I nodded.

“Hell of a promotion. How’d you land here?”

“I got an email from you.”

“And then?”

“I read it.”

“And then?”

“My heart couldn’t take it.”

The ghost burst out laughing.

I didn’t.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

“No, seriously.”

“No, seriously — me too.”

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She sat down.

Studied the room.

Studied me.

Then said:

“You’re the man I’ve been waiting for my whole life.”

“Seems like a complicated system for meeting someone.”

“It was the best I could find.”

“No. Trust me. It wasn’t the best.”

She went quiet for a moment.

Then I asked her the only question that mattered.

“Before the Copyright Office — where did you work?”

“An American multinational. Detergents.”

“How was it?”

“To hit the targets, you have to die.”

“Meaning?”

“Literally. They work you until you burst.”

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I stayed silent.

Then I smiled.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart.”

“For what?”

“You picked the wrong dimension.”

“Excuse me?”

“In life, it’s always — only ever — a matter of style.”

I pointed at the window.

Earth was still out there.

Confused.

Loud.

Full of problems.

“I listen to everyone.”

“Even ghosts?”

“Especially them.”

“Then why don’t you come with us?”

“Because I’ve still got something to finish down here.”

The ghost of Boston nodded.

The executive lowered her eyes.

She looked disappointed.

• • •

I stood up.

Walked to the door.

Then turned back.

“By the way —”

“What?”

“I’m in detergents too, as it happens.”

“So?”

“But I don’t wait for anyone to die to hit my targets.”

The ghost howled with laughter.

She smiled — for the first time.

When I opened my eyes again, I was alone.

No one left in the room.

No ghosts.

No executives.

No Indians looking for a bathroom.

Just the red armchair.

Still watching me.

As if it already knew who was coming the next night.

***Ferdinando* ■■**

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