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Letters to an Unknown Mistress

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Introduction

They did not begin as a case. The first envelope lay among summonses and petitions, pale as a moth upon the dark wood of my desk. There was no seal of office, no signature, only a careful hand that had written: To the Unknown Mistress. It might have been misdelivered, were it not that my clerk swore to the postmark and the purposeful way it had been placed—like a candle set at a threshold. I slit it open out of habit, not hunger, and found neither crime nor complaint inside, but a confession so private that my chambers, with their ledgers and statutes, suddenly felt like a dressing room where the city changed its face.

More letters followed. They came at the turn of the week and at odd hours, delivered by boys and by respectable messengers, by the rain itself, it seemed, when one appeared warped and fragrant on a stormy morning. Each began with the same invocation and unfurled a different facet of longing: the ache to be seen, the courage to be held in one's own truth, the intricate knots we call fidelity and the quick, quiet ways we learn to loosen them. I told myself I read them in the interest of order, that if the city had devised a new channel for its secrets, a magistrate ought to know its course. But the truth is that my eyes sought those pages each day the way a tongue worries a tooth, testing the tender place to feel it throb.

You might ask, as I did, who or what this "Unknown Mistress" is. A person? A rumor? A mirror held at an angle? In time I began to understand that she is a mask the city wears when it wants to speak without consequence, a discreet threshold beyond which decorum loosens its stays. To write to her is to admit that public virtue and private desire seldom shake hands without trembling. She is less a woman than a room—unlit, door ajar—into which the writers step to say what they dare not say at a supper table, at a baptism, in council.

I would like to say that I remained apart, that I read as a doctor might regard a fever—curious, professional, unburned. Yet as the stack rose, so did the heat at my collar. It is a strange thing to sit in judgment by day and be judged by ink at night. The letters did not accuse me, not directly; still, they taught me to hear my own verdicts as echoes. In the whispers of tailors and merchants, widows and actresses, I recognized the very patterns I had called disorder, only now traced across my own skin. My household began to feel the draught from doors I had not known were open; conversations stopped when I entered rooms where, before, they had welcomed me without pause.

Our city is expert in the art of surface. We iron our collars, polish our shoes, and walk past the river as if it does not carry away so much of what we dare not keep. To serve

as its magistrate is to believe in the usefulness of that surface, to patch it with verdicts and polite phrases. But the letters asked me to look beneath: under the altar flowers, behind the theatre's painted clouds, into the pockets of men who counted coins to quiet their hearts. Little by little, the distance between the bench and the pew, between the curtain and the audience, collapsed. The law cannot pardon what it refuses to name, nor can it condemn what it cannot bear to see.

If these pages now find you, reader, it is because I have chosen to order what once arrived unordered, to lay out a map of the territory I failed to admit I lived in. I have kept the letters' anonymity, not out of delicacy alone but because their power lies in the way they could be any of us. Where necessary, I have braided my own reckonings between them, not as commentary but as confession. You will not find scandal for scandal's sake here. You will find a magistrate learning, too late and then just in time, that virtue without compassion is a brittle thing, and that desire, named carefully, can be a lantern rather than a fire.

Before you begin, allow me one further confession: the final letter is mine. For months I searched for the woman to whom they were all addressed, until I understood I had been seeking a door rather than a face. If there is an unknown mistress in these pages, she is the sum of all the risks we do not take and the truths we do not tell. Should you open this book, you agree to stand with me in that unlit room, to let your eyes adjust, to learn the shapes that emerge. I can promise only this: once you have read, the city outside will not look the same. Nor, I suspect, will you.

CHAPTER ONE: The First Envelope

The city of Veridia operated on a principle of organized forgetting. That is to say, we remembered only what was useful for commerce and reputation, and politely erased the rest. As the Chief Magistrate, my days were spent reinforcing this selective memory, sitting behind a walnut desk that had absorbed a century of petitioners' nervous sweat and clerks' monotonous ink. The desk was large enough to contain two clerks, a cat, and a small library of statutes, yet it always seemed meticulously empty when I arrived at half-past seven. On the morning in question—a Tuesday marked by the predictable damp chill of early autumn—the only disruption to the pristine surface was a stack of official mail and a single, unsealed envelope resting slightly apart, like a piece of foreign currency.

My clerk, Finch, a man whose spine was as rigid as the legal texts he managed, confirmed it had arrived by special messenger, a boy who had lingered just long enough to confirm its placement on *my* desk before vanishing into the morning fog. Finch, naturally, had assumed it was personal correspondence, perhaps an invitation from the Mayor's wife, since it lacked the requisite stamp of the municipal post office. I, however, noticed the handwriting instantly. It was not flourished or educated, but steady and deliberate, the letters formed with an almost painful dedication to legibility.

The address was unsettlingly vague: "The Hon. Magistrate, for Her Private Consideration." Finch was convinced "Her" referred to my wife, Elara, known for her charitable committees and impeccable management of our social calendar. I knew better. Elara rarely had anything delivered that didn't arrive via a uniformed chauffeur bearing the seal of a reputable establishment. The envelope was plain manila, the sort used by tradesmen to enclose invoices for hardware or coal.

I dismissed Finch to his archives, instructing him to track down a precedent for an upcoming case involving a contested deed of conveyance—a task guaranteed to keep him occupied until lunch. Alone, I picked up the envelope. It was surprisingly heavy, suggesting more than a single sheet of paper, and the texture felt almost coarse against my fingertips. I ran a brass letter opener along the fold, the metal scraping faintly, a sound that always signaled the shift from the public domain into the confidential.

Inside, there was a single folded sheet of thick, creamy paper—expensive, contradictory to the envelope—written entirely in the same careful script. It bore no date, no location, and certainly no signature. The only identifiers were the salutation and the abrupt start of the narrative.

To the Unknown Mistress,

I confess I do not know where to send this, except to where I believe the city's heart truly beats: in the place that hears without judging, and knows without telling. I address you not as a person, but as the quiet corner in the mind of the man who now reads this. For he must be the keeper of secrets, must he not? The repository of the city's shame and its silent, unacknowledged delights.

I am a man of means, respected in my ward. My profession demands precision, and I measure my life in increments: the length of a ribbon, the turn of a cuff, the exact number of stitches required for perfection. I am a tailor. A good one, established for thirty years on the Rue des Artisans. My wife believes I am devoted to her and to the seamless drape of a wool coat. She is not wrong. I am devoted to the illusion of the seamless drape.

The truth, madam, is that my hands, which craft the suits of statesmen and bankers, have begun to crave an entirely different kind of measuring. It started innocently enough, with the Mayor's secretary, a thin, nervous man named Julian who always insisted on the finest silk linings. He would come in for fittings, stiff with propriety, discussing tariffs and the weather.

One afternoon, during a final adjustment to his waistcoat, I noticed a faint, almost imperceptible tremor in his chest. I was leaning close, the scent of lavender pomade clashing with the dry smell of pressed wool. My fingers, practiced in finding the exact line of the body beneath the cloth, pressed against his ribs to mark the perfect button placement. The tremor increased.

It was an accident, the way the pads of my thumb lingered a moment too long. But in that second, Julian's breath hitched, and his eyes—normally distant and guarded—flickered, filled with something raw and utterly exposed. It was like finding a flaw in the warp of an expensive fabric, a tiny pull that, once noticed, ruins the whole piece.

We said nothing. He paid his bill, thanked me formally, and left. But the silence had been broken. It was as if the cloth of his reputation, which I had helped him construct, had been momentarily peeled back, revealing the frantic beating muscle beneath.

He returned a week later, needing a button replaced on a pair of trousers—an absurd pretext, as he could have sent a footman. When he came into the fitting room, a space meant for intimate negotiations between body and appearance, he didn't talk about thread counts. He simply leaned against the wall, his posture losing its military rigidity.

"I'm tired of being perfect, Monsieur Dubois," he whispered, using my professional

name.

I understood. Perfection is exhausting. It requires perpetual vigilance, a constant tension in the shoulders and jaw. I was tired of it myself, watching the world pay exorbitant prices for the appearance of effortless rectitude.

"I can take the measurements again, if you wish," I offered, my voice neutral. My hands, however, were not. They moved slowly, deliberately, tracing the tautness of his waist, the curve of his hip that the trousers were meant to disguise.

I found the places where the pressure was greatest, where the restraint chafed. The Mayor's secretary, the pinnacle of Veridian politeness, trembled again under the pressure of my touch. He looked at me, this man who dressed the city's leaders, and in his eyes, I saw the complete absence of judgment. Only yearning.

It didn't happen right away. We maintained the fiction for another week, our conversations clipped and technical, revolving around vents and lapels. But the subtext was already stitched into the fabric of our meetings. We had discovered a shared language that did not require vowels or consonants, only the weight of a hand and the acknowledgment of a need.

The fitting room is a peculiar place, isn't it? It is where the body is most honestly revealed, yet most carefully concealed. The tailor sees the deformities and the vanities, the places where the wearer adds padding or seeks constraint. We are the keepers of the physical truth, even as we manufacture the social lie.

It happened finally on a dull afternoon, after I had spent hours arguing with a supplier over the quality of Spanish leather. He came in for a supposed final cuff adjustment. I locked the door—a habit I had when dealing with delicate silk, to prevent any dust from the main shop settling on it.

I did not touch the cuff. I simply turned and looked at him. Julian, the secretary, stripped of his Mayor's seal and his endless reports, looked back. The silence was thick, woven from unspoken years of denial.

I did not ask, he did not confess. I simply took the measure of him without my tape. It was an act of recognition that transcended gender, class, or expectation. It was an agreement to allow one small, safe space where the pressure of Veridia's social architecture could be momentarily eased.

It is still happening. Once a week, sometimes twice. We meet behind the bolted door. He is not my lover in the way the city understands the word. He is my complicity. He is the acknowledgement that even the most starched collar must, eventually, surrender to the body underneath.

My wife believes I am exhausted by commissions. She sees the ink stains on my fingers and the precision in my movements and believes I am a man of immaculate order. She is happy because the seams of our life are perfect.

But the greatest pleasure is not in the perfection, Unknown Mistress. It is in the single, willful, hidden stitch that pulls the whole garment slightly askew for just a moment, a stitch only two people know about, a stitch that keeps the tailor from tearing the entire cloth apart in frustration.

I have no fear of being discovered, only a fear of being cured of this need to acknowledge the chaos beneath the careful arrangement. Tell the keeper of the silence that I thank him for his hearing. And tell him that the measuring continues.

I finished reading and slowly lowered the thick paper to the desk. The silence in the chambers, usually a comforting backdrop of order, now felt loaded, almost accusatory. The first reaction was professional: I should file this. But where? Under "Criminal Intent"? No, there was no threat, no coercion, no fraud that Veridian law would acknowledge. Under "Moral Turpitude"? That would require me to define 'turpitude' in a way that challenged the very foundations of the social contract the letters' author so meticulously described.

I realized, with a faint nausea, that the letter was addressed to the "Unknown Mistress," but it had been delivered to me, Magistrate Alistair Rourke. And the author was right: I was the quiet corner that hears without judging, and knows without telling. My chambers were the city's repository of shame and silent delights, though usually only in the form of official complaints and contested wills.

The tailor's words had a tactile quality. I could almost smell the wool, the lavender pomade, the faint, metallic scent of the bolt on the fitting room door. And I could feel the tremor in the Mayor's secretary, Julian. I knew Julian. He was precisely as the tailor described: thin, nervous, a walking monument to protocol. He often appeared in the courthouse on behalf of the Mayor's office, always impeccably dressed in a charcoal gray suit—likely one tailored by Monsieur Dubois.

The hypocrisy was breathtaking, yet entirely predictable. We construct our society to abhor the very desires that fuel it. I pictured Julian, the emblem of public decorum, silently consenting to be measured in a manner that had nothing to do with suit linings. And I pictured Dubois, the quiet artisan, wielding his professional intimacy as a tool of rebellion.

I stood and walked to the high, arched window, looking out over the bustling square. Veridia was alive with carriages and merchants, the daily theater of respectability. Every person below, moving with purpose toward some pillar of commerce or

bureaucracy, was wrapped in their tailored facade. How many of them, I wondered, carried a secret stitch, an intentional imperfection known only to themselves and perhaps one trusted co-conspirator?

The weight of the letter felt different now. It was not a piece of evidence; it was an invitation. An invitation to look at the city not through the glass of statutes, but through the frayed edges of human need. And the uncomfortable realization was that I, too, was a subject of this unwritten law of covert longing.

My wife, Elara, demanded a particular perfection, a seamlessness in our life that mirrored the tailor's perfect drape. Our household was a masterpiece of constraint: measured conversations, scheduled affections, and a profound, shared silence concerning anything that might introduce complication or heat. We had been married for fifteen years, a union built on mutual respect and the efficient management of reputation. It was, by all accounts, a successful arrangement. It was also sterile, a room scrubbed clean of life's mess.

The tailor's letter had opened a ventilation shaft in that suffocating perfection. It asked me to acknowledge the body beneath the formal clothing—not just Julian's, but my own. It forced me to consider what parts of myself I had carefully snipped away and discarded in the pursuit of the Magistracy.

I placed the letter carefully in the largest central drawer of my desk, beneath a stack of old, unused parchment. It was not filed, but hidden—a distinction I understood implicitly. It was a secret now, shared only between myself and the man who wrote it, addressed to a mythic entity neither of us could name.

I sat back down, picked up the first official summons—a boundary dispute between two landowners—and tried to focus on the black and white certainty of the law. But the words blurred. All I could see were silk linings and the tremor in a man's chest, the brief, illicit moment when the illusion of order failed and the true body asserted its messy, unpredictable will.

The rest of the morning passed in a fog of mandated concentration. I issued an injunction, reviewed a minor case of petty theft, and dictated three letters to the City Council regarding infrastructural funding. Through it all, the presence of the tailor's confession under the parchment was a physical weight. I found myself subtly altering my posture, straightening my back, feeling the constraint of my own custom-made jacket, suddenly aware of the exact tailoring that defined my public self.

That evening, I returned home to our perfectly appointed house on King's Row. Elara was presiding over a small dinner with the Bishop and his wife. The conversation was, as always, a beautifully orchestrated affair: politics polished into polite debate, gossip filtered into gentle concern. Everything was in its place.

As I listened to the Bishop discuss the necessity of moral fortitude in governance, I glanced at Elara. She was wearing a gown of deep sapphire, cut to emphasize her elegant shoulders, another flawless execution of appearance. And I thought of the tailor's fitting room, the private intimacy of that exchange, the honest measurement taken outside the glare of public life.

I realized the significance of the address: *To the Unknown Mistress*. It was not addressed to a woman I could name, but to the willingness to shed the suit, to be measured by desire rather than by statute. And in receiving the letter, I was, by proxy, stepping into that role. I was the silent repository, the discreet ear of the city's true pulse.

After the guests departed and the house settled into its nightly, expensive hush, I retreated to my study. I poured a measure of brandy, but did not drink it. Instead, I retrieved the letter. The paper was still thick and cool. I read it again, searching for clues, for identifying flaws, for anything that might lead me to the tailor. But the anonymity was absolute, woven into the text like a hidden thread.

He wasn't confessing to a crime; he was celebrating an escape. And I, the guardian of the city's order, found myself not reaching for my notebook to investigate, but reaching for a strange sense of shared understanding. The Magistrate was supposed to be impervious to such weakness, a bastion of rational judgment. But the tailor had found the crack in the facade, the tiny, almost invisible imperfection in the weave.

I placed the letter back in the drawer and locked it. It was now private property, utterly separate from the jurisprudence of Veridia. The first envelope had arrived, not to solve a case, but to create a reckoning. And I sensed, with a mix of dread and undeniable anticipation, that this was only the beginning of a correspondence that promised to unpick the tight, careful stitches of my life. The city was speaking, and it was using me as its confessor.

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