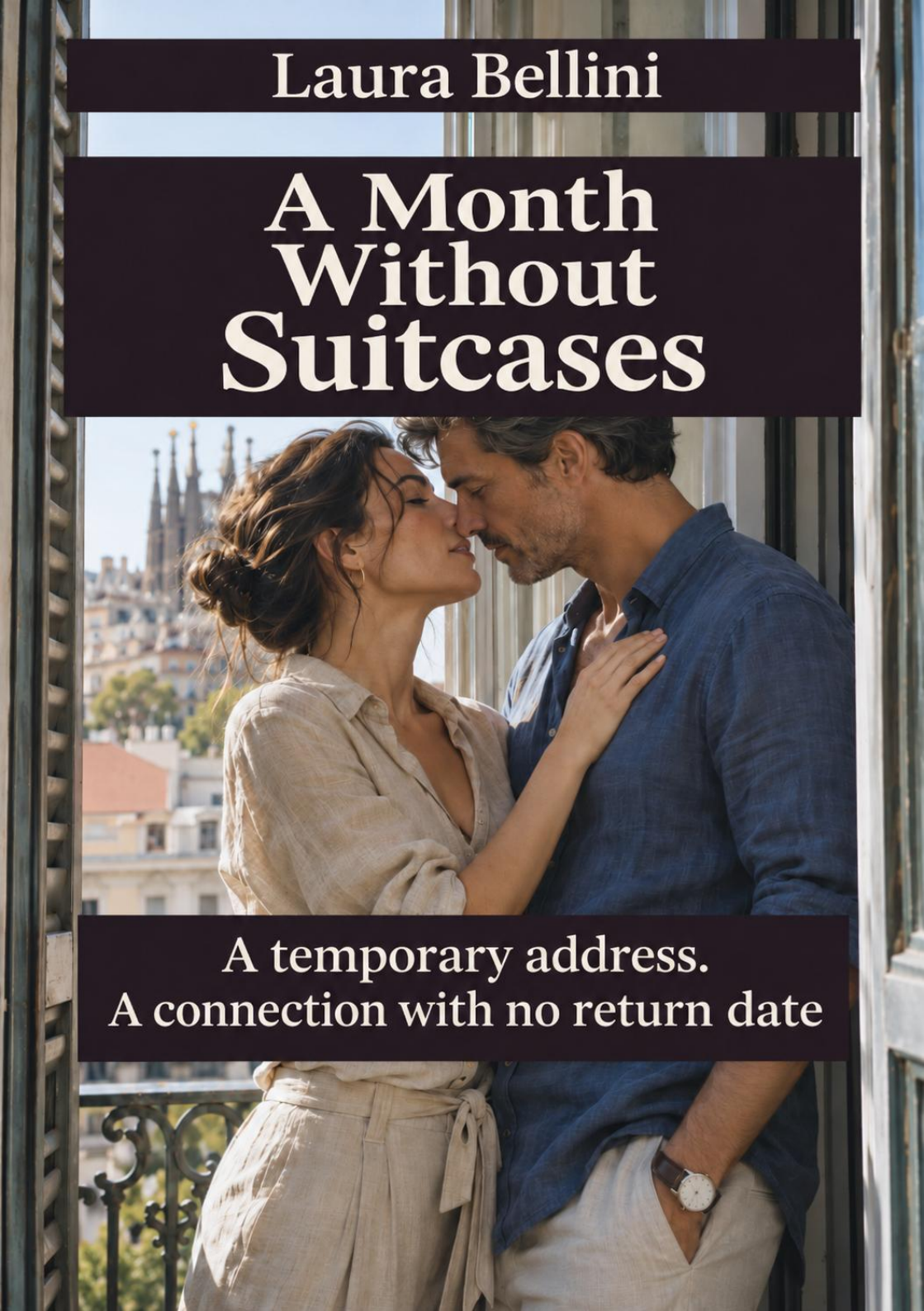
Laura Bellini

A Month Without Suitcases



A temporary address.
A connection with no return date

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ROMANS

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INTRO

The first thing I did when I entered the apartment in Barcelona was put my suitcase in the wardrobe.

Not unpack it. Not check the view from the balcony or even open the windows, although the air smelled of sun-warmed stone, the sea, and something sweet from a nearby bakery. I simply pushed the suitcase behind the sliding doors, closed them, and studied my reflection in the mirror for a moment.

Thirty-seven years old. More than a dozen addresses over the past five years. And an unsettling ease with which I could call any new place home, provided I didn't have to stay there too long.

This time was supposed to be different.

Not because I intended to put down roots. Quite the opposite. I had come to Barcelona for exactly thirty days to finish a project I'd been waiting two years to work on, and to prove to myself that I could live for an entire month without constantly packing. Without checking flight schedules over breakfast. Without that familiar feeling that real life was always waiting behind the next door.

I'd found the apartment through a home-exchange platform. A Catalan couple who needed a quiet place to work were staying in my apartment in Kraków, while I had been given a bright, high-ceilinged place in Gràcia. In the photographs, it had looked almost unreal: linen curtains, a wooden table, a balcony with wrought-iron railings, and two bedrooms separated by a narrow hallway.

I didn't need two bedrooms, but I'd considered them a pleasant luxury.

I put my laptop on the table and opened my notebook. On the first page, I wrote down three things: finish documenting the museum collection, prepare a presentation for the curatorial team, and find one place in Barcelona I would return to not out of obligation, but for pleasure.

Beneath them, I added another sentence.

Don't make any decisions out of loneliness.

I read it twice, then closed the notebook.

Loneliness was an uncomfortable word. Independence sounded much better.

I opened the balcony doors. Conversations drifted up from below, along with the clink of coffee cups and the distant buzz of a scooter. On the opposite balcony, an elderly woman was watering her geraniums, while her cat watched me with the expression of someone who had seen far too many visitors to find another one interesting.

I took out my phone and texted my friend.

I've arrived. Beautiful apartment. No disasters. For the next month, I'm going to be a model resident of Barcelona.

Marta replied immediately.

So you'll find an excuse to leave town in three days?

I smiled.

Not this time.

That was when I heard a key turning in the lock.

I turned, convinced I'd mistaken a noise from the stairwell for something closer. But the lock clicked again, and the front door opened with a faint creak.

A man walked into the apartment.

He wore a pale linen shirt with its sleeves rolled up, navy trousers, and a leather bag slung over one shoulder. He looked like someone returning from a meeting where he'd been forced to remain patient with people who talked far too much. His dark hair, lightly threaded with grey at the temples, had been tousled by the wind.

He stopped when he saw me.

For several seconds, we stared at each other.

"I'm sorry," he said at last, in Polish.

That surprised me even more than his arrival.

"What exactly are you apologising for?" I asked. "Walking into my apartment, or having a key to it?"

His eyebrows rose.

"That depends on why you think it's your apartment."

"Because I have a booking confirmation, an access code, and a message from the owner. What do you have?"

He set his bag beside the door without taking a step towards me.

"Exactly the same things."

He took out his phone. Rather than coming closer, he turned the screen so I could see the apartment's name and the dates of his stay.

The first of June to the thirtieth.

My dates.

"That's impossible," I said.

"I'm beginning to suspect it isn't."

There was neither irritation nor triumph in his voice. Only restrained amusement, which instantly made me dislike him. I needed someone as outraged as I was, not a man who seemed to regard a double booking as an intriguing mathematical problem.

"Please tell me you've got the wrong floor."

"I checked the number on the door."

"Or the wrong building."

"The address matches too."

"Then perhaps you've at least got the owner's name wrong?"

"Clara Vidal."

I fell silent.

The faintest smile touched his mouth.

"I'm afraid we've run out of easy explanations."

I picked up my phone and opened my correspondence with Clara. The confirmation was unambiguous. The entire apartment, for one month, exclusively mine. I scrolled through the messages, found her number, and called.

No answer.

The man waited until I lowered my phone.

"Jędrzej Kurek," he introduced himself. "We might as well know who we're sharing this absurd situation with."

"Ilona Mróz."

"Pleasure to meet you, Ms Mróz. Though the circumstances could be better."

"I'm not entirely sure the pleasure is mine."

"A sensible position."

That annoyed me most of all. He wasn't trying to take charge, demanding his rightful space, or assuring me everything would work out. He endured my rudeness calmly, as though he understood that it wasn't really about him.

And I cared about this apartment more than I wanted to admit.

My phone rang on the table. Clara was calling back.

We spoke in English. She talked quickly and apologised so often that within a minute I began to suspect the problem was worse than I'd imagined. Apparently, her partner had confirmed Jędrzej's stay through a second booking system, unaware of my home exchange. Both arrangements were valid, and the apartment had indeed been allocated to two different guests.

Clara offered a refund, help finding alternative accommodation, and several other solutions, none of which could give me back the afternoon I'd already lost.

"I didn't pay for a hotel," I explained. "I exchanged my own apartment. I can't simply cancel my stay."

Hearing my side of the conversation, Jędrzej reached for his bag.

For a moment, I thought he was leaving. Instead, he took out a slim folder, glanced through its contents, and put it away again.

"May I?" he asked, indicating the phone.

I nodded and switched to speaker.

"Clara, are both bedrooms ready to be used?" he asked in English.

"Yes, of course."

"And does the insurance cover two independent guests staying in the apartment?"

Silence followed.

I looked at him more carefully.

There was nothing romantic about the question. Yet the way he asked it changed my first impression. He wasn't searching for the most convenient arrangement for himself. He was checking whether the solution he had evidently begun considering would be fair to both of us.

Clara promised to verify the insurance terms and call back within an hour.

When the conversation ended, the apartment seemed strangely quiet.

"What do you do?" I asked.

"I'm an urban planner."

"Does that explain the insurance question?"

"More of an occupational habit. Before I suggest that people share a space, I check whether they can use it safely."

"You haven't suggested sharing anything."

"Not yet."

I studied him more closely. He looked a little over forty. There was no wedding ring on his finger. His bag was worn where the leather rubbed against his shoulder, although his shoes looked almost new. I also noticed a small key fob with a single key, which he detached from the ring and slipped into his pocket before putting the remaining keys on the chest of drawers.

"Are you here on holiday?" I asked.

"No. I want to work from one place for a while."

He placed particular emphasis on the last few words.

"Barcelona seems like a good choice."

"I hope so."

He glanced towards the balcony. He didn't look like someone thrilled by the prospect of discovering another city. More like a man who hadn't had time to stop and enjoy a view in a very long while.

"And you?" he asked. "Holiday?"

"Work. I'm consulting on the documentation of a museum collection."

"So we've both come here to work."

"I also came here for some peace and quiet."

"That might prove harder to arrange."

He was right. And I distinctly disliked the fact that a man I'd known for only a few minutes could already say things I couldn't argue with.

A gust of wind swept through the open balcony doors. One of the pages of my notebook lifted and slid across the table. Jędrzej instinctively caught it before it fell to the floor.

He saw the sentence written on the first page.

Don't make any decisions out of loneliness.

He didn't read it aloud. Instead, he turned the notebook face down and slid it towards me, keeping the words hidden.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly.

This time I didn't feel like making a cutting remark.

"It's all right."

He stood beside the table for a moment while I watched his hands. Broad, tanned, with a small scar near his thumb. I thought how much easier this would be if he turned out to be arrogant or pushy. Then I could throw him out without a second thought and demand that Clara sort everything out.

Instead, he simply stepped away, giving me room.

"I don't want to get in your way," he said. "We can wait for Clara to call. If she finds a reasonable solution, we'll both consider it."

"And if she doesn't?"

Jędrzej looked towards the closed doors of the two bedrooms, then back at me.

"Then we'll have to decide whether we can live under the same roof without taking away what each of us came here for."

My phone vibrated. Another message from Marta.

Remember, you promised you were finally going to stop running away.

I turned the screen against my palm.

All day, I'd dreamed of shutting the door on the world. Now a stranger stood across the table from me, and his composure unsettled me more than the booking mistake itself.

"Mr Kurek," I said, "what if it turns out we need completely different things?"

He didn't answer immediately.

"Then at least we'll know what questions are worth asking before either of us decides to stay."

I looked at him, sensing that the solitude I'd planned so carefully had suddenly become far less certain.

What if, this time, the hardest thing wasn't leaving at all, but allowing someone else to stay?

Chapter 1 - Two Keys to the Same Door

Clara called back exactly forty-seven minutes later. In that time, I had managed to look at six alternative apartments, reject four because of the price and two because of their location, and drink a glass of water that did nothing to improve my mood. Jędrzej sat at the far end of the table, looking through something on his laptop. He made no attempt to start a conversation or persuade me that the situation had its advantages. His restraint was both polite and irritating. A person who gives you no reason to argue can make life considerably harder than someone who is openly unpleasant.

"I have some information," Clara announced when I answered.

Jędrzej looked up. I put the call on speaker.

"The insurance covers two guests. I've also checked the building's regulations. You can both stay, provided you agree to it. But I know this isn't what either of you arranged, so I'm not going to pressure you."

"What about another apartment?" I asked.

"I can arrange a room in an apartment in Eixample, but not until Monday. I'd have to find you a hotel for the first three nights."

I glanced at my calendar. It was Friday, the first of June. I had a meeting with the museum team at nine on Monday morning, and I'd intended to spend the weekend organising my materials and preparing questions about the provenance of several exhibits. Moving from a hotel to another apartment would cost me at least a day's work.

"Does that apartment have a separate workspace?" I asked.

"Unfortunately not. It's a small studio."

Jędrzej closed his laptop.

"And would I be entitled to a partial refund if I decided to stay here?" he asked.

Clara confirmed that he would. She also offered to draw up a written agreement specifying the arrangements for our shared stay and our responsibilities concerning the apartment. After another round of apologies, she promised to send the documents that evening.

When the call ended, I looked at Jędrzej.

"So you've already decided."

"No. I asked about the terms."

"It sounded as though you intended to stay."

"I do, if we can agree on reasonable rules."

"And if we can't?"

"Then I'll look for another solution."

He answered without hesitation. I couldn't tell whether he was being sincere or simply had exceptional control over his emotions. I was accustomed to negotiations in which people revealed their true intentions only when they began to lose something. He didn't look like a man who was particularly afraid of losing anything.

"I don't know you," I said.

"And I don't know you. That's a good argument for being careful, not necessarily against sharing an apartment."

"Do you have an answer for everything?"

"No. For instance, I have no idea why you've been speaking to me as though I personally added my name to your reservation."

I hadn't expected that.

Instead of answering immediately, I studied him more closely. His eyes were dark and steady, with lighter flecks near the pupils, and his mouth suggested a tendency towards irony even when he wasn't smiling. Only then did I notice how carefully he was trying not to take up space. He sat sideways at the table, leaving me an unobstructed route to the kitchen and balcony.

"Because you appeared at the exact moment when everything was finally supposed to be simple," I admitted.

His expression softened.

"That, I understand."

He didn't ask why I needed simplicity so badly.

I was grateful for that.

I opened the apartment listings again, although I already knew them almost by heart. I could find a hotel, move my documents and spend several days working at an uncomfortable desk. I could also demand compensation and return to Kraków, but that would mean withdrawing from a project I had proposed myself.

None of those options made sense.

They did, however, offer one convenient advantage: I wouldn't have to adjust to another person's presence.

"I need quiet between eight in the morning and two in the afternoon," I said at last.

Jędrzej put down his phone.

"Every day?"

"On weekdays. Sometimes in the evenings too."

"I have online meetings. Some of them last two hours."

"You can take them in your bedroom."

"Before I move into that bedroom, I'd like to establish one thing."

I rested my hands on the back of a chair.

"I'm listening."

"I don't want us to spend a month behaving like intruders in our own apartment. I'm not going to ask permission to make coffee or apologise for coming home in the evening. Obviously, we'll respect each other's privacy. But if we're going to live here, we both need to be able to use the space properly."

For a moment, I searched for an argument against his condition.

I couldn't think of one that didn't sound ridiculous.

"So you're refusing to live according to my schedule."

"I'm agreeing to take your schedule into account. There's a difference."

I turned towards the balcony. Outside, someone laughed loudly, and music drifted from a neighbouring apartment. Barcelona clearly had no intention of adjusting to my plans, whether Jędrzej stayed or not.

"Fine," I said. "Let's try it."

He didn't smile triumphantly. He merely nodded, as though we'd finished the first part of a discussion rather than made a decision that would change my entire stay.

Then we went to look at the bedrooms.

The first was larger, with a balcony window overlooking an interior courtyard. It had a wide bed, a wardrobe and a small desk. The second faced the street and was brighter, but slightly smaller. It contained a generous single bed and a bookcase where someone had left several Spanish novels.

"You choose," Jędrzej said.

"The first one has a desk."

"I know."

"You need to work too."

"There's enough room for me at the table in the living room."

For a moment, I suspected him of trying to be excessively gallant. Then I remembered his condition about sharing the communal space.

"And if I need to work in the living room?"

"Then we'll swap places or agree on times."

"You really do enjoy negotiating."

"No. I like knowing where I stand."

I chose the larger room.

Jędrzej accepted my decision without comment, carried his bag into the other bedroom and closed the door. I stood alone in the hallway, surprised by the feeling that I'd just been given something more than additional space.

I hadn't had to fight for every detail.

It took me twenty minutes to unpack my suitcase. I hung my clothes in the wardrobe, arranged my toiletries in the bathroom and spread my documents across the desk. All the while, I listened for sounds coming from the other side of the apartment.

Jędrzej moved quietly.

At one point, his phone rang. I heard a few short sentences in English, followed by something in Polish, spoken firmly.

"No, I'm not postponing it again. We agreed on the date."

I closed my bedroom door before I could hear anything else.

His life was none of my business.

At least that was what I kept telling myself.

At around six, I went into the kitchen.

Jędrzej was standing at the counter, trying to operate the coffee machine. He had taken off his watch, and his shirt sleeves were rolled up even farther than before. An instruction booklet in Catalan lay on a wooden chopping board.

"Any luck?" I asked.

"I'm getting there."

"Meaning?"

"I've discovered how to open the water tank. The rest requires patience."

I stepped forward, pressed two buttons, and the machine began to work.

Jędrzej looked at me with unmistakable appreciation.

"Are you an expert on coffee machines?"

"On recognising symbols. It comes in handy in my work."

"I should have asked sooner."

"Definitely."

I handed him a cup. For a moment, our fingers came close without touching. I noticed, however, that his attention lingered on my face a little longer than ordinary politeness required.

"Thank you, Ilona."

It was the first time he'd used my name without the formal address. It sounded different from what I'd expected. Lower, calmer, as though he didn't need to make any particular effort to give it meaning.

"You're welcome, Jędrzej."

He raised his cup.

"Now that we're on first-name terms, perhaps we should establish who's responsible for future equipment failures?"

"Whoever notices them first."

"A dangerous rule. I usually notice problems before other people do."

"Then you're going to be very busy."

He gave a short laugh.

I liked that laugh more than I wanted to admit.

That evening, we sat opposite each other at the table. Clara had sent the agreement, and we added our own arrangements.

Separate bedrooms. Respect for personal belongings. No unannounced visitors. Advance coordination when either of us needed the shared space for an important meeting. We would split the cost of communal groceries equally, and Clara would issue our partial refunds separately.

"And no moving the other person's things without asking," I added.

Jędrzej glanced at my notebook beside the laptop.

"Agreed."

I knew he remembered the sentence he'd seen written there. He didn't make a joke about it or ask what it meant.

"What about you?" I asked. "Any other conditions?"

He turned his pen between his fingers for a moment.

"Yes. I don't want us to hide problems just to maintain the appearance of peace."

"That's a rather broad demand."

"It'll do for a start."

"And if you turn out to be the problem?"

"I'd rather find out before breakfast on the last day."

I hesitated, then added his condition to the agreement.

When we'd finished, we sent the document to Clara. She replied a few minutes later, confirming the arrangements and assuring us that she would send the financial details the following day.

There were no longer any formal obstacles to our staying.

I should have felt relieved.

Instead, I had the distinct impression that I'd just signed an agreement concerning something much harder to predict than sharing an apartment.

Jędrzej gathered his papers and stood.

"I'm going out to buy something to eat. Do you need anything?"

"No, thank you."

"Are you sure?"

"I have everything."

He didn't ask again.

He simply left.

For the next half hour, I worked on my museum materials. I checked dates, compared descriptions and tried to concentrate on a task that demanded precision. Yet when I heard footsteps in the stairwell, I automatically looked up.

It wasn't Jędrzej.

I was irritated by my own reaction.

He returned a quarter of an hour later carrying a paper bag. He took out tomatoes, fresh bread, olives and two small pieces of cheese. Then he placed a bottle of sparkling water and a punnet of strawberries on the counter.

"I know you said you didn't need anything," he said, "but I bought a little extra. Help yourself if you change your mind."

"You didn't have to."

"I know."

There was no expectation of gratitude in his answer.

And that was precisely why, when the smell of fresh bread reached me, I closed my laptop.

"I could slice the tomatoes," I offered.

Jędrzej looked at me.

"Now that sounds like cooperation."

"Don't get used to it."

"I'm not going to make any assumptions."

We prepared a simple dinner. We ate beside the open balcony doors, listening to conversations drifting up from the street. We didn't discuss our former relationships or the reasons either of us had ended up here. Instead, we talked

about Barcelona, difficult-to-pronounce Catalan names, and the way some cities seemed designed more for living in than for sightseeing.

"That's one of the things I like about this neighbourhood," Jędrzej said. "People don't have to search for somewhere new every day. They have their own bakeries, their own benches, their own reasons to return."

"Sounds a little too predictable."

"That's exactly what appeals to me."

I looked at him over my glass.

"I prefer places I haven't discovered yet."

"I know."

"How?"

"You've spent the last two hours trying to plan the next four weeks so that no two days look alike."

I hadn't expected him to notice.

"And you'd like every day to be the same?"

"No. I'd simply like to know where I'll be the following morning."

He said it lightly, but something in his expression prevented me from taking the words as a joke.

For a while, we sat in silence.

Then I stood, collected the plates and carried them to the sink. Jędrzej came over to help. We found ourselves side by side in the narrow kitchen. I caught the scent of his shirt, clean cotton and a faint woody fragrance I couldn't identify.

"Ilona?"

I turned my head.

"Yes?"

"If you need quiet tomorrow morning, let me know. I can go out somewhere to work."

"You don't have to move out every time I open my laptop."

He smiled.

"Good. That's exactly the answer I was hoping for."

He stepped aside, leaving me room to pass.

When I closed my bedroom door later that night, I realised that, for the first time since arriving, I hadn't checked a single alternative booking.

Beyond the wall came the soft sound of a drawer being opened, followed by footsteps.

The apartment was no longer perfectly quiet.

And yet, to my own surprise, I had no desire to change that.

Chapter 2 - An Agreement for Thirty Days

The following morning, I woke to the smell of coffee and the sound of the balcony doors opening.

For a moment, I didn't know where I was. The light filtering through the curtains had a warm, golden quality, and voices rose from the street below, belonging to people who apparently saw no reason to speak more quietly on a Saturday morning.

I checked the time.

Seven forty.

Usually, I got up immediately when I was somewhere new. Exploring an unfamiliar neighbourhood was a ritual of sorts, one that helped me maintain a sense of control. This time, I lay still for several minutes, listening to the apartment.

The clink of a cup. The soft rustle of paper. Footsteps moving away from the kitchen.

Someone else was already living here before I'd even begun my day.

I got up, put on a light dress and left my room.

Jędrzej was sitting on the balcony with a cup of coffee and a small sketchbook. He wore a dark T-shirt and linen trousers. His phone lay on the table beside him, its screen dark.

I watched him through the glass for a moment. He was sketching quickly, making short strokes and occasionally glancing at the buildings across the street.

When he noticed me, he closed the sketchbook.