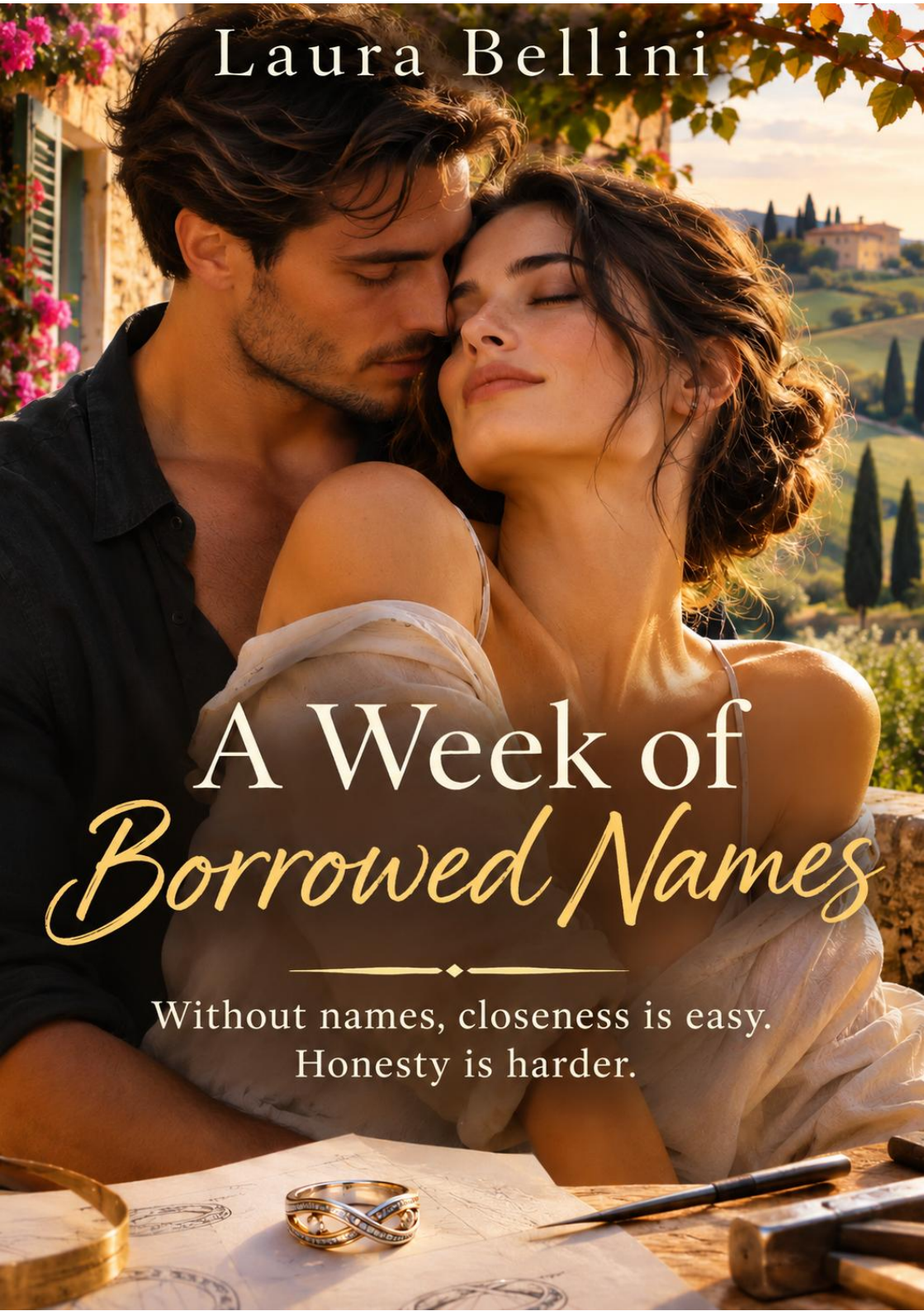

Laura Bellini
A Week of
Borrowed Names
Without names, closeness is easy.
Honesty is harder.

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Laura Bellini

ROMANS

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INTRO

On my first evening in Tuscany, I decided that for seven days, I wouldn't let anyone find out who I was.

It wasn't particularly difficult. The organizers of the artists' residency had gone to almost excessive lengths to protect everyone's anonymity. At the entrance to an old villa near Siena, linen name tags displayed first names only. The rules expressly forbade participants from introducing themselves by their surnames, mentioning the companies they worked for, or discussing their professional achievements.

For one week, we were supposed to be people, not business cards.

It sounded like a holiday game for bored artists. To me, however, it offered something far more valuable: the chance to discover whether my work could interest anyone without the story of my father, who had run one of Kraków's best-known jewelry workshops for thirty years.

My name was Karina Jarosz. I was thirty-one years old, and I had no intention of spending the rest of my life as the talented daughter of a talented man.

Inside my suitcase, between two linen dresses, I'd hidden a small box containing a ring I'd designed myself. Its silver surface was irregular, and a delicate crack running through the band had deliberately been left visible. I'd named it The Line of Return.

Three months earlier, I'd entered the piece in an international contemporary jewelry competition. The results of the first round were due shortly after I returned home.

Nobody at the residency needed to know about that.

I had a plan of my own: work on a new collection in the mornings, sketch in the afternoons, and spend my evenings walking alone among the cypress trees. No professional networking. No flirtations that would end with me having to explain why I wasn't answering my phone. And absolutely no men who believed they could plan my life better than I could.

I added that last rule silently when I spotted him beside a stone table on the terrace.

He stood with his back to the entrance, the sleeves of his pale shirt rolled up, attempting to repair the metal latch on a wooden chest. Tools lay beside him, and he handled them with unsettling ease for someone supposedly enjoying an artistic holiday.

"If you push any harder, you'll break the spring," I said before I could decide that interfering was a bad idea.

He turned his head.

He had dark hair, several days' worth of stubble, and the face of a man who wasn't accustomed to apologizing for the space he occupied. He didn't seem arrogant, though. At least, not immediately. He looked at me with interest, then back at the metal mechanism.

"And if I stop pushing, the chest stays locked."

"Still better than a chest with a broken lock."

"Depends what's inside."

I stepped closer. The terrace smelled of sun-warmed stone, rosemary, and grapes ripening beyond the low wall. The man moved his tools aside to make room for me, although I hadn't asked him to.

"May I?"

"Be my guest."

He raised both hands in surrender.

The problem with the latch turned out to be embarrassingly simple. Someone had installed the spring backward, causing the mechanism to jam whenever the key turned. I took a small pair of pliers from my pocket, where I almost always kept them, and adjusted the fastening.

There was a soft click.

The lid opened.

"Impressive," he said.

"Not particularly. I just had to see what was wrong."

"Most people would rather use force."

"Most people shouldn't repair locks."

He smiled. Not broadly, not for effect. One corner of his mouth lifted as though my answer had genuinely amused him.

Only then did I realize he'd been looking at me differently for the past few moments. Not like another random participant in the workshop. His attention was steady, unhurried, and free of the irritating once-over I'd grown used to at exhibition openings.

"Norbert," he introduced himself.

The name tag on his chest said the same thing.

"Karina."

"Then thank you, Karina. You've saved the evening."

I looked inside the chest. It contained small ceramic bowls, pieces of wire, tools, and a dozen or so unfinished silver bands.

"Was it really that dramatic?"

"We're supposed to work with metal tomorrow morning. Without this chest, the instructor might decide I'm useless."

"Are you?"

He closed the lid and looked directly into my eyes.

"That depends who's judging."

I didn't answer immediately. His voice was calm, slightly husky, and entirely without the effort of trying to impress me. Even so, for a brief moment, I forgot why I'd come out onto the terrace.

I'd come here for peace and quiet, after all.

"So far, I'm giving you three out of ten," I announced.

"What would earn me the other seven?"

"You haven't done anything yet."

"Apart from inviting you into a conversation."

"I don't recall being invited."

"Then I should correct that oversight."

He gestured toward two chairs by the balustrade.

"Will you sit with me for a while?"

I hesitated. Several participants laughed somewhere in the garden, and through the villa's open windows came the clatter of cutlery being laid on the table. Dinner was due to begin in twenty minutes.

Twenty minutes was enough time to drink a glass of water and return to my room. It was also enough time to do something that went against every resolution I'd made.

"Ten minutes," I decided.

"I won't try to negotiate eleven."

I sat opposite him. From this side of the terrace, I could see hills covered with silvery olive trees, the distant roofs of farmhouses, and a narrow road cutting across the valley. The sun was sinking slowly, painting the edges of the stone walls gold.

Norbert fetched a carafe of water and two glasses from a side table. He placed one in front of me without asking whether I'd prefer wine.

I appreciated that small gesture more than I intended to.

"Why did you come here?" he asked.

"To work."

"That's a rather severe approach to a Tuscan holiday."

"Who said I was on holiday?"

"No one. That's what I'm trying to find out."

I studied him more closely. He looked to be in his mid-thirties. An old watch with a leather strap circled his left wrist, and a small scar marked his index finger. His hands didn't look like those of a man who only admired art from a safe distance.

"I want to spend one week making things nobody will judge by my surname," I answered.

He nodded without demanding an explanation.

"I understand."

"Do you?"

"I know what it's like when people think they understand your decisions before you've even made them."

He said it with such certainty that I wanted to ask another question. But the residency's rules existed for a reason.

They weren't meant to encourage us to dismantle one another's biographies.

"What about you?" I asked. "Why are you here?"

He turned his glass between his fingers for a moment.

"I wanted to remember why I used to enjoy looking at things before I started wondering what they were worth."

That wasn't the answer I'd expected.

"Sounds like the problem of a man who spends too much time with a calculator."

"Possibly."

"Or with people who use one."

"That's more likely."

He regarded me as though I'd said something important. I couldn't imagine why it should matter to him, but suddenly I no longer felt obliged to fill every silence.

After a moment, I took a small silver band from my pocket, a sample from an unfinished design I'd been working on during the journey. I placed it on the table. The metal was uneven, deliberately interrupted by a narrow gap.

Norbert leaned forward but didn't touch it.

"May I have a look?"

I slid the band toward him.

He turned it carefully, searching for the angle where light passed through the opening.

"Why didn't you close the circle?"

"Because it would have been less truthful."

"And what if I said that not everything unfinished is honest?"

I looked up.

"I'd say you're confusing something unfinished with a deliberate choice."

He was silent for a moment. Then he handed back the band.

"In that case, I'd like to see you make those choices someday."

A bell rang inside the villa, calling everyone to dinner. I should have stood, put the silver away, and said goodbye to the man who had managed to irritate and intrigue me in the space of ten minutes.

Instead, I asked, "And what if I don't want an audience?"

Norbert pushed his chair back, leaving the path to the door completely clear.

"Then I'll ask if I can simply sit beside you."

I slipped the band into my pocket. I realized I still knew nothing about him except his first name, yet I wanted to hear what he would say the following day.

It was a dangerously pleasant feeling.

I headed toward the entrance, then stopped in the doorway.

"Norbert?"

"Yes?"

"I'm starting work at seven tomorrow."

His smile appeared slowly.

"I didn't ask what time."

"I know."

I stepped into the villa before he could answer.

Inside my pocket, I curled my fingers around the cool silver. For months, I'd done everything possible to ensure that nobody could influence how my work would be judged. Now I'd invited a stranger into the very world I'd guarded so fiercely.

And if he was the first person in a long time who made me want to be more than my surname, would I be able to tell him who I really was before it was too late?

Chapter 1 - A Condition Without a Surname

At six forty-five the following morning, I discovered that it was entirely possible to regret a moment of spontaneity while eagerly anticipating its consequences.

I stood beside the open window of my room, buttoning my linen shirt and looking out at the garden, still submerged in the cool morning shadows. The hills beyond the villa were slowly brightening, and the scent of damp earth mingled with the aroma of coffee drifting up from downstairs. My sketchbook lay on the desk beside my box of tools and a sheet of paper on which I'd written my work schedule the previous evening. Everything had its place. Everything was ready.

Except me.

What unsettled me was how clearly I remembered the way Norbert had said my name. He hadn't drawn out the syllables or tried to give them any special significance. He'd simply spoken it with care, as though testing whether it suited the woman he'd just met.

Annoyed with myself, I closed the window and picked up my sketchbook.

The studio occupied a former farm building a short walk from the villa. Its enormous windows faced south, and inside stood six sturdy worktables, cabinets filled with tools, and shelves crowded with materials. Above the entrance hung a board bearing a sentence handwritten in Italian: "Don't ask who I am. Look at what I create."

That was precisely why I'd come.

For months, I'd dreamed of finding a place where nobody expected me to design elegant engagement rings or safe, commercially appealing collections that resembled my father's work. I wanted to treat silver as a material capable of telling stories about imperfection, rather than merely expressing luxury.

I opened the studio door.

Norbert was sitting at a table beneath the window.

"It's not seven yet," he said without looking up from his paper.

I stopped.

"I don't recall inviting you in."

"You didn't. The door was open."

"That doesn't always constitute an invitation."

He set down his pencil and looked at me with the same calm attention I remembered from the terrace.

"In that case, I can leave."

There was no irony in his voice. He was already preparing to stand when I noticed the sheets of thin paper spread across the table. On them, he'd sketched the arrangement of the workstations and the directions in which the light entered the room.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Working out the best place to prepare a collaborative installation."

I frowned.

"What collaborative installation?"

"Didn't you read the program?"

Of course I'd read it. Three times. The schedule provided for individual work in the mornings and optional workshops in the afternoons. On the final day, there would be a small presentation of our projects.

Norbert slid a sheet toward me.

At the bottom was a handwritten addition in a different hand: "Group project: Boundaries. Teams of two. Final presentation."

"The organizers changed the arrangements last night," he explained. "Apparently, the installation prepared by the invited artist never arrived. They want to turn the situation into part of the experiment."

"That's not an experiment. That's passing an organizational problem on to the participants."

"That was my first thought too."

"And your second?"

"That something interesting might come out of it."

I stared at him in disbelief.

"Are you seriously planning to give up half your week for a project you never intended to undertake?"

"If I find the right person."

I understood what he meant only when he gestured toward the empty table beside his.

"No," I said.

"I haven't actually proposed working together yet."

"I'm saving us both time."

A slight smile appeared on his face.

"Yesterday, you decided most people shouldn't repair locks. Today, apparently, you think they shouldn't ask questions either."

"Questions aren't the problem. The problem is assuming the answer has to be yes."

He stood and pushed back his chair. He was tall enough that I had to tilt my head to meet his eyes, but he made no attempt to come closer. Instead, he gathered his sketches, leaving the entire table between us.

"All right. Tell me what you need."

His response caught me off guard.

"Solitude."

"While you're working?"

"Especially then."

"And outside work?"

I sensed him shifting the nature of the conversation, though he did it so subtly that it was difficult to take offense.

"I haven't scheduled my free time yet."

"That's good news."

"For whom?"

"For the schedule. It still has a chance to remain flexible."

I turned away to hide my smile and placed my sketchbook on the table farthest from the entrance.

Norbert didn't insist. He returned to his notes while I prepared my workstation. For the next fifteen minutes, silence settled between us, broken only by the rustle of paper and the occasional tap of metal tools.

I should have been relieved.

Instead, I kept glancing in his direction.

He worked differently from most people I knew. He didn't endlessly revise every sketch until the composition was perfect. He drew quickly, discarded unsuccessful ideas, and returned to them only when he noticed something worth preserving. He made no effort to look like a man waiting for inspiration. He simply concentrated on the task in front of him.

When the clock on the wall reached eight, the residency organizer entered the studio. She was a petite Italian woman whose gray hair was tied back with a red scarf.

"Buongiorno!" she called. "I see we have some early workers."

She had introduced herself as Sofia the previous day. She was the only person who knew the real identities of all the participants.

"Sofia, I'd like to discuss the change to the program," I began.

She sighed.

"I thought you might. I know it was rather sudden."

"I came here with my own project."

"And you can still work on it. The installation will take up the afternoons."

"Afternoons I'd already planned as well."

Sofia accepted my objection without taking offense. She explained that the final presentation was intended to demonstrate not only individual artistic skills but also the ways people communicated when their professional labels had been taken away. We weren't required to reveal our

experience or specializations. The collaborative work was supposed to develop without a hierarchy.

"Participation is voluntary," she added. "But I'd like everyone to at least consider it."

"And if I refuse?"

"You'll keep your place in the studio and access to the materials. You won't lose anything."

I felt relieved.

Then Sofia looked at the sketches spread across Norbert's table.

"Ah, I see you've already got an idea. I was just about to ask whether you could help prepare the installation."

"I can," he replied.

"Wonderful. I need someone who can work with space. And someone who understands metal."

Both of them looked at me.

"No," I said for the second time that morning.

Sofia laughed softly.

"I'm not going to force you, Karina. But I'd like you to see the materials before you decide."

She led us into a room behind the studio. Steel hoops, thin copper wires, pieces of glass, and wooden frames lay scattered across the floor. Above them hung a sheet of paper bearing a single word: "Boundaries."

My imagination responded faster than my common sense.

I pictured a construction based on two incomplete circles, their ends approaching each other without ever touching. Light passing through the gaps could cast a shape onto the wall entirely different from the installation itself.

I approached one of the hoops.

"Has somebody already tried bending this?" I asked.

"Yes," Sofia replied. "Without success."

I ran my hand over the metal.

"Because they were trying to force it into a regular curve. This material has a memory. You have to work with the tension, not fight it."

Norbert moved beside me, maintaining a little distance.

"That's exactly what I was thinking."

I gave him a suspicious look.

"Really?"

"Not about the metal's memory. About letting the structure retain evidence of resistance."

He held out a sketch. Two overlapping forms created a space on the paper that wasn't enclosed by any continuous line.

Reluctantly, I had to admit he had a good idea.

"You've brought them too close together," I observed.

"Why?"

"Because it makes one shape look as though it's trying to take over the other. Boundaries don't always mean conflict. Sometimes they mean being allowed to remain yourself."

Norbert studied the drawing for a long moment.

"Show me."

I took the pencil and shifted one of the arcs.

Our hands rested on opposite sides of the paper. A tiny movement would have been enough for them to meet above the drawing, yet we both remained focused on the design.

"Here," I said. "A space appears between them. It doesn't belong to either shape, but it exists because of both."

"And that becomes the most important part."

I looked at him.

"Exactly."

Sofia watched us with obvious satisfaction.

"In that case, I'll leave you with the idea."

"I haven't agreed yet," I reminded her.

"Of course."

She disappeared before I could add anything else.

Norbert rested his hands on the edge of the table.

"You don't have to do this."

"I'm glad we've established that."

"But if you decide to, I have one condition."

I raised my eyebrows.

"You have a condition?"

"Yes. I don't want to work with someone who treats every idea I offer like an intruder."

"And I don't want to work with someone who tries to take control of my work."

"Then we have a similar problem."

"No. We have two different problems."

"Perhaps one agreement could solve both."

We held each other's gaze for a moment. I noticed he wasn't trying to persuade me with his smile. He waited for my answer, apparently prepared to accept another refusal.

"What agreement?" I asked.

"No decision about our shared work gets made without both of us agreeing."

I considered it.

"That also means you can't make adjustments to my components."

"And you can't make adjustments to mine."

"Even if they're badly made?"

"Then you can tell me."

"I can be merciless."

"I've noticed."

I looked at the steel hoop for a moment. In Kraków, I spent every day proving that I was capable of running a workshop independently. Here, I had an opportunity to test something different: whether I could collaborate without feeling as though I was surrendering a part of myself.

"Two trial afternoons," I said. "After that, we'll decide whether to continue."

"Agreed."

"And no questions about surnames, companies, or professional connections."

"That's already a rule of the residency."

"I'd rather repeat it."

He nodded.

"Then I'll add one thing. I don't want us pretending we have no opinions of our own simply because we don't know each other's biographies."

"That would be impossible."

"Especially in your case."

I smiled, although I had no intention of giving him the satisfaction of seeing it.

Before lunch, we returned to our respective workstations. I worked on a series of small pendants whose surfaces I wanted to shape through controlled fractures. Norbert concentrated on construction sketches. Occasionally, we exchanged brief observations, but otherwise we left each other undisturbed.

At eleven, Sofia brought us coffee and announced that the remaining pairs would be formed after lunch. She considered our project provisionally accepted.

"I didn't say I'd accepted it," I corrected her.

Norbert raised his cup.

"You said you'd give it two afternoons."

"That's not the same thing."

"I know. I'm beginning to understand that precision is a form of self-defense for you."

I put down my tool.

"And interpreting other people's behavior is your way of avoiding your own?"

For once, he didn't answer immediately.

"Possibly," he admitted at last.

I hadn't expected that. Keeping my distance would have been easier if he'd responded with another joke.

After lunch, we moved the materials into the small courtyard adjoining the studio. The sun had warmed the stone paving, and canvas shades stretched overhead. Norbert had prepared two work areas, leaving enough space between them for us to move freely.

"You didn't have to do that," I said.

"I know."

"Then why did you?"

"Because I noticed you like having your own space."

He answered so naturally that I couldn't think of a suitable retort.

For the next two hours, we worked on shaping the steel components. There were disagreements, of course. Norbert wanted the structure to be visible from a distance; I believed its most important features should reveal themselves only when someone approached. He thought about how people moved through a space. I thought about how they studied details.

At one point, irritated, I pushed a metal arc away from me.

"If we do it your way, we'll end up with a decoration for a hotel lobby."

Norbert studied the structure.

"And if we do it yours, visitors will need a magnifying glass and an instruction manual."

"Not everything has to be immediately understandable."

"But there should be a reason to come closer."

I fell silent.

He was right about one thing. My designs sometimes demanded too much patience from the people looking at them. My father had been telling me that for years, though for entirely different reasons. Norbert wasn't suggesting that I simplify the concept. He was trying to find the right form for it.

"Let's try something else," I said.

I moved the hoop to where the light began passing through its center.

Norbert crouched on the opposite side.

"Now?"

"A little farther left."

He followed my direction.

A shadow appeared on the stone wall, resembling two open rings. The space between them formed a third shape, visible only because of the light.

For a moment, neither of us spoke.

"Is that what you had in mind?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"Something better."

He looked at me, and his expression softened.

"Then it's a good thing we didn't work separately."

I didn't answer immediately.

For years, I'd considered independence the most important proof of my worth. Yet we'd just created something neither of us would have imagined alone.

Toward the end of the day, Norbert suggested leaving the construction where it was until morning so we could see how its appearance changed in different light.

I agreed.

As we gathered our tools, he picked up one of my sketches after the wind blew it onto the ground. He didn't turn it over, although I knew there were handwritten notes about my competition entry on the back.

He simply returned the sheet to me.

"Thank you," I said.

"For the sketch?"

"For not trying to read it."

He regarded me seriously for a moment.

"Karina, if you ever want to show me something, you'll do it yourself."

There was more respect in that sentence than I'd received during many professional conversations.

I turned toward the olive grove.

"We're still on a trial basis," I reminded him.

"Of course."

"And you can still irritate me."

"That seems extremely likely."

I laughed.

When I headed back to the villa, Norbert remained beside the construction. I glanced over my shoulder once, unable to resist. He stood in the afternoon light with his hands on his hips, studying our work.

For the first time since arriving, I thought seven days might be nowhere near long enough.

Chapter 2 - Between Two Lines

The following morning, I woke to the sound of rain striking the windowsill.

The Tuscany I knew from photographs consisted almost entirely of golden hills, gentle sunlight, and little tables arranged outside charming cafés. Outside my window, however, the sky was a heavy gray, and the path leading to the studio had become a strip of wet gravel.

My phone lay on the bedside table. Its screen kept lighting up with notifications I'd deliberately ignored the previous evening.

Three messages from my father.

The first concerned an order for wedding rings. The second reminded me about a meeting with a supplier. The third was short and considerably more personal.

"Remember, when you get back, we need to have a serious conversation about the future of the workshop."

I placed the phone facedown.

I didn't need reminding.

I knew my father expected me to take over the family business. I also knew that, in his imagination, that meant continuing the existing operation, developing safe collections, and making sure customers still associated the Jarosz name with tradition.

The problem was that I wanted something different.

I had no intention of abandoning the craft he'd taught me since childhood. But I wanted to stop having to prove that I could be an extension of him.

The competition I'd entered The Line of Return in was supposed to be my first step. It wasn't simply about winning a prize or having the opportunity to exhibit my work abroad. It was about being judged without family connections, without personal favors, and without any obligation to be grateful.

That was why the anonymous residency mattered so much to me.

It was also why Norbert's presence was becoming a problem.

Not because he disturbed me while I worked. Quite the opposite. The previous day, he'd demonstrated that he could listen and change his mind. The trouble was that I was becoming increasingly interested in who he was outside the studio.

And that wasn't something I'd included in any of my plans.

I went downstairs for breakfast a few minutes after eight. The dining room smelled of fresh bread, coffee, and oranges. Several participants were seated around the long table, conversing in Italian, French, and English, exchanging observations about the weather and their first projects.

Norbert wasn't there.

I felt an absurd pang of disappointment.

I sat beside Marta, an energetic woman from Warsaw who had told me about her ceramic experiments the previous day. She had short red hair and a habit of asking questions before the person she was speaking to had managed to swallow their first sip of coffee.