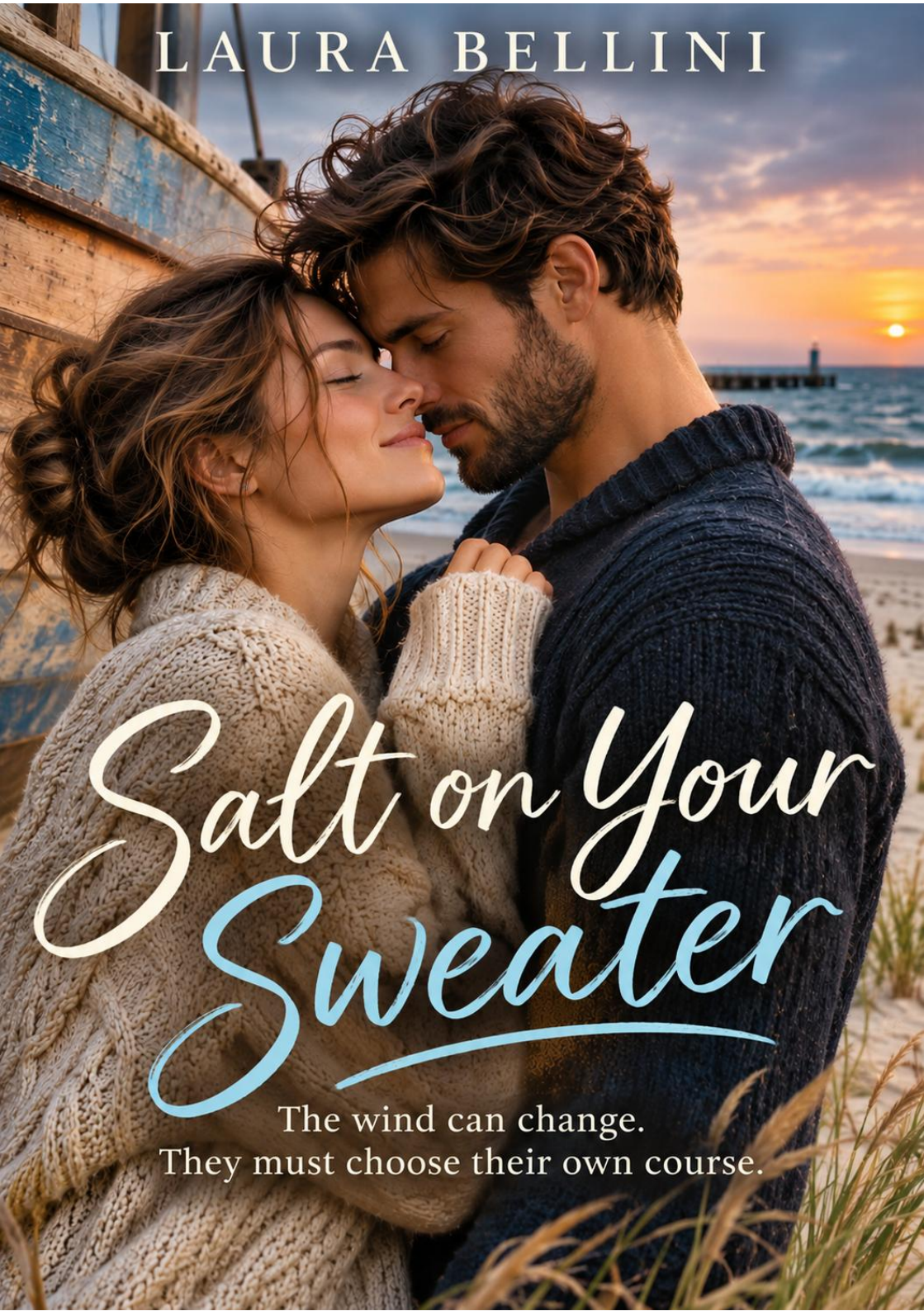

LAURA BELLINI
Salt on Your Sweater
The wind can change.
They must choose their own course.

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Laura Bellini

ROMANS

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INTRO

The first thing I noticed when I stepped into the workshop was the smell of wet wood. The second was the unmistakable feeling that someone was about to ruin my carefully laid plans.

I stood in the open doorway with a drawing tube tucked under my arm, a bag full of knitwear samples, and hair that the November wind had already turned into something resembling a bird's nest. Behind me, Hel looked like a town abandoned by everyone sensible enough to leave before winter. Ahead, in the half-light of the high-ceilinged workshop, rested a boat. A seven-meter wooden hull with a slender bow, supported on trestles, its surface streaked with the pale marks of freshly sanded timber.

It was more beautiful than in the photographs.

And considerably less finished.

"Please tell me that's not the boat," I said.

The man bent over its side didn't even look up. He wore a charcoal-gray sweater with the sleeves rolled to his elbows, work trousers, and safety glasses. In one hand he held a small wood plane, guiding it along a narrow piece of timber with the patience of someone for whom the world ended a few inches beyond his next movement.

"Depends which boat you're looking for."

"A restored one. Ready to be photographed. Preferably one that doesn't look as though someone has only just started building it."

He pushed the plane forward once more. A thin shaving curled down to the floor.

"Then we have a problem."

I disliked people who announced problems in the same tone they might use to deliver a weather forecast.

I set my bag on the workbench, taking care not to knock over the coffee mug standing nearby. Sandpaper, metal fittings, and an open notebook covered the surface. Among the tools, I noticed a small model sailboat, made with extraordinary precision.

"I spoke to Mr. Morski on the phone. He assured me the restoration was nearly finished."

"It is."

"Your definition of nearly finished is different from mine."

At last, he put down the plane and looked at me.

He had the face of a man accustomed to wind, exhaustion, and making his own decisions. Dark hair, a little too long over his forehead, a short beard, and eyes that didn't retreat from someone else's irritation. He was tall, but that wasn't what caught my attention. It was the way he stood: calm, assured, without the slightest need to prove anything.

"Bartosz Morski," he introduced himself. "And you must be Róża Krawiec."

"Must I?"

"Only one person told me she'd be arriving with wool samples and a schedule planned down to the hour."

"I also brought a contract."

"I suspected you might."

He smiled, barely noticeably. And it was that smile that irritated me most.

I was twenty-nine, had my own knitwear brand, and had met more than enough men who considered my attention to detail an amusing personality trait. I had no intention of adding another to the collection.

I pulled a folder from my bag.

"In three weeks, I need the materials ready for my collection presentation. The photographer, model, and stylist are all booked. Everything has been paid for. If the boat isn't ready, the entire project..."

"It will be ready for photographs," he interrupted. "But not for sailing."

My hand stopped above the folder.

"I wasn't planning a voyage."

"In the photographs you sent, the boat was on the water."

"Those were inspiration images."

"The trouble with inspiration is that people start treating it like a promise."

I rested both hands on the workbench. Outside, a gull gave a long, piercing cry, followed by a gust of wind striking the metal roof. For a moment, all we heard was the creaking of the workshop's wooden framework.

"So you can provide the boat, but not the setting we agreed on?"

"I can provide something real. The rest requires a conversation."

I didn't answer immediately.

I'd come to Hel because I wanted to create a collection that would finally belong entirely to me. Not to the large clothing manufacturer where I'd spent six years designing

other people's ideas. Not to the investor who had offered funding on the condition that my name disappear from the labels.

To me.

Ten designs, natural wool, the muted colors of the Baltic, and photographs taken aboard a wooden boat. Everything was supposed to be simple, raw, and honest.

And now honesty stood before me in a work sweater, refusing to cooperate with my vision.

"May I take a closer look?" I asked.

Bartosz nodded.

I walked around the hull, studying the lines of the wood. Traces of old repairs remained along the side, carefully filled and sanded. Near the bow, I noticed a small patch of original paint that hadn't been removed. The faded blue looked like a memory of summer.

"Why did you leave that?"

He came to stand beside me, keeping enough distance that I didn't feel crowded.

"Because you don't have to strip everything away to restore something."

I looked at him.

He hadn't said it like a phrase meant to be remembered. More like a man who had known the answer for a long time and needed no one's agreement.

"That, I understand," I admitted.

He raised an eyebrow.

"Really?"

I opened my bag and took out the first sweater. It was heavy and cream-colored, knitted from thick wool with an uneven texture. I'd reworked its construction four times before getting the shoulders to fall correctly. I laid it on the wooden bench and smoothed out the sleeves.

"Have you ever seen a handmade sweater that looks better after years of wear than it did when it was new? The fibers adapt to the person. The sleeves remember how they move. You can mend a worn patch, but if you smooth away every imperfection, you lose what makes it special."

Bartosz touched the edge of the cuff with two fingers. He didn't tug at the fabric or stretch it carelessly. He examined the stitches as though trying to understand how they'd been made.

"Good work," he said.

Two words.

Yet they sounded different from the dozens of compliments I'd heard while presenting my designs.

"Thank you."

"Except here." He pointed to a spot beside the seam. "Moisture will collect in this area if someone actually wears it on a boat."

I examined the place he indicated.

He was right.

That discovery was irritating for an entirely new reason.

"Do you always find something that needs improving?"

"Only when I care."

This time, our eyes held for longer.

I moved the sweater aside before I could attach a meaning to his answer that he might never have intended.

That was when I noticed a photograph attached by a magnet to a metal locker. It showed the same boat under full sail. A younger Bartosz stood on deck, smiling broadly at someone outside the frame. In one corner was a company logo and a name I couldn't make out.

"Is that her?" I asked.

He followed my gaze.

His expression changed almost imperceptibly. His smile disappeared, and his jaw tightened for a moment.

"A long time ago."

"Looks as though she handled the water beautifully."

"She did."

He turned the photograph to face the wall.

I didn't comment. I knew how much could be hidden behind a short sentence delivered in a sufficiently calm voice.

Bartosz walked over to the workshop's large doors and opened them wider. Cold, salty air swept inside. Beyond the building stretched a narrow strip of wet sand, then reeds and the dark surface of the bay. The wind slipped beneath the collar of my coat.

"You could do the shoot here," he said. "With the doors open and the water in the background. On deck, too, once I've finished fitting the hardware. But the boat stays on land."

"Even if I offer you extra money?"

"Even then."

There was no resentment or theatrical pride in his answer.

Simply a boundary.

I'd known people who spoke firmly only to drive up their price. He didn't strike me as one of them.

I stepped closer to the doorway. The wind immediately caught the loose end of my scarf. Bartosz held the door steady so I could look outside.

"You're not the person I expected," he said.

"And who were you expecting?"

"Someone who'd come, take her photographs, and never notice that this boat has a history."

I looked at his hands. At the small scratches, the marks left by work, and the pale dust gathered around his wrists.

"And you're not the man who promised me on the phone that everything would go according to plan."

"I never promised that."

He was right for the second time.

This time, I allowed myself a smile.

I returned to the workbench and began packing my samples. I needed to find a solution before deciding that the entire trip had been a mistake. Back in Warsaw, ordered yarn, a paid-for studio, and a collection that would determine whether my business survived its first year were waiting for me.

Bartosz watched me fold the cream sweater.

"Would you leave one piece here?" he asked.

"What for?"

"I want to see how it looks against the wood. In daylight."

I studied him suspiciously.

"Is that an offer to collaborate?"

"It's an offer to find out whether we can save your plan without pretending this boat is something it isn't."

Slowly, I placed the sweater back on the table.

Through the open doors, the wind carried the smell of salt, and tiny damp crystals settled on the dark wool of his sleeve. Bartosz didn't even notice. He was watching me, patiently waiting for my answer.

I'd come here determined never again to surrender control of my life to anyone. Yet after knowing him for less than an hour, I wanted to stay in the workshop of a man who had questioned my plan, refused to compromise, and spotted a flaw in a design I'd spent months perfecting.

"All right," I said. "One sweater. One test."

"That's enough to begin with."

I didn't yet know exactly what he meant.

I only knew that when he looked at the sweater I'd left behind and then back at me, I stopped thinking about the journey home.

And for the first time in months, what frightened me wasn't the possibility of losing control.

It was how much I wanted to trust someone.

Could I let this man get close to me without surrendering everything I'd worked so hard to build?

Chapter 1 - The Terms of the Wind

Bartosz spread the cream-colored sweater across a wide plank he had carefully cleared of dust and studied it in silence for several seconds. He no longer touched the fabric. His gaze traveled between the stitches, the pale wood of the hull, and the strip of November daylight falling through the workshop's open doors. I wanted to ask whether he intended to conduct a full technical inspection of my knitwear, but I restrained myself. After all, I had agreed to one test. I could hardly complain now that he was taking it seriously.

"Let's put it against the side of the boat," I suggested, reaching for the sweater.

"Not that side."

"Why not?"

"Fresh oil. It'll leave marks you won't be able to wash out without damaging the fibers."

My hand stopped.

"So you do know something about clothes."

"I know about stains people regret later."

He found a clean canvas cloth, spread it over a wide bench beside the hull, and indicated where I could arrange the sweater. When I moved the fabric closer to the light, I saw exactly what I had been searching for since I began designing the collection. The soft wool didn't contrast with the wood. It seemed to extend naturally from it, as though both materials belonged to the same world.

I took out my phone and snapped three photographs.

"This is better than the rendering," I admitted.

"You don't look pleased."

I noticed that he had shifted from addressing me formally to speaking more familiarly, but I didn't object.

"Because in the rendering, the boat is on the water."

"And here, it actually exists."

"That isn't always enough for clients."

"Is it enough for you?"

I looked up from my phone. The question was simple, but something in the way he asked it prevented me from giving an equally simple answer.

"I'd like it to be."

Bartosz nodded, as though I had told him something more important than my opinion of a photograph.

I unrolled the concept sheet on the table. It contained color samples, photographs of the coastline, sketches of silhouettes, and a shot list. I had prepared it in Warsaw, refining the details over several sleepless evenings. I showed Bartosz the images of a model standing at the bow, a sweater draped over the railing, and a long coat moving in the wind.

"We won't be doing that last one," he said, pointing to a photograph.

"Why?"

"Because the model is standing on deck without any safety precautions, wearing shoes that wouldn't even be suitable for a wet pier. And the picture suggests the wind is blowing from a direction it couldn't possibly come from with the boat positioned like that."

"It's only an artistic concept."

"I understand. But if we're trying to make something look authentic, let's not begin with the impossible."

I stared at him in disbelief.

"Are you seriously trying to teach me how to photograph clothes?"

"No. I'm explaining why I won't let anyone get hurt on my boat."

He hadn't raised his voice. That calm firmness was harder to challenge than outright opposition would have been.

"Nobody said anything about dangerous shots," I replied.

"Then changing this one shouldn't be a problem."

I closed my eyes briefly. When I opened them, Bartosz was watching me with unmistakable interest.

"What?" I asked.

"I'm wondering how many more times you'll try to win an argument when we could simply have a conversation."

"I'm used to defending my ideas."

"You don't have to defend them against me. You just have to tell me what you're trying to achieve."

His words were unexpectedly gentle.

I ran a finger over the sketch of a long cardigan in the color of wet sand.

"I want to show clothes that are beautiful because someone can actually live in them. I don't want another photo shoot with a woman pretending to freeze on a beach while a crew of ten stands just outside the frame. I want wind, the weight of the fabric, movement. Something imperfect, but intimate and real."

Bartosz looked at the sketch, then at the sweater lying on the bench.

"So you need a place, not a backdrop."

"Exactly."

"Then let's start with the place."

He walked over to the hull and opened a small wooden box. From it, he took several photographs showing different stages of the restoration. In the first, the boat looked pitiful: peeling paint, a damaged deck, and unmistakable signs of years of neglect. In the others, she gradually regained her former shape.

"You want a real story?" he asked. "She already has one. She doesn't need the sea in the background to tell it."

I studied the photographs.

"How long have you been working on her?"

"Eight months. With breaks for jobs that actually pay the bills."

"And when will you finish?"

"Depends what you mean by finished."

I gave him a warning look.

He smiled.

"The deck and finishing work should be done in three weeks. Assuming I don't discover anything new beneath the next layer of old wood."

"So the deadline still isn't certain."

"A deadline isn't a promise. It's a plan based on what we know today."

"You sound like someone who's never had to explain a late delivery to a client."

His smile disappeared.

"I have."

He didn't elaborate. He returned the photographs to the box, and I had the distinct impression that I had accidentally touched on a subject he preferred to keep closed. I didn't know him well enough to ask questions, but I remembered the change in his voice.

We went back to planning the shots. For the next half hour, we moved samples between the boat and the workbench, comparing the colors of the knitwear with the wood. Bartosz suggested using an old rope, but I rejected the idea when I saw how completely it overwhelmed the delicate stitches of one cardigan. He didn't argue. Instead, he brought me a thinner, softer rope in a faded sandy shade.

"This one's better," I said.

"I know."

"Is modesty one of your greatest strengths?"

"I have several others."

I looked up.

He stood on the opposite side of the table, his hands resting on the surface. There was amusement in his eyes that I hadn't noticed before. For a moment, I forgot that we were supposed to be discussing my collection.

"Such as?" I asked.

"I don't reveal all of them at the first meeting."

"Very sensible. A client might demand a discount."

He laughed softly.

I liked that laugh. It wasn't loud or exaggerated. It appeared suddenly, as if Bartosz didn't always give himself permission to show when something amused him.

My phone vibrated on the table.

A message appeared from Maja, the photographer I had worked with for two years.

I need confirmation of the location by tomorrow. If we're changing the date, I need to know now. The model has another booking.

I felt the familiar weight of responsibility settle over me. Every decision led to another. The deposit for the crew, the material orders, the deadline for presenting the collection to the owner of a small boutique in Gdańsk. I didn't have much money to spare. If this shoot failed, I couldn't simply organize another one.

Bartosz noticed my expression.

"What's happened?"

"Reality has decided to assert its rights."

I showed him the message without handing over the phone. He read it from where he stood.

"I can have the deck ready for the crew to access safely within two weeks," he said. "But on one condition."

I straightened.

"I'm listening."

"No promises that we'll sail. And no adding that to the contract later because you've seen the weather forecast and decided the sea looks particularly beautiful."

"I wasn't planning to force anyone to go sailing."

"I know. I just want us both to be clear about it."

I considered his words.

"Then my condition is that you don't change my concept without discussing it with me. I can use your expertise, but the final artistic decisions are mine."

"Provided they don't involve safety."

"Provided they don't involve safety," I confirmed.

He held out his hand.

"Deal?"

I looked at it. Large, rough, with a small scar near the thumb. When I shook it, he made no attempt to prolong the contact. His grip was firm but gentle, and then he let go.

"Deal," I replied.

I hadn't expected an ordinary agreement about professional responsibilities to bring such noticeable relief.

For the next hour, we worked out an alternative layout for the shoot. Bartosz showed me the side entrance through which equipment could be brought in and a small storeroom that could serve as an improvised changing room. I found a spot where light bounced off a pale wall, softening the shadows. New compositions began to take shape in my sketchbook. Rather than pretending we were sailing, we could tell a story about preparing to leave. About anticipation, work, and the things that stay with a person even when they never go out to sea.

When I said that aloud, Bartosz was silent for a moment.

"That already sounds better," he admitted.

"You don't have to say it as though you've just approved an engineering design."

"Would you prefer praise?"

"I'd like to hear that you can see the difference between what I originally imagined and what we can create together now."

He studied me carefully.

"I can. And I like it."

He answered without smiling, leaving me with nothing behind which to hide my embarrassment.

Before leaving, we went over to the boat once more. Bartosz showed me two places where the restoration required particular care. He spoke about wood with such knowledge that I briefly forgot about my deadlines. I noticed how gently he tested the joint between two planks with his fingers, detecting tiny irregularities I couldn't see at all.

"You love this," I said.

"What?"

"Saving things other people would consider beyond repair."

He froze for a fraction of a second.

"Not everything can be saved."

He turned away before I could answer and closed his toolbox.

Outside, darkness was beginning to fall. November days ended early, and heavy clouds were gathering over the bay. I put on my coat and checked my phone. Maja was waiting for my decision.

I wrote that the location was confirmed, but that we would be changing the concept. I would send her new compositions for approval.

I sent the message before I could change my mind.

"Have you decided?" Bartosz asked.

"Yes."

"Even though the boat won't be sailing?"

"Even though her owner is an exceptionally difficult man."

"That seems like a fair assessment."

I stopped in the doorway.

"Bartosz?"

"Yes?"

"Don't spend tomorrow trying to prove that you know everything better than I do."

He leaned one shoulder against the doorframe.

"And don't arrive assuming every suggestion is an attack on your work."

I wanted to respond with something sharp, but I couldn't quite summon the conviction. He had come too close to the truth.

"We'll see which of us breaks the rules first," I said.

"I have my suspicions."

"Keep them to yourself."

He smiled.

I headed toward my car, feeling the cold and salty moisture carried by the wind against my cheeks. After a few steps, I glanced back. Bartosz was still standing in the workshop doorway. He didn't look as though he was waiting for anything in particular, yet when our eyes met, he raised a hand in a brief farewell.

I returned the gesture.

Inside the car, I turned on the heating and placed my sketchbook on the passenger seat. I opened it to the page with my new compositions. They were less spectacular than the original renderings, but they possessed something those images had lacked: the character of a place that had no intention of adapting itself to my expectations.

On the last page, I had drawn a man standing beside a wooden boat. His sleeves were rolled up, his head bent over his work.

I only noticed the sketch now.

I couldn't remember when I had drawn it.

I closed the notebook before I could think about it for too long.

My collection was supposed to be about freedom. Yet my first day on Hel had taught me something uncomfortable: perhaps freedom didn't always mean doing everything alone.

Perhaps sometimes it began when someone said no, and I still wanted to hear what they had to say.

But why did it have to be this man?

The following morning, a call from Maja woke me.

"Tell me you haven't lost your mind," she began without a greeting.

I was sitting on the bed in my rented apartment, wrapped in a blanket, holding a cup of coffee that had already gone cold. Outside, the wind swept fine droplets of rain across the window. It felt as though the entire town was swaying along with the trees.

"Good morning to you, too."

"Róża, yesterday you sent me pictures of a boat sitting inside a workshop. Instead of the sea, I've got a wooden building. Instead of sails, there are planks everywhere. And then you wrote that this was a better concept."

"Because it is better."

"Either that or you've fallen in love with the boatbuilder."

I covered my eyes with one hand.

"Maja."

"That was a technical question. I need to know whether we're evaluating a location or the state of your love life."

"We're evaluating the location."

"Then show me something that will convince me."

I opened my laptop and sent her the sketches we'd worked on the previous afternoon. For several minutes, all I could hear was the tapping of her keyboard.

"All right," she finally said. "I'll admit it makes sense."

My shoulders relaxed.

"I knew it."

"But I need to be sure this man isn't going to change his mind in a week."

I looked at Bartosz's number saved on my phone.

"That's exactly what I'm about to find out."

When we ended the call, a message from him appeared.

Come after ten. I'll prepare the space for a lighting test. Bring a darker sweater.

I read it twice.

There was nothing personal in it. Not a single unnecessary word. Even so, I smiled at the screen.

I replied:

I'll be there. And I'll bring the contract.

His answer appeared almost immediately.

I expected nothing less.

I put down my phone, feeling that the day was going to be considerably more interesting than I'd planned.

Chapter 2 - Across the Table

At quarter past ten, the workshop smelled of freshly brewed coffee, wood, and something else I couldn't identify at first. Only when Bartosz moved a small electric heater away from beneath the table did I realize he'd been using it to dry his soaked work gloves. The ordinariness of the scene surprised me more than the beauty of the boat. Yesterday, the workshop had seemed almost theatrical. Today, I noticed mugs lined up on a shelf, an old calendar, a spare pair of boots beneath a bench, and a radio playing quietly in the corner.

Bartosz stood beside the wide workbench, looking through the sketches I'd printed.

"Punctuality isn't your greatest strength," he said as I entered.

"I'm fifteen minutes late."

"I noticed."

"I think every wind in Europe is blowing across this peninsula. I could barely close my car door."

"That's a normal November."

"Then November owes me an apology."

He put down the papers and indicated a mug waiting beside an empty chair.

"Coffee. No sugar. I didn't know whether you take milk."

I stopped beside the table.

"How did you know I drink coffee at all?"

"Yesterday, you were looking at my mug as if you were planning to steal it."

I laughed.

"It was a very long day."

"Today will be another one."

I took off my coat and draped it over the back of a chair. Underneath, I wore a navy turtleneck of my own design, fitted at the shoulders and looser around the waist. Bartosz glanced at it with professional interest.

"Did you make that one too?"

"Yes."

"It fits well."

"No comments about the seams this time?"

"I haven't seen them up close yet."

"You're not getting that opportunity."

He looked at me for a moment without speaking, then returned to the sketches. Only after I sat down did I realize how much more suggestive my answer had sounded than I'd intended.

He didn't comment.

I was grateful for that.

I spread out the documents, and we began discussing the terms of our collaboration. I wanted everything in writing: dates, access to the workshop, permission to take photographs, responsibility for damage, and the right to use the pictures in promotional materials. Bartosz read each clause carefully, occasionally returning to an earlier sentence. He didn't pretend to understand provisions whose meaning wasn't clear.

"This part needs changing," he finally said.

He pointed to the clause concerning the use of images of the workshop.

"Why?"

"Because it allows you to use the photographs without restrictions. And I don't want someone advertising my services six months from now with a photograph that doesn't even show me."

"I'm not planning to advertise your services."

"I believe you. But the contract should say the same thing."

I studied him with appreciation.

"You know your way around contracts."

"Well enough to read them."

There was no point arguing. I amended the clause, limiting the use of the photographs to promoting my collection and documenting our joint project. I also added a requirement for his separate approval of any material mentioning the workshop by name.

Bartosz read the revised version.

"That's better."

"And my condition?"

He looked up.

"I'm listening."

"I need guaranteed access to the boat on the agreed dates. I can't bring a whole crew from Warsaw and discover you've taken on something more urgent."

He considered that.

"I can reserve two days for the shoot and one beforehand for preparations. Let's put the dates in writing, along with a provision allowing us to reschedule if the weather makes it unsafe to open the workshop."

"And if you have to take another job?"

"That's my problem. Not yours."

I liked that answer more than I wanted to admit.

In my previous job, I had repeatedly been told something was impossible until I agreed to take responsibility for someone else's commitments. Now I was sitting opposite a man who didn't promise what he couldn't guarantee, but took whatever he did agree to seriously.

Over the next hour, we established our respective responsibilities. He would prepare the deck and several safe areas for positioning equipment. I would be responsible for the collection, the crew, the photography, and the expenses associated with the shoot. Together, we would create a simple setting using materials already available in the workshop, without altering the boat's structure.

When we reached the question of payment, Bartosz quoted a figure lower than I'd expected.

"That's too little," I said.

He looked surprised.

"That's the first time I've heard a client say that."

"Because I'm not paying you to rent a patch of floor. I need your time, expertise, and help preparing the shoot."

"You don't have to overpay."

"And I don't have to take advantage of your work at half its value."

He watched me for a moment.

"Do you always negotiate like this?"

"Only when fair collaboration matters to me."

He smiled faintly.

"Then make me an offer."

We agreed on a fee that covered his presence during the preparations and the shoot itself. It wasn't especially convenient for me financially, but it meant I could expect a clear level of commitment without feeling that someone was doing me a favor. Bartosz didn't pretend money was unimportant. I appreciated that. Too often, people who claimed they didn't care about being paid later expected a kind of gratitude much harder to settle than an invoice.

Once we'd signed the contract, I pushed back my chair.

"We did it. Two adults managed to agree on the terms of working together without insulting each other."

"We still have the shoot ahead of us."

"Don't ruin the moment."

Bartosz stood and walked over to the boat. He indicated a raised platform beside the hull.

"Come on. I want to show you something."

I climbed a short ladder onto the stable work platform. From that height, I could see the deck almost as the photographer would. The wood had a warm, honey-colored tone, and the pale lines of the joints formed a quiet rhythm. Bartosz stood beside me, close enough that I could hear him without either of us raising our voice.