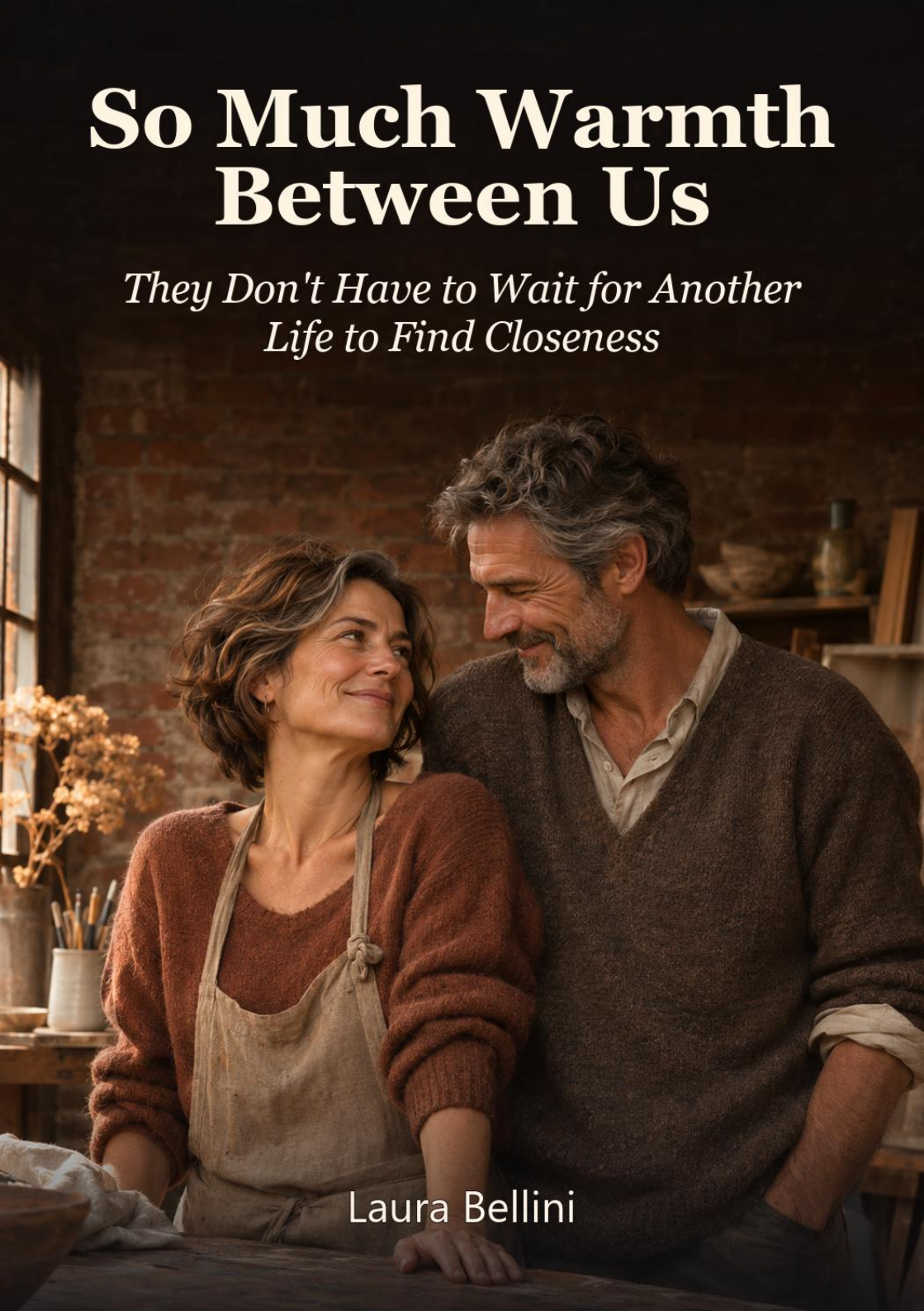
So Much Warmth Between Us

They Don't Have to Wait for Another Life to Find Closeness



Laura Bellini

So Much Warmth Between Us

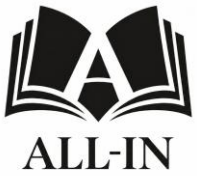
They Don't Have to Wait for Another Life to Find Closeness

Laura Bellini

ROMANS

ISBN: 9788384905975

ALL-IN Rafał Płonkowski



CONTENTS

INTRO 4
Chapter 1 - The First Spark 11
Chapter 2 - Between What Belongs to Us 21
Chapter 3 - The Things We Cannot See 34
Chapter 4 - Beyond Working Hours 44
Chapter 5 - The Right to Set My Own Pace 59
Chapter 6 - When We Stopped Pretending 66
Chapter 7 - What We Don't Say 77
Chapter 8 - His World, My Place 88
Chapter 9 - The Risk We Took Together 101
Chapter 10 - More Than Friendship 116
Chapter 11 - A Place Beside Each Other 129
Chapter 12 - The Words We Fear 140
Chapter 13 - The Price of Our Own Decisions 151
Chapter 14 - The Truth We Cannot Divide 162
Chapter 15 - When Others Start Watching 172
Chapter 16 - The Boundary That Hurts 182
Chapter 17 - What We Have to Do Ourselves 192
Chapter 18 - The First Step Towards Each Other 201
Chapter 19 - I Choose You Without Reservations 213
Chapter 20 - So Much Warmth Between Us 224

INTRO

The studio smelled of wet clay, coffee, and the wood that had served as my shelving for years. I especially loved that scent in the evenings, when the world outside my windows grew quiet and I could finally stop responding to other people's expectations. I was left alone with my pottery, my unfinished ideas, and a silence that had never made me uncomfortable. That evening, however, I had a specific plan. By Monday, I needed to prepare photographs of twelve pieces for a small gallery in Toruń. The owner had taken an interest in my new collection and asked me to submit a proposal for an exhibition. I wasn't going to waste that opportunity simply because the past few months had been consumed by preparations for installing my new kiln.

A notebook filled with measurements lay on the table, beside my camera and a list of the pieces I intended to submit. They weren't perfect. One bowl had an uneven rim, another still bore the faint mark of a finger on its surface, and three small vases differed slightly in the shade of their glaze. Those imperfections were precisely why I liked them. I had no desire to create objects that looked as though they had been taken straight from a catalogue. I was interested in things with their own character, even if that sometimes meant accepting their flaws. I was fifty-seven years old and had enough experience to know that I no longer needed to prove to anyone that I could do my work. Yet I still wanted to achieve something. Not out of habit, and not simply to fill my free time. I wanted to do it for myself.

I moved one of the bowls to the centre of the table and stepped back. The lamp highlighted the warm, sandy colour

of its glaze. I took a photograph, checked the composition, and frowned. The background was too dark. I adjusted the lamp, repositioned the bowl, and reached for the camera again. That was when I heard a car pull up outside the studio.

I didn't need to look through the window to know who it was.

Mieczysław Lis had a distinctive way of closing his car door. He never slammed it, but he never left it half-open either. A moment later, I heard footsteps on the stone path, followed by two brief knocks at the door.

"Come in!" I called, without taking my eyes off the camera.

He entered carrying a cardboard box tucked under his arm. He was wearing a dark sweater and a jacket that he had apparently taken off just before coming inside. His grey hair was slightly dishevelled, as usual after a full day spent among workshop dust and debris. He was sixty-one, but he moved with the energy of a man who still found more reasons to keep busy than to rest.

"I see you're working overtime again."

"I see you're counting my hours again."

"Someone has to make sure you remember to take breaks."

"I'm fifty-seven, Mieczysław. I've managed perfectly well for most of that time."

He smiled and placed the box on an empty section of the table.

"I don't doubt it. But for most of that time, you didn't have quite this much clutter on your table either."

I gave him an exaggeratedly offended look. He knew me too well to be impressed by my expression. We had known each other for many years. He remembered my first studio, my first failed firings, and the period when I was convinced that pressing hard enough on clay would make it obey me. I knew his patience, his stubbornness, and his tendency to fix things that other people didn't consider broken. He designed ceramic kilns and could talk about temperature, insulation, and firing curves with the same enthusiasm other people reserved for describing their travels.

"What have you brought?" I asked.

"The component you asked for. The one for the controller. I didn't want to leave it outside your door. Someone might have mistaken it for a washing machine spare part."

He opened the box and showed me a small metal component. I examined it, then nodded.

"Thank you. It'll come in handy."

"And the photographs?"

"As you can see, I'm working on them."

He stepped closer to the table. He didn't touch any of the pieces, although I knew he wanted a better look. He always asked before picking up anything I had made from clay. That small gesture told me more about him than many grand declarations ever could. He could be stubborn, sometimes irritatingly certain that he was right, but he never treated my work as something he could casually move around without a second thought.

"Is this the new collection?" he asked.

"Yes. I'd like to show it at a gallery in Toruń."

"You'd like to show it, or you actually intend to?"

"Don't start."

"I'm only asking whether you've sent the proposal."

"Not yet. I need to take the photographs, prepare a description, and decide which pieces work best together."

He studied the bowl nearest to him.

"That one should go first."

"Why?"

"Because it doesn't pretend to be something it isn't."

His answer surprised me. I looked at him more carefully, but his expression gave nothing away. I couldn't tell whether he had said it casually or whether he was trying to suggest something. Mieczysław rarely spoke about personal matters directly. He had a way of saying a single sentence that could reach a place inside me other people had avoided for years.

"Are you becoming an expert in ceramics?" I asked.

"Don't exaggerate. After all these years, I at least know when I shouldn't pretend to be one."

I laughed softly. I liked his sense of humour, particularly when he wasn't trying too hard to make anyone laugh. Around him, I didn't have to weigh every word. I didn't have to explain why I sometimes preferred staying in the studio until late rather than going home and turning on the television. He understood my attachment to my work, even though he organised his own life in a completely different way.

"I want to send everything on Monday," I said. "After that, I'll focus on my own things. The kiln is important, but I'm not going to organise my entire life around it."

"Quite right."

"I expected you to persuade me to run more tests."

"I don't need to persuade you of anything. All you have to do is know what you want."

I turned back towards the table to hide my smile. There was something dangerously pleasant about the ease with which he gave me space. He didn't impose himself on me, correct me without asking, or try to take responsibility for my decisions. Sometimes I thought that was precisely why I was so willing to let him into the ordinary details of my everyday life.

My phone vibrated on the windowsill. A message from the gallery owner appeared on the screen, asking me to confirm the deadline. I replied briefly that I would send the materials on Monday, then put the phone down. Mieczysław looked at me approvingly.

"So there's a plan."

"There has been a plan from the beginning."

"I know. It's just that sometimes you forget you can change it."

"And sometimes you forget that not everything needs your design expertise."

This time, he was the one who laughed. Then he picked up the box, as though he intended to leave, but stopped by the door.

"I'll come earlier tomorrow. We need to settle a few things before we fire up the kiln."

"I know."

"And don't work until midnight."

"No promises."

"That's exactly what I expected."

He lingered for another moment, as though he wanted to say something. I didn't ask. Sometimes there were moments between us when an ordinary conversation suddenly seemed too small for something we both felt, although neither of us tried to give it a name. Then a glance, a faint smile, or a change of subject was enough. Over the years, we had become remarkably skilled at avoiding those moments, like two people who didn't want to damage something that mattered deeply to them.

When he finally left, I stood still for a moment, listening to his car disappear into the distance. Then I returned to the photographs. I moved the lamp, adjusted the bowl, and looked at the camera screen. The composition was good, but for the first time that evening, I couldn't concentrate entirely on my work.

The list of tasks still lay on the table, the controller component was waiting in its box, and I had an exhibition proposal to send on Monday. Everything was exactly where it belonged. And yet his presence had left me with a restlessness I couldn't attribute to any professional concern.

For years, I had grown accustomed to Mieczysław being somewhere nearby. I could call him when something stopped working, ask for his advice, or simply tell him about something that had made me happy. I had never wondered whether I wanted something more from him. Or perhaps it was precisely because I had never allowed myself to ask that question that our friendship had remained so comfortable.

I switched off the lamp above the table and glanced once more at the door through which he had disappeared. Tomorrow, we would start up the new kiln together. I knew he would insist on his solutions, and I would defend my own. I also knew we would find a way to work together.

What I didn't know was whether I could allow him to stay in my life even when we no longer had a professional reason to see each other. Or whether he would ever find the courage to ask for that himself.

Chapter 1 - The First Spark

I woke up earlier than I had intended. Outside the window, the morning was still grey, and a thin layer of moisture had settled on the glass. For a moment, I lay motionless, listening to the familiar sounds of the house. There was no reason to hurry, yet the thought of the new kiln made it impossible to fall asleep again. That day marked the beginning of its first actual test firing. I had been preparing for this moment for weeks, setting money aside, choosing materials, and consulting a man who knew more about kilns than anyone I had ever met. A man whose presence had recently begun stirring questions in me that had nothing to do with ceramics.

I got up, made coffee, and went downstairs to the studio. First, I checked the room temperature, then the ventilation and the arrangement of the shelves. Everything was ready. My notebook lay on the table, accompanied by several small glaze samples I had prepared especially for the initial tests. I had no intention of putting valuable pieces into the new kiln, but I wanted to see how it would handle the material I used most often. I wasn't interested merely in whether the machine could reach a particular temperature. I needed to know whether I could trust it in my everyday work.

Mieczysław arrived a few minutes after eight. I spotted him through the window as he took a flat document case out of his car. This time, he didn't knock. He knew I was already inside, so he simply walked in.

"Good morning, Madam Manager."

"Good morning, Mr Designer. You're four minutes late."

"That's because someone stopped me along the way and decided he needed to discuss his chimney with me."

"You could have told him chimneys aren't your speciality."

"I did. He didn't believe me."

He took off his jacket and hung it on the coat rack. For a moment, he looked around the studio as though he were assessing not only how well I had prepared the workspace but also what kind of mood I was in. I was wearing dark trousers, a light-coloured shirt, and a work apron. My hair was tied back carelessly to keep it out of the way. Mieczysław's gaze lingered on my face a little longer than an ordinary greeting required, but he made no comment. I had no intention of making things easier for him either.

"Is everything ready?" he asked.

"We can begin."

"First, I'd like to see the documentation."

I sighed theatrically but handed him the folder. He went through it carefully, checking each label and marking. He wasn't doing it simply because he enjoyed inspecting someone else's work. I had known him long enough to understand that whenever something needed to be done properly, he couldn't ignore even the smallest detail. That was one of the reasons I trusted him. It was also one of the reasons behind some of our most persistent disagreements.

"The electrical connection has been inspected," I said. "The ventilation is working. I checked the door seals again yesterday."

"I know. I spoke to the electrician."

"Of course you did."

"Surely that's no reason to complain."

"I'm not complaining. I'm just wondering whether you'll ever stop checking everything behind my back."

He raised his eyes from the documents.

"I'm not checking things behind your back. I'm checking what I'm responsible for."

"And I'm responsible for the studio."

"Exactly. Which is why we should know where one person's responsibilities end and the other's begin."

I didn't answer immediately. It was a reasonable statement, but it sounded like the beginning of a conversation I didn't want to have before the first start-up. I put my notebook down on the table and walked over to the kiln.

It was larger than my previous one, built according to my specifications, although Mieczysław had suggested some of the solutions himself. It gave me more room for larger forms, allowed more precise temperature control, and had a configuration that would let me experiment with different types of glaze. This wasn't an impulsive purchase. I had spent a considerable part of my savings on it and had taken months to make the decision. I believed it would allow my studio to become more than a place where I simply reproduced familiar designs. I wanted to develop my own ceramic language.

"I've prepared the samples," I said, showing him the small tiles. "I'd like to place them at three points inside the chamber."

"Not today."

I looked at him.

"Excuse me?"

"Today we're testing the machine without your glazes. We need to check temperature distribution, the controller's behaviour, and operational stability. We shouldn't introduce several variables during the first start-up."

"But these samples aren't random. I know their composition."

"I'm not questioning your knowledge of glazes."

"Then I don't understand the problem."

Mieczysław put the folder aside and approached the kiln. He crouched beside the lower section of the casing to inspect one of the fittings.

"If the results aren't right, we need to know whether the problem lies with the machine, the control system, or the material. The first firing needs to give us a baseline. I don't want us guessing later about why something behaved differently from what you expected."

"And I don't want to spend the next few weeks testing the tests themselves. I need a kiln for my work, not an object to admire for its technical specifications."

"I know why you ordered it."

"Do you really? Because sometimes I get the impression that you're more concerned with making sure everything works according to your design than with making sure it works for me."

He slowly straightened up. He didn't look offended, but rather like someone who had just heard an accusation that deserved an honest answer.

"I designed it according to your requirements, not my own ambitions."

"But now you want to decide how I'm supposed to use it."

"I want to decide how we carry out the first test safely. After that, you can do whatever you like with it."

"Provided you get the results you want first?"

"Provided we don't pretend the machine is ready just because we're both impatient to get the first firing underway."

His words struck me more deeply than they should have. He was right, and I didn't like admitting it when he spoke in the tone of someone convinced he knew the solution. I rested my hands on the worktop and looked at the prepared samples for a moment. I knew how much work had gone into making them. Each one was labelled, described, and prepared with a specific result in mind. Still, I wasn't willing to risk damaging the new kiln simply to prove that I could make decisions on my own.

"All right," I finally said. "Today we'll do the technical test. But tomorrow I want to start working with the materials."

"If today's results are satisfactory, we'll agree on the next stage."

"You haven't actually said you agree."

"I said we'll agree on the next stage. I won't promise you something I don't know yet."

"Do you realise how impossible you can be?"

"I've known for years."

Despite myself, I smiled. There was something about him that irritated me and reassured me at the same time. He didn't try to win every argument at any cost. When he drew a line, he could explain why. And when he was wrong, he was capable of admitting it, although he usually needed a few minutes to arrive at the correct conclusion.

We got to work. Mieczysław checked the various components of the system while I prepared the chamber according to the agreed plan. We positioned the measuring sensors and control elements. He didn't need to explain the basics to me, but he pointed out details that could escape even someone with considerable experience. In turn, I noticed that one of the shelves shouldn't be placed where his original diagram indicated. I explained how I intended to arrange larger pieces and showed him why I needed a slightly different spacing.

"You're right," he said after examining my solution. "With your pieces, this configuration will work better."

"Could you repeat that? I'd like to record it."

"Don't exaggerate."

"I so rarely hear you admit I'm right."

"You hear it more often than you remember."

We worked for another fifteen minutes or so. When we finished, Mieczysław checked the controller settings, while I made sure there were no unnecessary objects left inside the chamber. Finally, we stood in front of the machine, both holding our respective documentation.

"Ready?" he asked.

"I've been ready for months."

"I'm asking about now."

I looked at him. His voice no longer carried the professional distance of a moment earlier. I noticed the tiredness on his face, but also something resembling satisfaction. This kiln wasn't just another project to him. I knew he cared about his work genuinely serving someone.

He understood my ambitions, just as I understood his attachment to things done properly.

"Now too," I answered.

We switched on the controller. The display lit up, showing the initial readings. Mieczysław watched the indicators while I monitored the machine's behaviour. There was no spectacular moment. No loud bang or dramatic flash. Just the quiet signal of the controller and the first change in temperature. And yet I had the feeling that I had just closed the door behind me on a particular stage of my life.

"It's working," I said softly.

"It's started working. We still need to wait before we can make a full assessment."

"Let me enjoy it for a moment."

He turned towards me. The smile that appeared on his face was calm and genuine.

"Enjoy it. You've earned it."

I hadn't expected those words to give me so much pleasure. He hadn't said that he had done a good job. He hadn't taken credit for the result. He had said that I deserved to be happy. As though he saw me not merely as the person who had ordered the kiln and prepared the studio, but as a woman who had spent years building something of her own.

We monitored the test for the next few hours. In between, we drank coffee and ate the sandwiches I had brought from home. Mieczysław didn't complain about the food, although he had once admitted that he couldn't understand how anyone could call a slice of bread with cheese breakfast. This time, he ate two and asked for a third.

"I'm not going to feed you every time you come here," I announced.

"You don't have to. I can make my own sandwiches."

"I know. I've seen your creations. Two slices of cheese and enough pepper to use the result as a self-defence weapon."

"That was an experimental version."

"Some experiments should remain in the notebook."

He laughed, and for a moment I watched him from the side. I had known that face for years. I knew what he looked like when he was concentrating, irritated, or amused. I also knew that when he listened, he didn't interrupt people simply to insert his own opinion. And yet lately I had begun noticing details about him that had once seemed entirely ordinary. The way he always put his cup down in exactly the same place. The fact that he remembered I disliked overly sweet coffee. And the way he never used the word "someday" when I talked about my plans, as though he believed the best things in life were not necessarily behind me.

In the afternoon, we carried out a preliminary assessment of the controller's performance. The results looked promising, although we would have to wait until the cycle was complete and the machine had cooled before conducting a full analysis. Mieczysław made his notes, while I added my own observations about the positioning of the sensors.

"Tomorrow we can plan a test with the glazes," he said.

"So you agree after all?"

"I never said we wouldn't test them. I said not today."

"Do you always have to have the last word?"

"No. Sometimes it's enough for me to have the first."

I shook my head, unable to suppress my smile. Before leaving, he stopped beside the table where the samples were still lying.

"This series is interesting," he said, pointing to one of the tiles. "Especially this one with the lighter transition."

"I want to achieve the effect of warm stone, but without making the surface too smooth. Some surfaces should look as though they have a history of their own."

"I understand."

"Really?"

"Not everything has to be perfectly even to be well designed."

I looked at him. For a moment, I wanted to say something that had absolutely nothing to do with work. To ask whether he ever felt that he had put certain things off for too long. Whether he sometimes wondered what his life might have looked like if he hadn't always chosen the sensible option. But I didn't. Instead, I handed him the folder containing the results.

"Tomorrow at nine?" I asked.

"If that suits you."

"It does."

"Then I'll see you tomorrow, Leokadia."

For the first time that day, he said my name without a hint of teasing. I answered him in the same way.

After he left, I returned to the table and organised the documentation. The kiln was operating according to specifications, and my plans for the coming days remained

unchanged. Even so, I knew something had shifted. I couldn't name the change yet, but it wasn't entirely professional.

Chapter 2 - Between What Belongs to Us

The following day, he arrived on time. This time, we didn't begin with coffee or jokes. Mieczysław placed a printout of the first firing cycle on the table and went straight to the results. During the night, he had analysed the controller's performance, compared the temperatures with the control measurements, and prepared a list of parameters that still needed checking. He didn't look like a man who had slept very little, although I knew him well enough to suspect that was exactly what had happened.

"You didn't have to do all this during the night," I said, looking through the document.

"I didn't. I did it this morning."

"What time?"

"I don't remember."

"Which means early."

"Leokadia, don't start the day by checking how much sleep I've had."

"Someone has to make sure you remember to take breaks."

He raised his head and looked at me with amusement. I had repeated his own words from the previous evening. Of course, he noticed, but he made no attempt to defend himself.

"All right. Point taken."

We moved on to analysing the results. The preliminary measurements showed no serious irregularities, but Mieczysław wanted to check the temperature differences at

several points inside the chamber. I agreed, provided we didn't postpone the glaze tests without a specific reason. I wasn't about to let an entire month pass while we prepared one set of tables after another.

"I have a suggestion," he said when we had finished reviewing the documents. "Let's carry out three controlled firings. The first with samples of your glazes, the second with small forms, and the third with pieces you actually intend to exhibit in the gallery. After each one, we'll examine the results and make any necessary adjustments."

"Three firings. How long are we talking about?"

"If everything goes according to plan, about two weeks."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then we'll know what needs improving."

"You haven't answered my question."

"I can't promise a deadline when I don't know the results."

I studied him for a moment. I understood that he wasn't trying to stop me from working. He wanted to avoid a situation in which rushing would force me to accept a machine that didn't meet my expectations. On the other hand, I wasn't prepared to hand him complete control of the process. This was my studio, my savings, and my collection. I had every right to decide what risks I was willing to take.

"I agree to three firings," I said. "But we'll set the dates in advance. You won't keep moving them just because you find another parameter you want to check."

"And you won't put pieces in the chamber without agreeing on the settings with me first."

"For the initial tests, fine. After that, I want to use the kiln independently."

"Of course."

"And I don't want you making decisions about my work when I'm not here."

"I have no intention of doing that."

"Even if you decide I would do something differently from the way you think it should be done according to your rules."

"Leokadia, I design kilns. Not your life."

He said it calmly, without irony. That was precisely why I didn't respond immediately. Over the years, I had met people who declared that they respected my independence, only to start explaining how I should run my studio, how many hours I ought to work, and when I should accept that enough was enough. Mieczysław had never behaved that way, but I wanted to be certain that our cooperation wouldn't change that.

"All right," I finally said. "Then we have a deal."

He held out his hand as though we had just signed an important contract. I shook it. His hand was warm and firm, and the gesture lasted a fraction of a second longer than an ordinary formality required. I didn't withdraw my hand immediately, but neither did I do anything that could be interpreted as an invitation to something more. Mieczysław didn't try to prolong the moment either. He simply released my hand and returned to the documents.

"One more thing," he said. "I need a list of the glazes you use and the temperatures you normally work with. I'd like to prepare a table for the next tests."

"You'll have it this evening."

"You don't have to rush."

"I already have my notes prepared."

"Of course you do."

He smiled as though he had just remembered something he had known about me for a long time. I didn't comment. Instead, I got on with preparing the samples. We selected them together, although each of us paid attention to different details. Mieczysław was primarily interested in how the material would behave under particular conditions. I focused on colour, texture, and how the glaze would complement the shape of the vessel.

He stopped for a little longer in front of one of the samples.

"This one could cause problems."

"Why?"

"It has quite a complex composition. I wouldn't want us to start with it."

"I've been working with it for years."

"I know. I'm not saying you can't handle it. I'm saying I'd choose something simpler for the first test."

"Do you always choose the safest route?"

"No. I choose the one that allows me to understand what happened."

"That sounds like a very convenient way of avoiding surprises."

"And do you like surprises?"

His question caught me off guard. I looked at him over the samples. His expression wasn't the usual professional one. There was a lightness in his voice that didn't quite belong in a conversation about temperatures.