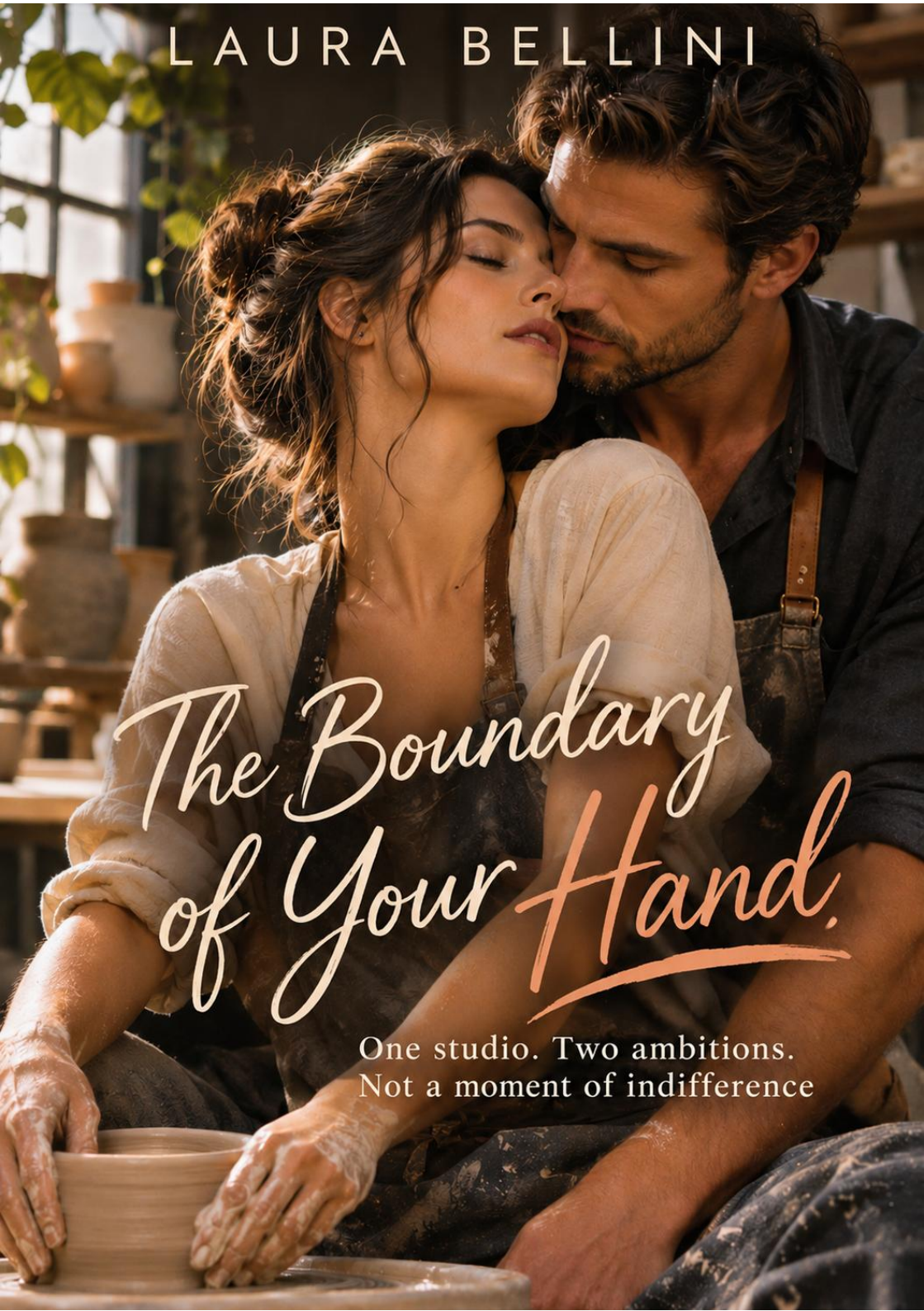

LAURA BELLINI
The Boundary of Your Hand.
One studio. Two ambitions.
Not a moment of indifference

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One studio. Two ambitions. Not a moment of indifference

Laura Bellini

ROMANS

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INTRO

Clay had one advantage over people: it never pretended to be something it wasn't. If I pressed too hard, it collapsed beneath my fingers. If I lost patience, it cracked while drying. It never promised that everything would be fine, made declarations it couldn't keep, or tried to convince me I should be grateful for the privilege of working on someone else's terms.

That was why, at seven on Friday morning, I was sitting at a pottery wheel in an old studio in Wrocław's Nadodrze district, trying to finish a vase on which far more depended than another sale.

Beyond the tall windows, rain blurred the outlines of the tenement buildings. The air smelled of damp brick, coffee, and wet clay. The old radiator beneath the windowsill knocked indignantly, as though the building were protesting the arrival of another autumn. I didn't mind. I loved the place precisely because of its imperfections: the uneven floor, the patch of chipped blue paint above the sink, and the morning light that fell across the tables at an angle that made even an ordinary bowl look like something worth saving.

I wanted this place to be mine.

Not for a few hours a week, and not through verbal arrangements with an owner who could change everything with a single phone call. I wanted to sign a five-year lease, install a second kiln, and finally stop packing half my life into cardboard boxes whenever someone with a bigger budget came up with a better use for the premises.

For three months, I had been developing my proposal for an open ceramics studio. A place where pottery wasn't

merely decoration on a shelf but a living craft, with workshops, firing demonstrations, a small gallery, and a table where people who had no idea what to do with a lump of clay could sit down and try.

My proposal had reached the final stage of a competition organized by a foundation responsible for revitalized properties. The winner would receive a long-term lease on this space under preferential terms.

I was one step away from something I'd spent nine years working toward.

And I wasn't about to let anyone take that step for me.

I switched off the wheel and carefully lifted my hands. The vase had a slender neck and slightly asymmetrical shoulders. It wasn't perfect. That was exactly why I liked it. For a moment, I studied its surface, wondering whether to leave the faint impression of my thumb near the rim.

"You're staying," I told it.

"I hope you weren't talking to me."

The voice came from the doorway.

I startled so violently that my elbow caught the bowl of water beside me. I managed to steady it before it overturned onto my prepared drawings. Only then did I look over my shoulder.

A man I'd never seen before stood in the doorway.

He wore a dark coat over a charcoal sweater and carried a large portfolio under one arm. He was tall, but that wasn't what caught my attention. He stood there with the ease of someone who had known the place for years, yet he hadn't taken a single step inside without an invitation. His hair was damp from the rain, a small scratch marked his cheek, and

he had the attentive gaze of a man accustomed to noticing details.

"The studio is closed," I announced.

"I know. That's why I knocked."

I glanced toward the door. I could hear the rain, the radiator, and my pottery wheel, which was only just coming to a stop. I hadn't heard any knocking.

"That doesn't mean you can come in."

"I haven't."

He was right. He was still standing on the threshold.

There was something infuriating about that. Not the fact that he'd answered so matter-of-factly, but that he'd done it without the slightest need to prove himself superior.

I reached for a cloth and began wiping my hands.

"How can I help you?"

"I'm looking for Eliza Kmita."

"You've found her."

Interest flickered across his face. Not the kind I was used to seeing when meeting clients, when people assessed whether an artist matched their idea of someone who made expensive objects. He looked at me as if finding me in this particular place confirmed something he'd already suspected.

"Sebastian Las," he introduced himself. "I design furniture."

I didn't offer my hand. My fingers were still coated in clay.

"Congratulations."

The corner of his mouth twitched.

"Usually, people say it's nice to meet me at this point."

"Usually, people don't turn up at my studio before eight in the morning."

"Nine," he corrected gently, pointing to the clock above the door.

I looked.

It read nine-oh-seven.

For a moment, I had the absurd sensation that someone had stolen two hours from me. My phone lay buried beneath a pile of sketches, and I'd been working without a break since dawn.

"That still doesn't explain what you're doing here."

"The foundation arranged for me to inspect the premises."

I stopped wiping my hands.

"What inspection?"

Sebastian placed his portfolio on a chair near the entrance, but didn't open it without my permission.

"For the long-term lease. I spoke to Ms. Rogowska yesterday. She said I could look around the space and take measurements today."

For several seconds, all I could hear was water dripping from his coat onto the doormat.

"There must be some mistake."

"Possibly. Although I have confirmation."

He took out his phone and showed me the message. I saw the competition coordinator's name, the date, and the address. Everything matched.

Except for one thing.

Nobody had warned me.

"These premises are part of a competition," I said carefully.

"I know."

"And I'm one of the finalists."

"I know that too."

I studied him more closely. He didn't look like someone who had accidentally arrived at the wrong address. The edge of an architectural floor plan protruded from his portfolio, and the way he examined the ceiling beams and spacing between the windows betrayed a professional interest.

"You're entering as well?"

"Yes."

He offered no excuse. He didn't try to turn the situation into a joke. He simply told the truth and left me free to react.

And my reaction was anything but polite.

"Wonderful. In that case, the foundation has forgotten one tiny detail. Your inspection is taking place while I'm working on my own competition proposal."

"I didn't know you'd be here."

"Is that supposed to reassure me?"

"No. But I'd rather you knew the facts."

I wanted to respond with something equally cold. Instead, I noticed him looking at the vase beside the wheel. He didn't move closer. He merely tilted his head, as though trying to understand what I'd intended with its unexpected shape.

"Interesting weight distribution at the base," he said. "It makes the vase look as though it's leaning further than it actually could."

I hadn't expected that observation.

Most people called my vases beautiful or strange. A few asked about the price. Sebastian had noticed a structural decision I'd spent half the morning working on.

"I wanted to create tension," I replied, before remembering that I had no intention of discussing my work with him.

"It shows."

He looked at me, not the vase.

Those two words sounded surprisingly personal.

I put down the cloth.

"Go ahead and take your measurements. But no photographs of my designs. And don't touch the work."

"Agreed."

He took a small laser distance meter from his portfolio, then stopped beside the table covered in papers.

"May I move this chair?"

I nodded. He lifted it instead of dragging it across the uneven floor. That small courtesy annoyed me more than it should have. Disliking him would have been much easier if he'd turned out to be arrogant.

While he measured the distance between the windows, I went to the table and began gathering my drawings. One sheet slipped from beneath my hand and floated to the floor, landing with the design facing upward.

Sebastian instinctively moved toward it, but I stopped him with a gesture.

"I'll pick it up."

He stepped back immediately.

I bent to retrieve the sheet. It was a sketch of the central worktable, the most important element of my proposal. Along one edge, I'd written a note about a movable workstation system that would allow the studio to become an exhibition space without removing its equipment.

When I straightened, Sebastian was already looking toward the window.

"You don't have to pretend you didn't see anything," I said.

"I don't intend to use an accidental glimpse as part of my proposal."

He answered too quickly for it to sound like simple politeness. For an instant, his fingers tightened around the distance meter before he slipped it into his pocket.

I didn't know what to make of that small change in his behavior.

My phone vibrated on the table. A message from Ms. Rogowska contained a sentence I read twice.

Ms. Kmita, please don't cancel today's meeting. We need to discuss the possibility of a joint crafts exhibition by the finalists before the competition is decided.

I raised my head.

Sebastian stood a few steps away in the gray morning light. Between us lay a table, wet clay, and two conflicting visions of the same place. Yet something about the way he

waited for my response made me reluctant simply to point him toward the door.

"Have you received a message from the foundation?" I asked.

He took out his phone, read the screen, and sighed quietly.

"Just now."

"Did you know about the joint exhibition beforehand?"

"Not about this date."

I noticed the difference between that answer and a straightforward denial. I kept the observation to myself.

"In that case, we have a problem, Mr. Las."

"Sebastian," he corrected.

"Problem Sebastian?"

He laughed, briefly and genuinely, without a trace of wounded pride.

And that was the first time I thought the man who had come to take my dream studio away might prove a much more difficult opponent than I'd expected.

Not because he knew how to design furniture.

Because when he looked again at my clay-stained hands, I saw neither condescension nor calculation in his expression. I saw curiosity he made no effort to conceal.

And the worst part was that I answered it with curiosity of my own.

"Eliza," he said more softly. "If we're going to create something together, I'd like to know where you draw the line."

I looked at the table, at the designs spread between us, and then back at him.

How was I supposed to know where to draw the line with a man I'd only just met, when I already wanted to find out whether he'd dare come close enough to touch it?

Chapter 1 - Terms of Entry

"I won't agree to an exhibition that makes it look as though we're business partners," I said.

Sebastian looked up from his phone. He was standing by the window, and the morning light revealed something about his face I hadn't noticed before: a small scar near his jawline and a crease between his eyebrows that appeared whenever he was genuinely thinking something through.

"Even if it improves our chances?"

"Our chances?" I repeated. "That's exactly the problem."

I laid the sketch I'd just retrieved from the floor on the table. I tried not to show how much the foundation's message had unsettled me. Ms. Rogowska was free to suggest whatever promotional activities she liked, but she had no right to treat my work as a supporting feature in someone else's presentation. I'd spent three months developing a vision for a place that would be more than another studio with an attractive logo. I had no intention of pretending that my plans were perfectly compatible with those of a man who had walked through my doorway barely fifteen minutes earlier.

Sebastian put his phone away.

"I'm not suggesting we start a business together. We're talking about one event."

"An event whose purpose remains unclear."

"Then we should establish its purpose before refusing."

That was reasonable.

Which was precisely why it irritated me.

I sat on a high stool and reached for my mug of cold coffee. I was thirty-three years old, had nine years of professional experience, and had survived enough unsuccessful collaborations to know that the most expensive decisions often began with the words, It's only one event.

"That's easy for you to say," I pointed out. "You arrived with a portfolio and a distance meter. I have a kiln here, materials, orders, and practically everything I've built professionally."

"Which is why you should have the greatest say in matters of safety and organization."

I gave him a suspicious look.

"Is that an attempt to bribe me?"

"No. It's an acknowledgment that you know this place better than I do."

I walked to the cupboard, took out a second mug, and poured coffee into it from the thermos. I placed it at the clear end of the table without asking whether he wanted any. Only when Sebastian thanked me did I realize that I'd just offered him the first thing that wasn't a refusal.

My phone rang before I could reconsider.

Maria Rogowska's name appeared on the screen.

I switched to speakerphone.

"Good morning, Ms. Rogowska. I'm here with Mr. Las. We'd both like to understand why we're only now hearing about a joint presentation."

There was a brief silence at the other end.

"Ms. Kmita, I'm glad you've managed to meet. I intended to explain everything during our conversation on Monday."

"But the inspection was arranged for today."

"Yes, because the schedules overlapped. Please believe me, there was no ill intention."

Sebastian said nothing. He leaned against the edge of the table, holding his mug in both hands.

Maria explained that the foundation was organizing an open event in three weeks for local residents, financial partners, and the competition committee. The finalists were expected to demonstrate their crafts in practice, rather than merely display them on presentation boards. The board wanted one cohesive event in which ceramics and furniture design would form a shared exhibition space. The proposals would still be evaluated individually, but participation in the exhibition was mandatory for both finalists.

"You're changing the rules in the middle of the competition," I said.

"The regulations provide for a practical presentation," Maria replied. "The organizer determines the precise format."

"The regulations don't provide for giving my competitor access to my ideas."

"Of course. We don't expect either of you to disclose confidential information."

Sebastian set down his mug.

"I suggest the foundation send us the assessment criteria in writing," he said. "With a clear distinction between the individual applications and the joint exhibition."

I looked up at him. We hadn't agreed on that request beforehand, but it was exactly what I needed.

"I'll prepare the document today," Maria assured us.

"And I'd like the opportunity to comment on the presentation format," I added.

"Naturally. I hope you'll both see this exhibition as an opportunity."

After the call ended, we stared for a moment at the phone lying between us.

"You don't like surprises," Sebastian observed.

"I like the kind that don't require three weeks of work."

He smiled, then grew serious again.

"I have one condition regarding the joint exhibition."

I folded my arms.

"I'm listening."

"I don't want to decorate my furniture with your ceramics, or provide furniture as a backdrop for your pottery. If we're going to do this, we need to create something neither of us could make alone."

For a moment, I pictured a heavy wooden table with my vessels arranged across it like accessories in an interior-design catalog.

"I won't agree to ceramics being made subordinate to furniture."

"And I won't agree to furniture being made subordinate to ceramics."

"So we're back where we started."

"Not quite. At least we know what we don't want."

He slipped off his coat and draped it over the back of a chair. Beneath his charcoal sweater, he wore a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up. A thin, pale scar ran along his right forearm. His hands didn't belong to someone who

spent his entire working life drawing at a computer. The skin around his thumbs was slightly calloused, and a trace of dark varnish remained on one fingernail.

"You actually work with wood?" I asked.

He looked at his hands.

"I design furniture, build prototypes, and occasionally correct the mistakes of people who were convinced a designer couldn't tell a chisel from a bottle opener."

"And can you?"

"I could demonstrate. Although I'd rather not use your furniture."

I smiled despite myself.

I asked him to show me his sketches. He spread three presentation boards across an empty work surface, first asking permission to move my tools out of the way.

The drawings showed a system of modular tables made from solid ash, with heights that could be adjusted without electric mechanisms. The construction was simple but carefully considered. The joints were exposed, as though their designer had deliberately refused to conceal how the objects were made.

"Why are all the joints visible?" I asked.

"Because I don't think well-made construction is anything to be ashamed of."

I studied one of the drawings.

"It's similar with ceramics. You don't always have to smooth away the marks left by your hands."

"I noticed."

He didn't need to specify that he meant my vase.

I pulled up another stool and sat beside him, keeping enough distance between us to examine both sets of sketches. Sebastian moved a board toward me. When he explained how the tabletop was attached, he spoke more calmly than he had during our earlier exchange. He wasn't trying to impress me. He explained why he'd chosen particular solutions and where things might go wrong.

That was far more dangerous than a polished presentation.

I had a weakness for people who were genuinely good at what they did.

"These tables won't work with wet clay," I said.

"Why not?"

"The wood will move. Water will get into the joints, and the surface will start to warp. After a few months, you'll have beautiful photographs and a very expensive problem."

He didn't take offense. He reached for a pencil.

"What would you suggest?"

I accepted a sheet of paper from him, but not the pencil. Instead, I picked up my own, short and chewed at one end.

"Removable work inserts. Ceramic ones, or something else that can withstand moisture. But I don't want anyone treating them as decorative tiles."

"So they'd be structural elements, not decoration."

"Exactly."

Sebastian looked at me with something resembling admiration.

"That's precisely what I meant."

"Don't get used to us agreeing."

"I wasn't planning to. It would be boring."

For the next half hour, we argued about tabletop heights, workstation arrangements, and where to position the kiln.

It wasn't a harmonious brainstorming session. Twice I pushed his drawings aside. Once he challenged my proposal for moving visitors through the space. At one point, we both started speaking simultaneously. Only when he handed me a metal ruler instead of explaining yet again what I wasn't understanding did our conversation begin to resemble actual cooperation.

"You could leave the center of the room open," I suggested. "Design the exhibition around the people rather than around the table."

"Then they won't see the furniture."

"They'll see how it's used."

Sebastian put down his pencil.

"That's good."

I didn't answer immediately. There wasn't a trace of condescension in his praise. He simply recognized the value of my idea without trying to claim it as his own.

That was when my friend Natalia called.

I rejected the call, and a message arrived a second later.

Still alive? You've got a ceramics pickup at eleven. And don't forget breakfast again.

I glanced at the clock.

It was almost ten thirty.

"I need to get back to work," I said.

Sebastian gathered his presentation boards, though he left the last one out.

"I'll give you my number. We can arrange to discuss whatever the foundation sends us in writing."

"Only after we receive the document."

"All right."

He took out his phone and dictated his number. I saved it under his full name without adding a comment. When I sent him a short message, his phone lit up on the table.

"I have one more question," he said.

"I'm beginning to get used to that."

"Why this particular place?"

I considered my answer.

I could have mentioned the costs, the light, the height of the rooms, and access to the courtyard. Every one of those arguments appeared in my competition documentation. But the way he looked at me suggested he wasn't asking about technical specifications.

"Because this was the first place where I stopped feeling as though I was working in somebody else's space," I replied. "Even if, technically, I still am."

He nodded.

"I understand."

"And you?"

He ran his hand along the edge of one of his boards.

"I want to build a place where I don't have to explain to clients why a well-made object can't cost the same as a cheap imitation."

"That sounds ambitious."

"It is. And expensive."

"You're not planning to give way?"

"No."

He answered without hesitation.

I stood and walked him to the door. The rain had eased, and pale sunlight was beginning to break through the clouds. Sebastian put on his coat, then stopped with one hand on the door handle.

"I'm not going to pretend winning doesn't matter to me," he said. "But I'm not going to pretend your work doesn't impress me, either."

I had no ready answer.

Over the years, I'd learned to recognize compliments that concealed attempts to obtain something for free. This one sounded different, perhaps because it came from a man who had openly challenged several of my ideas only moments earlier.

"Goodbye, Sebastian."

He looked at me, clearly registering the change.

"See you soon, Eliza."

I closed the door and only then let out the breath I'd been holding.

I returned to the table where we'd spread our two sets of sketches. My proposal was untouched, and his presentation boards were gone, but I found a small rectangle penciled onto one of my sheets. Sebastian had marked the place where our two solutions might meet.

I didn't like that he'd done it without asking.

I liked even less that I could immediately see the sense in his idea.

After eleven, the order for the restaurant on Ostrów Tumski was collected, and I called Natalia.

She answered on the second ring.

"If you're about to tell me you forgot breakfast again, I'm coming over to force-feed you."

"I met my competitor."

"Oh. Handsome?"

"Natalia."

"So that's a yes."

I told her about the meeting, the inspection, and the foundation's proposal. She listened carefully, interrupting only when I began reconstructing the arguments about table construction in excessive detail.

"Eliza, I'm asking how you felt around him, not how wide his tabletops are."

"He annoyed me."

"We've established that."

"And he listened."

Silence followed.

"That's worse," Natalia declared.

I laughed, although the situation didn't feel especially funny.

After our conversation, I opened the message from Maria Rogowska.

She had sent the promised presentation requirements. The document was six pages long, with a schedule on the final page. Three weeks to prepare the joint exhibition.

Separate assessment of the proposals. Mandatory attendance by both finalists during the event.

There was one more requirement at the bottom.

The exhibition layout had to be agreed upon jointly and submitted to the organizer by the following Thursday.

I had six days.

I picked up my phone and opened the new contact.

Sebastian Las.

I typed:

I've received the document. I don't like half the conditions. We need to talk.

His reply came almost immediately.

Neither do I. Tomorrow at ten? I'll bring better coffee and arguments.

I read the message twice.

Arguments will be enough, I replied.

A moment later, another message appeared.

I'm not giving up the coffee.

I put my phone beside the pottery wheel.

Outside, Wrocław was slowly brightening after the rain. I had a full working day ahead of me and a competition I couldn't afford to lose.

And yet, when I returned to shaping another vessel, I caught myself thinking not about tomorrow's discussion of the competition rules, but about the sound of Sebastian's laughter.

Which was decidedly not all right.

Chapter 2 - Between the Lines

At nine fifty-eight on Saturday morning, Sebastian appeared outside the studio carrying two paper cups and a canvas bag over his shoulder.

I'd known he would arrive on time. What I hadn't anticipated was that I'd spend the previous twenty minutes glancing toward the door as though I were waiting for something more than a conversation about competition documents.

I'd printed the regulations, prepared a list of objections, and drawn up three possible exhibition layouts. Everything was arranged on the table in neat stacks, which Natalia would undoubtedly have regarded as a symptom of serious nervousness.

Sebastian didn't come inside until I invited him.

"Coffee," he announced, setting a cup on a clear section of the worktop. "Black, no sugar. I didn't see any milk beside your machine yesterday, so I assumed that's how you take it."

"That's a risky assumption."

"Agreed. If I'm wrong, I can drink both."

I picked up the cup.

The coffee was hot and smelled of chocolate and nuts. The first sip tasted considerably better than anything I'd ever managed to coax out of the studio's coffee machine.

"You guessed correctly."

"Sebastian."

"Don't use every opportunity to shorten the distance between us."

"All right, Eliza."

I heard the amusement in his voice. I couldn't tell whether he was deliberately provoking me or whether this was simply his nature. I suspected the two possibilities weren't mutually exclusive.

We sat opposite each other.

This time, I refused to let our conversation begin with the designs. I took out a sheet containing five points and pushed it toward him.

"Before we start, I'd like to establish some rules."

Sebastian read the list. He didn't comment until he'd finished.

"No photographs of individual sketches, separate competition documents, approval before publishing any joint work, shared costs, and the right to withdraw a particular solution before final approval," he summarized. "Reasonable."

"Not a single objection?"

"One. We also need a rule about decision deadlines. We can't wait three days for a reply if something has to be ordered the following morning."

I conceded the point and added a sixth item.

We agreed to confirm decisions concerning the joint exhibition by message and to require both our approval for any major changes. Sebastian also suggested creating a separate folder containing only materials intended for our shared work.

"Without access to our individual applications," I emphasized.

"Of course."

His pen paused briefly on those last words.

I couldn't tell whether he was thinking about how to organize the files or something else entirely. A moment later, he slid the paper toward me for my signature.

"And if one of us wins the premises?" I asked.

"Then the other will have to find somewhere else."

"That's not what I'm asking."

He looked up.

"I know."

For a moment, neither of us spoke.

A tram passed outside, its metallic rumble penetrating the old windowpanes. Suddenly, I became acutely aware that we were sitting in a place we both wanted to call our own, although neither of us had a greater claim to it.

"I don't want a joint presentation to create an obligation to continue working together," I said.

"It won't."

"Even if we make something genuinely good."

"Even then."

His answer was calm. Yet for a moment, I had the impression that making that promise cost him more than it should have.

I didn't ask why.

Once we'd established the rules, we spread out our sketches.