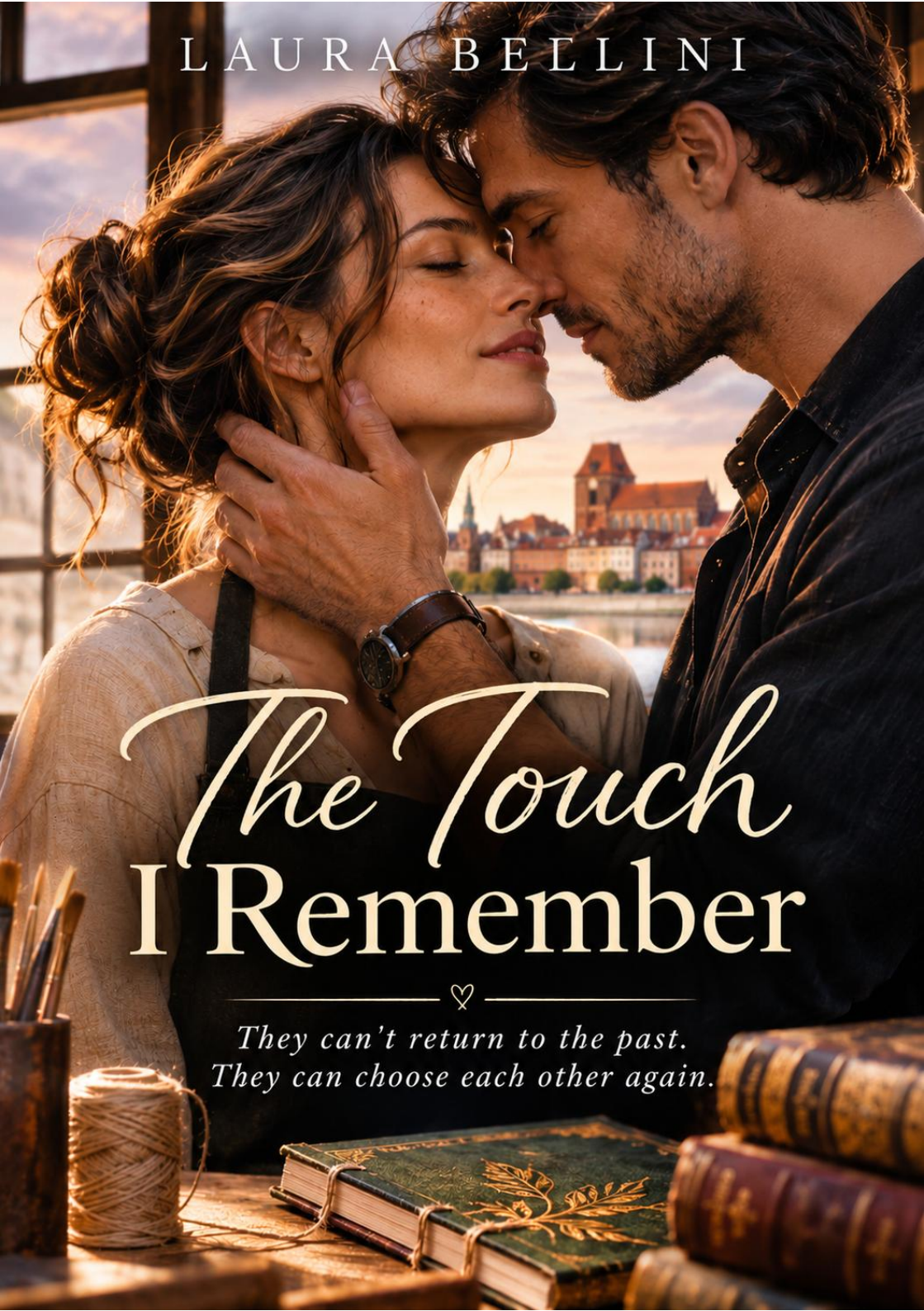

LAURA BELLINI
The Touch I Remember
They can't return to the past.
They can choose each other again.

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They can't return to the past. They can choose each other again

Laura Bellini

ROMANS

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INTRO

The first thing I noticed that morning was a flaw in the green bookcloth. It was less than a centimeter long, running diagonally near the bottom edge of the cover, and would have been completely invisible to anyone unfamiliar with bookbinding. To me, it meant another four hours of work or the possibility of having to start all over again.

I ran my fingertip over the uneven surface. The cloth was cool and slightly rough, carrying the scent of adhesive and freshly pressed paper. I loved the moment when separate materials stopped being individual pieces and began to resemble a book. Nothing happened by accident in my workshop. Even imperfections had causes, and those causes could be found, understood, and corrected.

I had never been nearly as successful with people.

"Stop looking at it like that, or it'll fall apart out of sheer nervousness," Marta said, setting two cups of coffee on the table.

My best friend ran a small graphic design studio one floor above mine and treated my workshop like an extension of her own kitchen. She was thirty-nine, incurably prone to being late, and firmly convinced that every disaster life could produce was survivable with a sufficiently strong espresso.

"The cover hasn't been stretched properly," I replied.

"And my life hasn't been put together properly, but you don't see me starting it from scratch every morning."

I smiled despite myself.

Outside the window, November had wrapped Toruń in damp grayness. The old townhouses across the street

looked as though someone had rubbed their colors away with an eraser. The smell of warm bread drifted over from a nearby bakery, while an elderly man on the sidewalk struggled to convince his dachshund that walks were still necessary when it rained.

I was thirty-eight years old, owned my own bookbinding workshop, and had a plan I had spent the previous eight months putting together with almost painful attention to detail. I wanted to create a collection of handmade art books under my own name, present it at the spring trade fair in Warsaw, and finally stop accepting every commission simply because it would help me pay the rent.

I didn't dream of building a large company.

I dreamed of having a choice.

On the table lay a production schedule, samples of cotton paper, and the contract I had signed the day before for our first limited edition. Thirty numbered copies, hand-sewn bindings, traditional embossing, and illustrations commissioned specifically for the project. The job was supposed to give me enough financial breathing room to develop my own collection.

There was only one thing missing.

The illustrator.

Or rather, he wasn't exactly missing. The publisher had already selected him, but for three weeks I had been unable to obtain confirmation that the man actually intended to take part in the project.

"Have you called him?" Marta asked, glancing at the documents.

"Yesterday."

"And?"

"He didn't answer."

"Maybe he's busy."

"For three weeks?"

Marta shrugged.

"Artists can be complicated."

"So can bookbinders. Somehow, we still manage to answer messages."

I didn't tell her that I had looked through the illustrator's portfolio more than a dozen times before signing the contract. It wasn't because I doubted his abilities. Quite the opposite. His work was extraordinary: economical lines, a remarkable sensitivity to space, human figures captured as though they were about to move, only for the artist to deliberately leave that movement unfinished.

I knew that way of drawing.

Once, it had been enough to keep me standing in front of a sheet of paper for an entire afternoon.

Marta finished her coffee, promised to bring some ink and pigment samples later, and disappeared up the stairs. I was left alone with the soft hum of the ventilation fan and a clock that had been running seven minutes fast for two years. I had never corrected it. I liked having a little time in reserve, even if the advantage was entirely imaginary.

At ten, I began preparing the cardboard boards for the covers. I cut the material slowly, guiding my knife along a metal ruler, when my phone buzzed.

A message from the publisher.

Ms. Zięba, apologies for the sudden change. Mr. Tomasz Wrona has confirmed his participation and would like to examine the materials today. I've given him the workshop address. I hope you'll be able to agree on the details.

I read the message twice.

Then I placed my phone face down on the table.

Tomasz Wrona.

For fifteen years, I had taught myself to think his name without feeling anything in particular.

At least, that was what I had believed.

He wasn't part of my everyday life. His name didn't come up in conversations. I didn't keep photographs of him or check who he lived with and where his work was being exhibited.

Eventually, I had even stopped wondering whether he had read my last letter.

And now he was about to walk into my workshop, place his drawings beside my bindings, and spend several weeks working with me on the book that was supposed to open a new chapter in my professional life.

I couldn't decide whether this was fate's idea of a joke or simply an extraordinary lack of imagination on the publisher's part.

I picked up my phone, intending to call and refuse.

I had every right to. The contract allowed for a change of illustrator under justified circumstances. I could even withdraw from the entire commission, although that would mean losing the advance I had already spent on materials.

I stared at the publisher's number.

I didn't call.

The bell above the door rang.

He was exactly as I remembered.

Not the bell, of course.

Tomasz.

He stood in the doorway wearing a dark coat, rain dampening his hair, a leather portfolio slung over one shoulder. He was forty-one now, with a few silver strands at his temples and a face on which time had left more visible traces than I had expected.

For a moment, neither of us spoke.

"Olga," he said at last.

He had always pronounced my name calmly, as though it were something worth giving his full attention. I hadn't forgotten that. What irritated me was discovering that I remembered the sound of his voice just as clearly.

"Tomasz."

He looked around the workshop. At the wooden shelves, the bookbinding press, the paper samples arranged according to their weight. His gaze settled on the green cover lying in front of me.

"You did it," he said softly.

"Did what?"

"Opened your own workshop."

I didn't answer immediately. Fifteen years earlier, I had told him about this dream in our tiny rented room, while we sat on the floor eating cold pizza and believing that everything we wanted was simply a matter of finding enough courage.

He remembered.

It shouldn't have mattered.

"If you're here to look at the materials, they're on the table," I said.

He took off his coat but made no move farther into the room without an invitation.

"I didn't know this was your workshop."

I raised my eyebrows.

"My name is on the contract."

"I only saw it yesterday. My agent handled the earlier arrangements."

I studied him, searching for the easy familiarity with which I had once been able to read his face. There had been a time when I knew he was worried before he said a single word. Now all I could see was caution.

"You could have called."

"I could have."

A simple answer.

No excuse.

I walked over to the table and spread the samples out in front of him. He stood opposite me, maintaining a distance that had never existed between us before. When he reached for one of the covers, I noticed the small scar near the base of his thumb.

I remembered the evening he'd cut himself with my bookbinding knife. I remembered the sharp smell of antiseptic and the amusement in his voice when I'd bandaged his hand with ridiculous care.

More than anything, I remembered how he'd wrapped that same hand around me afterward.

I looked away.

Tomasz gently ran his fingers over the cloth, avoiding the damaged section.

"You always chose green when something mattered to you."

"These days, I choose it when it suits the project."

The faintest smile touched his mouth.

"Of course."

I didn't like that smile.

More precisely, I didn't like the fact that, after all these years, I still knew exactly what it meant.

He took a sketchbook from his portfolio and placed it beside my materials. On the first page was a drawing of two hands almost touching, separated by a narrow strip of empty space.

I stared at the image for a long moment.

"Why this?" I asked.

Tomasz didn't answer immediately.

"Because sometimes the things we never managed to touch are the things that stay with us the longest."

I looked up.

He was close enough for me to catch the familiar scent of cedar soap, but not so close that I could accuse him of invading my space.

Before me stood a man I had once loved and the work I had spent years waiting for.

I knew how to protect my workshop, my contract, and the future I had planned for myself.

What I didn't know was whether I could protect the part of me that still remembered his touch.

Chapter 1 - The Boundaries of Paper

Tomasz pushed his sketchbook into the center of the table, and for several seconds I wondered whether it was acceptable to throw someone out of my workshop simply because he had drawn something too beautiful.

At first glance, the two hands separated by a narrow strip of empty space looked like an illustration of longing. Only when I examined them more closely did I notice that one hand was turned palm upward, ready to receive another person's touch, while the other remained closed. I couldn't tell whether he intended to tell a story about reaching for someone or refusing them. But I knew Tomasz well enough to suspect that the ambiguity was entirely deliberate.

"Is this your proposal for the first illustration?" I asked.

"More of a suggestion for the visual language we could use throughout the book."

The word we sounded awkward between us.

Not because it referred to our collaboration. Fifteen years earlier, we'd used that word almost constantly. We could move away. We could rent a bigger apartment. We could turn our dreams into something real.

Only later had I understood that the same word could conceal two entirely different futures.

"The publisher has already approved the visual direction," I said, reaching for the folder I'd prepared. "Minimalist illustrations, a limited palette, with an emphasis on materials and typography. We have thirty copies to finish before the end of February. The entire production schedule is here."

Tomasz opened the folder and spent a while examining the documents. He didn't rush. His gaze lingered on details as he compared samples and made pencil notes in the margins of his own notebook.

I remembered that concentration. When Tomasz was working, the world had to wait until he'd finished understanding whatever was in front of him.

"Did you design the page spreads as well?"

"Of course."

"Without the illustrations?"

"With spaces reserved for them."

"That's not the same thing."

I looked up.

"I know the difference between a book design and a finished book, Tomasz."

"I'm not suggesting you don't."

"It sounded remarkably like it."

He studied me for a moment. Then he closed the folder and rested both hands on top of it.

"There's something I'd like us to establish before we begin."

"I'm listening."

"I'm not going to agree to producing illustrations for a page layout that's already been finalized. I want us to design the rhythm of the book together. The images and the binding need to speak to each other."

I felt a familiar irritation rising inside me, the kind that appeared whenever someone tried to improve my decisions without first understanding why I'd made them.

"The layout has been carefully considered. I've tested three kinds of paper, calculated the thickness of the book blocks, and prepared a prototype. Moving the illustrations will change the entire design."

"Possibly for the better."

"Or possibly delay production by three weeks."

He didn't answer immediately. Instead, he opened the first sample and gently lifted one of the blank pages.

"Look here. You've planned six consecutive pages with plenty of white space, followed by three illustrated spreads. The reader gets silence first, then everything at once."

"That's intentional."

"I understand. But I'd like one of those illustrations to appear earlier. Like a promise of something we haven't discovered yet."

It was a good argument.

That was what irritated me most.

I pulled out a chair and sat on the other side of the table. Opening the prototype to the section he'd indicated, I studied the warm cream-colored paper. The blank pages created a quiet interval before the first substantial composition. I'd designed the sequence so that nothing would interfere with the stitching structure.

Tomasz, meanwhile, was looking at the book through the eyes of someone who could see the story before it existed.

"I don't want to dismantle the construction for the sake of an impressive artistic idea," I said.

"And I don't want to decorate something I haven't been allowed to help create."

That stopped me more effectively than anything else he'd said.

This wasn't merely about page spreads anymore.

I understood that Tomasz had no intention of becoming someone who simply carried out my instructions. He wanted genuine influence over the project. I couldn't refuse him that solely because his presence reminded me of a period in my life when I'd felt powerless.

"The publisher hired you as an illustrator," I reminded him.

"Yes. And the illustrations are part of the book. They're not decorations added after everything else is finished."

"You're talking as though I'm trying to restrict you."

"Right now, you're trying to settle everything before I've even had the chance to ask my first question."

I leaned back in my chair.

"Are we really going to go through this again after fifteen years?"

I saw the change in his face. He didn't look away, but the ease with which he'd been discussing the project disappeared.

"I didn't realize we were already going through anything again."

"That's precisely why we shouldn't."

Silence settled between us.

Behind the wall, the old heating system came to life, its pipes knocking loudly enough to end almost any conversation. Tomasz glanced toward the window before looking at me again.

"I didn't come here to make your life more complicated, Olga."

"Good, because I already have enough work."

"I can see that."

"I don't need you judging that as well."

"I'm not judging you. I'm admiring what you've done."

I could have prepared myself for disagreement, irony, or an attempt to use our past against me.

I wasn't prepared for admiration, spoken so simply and calmly.

I stood to put the paper samples back on their shelf, although they didn't need tidying.

"That doesn't change the terms of our collaboration."

"I don't expect it to."

I turned to face him.

"Then what do you expect?"

"For both of us to have the right to say when something isn't working. And for neither of us to treat that as a personal failure."

For a moment, I didn't know what to say.

Fifteen years earlier, I would have given almost anything to hear Tomasz say something like that. Back then, though, our most important conversations had always ended too quickly, and we'd mistaken pride for dignity.

I didn't want to find out whether he remembered things the same way.

"All right," I said at last. "Show me exactly what you're proposing."

Tomasz didn't smile triumphantly.

He took several loose sheets from his portfolio and spread them beside the prototype. They included more than drawings of hands: fragments of faces, half-open doors, reflections in glass, and small objects abandoned in empty rooms.

Every composition was connected by the absence of something that seemed as though it ought to be there.

"I was thinking about a book you also read through what it doesn't show," he explained. "Here, for example. Instead of placing the illustration on its own page, we could let it extend onto the next sheet. As someone turns the page, the image would slowly disappear."

I leaned over the drawing.

It was done in soft graphite, with the lines of a hand ending abruptly at the edge of the sheet. I imagined printing it on thin Japanese paper sewn between two heavier leaves. Through the translucent surface, the reader would be able to glimpse part of the following illustration.

"Not on this paper," I said.

"Why not?"

I took a sheet of washi from a drawer and placed it over his drawing.

"On this."

Tomasz held the paper by one corner. When I raised the other edge, we watched the graphite lines show through its delicate structure. He moved the lamp closer, allowing the light to reveal subtle irregularities in the fibers.

"That's exactly what I meant," he said.

"Except a sheet like this requires a different stitching method. I'd have to prepare special sections."

"Can it be done?"

"Yes. The question is whether we have enough time."

For several minutes, we talked exclusively about the book.

About paper, weight, ink, and how to preserve the clarity of a fine line. I didn't have to explain everything from the beginning. Tomasz listened, asked sensible questions, and never pretended to know something when he didn't.

We hesitated over one drawing at exactly the same moment.

He looked at me with amusement.

"You're about to tell me there's too much black here."

"And you're about to tell me it shouldn't matter."

"No. I'm about to tell you I can reduce it."

I smiled before I could stop myself.

"Remarkable progress."

"I've learned a few things in fifteen years."

"I hope meeting deadlines is one of them."

"I'm still working on that."

I laughed briefly.

His gaze rested on my face a fraction longer than the conversation required. I lowered my eyes to the drawings, even though there was nothing left for me to inspect.

At noon, Alicja Radecka, the publisher's representative, called.

I put the phone on speaker so Tomasz could take part in the conversation. Alicja wanted to confirm when we'd deliver the first materials and assured us that the publishing house was delighted at the prospect of two accomplished craftspeople collaborating.

I didn't correct her description, although I'd never considered myself particularly accomplished.

"We'll need to see the first mock-up in two weeks," she said. "And I'd like you to prepare a short presentation of the creative process. We'll use the materials during meetings with collectors."

"We can discuss the presentation separately," I replied. "First, we need to approve the production technique."

"Of course. Tomasz did mention, however, that he'd like to retain the option of modifying the illustrations until the trial printing stage."

I glanced at him.

"That's precisely what we're discussing," I said carefully.

"Excellent. In that case, I'm sure you'll find a solution."

After the call ended, we sat opposite each other for a moment.

The clock showed twelve seventeen, although the actual time was twelve ten.

"Did you discuss changes with her before meeting me?" I asked.

"I told her I wouldn't make a final decision about the illustrations without seeing the mock-up."

"That's not the same as retaining the right to make changes until the last possible moment."

"I know. I didn't agree to that deadline."

I studied him.

In the past, I'd too often assumed I knew his intentions before giving him an opportunity to explain them. This time, a simpler solution was available.

"Then we put everything in writing. No vague arrangements."

"Agreed."

I opened my laptop and created a new document.

Tomasz moved his chair closer, but remained on the opposite side of the table, with the prototype between us. We agreed that he would prepare the first four illustrations within a week, while I would make two trial sections.

Any changes introduced after the mock-up was approved would require a joint decision and a fresh assessment of costs.

One problem remained.

"The rights to the design," Tomasz said.

"Your illustration fee is already specified in the contract."

"I know. But if we change the layout and start designing together, I'd like that reflected in the authorship provisions."

I looked at him without speaking.

"This is supposed to be my original edition," I replied. "I've spent months developing the construction. I'm not handing over half the decisions simply because someone has suggested an interesting idea."

"I'm not asking for half of your work."

"Then what are you asking for?"

"An honest acknowledgment of mine."

I closed the laptop.

"Is that a condition?"

"Yes."

There was no challenge in his voice.

He sounded calm and firm, which made it impossible to dismiss his words as an attempt to provoke me. He had his own reputation, his own commitments, and every right to protect what he created.

I understood that perfectly.

It didn't change the fact that a man I'd once loved could now influence the most important professional project of my life.

"I need to consider the consequences," I said.

"Of course."

"And speak to the publisher."

"Let's do it together, once you've decided what you think would be fair."

I set down my pen.

I wanted to ask why, years ago, he hadn't been capable of discussing our shared plans with the same composure.

Instead, I looked at the drawing of the hands.

The closed hand no longer seemed merely a symbol of refusal. It might just as easily belong to someone who hadn't yet decided to open it.

Tomasz began gathering his drawings.

One sheet slipped from the table before I could catch it. We both bent down almost simultaneously. I drew my hand back, letting him pick up the paper.

He noticed the movement but didn't comment.

"When can I come back?" he asked.

"Tomorrow, after ten. I need to prepare the samples first."

"I'll be here at ten thirty."

He put on his coat and paused by the door.

The rain had eased, and narrow bands of afternoon light had appeared on the pavement.

"Olga?"

"Yes?"

"I didn't want to make you feel as though someone was taking your workshop away from you today."

I looked at him in surprise.

"I don't feel that way."

"Good."

I couldn't explain why his answer sounded sad.

Perhaps because he didn't try to convince me that he understood my feelings better than I did.

After he left, I returned to the table and opened the prototype again.

The cream-colored pages were still empty, but I no longer saw that emptiness in quite the same way.

For the first time in months, I considered the possibility that my plan might need changing not because it wasn't good enough, but because someone else had seen a possibility I hadn't noticed.

It was an uncomfortable thought.

Even more uncomfortable was the fact that I wanted to see what Tomasz would draw tomorrow.

Chapter 2 - An Agreement to Remain Silent

The following morning, I arrived at the workshop an hour early and discovered that I was capable of preparing for a professional meeting with a man as carefully as I once prepared for a first date.

The difference was that instead of choosing a dress, I was checking paper costs, my supply of bookbinding thread, and the provisions concerning intellectual property rights.

I wasn't going to let the past complicate my financial decisions.

At nine, Marta called.

"Still alive?"

"Working."

"So things are serious. You didn't even come upstairs for the ink samples I promised you yesterday."

"I had a meeting."

"With whom?"

I stayed silent a little too long.

"Olga?"

"With Tomasz Wrona."

I heard something fall at the other end of the line.

"That Tomasz?"

"I don't know another man with that name who'd provoke such a dramatic reaction from you."

"Sorry, I've just spilled coffee all over my invoices. He's back in Toruń?"

"I don't know where he lives now. He came about the illustrations."

Marta didn't reply for a moment.

She was one of the few people who knew how our relationship had ended, not from the carefully organized version I'd told afterward, but from those first painful days when I hadn't yet learned how to pretend I didn't care.

"How are you feeling?" she asked at last.

I looked at the documents spread across my table.

"Like someone who has to negotiate a contract with an extremely stubborn illustrator."

"I'm asking about you."

"So am I."

She didn't push.

Instead, she offered to stop by later with new pigment samples. I thanked her, and after we ended the call, I sat motionless for several minutes, listening to the sounds of the street waking up outside.

Marta remembered the girl I'd been fifteen years earlier, someone who could spend an entire evening waiting beside the telephone.

I preferred to remember myself as the woman who had eventually stopped waiting.

At ten thirty, Tomasz knocked on the open door.

He was wearing a dark sweater and a gray scarf, and carrying two paper coffee cups.

"I wasn't sure whether you still take your coffee without sugar," he said.

"I do."

He placed one cup at the unoccupied end of the table.

"Then I remembered correctly."

I didn't reach for it immediately.

The simple act of remembering someone's preference could feel more intimate than the most elaborate compliment. Yesterday, I'd managed to convince myself that our connection was primarily professional.

Today, I realized that our bodies and habits could remember things our minds had no intention of revisiting.

"I've prepared a proposal for our working arrangements," I announced.

"That sounds ominous."

"It's perfectly reasonable."

"With you, those two descriptions often mean exactly the same thing."

I handed him the printed document.

He read the first page, then looked up.

"Working hours, response deadlines, procedures for requesting changes, rules governing the use of materials. It all seems sensible."

"There's a second page."

He turned it over.

"I see. Personal boundaries."

"Yes."

He read in silence for a moment.