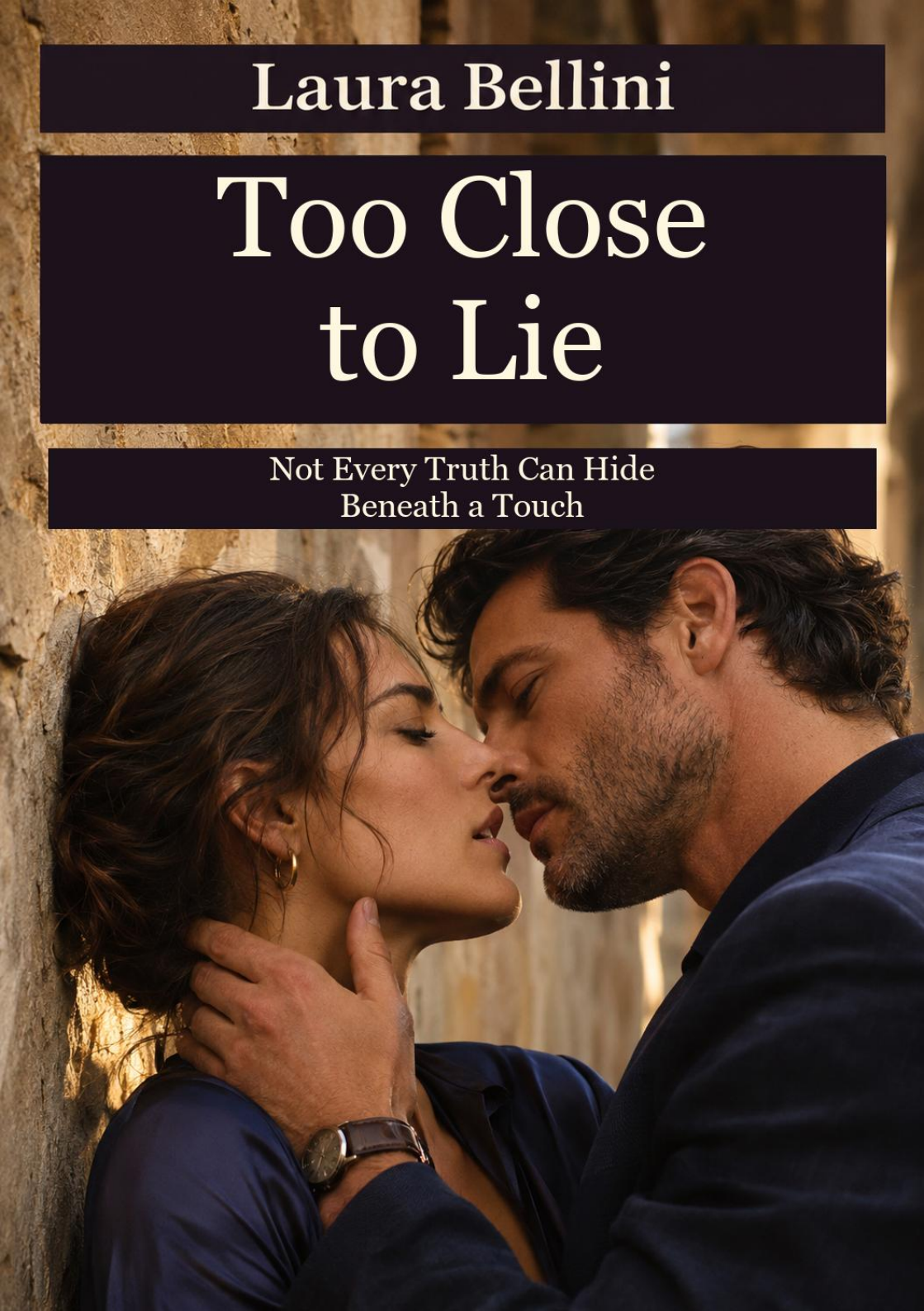
Laura Bellini

Too Close to Lie

Not Every Truth Can Hide Beneath a Touch



Too Close to Lie

Not Every Truth Can Hide Beneath a Touch

Laura Bellini

ROMANS

ISBN: 9788384900741

ALL-IN Rafał Płonkowski



CONTENTS

INTRO 4
Chapter 1 - Terms I Hadn't Anticipated 11
Chapter 2 - Boundaries in the Fine Print 23
Chapter 3 - What Daylight Doesn't Reveal 35
Chapter 4 - The Places We Keep Others Out Of 46
Chapter 5 - The Right to Say No 59
Chapter 6 - One Kiss Away 71
Chapter 7 - Between Desire and Trust 84
Chapter 8 - Light Behind Closed Doors 96
Chapter 9 - The Price of One Evening 106
Chapter 10 - The Night We Didn't Want to End 117
Chapter 11 - A Morning Without Promises 129
Chapter 12 - A Trace That Cannot Be Erased 141
Chapter 13 - The Price of Silence 154
Chapter 14 - The Truth Between Us 165
Chapter 15 - His Name Beneath Someone Else's Truth 176
Chapter 16 - A Distance We Cannot Close 189
Chapter 17 - What Remains When We Walk Away 199
Chapter 18 - A First Step Without Guarantees 209
Chapter 19 - Rewriting the Truth 221
Chapter 20 - A Choice That Belongs to Us 232

INTRO

Florence smelled of sun-warmed stone, freshly ground coffee, and rain that had been threatening the city since morning without quite making up its mind. I stood outside the side entrance to Palazzo Rinuccini, a folder of documents tucked beneath my arm, trying to convince myself that coming here was the best decision I had made in two years. I was thirty, self-employed, with a calendar full of assignments and enough experience not to mistake a professional opportunity for a romantic adventure. Even so, when I saw my name on the exhibition's list of collaborators, I felt a surge of pleasure I had no intention of hiding.

Nina Gaj. Language consultancy and preparation of the bilingual catalogue.

The words appeared in small print, between the names of art historians and conservators. I didn't mind. Over the years, I had learned that important things often began in small letters. My plan was simple: produce the finest catalogue of my career, interpret at some of the international meetings, and return to Warsaw with recommendations that would finally allow me to stop accepting every assignment simply because it paid well. I dreamed of running a small studio specializing in the language of art. I wanted to choose my projects instead of waiting for someone else to decide I was good enough.

I stepped inside before the rain began.

The palazzo had vaulted ceilings, cool stone floors, and the kind of silence that suggested not peace but the presence of something precious. Wooden shipping crates stood in the main hall, while a row of spotlights waited to be

installed along one wall. Through a half-open door, I could hear people speaking Italian in the next room. Someone was swearing about a delayed delivery of protective glass. Someone else was demanding a revised schedule.

That, at least, I understood perfectly.

"Signorina Gaj?"

I turned. A petite woman in a navy-blue jumpsuit was approaching, a tablet held against her chest.

"Sofia Conti. I'm coordinating the exhibition. I'm glad you've arrived."

We shook hands. Sofia had a firm grip and the expression of someone who had been sleeping four hours a night for the past week.

"I'm hoping my section of the documentation is ready for review," I said in Italian.

"That's precisely why I wanted to see you before the team meeting."

There was a note in her voice I didn't like. It wasn't quite the announcement of a disaster. It was that particular kind of caution people adopted when explaining someone else's decision, one they didn't entirely agree with themselves.

Sofia led me along a corridor into a small office. A proof copy of the catalogue lay on the desk. I recognized the page layouts, the photographs of architectural details, and quotations from documents I had worked on during my previous stay in Florence. My translations were intended to form the basis of the Polish and English versions of the exhibition commentary.

I picked up the catalogue.

"Has this been proofread?"

"Once. But the head conservator has requested several changes."

I opened it to page seventeen.

Beside a photograph of a Renaissance doorway, I found a sentence I knew almost by heart. I had written it two years earlier while explaining how successive layers of restoration could alter our perception of a historic surface. It hadn't been a straightforward translation. It was part of an original analytical paper I had prepared for a closed seminar.

And now it was here, without attribution.

"Who approved this section?" I asked.

Sofia glanced at her tablet.

"The technical documentation came from Marcel Borek. He worked on the property before preparations for the exhibition began."

My fingers went still against the edge of the page.

For a moment, all I could hear was the soft hum of the air-conditioning.

"Marcel Borek?" I repeated.

"Do you know him?"

I did.

Not well enough to call him a friend. Far too well for his name to mean nothing to me.

We had met two years earlier at an international conservation seminar in Kraków. He had been thirty-five, with an infuriatingly calm way of expressing his opinions and an irritating habit of listening so closely that you began questioning your own choice of words. During a public discussion, he had challenged my translation of a term

relating to historical restoration techniques. I had challenged him right back, pointing out that technical precision did not justify distorting the meaning of the source text.

The argument had lasted twenty minutes. Afterwards, we had talked for another hour in the gradually emptying conference room. We hadn't come to agree on everything. He had, however, acknowledged the validity of my distinction, and I had been forced to concede that one of his objections was sound.

What I remembered most clearly was that, even when he disagreed with me, he never treated me as someone who needed to be silenced.

And that, for several days afterwards, I had found myself thinking about his smile for no sensible reason whatsoever.

"We met through work," I said at last.

Sofia visibly relaxed.

"Excellent. That should make it easier to settle the details."

"What details?"

"Marcel is taking over final technical approval of the catalogue. He'll also be responsible for the route used during the nighttime tours."

I closed the proof.

"And my role?"

"That remains unchanged. Translation, language editing, preparing the guides. But we'll need both your approval before the material goes to print."

I studied her, wondering whether she could see the problem. I hadn't flown to Florence to prove to Marcel Borek

all over again that words mattered. And I certainly wasn't going to sign off on a document containing a passage from my earlier work without any explanation of how it had got there.

"I'd like the revision history and complete source documentation for this section," I said. "Before I approve anything."

Sofia nodded.

"Of course. Marcel should be here shortly. You can discuss it together."

As though summoned, a man's voice sounded in the corridor. He was speaking Italian, easily and with a faint rasp I hadn't forgotten. I couldn't see him yet, but I already knew he was somewhere nearby.

I was annoyed by the accuracy of my own memory.

Sofia left to check whether the meeting room was ready. I remained alone with the catalogue and the uncomfortable realization that my plans for the first day would have to change. I photographed page seventeen, then opened the notes on my phone and recorded the paragraph number. I had no intention of starting an argument over a single similar sentence. But I wasn't going to pretend I hadn't noticed it, either.

"Do you always start by looking for mistakes?"

I looked up.

Marcel stood in the doorway, one hand resting against the frame. He wore dark trousers and a linen shirt with the sleeves rolled up. He was a little more tanned than when I'd last seen him. A few strands of grey had appeared at his

temples, and I noticed a pale mark on his left hand where he had recently removed a protective glove.

Thirty-seven, I thought for no sensible reason. Two years older and still just as convinced he was entitled to open a conversation with a provocation.

"Only when someone gives me a reason."

He smiled, but his gaze shifted from my face to the open catalogue.

"I see you've already found page seventeen."

I didn't like how quickly he'd mentioned the number.

"Is there something particular I should find there?"

He came closer, stopping on the opposite side of the desk. Between us lay a dozen sheets of paper, two years of unasked questions, and a sentence whose presence I couldn't explain away as coincidence.

"Yes," he said after a moment. "Something we need to talk about."

He didn't look away. There was something familiar in that stubbornness, but this time I could see tension in his face as well. He made no attempt to lighten the atmosphere with a joke.

"Then I'm listening."

Marcel glanced toward the open door. Two people were passing in the corridor, carrying a framed painting. He waited until they had moved away before turning back to me.

"First, I need to know whether we can work together."

"That depends on what you're hiding from me."

The smile vanished from his face.

For a moment, I wanted to take the words back. Not because they were unfair, but because they had come so easily, revealing how desperately I wanted to hear his answer.

Marcel rested his hand on the closed catalogue without pulling it toward himself.

"Nina, I don't want you to learn something important from someone else."

He was close enough for me to see a tiny fleck of dried mortar on the cuff of his shirt. I remembered Kraków, and the moment after our argument when he'd invited me for coffee and I'd refused, even though I had wanted to stay. Now the man I'd once longed to know better stood before me, alongside a document that threatened everything I believed about his integrity.

"Then tell me now," I said more softly.

He didn't answer immediately.

And to my astonishment, I began to fear something more than the truth itself: that even after I finally heard it, I would still want him to stay.

"Marcel, can I really trust you?"

Chapter 1 - Terms I Hadn't Anticipated

Marcel didn't answer my question.

Instead, he pulled out the chair on the opposite side of the desk and sat down, as though we were about to have an ordinary business meeting rather than a conversation that might determine whether I stayed in Florence. The smell of wet stone drifted through the open window. The rain had finally begun, fine droplets pattering against the palazzo's inner courtyard.

"I'm not going to ask you to trust me on credit," he said. "Especially after what you've just seen in the catalogue."

It was a more reasonable response than I'd expected. Unfortunately, it did nothing to reassure me.

"Then start by explaining how my sentence ended up there."

Marcel placed both hands on the desk. He had long fingers and a small cut beside his thumb. I remembered those hands from Kraków, when he'd turned a pencil between them while listening to my arguments during the seminar. Now he had nothing to occupy them, and he clearly wasn't comfortable with that.

"That section of the catalogue was developed from several earlier documents. I need to check their history and how the sources were recorded."

"I didn't ask how many documents were involved. I asked about my sentence."

"I know."

"Well?"

"It's in the material I submitted to the editorial team."

He said it without avoiding my eyes. I waited for him to continue, but he didn't.

"And you don't see a problem?"

"I do. That's why I don't want this catalogue going to print in its present form."

That changed things slightly. Not enough to dispel my suspicions, but enough to keep me from making an immediate accusation.

"I want to see the source documentation," I said. "Every version, not just whichever ones you decide are suitable for me to see."

"You'll have access."

"Today."

"Today."

I didn't like how readily he accepted my conditions. I remembered him as a man who could defend a single word for fifteen minutes. Now he sat across from me, answering in short sentences, as though he'd been preparing for this conversation for a long time.

"There's something else," he added.

I leaned back.

"I'm beginning to suspect I should have bought a return ticket."

"Don't buy one just yet."

"That sounded suspiciously like a request."

"Because it was."

He said it so calmly that, for a moment, I forgot about the catalogue. Marcel wasn't a man who made requests lightly. Even his invitation for coffee in Kraków had sounded like a carefully considered proposal, one whose rejection he had been prepared to accept.

This, however, was considerably more serious.

"What do you need from me?"

"Don't approve the text until you've seen the objects themselves."

I frowned.

"I'm responsible for the language of the catalogue, not the conservation work."

"Exactly. In several places, we're describing things that aren't visible in the photographs yet. I don't want us publishing elegant sentences that turn out to be untrue once the protective coverings come off."

"You could send me your technical notes."

"I could. But some of the terminology depends on what you can see in raking light and what becomes visible under a conservation lamp. We can't settle those distinctions honestly by looking at a screen."

He was right.

Worse, he clearly knew I would admit it.

I hated that about him.

"How much time do you need?"

"Two mornings examining the objects. Then a trial walk-through of the nighttime tour."

"I have my own schedule."

"I've seen it."

I raised my eyebrows.

"How?"

"Sofia circulated the project timetable to everyone."

"The one where I specified my working hours?"

"Yes."

"Then you'll have noticed that I don't intend to spend every evening here."

"I also noticed that the trial tour is scheduled after the palazzo closes."

For a moment, we stared at each other without speaking. I realized that, despite my irritation, I was experiencing a familiar pleasure in our exchange. Marcel had never dismissed my arguments as feminine stubbornness. He listened, identified their weaknesses, and answered with facts. There was something dangerously attractive about that.

"I'm not rearranging my entire life because you need a nighttime tour," I said.

The corner of his mouth twitched.

"Good. I wouldn't want to be responsible for an event of such magnitude."

"Marcel."

"Nina."

The way he said my name briefly robbed me of an answer. He did nothing remarkable. He merely lowered his voice, and suddenly I remembered Kraków, the empty conference room, and the invitation for coffee I had regretted refusing.

Fortunately, Sofia returned to the office.

"Sorry to interrupt. The team meeting starts in ten minutes. Marcel, we still need to decide whether we're including the northern doorway."

"We are," he replied.

"No," I said at exactly the same moment.

They both looked at me.

"I'm not approving a description of something I haven't seen if the text is going into the catalogue under my name."

Sofia glanced at Marcel.

"That's precisely what we've been discussing," he said.

"And have we reached an agreement?" I asked.

"Not yet."

For the first time that day, I smiled genuinely.

"Excellent. At least we've established one thing."

The meeting took place in the former library, among tall bookcases that still carried the scent of old wood. Eight people sat around the table. Sofia presented the exhibition schedule. The opening was five weeks away, but the bilingual catalogue had to reach the printer considerably sooner. The first nighttime tour would be one of the most important events in the programme.

I listened and took notes. My contract was in my bag, setting out the translation work, language consultancy, and preparation of the guides. The fee was based on an agreed number of hours. There wasn't a single word about daily consultations beside scaffolding.

When my turn came, I opened my laptop.

"I suggest we separate two issues," I said in Italian. "Verifying the written material and developing the narrative

for visitors. The catalogue needs to be precise, but the commentary on the tour must remain accessible to people who aren't art historians."

An older historian at the far end of the table nodded.

"That's precisely why we need your experience."

"We also need the commentary to agree with what has actually been uncovered," Marcel interjected.

I turned toward him.

"Of course. Provided accuracy doesn't mean replacing every expression with technical terminology."

"And accessibility doesn't mean simplifying distinctions that matter."

Sofia looked over the top of her tablet.

"Do you two always talk to each other like this?"

"Only when we agree," I replied.

Several people laughed. Marcel lowered his head, but I could see his smile. I felt a ridiculous sense of satisfaction, as though I'd scored another point in a contest that had begun two years earlier.

For the next hour, we discussed the individual rooms. Marcel talked about original sections of plaster, later layers of paint, and places where the conservators had deliberately left traces of earlier interventions visible. He spoke without showing off. When the youngest member of the team asked about the difference between reconstruction and filling a gap, he didn't treat the question as naive. He stood up, approached a photograph, and explained patiently, using simple comparisons.

I watched him a little longer than necessary.

In Kraków, I'd mostly noticed his stubbornness. Now I was seeing something else. When he didn't feel obliged to defend his position, he could adapt his knowledge to the person listening.

I wasn't entirely comfortable with that discovery.

Toward the end of the meeting, Sofia projected the proposed opening credits page of the catalogue.

The names of the team members appeared on the screen. Mine was listed under translation. Beside Marcel's name were the words "Scholarly and Technical Content."

I made a note without commenting.

I didn't yet know whether it was a mistake or a deliberate decision. What I did know was that, before signing off on the final documentation, I would have to establish exactly which passages came from my earlier work.

When the meeting ended, people began filing out. Marcel remained at the table, looking through photographs on his laptop.

"You didn't say anything about the credits page," he observed when I approached to retrieve my charger.

"You noticed?"

"It was difficult not to notice that you'd stopped writing."

"I don't like settling questions of authorship in front of an audience before I've seen the documents."

"Sensible."

"Don't mistake being sensible for backing down."

He looked up.

"I wasn't going to."

For a moment, we stood facing each other, separated only by the narrow table. Around us, chairs scraped across the floor and people spoke quietly. Nevertheless, it felt as though our conversation were taking place somewhere apart from the room.

"Why does this project matter so much to you?" I asked.

He considered the question.

"Because I've spent months watching people try to preserve something almost nobody noticed for decades. I want the exhibition to show their work, not just the result."

I hadn't expected that answer.

"That doesn't sound like the ambition of a man who wants his name on the first page."

"Not every ambition is about having your name printed somewhere."

I glanced at the screen, where the list of contributors was still visible.

"Sometimes names matter, though."

"I know."

There was a weight in his voice that hadn't been there before.

That afternoon, we went down to the northern section of the palazzo. Marcel handed me a hard hat without commenting on my reluctant expression. I put it on and followed him onto a narrow platform running alongside a wall where part of a mural had been uncovered.

The air smelled of lime and damp wood. Up close, the surface looked different from the photographs. Layers of

colour seemed to merge into one another, while fine cracks formed an irregular network I hadn't noticed before.

"Here," Marcel said, indicating a section of the wall. "The catalogue calls this a 'reconstructed ornament.'"

I studied it carefully.

"And what should it say?"

"'Made legible.' We haven't replaced the missing elements. We've uncovered what survived."

"That distinction will be particularly important in the English version."

"I know. That's why I wanted you to see it."

I leaned closer. I noticed a fine line, barely visible in the light coming from the side.

"If we call it a reconstruction, readers will assume we know more than we actually do."

Marcel looked at me with something resembling satisfaction.

"Exactly."

"Don't get used to it. Agreeing once doesn't mean our rivalry is over."

"Pity. I'd hoped for a ceasefire, at least."

I smiled without taking my eyes off the wall.

As I was leaving the platform, one of the workers moved a trolley full of tools into the passage, blocking our way. Marcel stopped immediately behind me. He didn't touch me, although there was very little space between us. I caught the scent of his shirt, clean soap, and something faintly sharp, perhaps wood. For several seconds, we stood silently, waiting for the way to clear.

"Nina," he said quietly.

I turned my head.

"Yes?"

"You didn't refuse coffee in Kraków because we'd argued, did you?"

The question surprised me more than anything else that had happened that day.

"I thought you'd forgotten."

"I haven't."

The worker moved the trolley aside. I could have climbed down, but I stayed where I was for another moment.

"I had a train to catch," I replied.

Marcel studied me.

"I know. I checked the timetable afterwards. Your train wasn't leaving for another three hours."

I laughed despite myself.

"That was a remarkably undignified investigation."

"I wanted to know whether you genuinely didn't have time or simply didn't want to spend it with me."

"And what did you conclude?"

"That I shouldn't make the decision for you."

I ran my fingers along the cool handrail.

For two years, we hadn't revisited that conversation. Now, in the half-light of an old palazzo, I wanted to tell him the truth. That I'd been afraid of how interested I was. That, after the painful end of my previous relationship, I'd promised myself not to complicate my life with a man I'd met

while travelling. That his attentiveness had unsettled me more than any amount of flirting could have done.

I said none of those things.

"I still have a busy schedule," I replied.

"I'm not inviting you for coffee today."

"Excellent."

"Yet."

I looked at him incredulously, but this time he made no attempt to hide his smile.

By the time we returned to the courtyard, the rain had stopped. Late-afternoon light brightened the wet stone. Marcel paused beside the steps.

"I'd like to show you the remaining rooms tomorrow at nine."

"Ten. I have a call with a client in Warsaw at nine."

"Ten it is."

"And I want the documentation beforehand."

"You'll have it this evening."

I adjusted the strap of my bag.

"Marcel?"

"Yes?"

"Don't mistake the fact that I enjoy talking to you for permission to make decisions on my behalf."

For a moment, he looked at me without smiling.

"I don't want to make decisions for you, Nina."

"Then what do you want?"

He took his time answering.

"I'd like us not to walk away from the conversation this time before it's really begun."

I didn't reply. I turned toward the exit, aware of his gaze following me.

I had my own plans, my own professional ambitions, and several very good reasons to keep my distance. Yet once I reached the street, I caught myself thinking not about the documents waiting to be checked, but about ten o'clock the following morning.

And about a man who could simultaneously drive me to distraction and make me want to hear whatever he said next.

Chapter 2 - Boundaries in the Fine Print

At eight the following morning, I sat at a small table in my rented apartment near Piazza della Signoria, surrounded by notes and empty coffee cups. Florence was coming to life beyond the window. I could hear the metallic rattle of shop shutters being raised, neighbours talking, and the distant whine of a scooter squeezing through the narrow street.

Marcel's email was open on my laptop.

He'd sent it the previous evening, exactly as promised. It contained a folder of technical documentation, the catalogue's revision history, and a brief note: "Not everything has been organised yet. I've marked the sections we need to verify together."

There was no apology and no attempt to explain the question of authorship. On one hand, I appreciated that he wasn't trying to settle a complicated issue with a few polite sentences. On the other, I wanted to grab him by the shoulders and demand an answer before he started talking about plaster, pigments, and raking light again.

I spent almost an hour going through the files. Some versions were several months old; others had been prepared recently. Certain passages sounded familiar, but many expressions belonged to standard conservation terminology. I wasn't going to make accusations based on similar technical language. I needed evidence.

At nine, I called my client in Warsaw. We discussed a forthcoming conference on cultural heritage management. If everything went according to plan, it could become the first major assignment carried out under the name of my future studio.

"Are you still thinking about setting up your own team?" Joanna asked when we'd finished discussing the details.

"More seriously than ever."

"You'll need people you can trust."

I glanced at the open folder containing Marcel's documents.

"That's precisely what I'm working on."

After the call, I closed my laptop and sat motionless for a moment. I was thirty years old, yet I still occasionally behaved as though I had to prove to the world that independence meant never needing anyone close. My friend Marta called it my "professional armour." She claimed I could negotiate with directors of international institutions but treated an ordinary dinner invitation as an attempted takeover of my life.

I had no intention of admitting she was right.

Especially now.

Marcel was waiting for me at the palazzo entrance a few minutes before ten. He wore a dark navy shirt and light trousers, with rolled-up exhibition plans tucked beneath his arm. He looked like someone who had already put in half a day's work.

"Punctual," he observed.

"Some of us respect schedules."

"Others started work at six."

"That doesn't mean they have to boast about it."

He smiled and handed me a paper folder.

"Printouts of the most important versions. I thought it might be easier to compare them without constantly switching between documents."

I took the folder, surprised by the small gesture. I hadn't asked for paper copies, but that was exactly how I preferred to work on complicated texts. I liked marking differences with a pencil, seeing entire paragraphs side by side, and spreading successive versions across a table.

"How did you know?"

"In Kraków, you had a printed paper covered in colour-coded annotations."

"You remember that?"

He shrugged.

"I remember things that seem important."

For a moment, I couldn't think of an answer.

Marcel headed toward the stairs, and I followed, trying not to wonder what else he remembered.

Work on the lighting was under way in the exhibition hall. Cables lay across the floor, and technicians were checking the positioning of the spotlights. Marcel stopped in front of a large display panel showing photographs of successive stages of conservation.

"I'd like us to agree on one thing before we start," he said.

"I'm listening."

"I won't change your translations without discussing them with you. You won't alter technical descriptions without consulting me."

"That sounds reasonable."