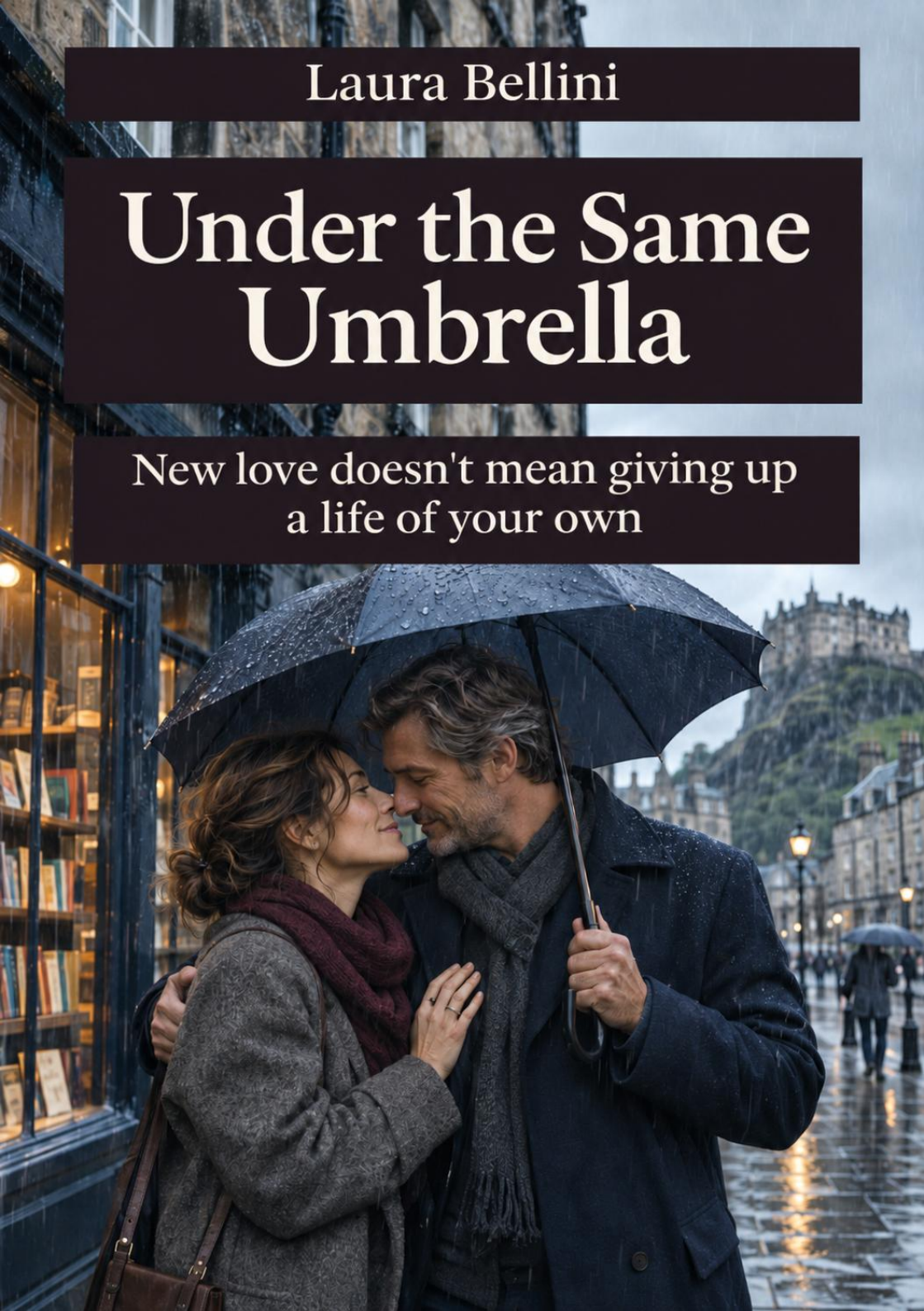
Laura Bellini

Under the Same Umbrella

New love doesn't mean giving up a life of your own



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ROMANS

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INTRO

Rain in Edinburgh had a particular talent for ruining plans that seemed perfectly thought out. It never fell properly, never offered the dramatic excuse of taking shelter beneath an awning and waiting for a downpour to pass. Instead, it patiently worked its way inside coat collars, settled on eyelashes, and ensured that even the most carefully styled hair developed a mind of its own within minutes. That Thursday afternoon, however, I had no intention of letting the weather spoil my mood. I carried a folder of designs in my left hand, a navy-blue umbrella in my right, and a plan in my head that, for the first time in years, belonged entirely to me.

I was forty-four, owned an interior design studio, and lived in a flat where nobody moved my belongings around while insisting it would make my life easier. Three years had passed since my divorce. Long enough for me to stop instinctively explaining every decision I made, yet not quite long enough to forget what it had cost me to reclaim the simple right to say, "This is how I want it."

That afternoon, my main objective was to sign the contract for renovating a small property on a side street in Stockbridge. It would become a Polish-English book club, the dream of my friend, Marta Sokołowska. For her, it was the venture of a lifetime. For me, it was an opportunity to create somewhere I could be proud of and perhaps attract a few more commissions in a city that was slowly beginning to feel like home.

My phone vibrated in my coat pocket.

"Beata, tell me you're close," Marta said before I could even greet her.

"I'm close. Unless you've moved the building since this morning, I'll be there in five minutes."

"I haven't moved anything. There's just one small complication."

I stopped at a pedestrian crossing.

"What kind of complication?"

"Andrzej is here."

"Who?"

"Andrzej Bury. The bookshop owner I told you about. He promised to help with the books, events, and contacts with publishers."

I remembered the man Marta had mentioned in several messages. Polish, a longtime Edinburgh resident, and apparently someone who knew every worthwhile bookshop in the city. Until now, I'd had no reason to take much interest in him.

"Wonderful. The more people helping, the better."

There was a brief silence at the other end.

"He's brought his own ideas for arranging the space."

I looked at the folder containing six weeks of work, three alternative layouts, and an estimate Marta had approved the previous evening.

"I see," I said slowly. "And is your friend an interior designer?"

"No."

"Then I'll be delighted to hear his suggestions."

Marta sighed.

"That's precisely what I'm afraid of."

I ended the call before she could explain exactly what she meant. Warm shop-window lights shimmered across the wet pavement. I passed a little café carrying the scent of freshly ground coffee and turned into the street leading to the future club. I was prepared for a difficult conversation with a man convinced that a few bookshelves and comfortable armchairs were all it took to create a successful interior.

What I wasn't prepared for was the sight outside the property: a man simultaneously trying to hold the door open, rescue a rain-soaked cardboard box of books, and shelter an elderly woman from the weather.

"After you," he was saying calmly. "The box has already lost this particular battle."

The woman laughed, squeezed through the doorway, and disappeared inside.

The man lowered the box onto a dry patch of pavement. He wore a dark coat, his hair was lightly threaded with grey, and he had the sort of face that suggested he smiled more often than he posed for photographs. When he lifted his head, I noticed fine lines around his eyes. He looked close to fifty, although he moved with the energy of a younger man.

"Would you mind giving me a hand?" he asked.

I glanced at the box.

"That depends. Are you going to try to convince me that books should be arranged alphabetically?"

He regarded me with unmistakable surprise.

"That depends on whether we're trying to sell them or read them."

I smiled despite myself. I took two parcels from him while he picked up the remaining box.

"Can't we do both?"

"I certainly hope so. I've spent twenty years trying to prove we can."

We went inside.

The property smelled of damp plaster, old wood, and paint that the previous tenant had apparently applied without much enthusiasm. Two tall windows faced the street, and a recess against the back wall would be ideal for a small stage for author events. I could already imagine warm lighting, upholstered seating, and low bookshelves with enough space between them for someone to walk comfortably while carrying a cup of tea.

Marta hurried out from behind a makeshift counter.

"Beata! You're here!" She gave me a quick hug, then turned towards my companion. "I see you've already met."

We looked at each other.

"Not quite," he said.

"Beata Wolska, our interior designer. Andrzej Bury, the bookshop owner."

Andrzej raised his eyebrows.

"So you're responsible for the plans I'm apparently about to ruin?"

"You haven't even seen them yet."

"Then I still have the opportunity to ruin them professionally."

His voice was deep, slightly husky, and his amusement held no trace of malice. I felt a reluctant flicker of curiosity.

He didn't look like someone who needed to win every conversation.

At least, not until I opened my folder.

I spread the drawings across the temporary table. Marta stood beside me, pointing out where she intended to hold poetry evenings. Andrzej studied the designs in silence for some time. Rather than immediately commenting, he walked around the room, paused beside a window, and examined the distance between the wall and the recess.

"This is very good," he said at last.

I was more surprised than I wanted to show.

"Thank you."

"Especially the open space in the middle. People need somewhere to talk, not just sit with a book. But here..." He indicated the shelves by the entrance. "I'd like to suggest a change."

"I'm listening."

"Those shelves should be taller. We could fit twice as many books."

"And block the natural light."

"We could add artificial lighting."

"We could also build a wall of books and stop pretending we're designing somewhere for people to meet."

Marta made a small noise that sounded suspiciously like a cough.

Andrzej looked at me but didn't answer immediately. He returned to the window, considered its height, and glanced at the plans.

"You're right about the light," he conceded. "But that means less room for the collection. And books are why people will come here."

"They're why people will come the first time. Whether they stay also depends on how they feel once they're here."

For a moment, we stood facing each other across the drawings. I noticed that he listened carefully even when he disagreed. That was considerably more dangerous to my peace of mind than his rather attractive smile.

"What if the shelves were movable?" he asked.

"That depends on the construction."

"I know a carpenter who could make them."

"I'd need to discuss dimensions and safety requirements with him first."

"I could send him the drawings right away."

He reached towards my folder.

Instinctively, I drew it closer.

Andrzej stopped his hand.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's your project."

There was no irritation in his voice, only understanding, which unsettled me unexpectedly. For an instant, I pictured another hand taking documents from my desk and heard a familiar phrase: "I'll sort it out for you. It'll be quicker." I'd heard those words so often that eventually I'd stopped noticing when my own decisions disappeared beneath someone else's concern.

"Exactly," I replied, more quietly than I intended.

Andrzej didn't try to ease the tension with a joke. He stepped back and turned to Marta, asking when the next

delivery of books was due. He gave me space, and to my surprise, I found myself wanting him to stay beside the table.

A little later, Marta had to leave to collect the keys to the storage room. We were alone. Outside, the rain grew heavier, and in the empty space we could hear drops striking the metal windowsill.

Andrzej slipped his hands into his coat pockets.

"I didn't mean to interfere with your work."

"I know. Although you moved rather quickly from making a suggestion to taking action."

"It's a bad habit of mine. When I see a problem, I immediately look for a solution."

"Sometimes it's worth checking whether the other person needs rescuing at all."

He studied me more closely. His smile disappeared, but he held my gaze.

"I'll try to remember that, Ms Wolska."

The way he said my name felt almost alarmingly personal for a man I'd known for less than an hour. I gathered the drawings to give my hands something to do. As I slipped the final sheet into my folder, I noticed Andrzej picking up my navy-blue umbrella from a chair.

"I believe this belongs to you."

"Thank you."

He handed it over without attempting to open it or decide whether it was time for me to leave.

"I have one more suggestion," he said.

"About the bookshelves?"

"No. Coffee. There's a place across the street that makes a decent espresso. We could discuss how to fit in the books without shutting out the light."

I glanced at my watch. I had a call with a client at six, after which I intended to spend the evening in my own flat, with dinner and my sketchbook. My plans didn't include coffee with a strange man. Especially one whose presence suddenly made me notice details: the damp lock of hair near his temple, the patience beneath his confident tone, and the way he waited for my answer.

"I can't today," I said.

Andrzej nodded.

"That's fine."

No persuasion. No questioning whether I really was that busy. He simply accepted my answer.

I should have felt relieved.

Instead, when he opened the door for me and the scent of wet stone drifted in from the street, I found myself thinking about the coffee I hadn't had and the man who had allowed me to say no.

I stood beneath my navy-blue umbrella for a moment, watching Andrzej go back inside for the books.

Was it possible that I was already beginning to want someone's company, just when I'd finally learned how to live so well without it?

Chapter 1 - Terms That Weren't in the Contract

On Friday morning, I woke with the conviction that I'd made a mistake the previous day. It wasn't about turning down the invitation for coffee. At my age, a woman had every right to refuse anything, from an extra biscuit to romantic complications. The trouble was that, before falling asleep, I'd thought about Andrzej Bury three separate times and wondered twice whether his invitation had been anything more than politeness.

None of those thoughts had appeared on my schedule.

Over the past three years, I'd built a life in which random men had no place between my morning coffee and a review of technical drawings. I had my own clients, bills that were paid on time, friends, and, most importantly, the freedom to make decisions without consulting anyone. Even my recently purchased armchair, outrageously expensive and indecently comfortable, stood exactly where I wanted it.

At nine o'clock, Marta called.

"Beata, please don't get upset."

"That's not a reassuring way to begin a conversation."

"Andrzej has found someone to supply the bookshelves."

I put down my coffee.

"The shelves we haven't designed yet?"

"Yes. Well, not exactly. He knows someone who could make them."

"Marta, yesterday we discussed the possibility of changing the design, not ordering furniture."

"I know. That's why I want the two of you to meet today and settle everything."

I looked at my calendar. I had a client appointment in New Town before noon, followed by two phone calls and an hour reserved for revising the cost estimate. I could find the time. That didn't mean I intended to pretend that rearranging my day to accommodate someone else's enthusiasm was my favourite occupation.

"I'll be there at four. But design decisions will be made jointly, based on what we've agreed with you as the client."

"Of course."

"And nobody orders anything without my knowledge."

"Of course."

I knew Marta well enough to recognise the second "of course" as an expression of hope rather than a guarantee.

At four o'clock, the rain had once again turned Edinburgh into a watercolour painting. Temporary lamps illuminated the premises on a Stockbridge side street, and more cardboard boxes stood against the wall than there had been the day before. Marta was sitting on the windowsill with a notebook, while Andrzej knelt beside one of the walls, measuring the distance from an electrical socket.

He looked up as I came in.

"Good afternoon, Ms Wolska."

"Good afternoon. I see someone likes to get started without the designer."

He glanced at his tape measure.

"I'm only checking whether reality matches the drawings."

"Reality usually takes precedence."

"So we agree on something after all."

He smiled faintly and stood up. He was wearing dark jeans and a pale jumper with the sleeves pushed up. Without his coat, he looked less formal and considerably more interesting. He wasn't conventionally handsome in the way glossy magazines liked to describe. His face, however, was one on which experience had left its marks without taking away its expression.

Marta jumped down from the windowsill.

"Good, you're both here. We need to decide whether we're changing the shelving layout, because we're starting to run out of time."

I spread the drawings across the table.

"Before we discuss the furniture, I'd like to clarify something. I've signed a contract to design the interior, supervise the work, and coordinate the delivery of the furnishings. If we're changing the scope, I need to know who has final authority over the decisions."

Andrzej rested his hands on the edge of the table.

"Marta."

"Correct," I replied. "But I'm professionally responsible for the safety and functionality of the design."

"And I'm responsible for the books that need to go in it."

I looked at him.

"In that case, we can work together, provided neither of us pretends to know everything."

"Fair enough."

He slid a sheet of paper towards me. It showed bookshelves on castors that could be arranged in different configurations. The sketch wasn't technical, but it demonstrated an understanding of the space. Andrzej hadn't tried to put furniture into every available centimetre. He had left room for gatherings, clear walkways, and a reading corner beside the window.

"It's not a bad idea," I admitted.

"I'll try not to look too pleased with myself."

"Please don't restrain yourself. It's a rare opportunity."

Marta laughed and walked towards the wall where the small stage was supposed to stand.

"Could you two stop duelling for five minutes? I'd like to know whether we'll be ready for the opening."

I opened the cost estimate.

"If there are no delays with the electrical installation, yes. But we need a proper quotation and specifications for the shelving."

Andrzej pointed to a name written beneath his sketch.

"The carpenter I know fitted out my bookshop. He's reliable, and he meets his deadlines."

"I don't know him."

"You can meet him."

"And I haven't seen his quotation."

"You can have that too."

"Then we don't have a problem yet."

Andrzej's smile widened.

"You have a remarkable talent for turning arguments into lists of things that need checking."

"It's part of my job."

For the next hour, we discussed the design. Andrzej knew how much space people needed when they started browsing books, how quickly a queue could form around a table of new releases, and why chairs that looked wonderful in photographs became instruments of torture after forty minutes at an author event.

I knew how to translate those observations into dimensions, materials, and costs. At one point, I realised we'd stopped competing and begun finishing each other's ideas.

I didn't like how naturally it came to us.

"There's something else," Andrzej said when Marta stepped outside to answer a call. "I'd like the club to have at least two evenings a month devoted to Polish literature."

"Marta was planning bilingual meetings."

"And rightly so. But sometimes people who come looking for books in their native language are searching for something more. They want to spend an hour without having to translate themselves."

I studied him more closely.

"This matters to you."

"Yes."

"Why?"

He hesitated, as though he hadn't expected the question.

"When I first came here, my English was good enough to work, but not good enough to explain what I missed about home. Books were easier than people."

He answered without sentimentality, almost matter-of-factly. That was precisely why his words stayed with me.

"And now?" I asked.

"Now people are sometimes more interesting."

He didn't look away. I became aware that our conversation was no longer entirely about the bookshop.

Marta returned with news that quickly brought us back to reality. The building's owner had announced a fire-safety inspection for the following week. If the furniture arrangement was going to change, she would need an updated plan.

"I can prepare it by Monday," I said.

"And I'll get a preliminary quotation by then," Andrzej added.

"Without placing an order."

"Without placing an order," he repeated, raising one hand in surrender.

Marta looked visibly relieved.

"Wonderful. So we have a plan."

"We have a provisional plan," I corrected.

Andrzej gave a short laugh.

By the time we'd finished, it was dark outside. Marta locked the rear room and went to a nearby shop to get something to eat, leaving us alone at the table. I was gathering material samples when Andrzej slid an empty folder towards me from the other end of the table.

"May I?" he asked, indicating my drawings.

"You may pass me the folder. I'd rather arrange the drawings myself."

He did exactly as I'd asked.

"Ms Wolska, do all conversations with you resemble the negotiation of a peace treaty?"

"Only the successful ones."

"Then I'm beginning to understand why people trust you."

I didn't know what to say. His compliment wasn't about my appearance or professional achievements. It concerned a quality that, for years, had been presented to me as a fault. Stubbornness. The need for independence. A reluctance to hand someone else the reins.

"Not everyone," I said.

"I'd be surprised if everyone did."

He pulled back a chair.

Outside, a car drove through a puddle, scattering water across the pavement. For a moment, I watched the reflections of the lights on the wet cobblestones.

"You like having the last word too," I observed.

"Unfortunately. I ran the bookshop with my wife for more than a dozen years. After the divorce, I was left with the business and the conviction that if I didn't keep an eye on everything, something would fall apart."

It was the first thing he'd told me about his marriage. I didn't ask for details, although I was surprised by how easily he'd mentioned his divorce.

"I understand that instinct," I said.

"But you don't approve of it."

"Not always."

He accepted the answer without protest.

"This is going to be an interesting working relationship."

"Provided we survive the first week."

He laughed, and I discovered that I enjoyed making him laugh. It was a warm, slightly rough sound, entirely free of the cautious politeness he'd shown at the beginning of our meeting.

When we stepped outside, the rain had softened into a fine mist. I opened my umbrella. Andrzej stood beside me with his hands in his pockets and glanced towards the café.

"I'm not going to repeat yesterday's invitation," he said.

"Good."

"But if you ever fancy a coffee, the offer still stands."

"And there's no expiry date?"

"Books have taught me that some things turn out better when they're allowed to develop without being rushed."

It was an almost excessively romantic thing to say. Yet he delivered it so calmly that instead of laughing, I found myself studying him more closely.

"Good night, Mr Bury."

"Good night, Ms Wolska."

I headed towards the main road. After a dozen steps, I glanced back instinctively. Andrzej was still standing outside the entrance, but he wasn't watching me leave. He was checking his phone, evidently occupied with his own affairs. That ordinary sight brought me unexpected relief.

At home, I sat down at my desk and opened the project files. For several minutes, I adjusted the shelving

arrangement to incorporate his suggestions. Then I stopped with the cursor hovering over the filename.

It would have been easy to convince myself that I was interested only in the way he thought about books. That his willingness to consider my arguments was simply a good foundation for working together.

Yet I couldn't forget the moment he'd said that people were sometimes more interesting.

My phone lit up with a short message from an unfamiliar number.

"Marta gave me your number for project matters. The quotation will be ready on Monday. And I promise not to order a single shelf without approval. Andrzej Bury."

A moment later, a second message arrived.

"Not even a very small one."

I laughed in my empty flat.

I waited a few minutes before replying.

"I appreciate the promise. Please remember that I have an excellent memory for such things."

His answer appeared almost immediately.

"In that case, I'll do my best to earn its favour."

I put my phone down, screen facing the table.

I'd once believed that the hardest part of my new life would be learning to live alone. Now I was beginning to suspect that allowing someone into it might prove considerably harder, especially someone who hadn't asked anything of me yet but was nevertheless occupying more and more of my thoughts.

Chapter 2 - Coffee with No Strings Attached

On Monday morning, I found three wood samples, two invoices waiting to be paid, and a message from Andrzej Bury on my desk. None of it should have made any particular impression. I received messages from colleagues every day, and my inbox usually resembled a catalogue of other people's urgent needs. This one, however, contained something I hadn't expected from a man with whom I'd recently been arguing about the height of bookshelves.

"I'm sending the preliminary quotation and the carpenter's details. I haven't agreed to anything on your behalf. You can take your time checking everything. And if you need coffee to survive Monday, I know a reliable remedy."

The message included an attached estimate.

I read that first, as professional duty required. The prices were reasonable, the proposed dates realistic, and the carpenter had allowed for the possibility of making a prototype of one shelving module. Unlike many quotations I received, the document contained all the information necessary to make a decision.

Only then did I return to the final sentence.

"Does your reliable remedy involve working on the project as well?" I replied.

His answer came a few minutes later.

"This time I'm proposing something considerably less dangerous. Coffee without drawings, estimates, or discussions about bookshelves."

I stared at the screen longer than it took to read a single sentence. The invitation was unmistakable. I could no longer pretend it was simply another professional consultation.

I set down my phone and began preparing a presentation for a client. For an hour, I adjusted fabric combinations, selected shades of beige, and compared stone samples. When I looked at the message again, I already knew I didn't want to turn him down.

"Today at five. One hour. And absolutely no project talk."

"I accept the terms," he replied.

He added nothing else.

I met Marta that afternoon. We sat at the temporary table in the empty premises, and I spread the revised drawings in front of her. The changes involved no compromises I had reason to regret. The movable shelves could accommodate more books without blocking the windows, while the central gathering area retained the openness that mattered to me.

Marta examined the plans with almost childlike delight.

"This is exactly how I imagined it," she said. "Not like a shop. Like somewhere you can come even when you don't want to buy anything."

"Then we need to make sure people can actually stay."

I pointed to the space beside the window.

"There'll be two armchairs and a small table here. No requirement to take part in any of the meetings. Someone can simply sit down with a book."

Marta ran her fingers over the drawing.

"Do you know why this matters so much to me?"

I shook my head.