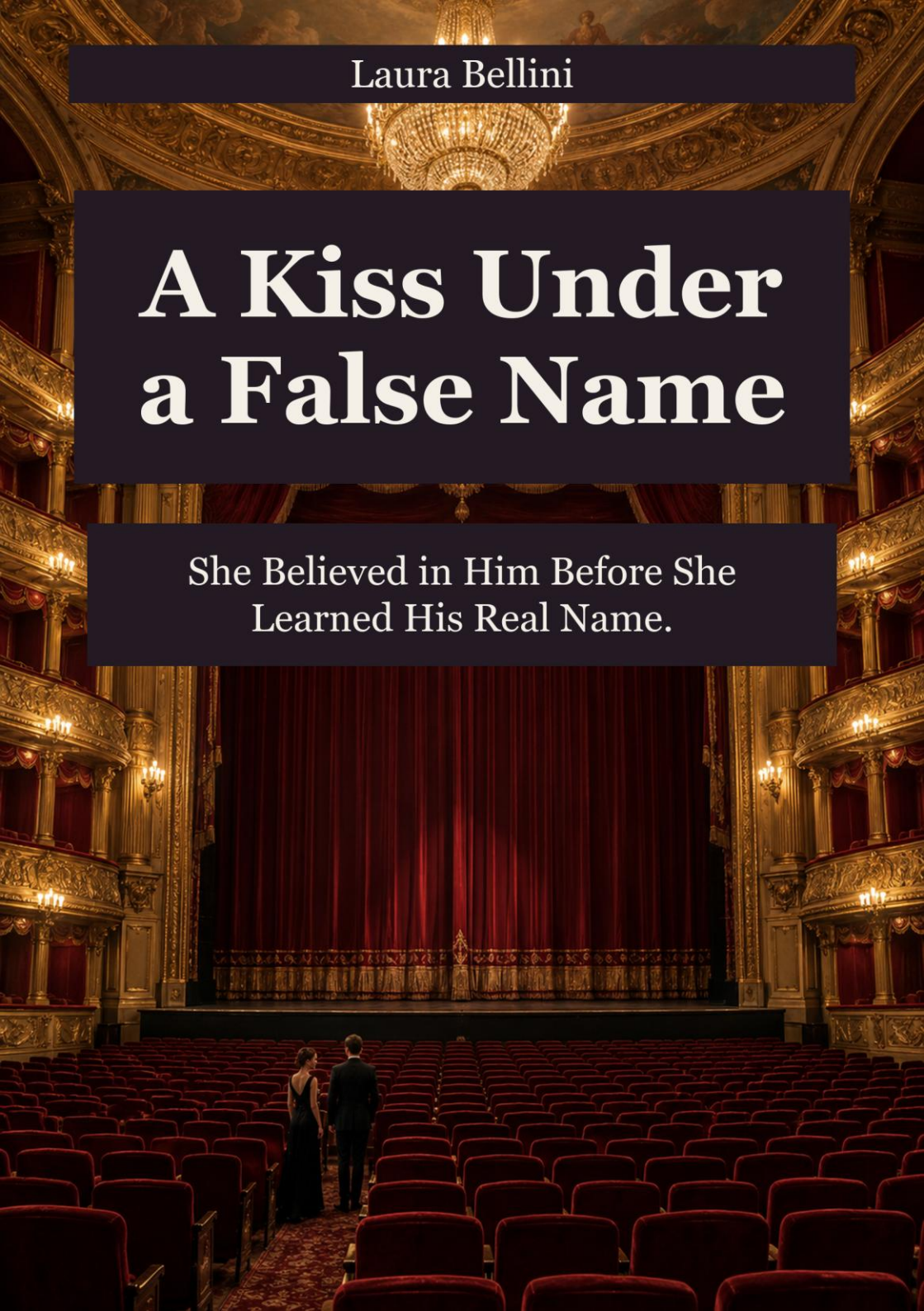


The background of the entire image is a photograph of a grand, ornate theater interior. The ceiling is high and features a large, multi-tiered chandelier that is illuminated. The walls are decorated with intricate gold-colored carvings and moldings. The theater is filled with rows of red velvet seats, which are currently empty. In the foreground, a man in a dark suit and a woman in a black dress are standing in the aisle, looking towards the stage. The stage is covered with a large, deep red velvet curtain. The overall atmosphere is one of elegance and drama.

Laura Bellini

A Kiss Under a False Name

She Believed in Him Before She
Learned His Real Name.

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ROMANS

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INTRO

At 11:17 p.m., every light in the cinema went out.

They did not dim or flicker in warning. They simply vanished, taking with them the hum of the ventilation fans, the buzz of the transformers, and the low murmur of the city slipping through a half-closed service door. I was left alone in the middle of the old auditorium, between rows of seats covered in plastic, with a laptop in one hand and a laser measure in the other.

"Perfect," I said into the darkness.

No one answered, which was the only courteous thing that had happened to me all day.

Luna Cinema was supposed to reopen in six weeks. Over the past seventeen years, the building had served, in order, as a furniture warehouse, an illegal rehearsal space, the site of three failed redevelopment projects, and a home to a pigeon population whose numbers no sensible person had ever attempted to establish. Now a private foundation had bought the property, secured funding from the city, and hired me to restore what the contract described as "the character of the original interior while accommodating contemporary functional requirements."

I called it trying to persuade an old cinema not to collapse on people during its first screening.

I was an interior architect specializing in historic buildings. I was thirty-two, ran my own studio, and had enough experience to know that when the electrical system stopped working a week before the first-stage inspection, panic was not the appropriate response.

So I panicked professionally.

I put down the laser measure, pulled out my phone, and switched on the flashlight. A white circle of light swept across the burgundy curtain, half of which had already been restored while the other half still looked as though it had survived a fire, a divorce, and several decades of indoor smoking.

I was about to call the site manager when something knocked somewhere behind the stage.

I froze.

"Mr. Paweł?"

Silence.

Paweł had left more than an hour ago. Everyone had. I had been the one encouraging them to go, assuring them I would stay for only twenty minutes, take the final measurements, and lock up.

That had been fifty-three minutes ago.

I heard another sound.

Clearer this time.

Footsteps.

I raised my phone higher.

"Hello?"

"If you're planning to hit me with that phone, I should warn you it looks expensive."

The voice came from the left side of the stage.

A moment later, a man stepped into the beam of light. First I saw a hand raised in surrender, then a dark jacket and a face I most definitely had not expected to see inside an abandoned cinema just before midnight.

He looked maybe thirty-five, thirty-six. Dark hair, several days' worth of stubble, and that irritating kind of calm particular to people whom the world rarely forced to explain why they were somewhere they had no business being.

"Who are you?"

"The man you just nearly blinded."

I lowered the phone a few inches.

"That wasn't an answer."

He smiled faintly.

"Marek Domański. I'm doing photographic documentation for the foundation."

The name meant nothing to me.

"You're not on the list of people authorized to enter the building."

"Because I was only supposed to be here for half an hour."

"Any burglar could say that."

"A burglar probably wouldn't spend twenty minutes sitting in a technical room trying to get your electricity back on."

I looked at him more carefully.

"You tried?"

"With moderate success."

As if to prove his point, a single emergency light came on somewhere above us. Its greenish glow was so bleak that the cinema instantly began to look like the set of a cheap horror movie.

Marek glanced up.

"There. We have atmosphere. All we need now are violins and the heroine making the unwise decision to go down into the basement."

"I don't go into basements with strange men."

"Good."

"Especially strange men who aren't on the access list."

His smile disappeared for a moment.

Briefly. Almost imperceptibly.

"A sensible rule."

Something about that answer made me study him again. He did not look like a photographer. Of course there was no official way a photographer was supposed to look, but a white shirt showed beneath his jacket, and his shoes were far too good for someone who had planned on spending the night walking around a dusty construction site.

"Where's your camera?"

He indicated the backpack slung over one shoulder.

"In there."

"Can I see your ID badge?"

"I don't have one."

"Identification?"

This time he was silent a fraction too long.

"It's in the car."

"Of course it is."

I started toward the exit, passing him while keeping my distance.

"Where are you going?"

"To lock up and call security."

"The front doors are held by an electromagnetic lock."

I turned.

"How do you know?"

Something changed in his face again.

"I checked."

I did not believe him.

I did not yet know why. Maybe because he answered too quickly. Maybe because when he said electromagnetic lock, his gaze automatically shifted toward the side corridor leading to a service exit that did not appear on the newer plans supplied to outside contractors.

I only knew about it because three weeks earlier I had found the old door myself, hidden behind a sheet of fiberboard.

"There's another exit," I said.

"I know."

The words escaped before he could stop them.

We stared at each other for several seconds.

"The foundation's photographer has an impressive knowledge of the building."

"I like knowing where the exits are."

"I like knowing who I'm locked in the dark with."

This time, he did not smile.

"And rightly so."

The phone in his pocket vibrated. He took it out, glanced at the screen, and immediately declined the call.

For one second, I saw only the contact name.

Wysocki Law Firm.

There was nothing especially strange about it. People had lawyers. Photographers could have lawyers too.

Still, I remembered the name.

"Come on," he said. "I'll show you the service exit."

"I know where it is."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Then you can show me."

I should have called security. I should have stayed by the entrance until someone arrived. Above all, I should not have walked through the dark corridors of the cinema with a stranger.

I did.

Not because I trusted him.

Not yet.

A few minutes later, when the side door refused to budge, Marek crouched beside the old mechanism and wordlessly handed me his phone so I could hold the light for him. He did it so naturally, as though he considered it obvious that there was nothing he needed to hide from me. A message notification flashed across the screen.

I did not read it.

I only saw the first words.

"Mr. Aleksander..."

The screen went dark.

I looked at him.

"Marek?"

He lifted his head.

For a fraction of a second, I had the feeling I had made a mistake.

Not about the name.

About the man.

"Yes?"

I handed him the phone.

"Nothing."

The door opened a moment later.

Outside, rain was falling, the street gleamed with the lights of passing cars, and the cold October air smelled of wet asphalt. I stopped beneath the narrow awning. Marek stayed beside me, close enough that I could feel the warmth of his shoulder, but he did not touch me.

"I'll walk you to your car," he said.

"You don't have to."

"I know."

I looked at him.

"Then why are you offering?"

"Because I'd like an excuse to spend another three minutes with you."

For the first time that night, I had no quick answer.

He smiled, but this time there was no confidence in it.

More of a question.

And that was exactly why I let him walk with me.

I did not yet know that Marek Domański did not exist.

I also did not know that when I let him kiss me a few days later, the man standing in front of me would already have had plenty of chances to tell me the truth.

The worst part was not going to be that he had given me a false name.

The worst part was going to be discovering why he needed my trust before he dared to give me his real one.