

Laura Bellini

All the Nights Apart

Twenty Years Later, Their Shared
Dream Opens Its Doors Again.



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ROMANS

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INTRO

The first key didn't fit.

For several seconds, I stood outside the side door of the Meteor cinema with wet hair plastered to my cheek, trying to convince myself that was a perfectly reasonable excuse to go back to the car. It was almost eleven at night, October rain streamed down the windows of the shuttered shops along Wschodnia Street, and I was forty-five years old, with enough experience to know that important decisions should not be made after ten hours of work and one sandwich eaten over the design for a hotel lobby.

The problem was, I had made the decision three weeks earlier.

Now I was holding the consequences on a metal key ring.

I chose the second key.

The lock gave way with a heavy clunk.

"Of course," I muttered. "You just had to make it dramatic."

I wasn't sure whether I was talking to the lock, the building, or myself.

The door opened perhaps a foot and stopped against something soft. I pushed with my shoulder. A pile of old advertising flyers scraped across the floor, apparently swept there during the last cleanup. "French Night. Three Films. One Ticket." The date on the faded paper was twenty-two years old.

I picked one up.

For a moment, I was twenty-four again.

Back then, I worked weekends at the Meteor, even though technically I was studying architecture and should have been spending every free hour on my projects. I sold tickets, made coffee on a machine older than I was, and helped close the auditorium after the final screening. Sometimes I stayed until two or three in the morning.

Not alone.

I crushed the flyer a little harder than I meant to, then smoothed it out with my thumb and left it on the windowsill.

I had come here to inspect the building.

That was all.

The official preparatory period started on Monday. I had six months to present the final modernization concept, secure heritage approvals, and prove to the fund covering part of the investment that I had not lost my mind when I submitted an offer for a ten-year lease on a cinema that had been closed for seven years.

My partners at the firm believed I had.

I said we were diversifying.

It sounded much better than: when I found out the Meteor might be turned into a discount store, I couldn't bring myself to let it disappear.

I switched on the flashlight on my phone.

The lobby looked worse than it had during the inspection with the city official. In daylight, dust was only dust, cracked plaster needed repairs, and peeling veneer was simply a line item in a budget. At night, every object recovered its history. The shuttered ticket booth. The brass railing. The poster cases with nothing left inside but yellowed rectangles where adhesive tape had once been.

I walked toward the doors to the main auditorium.

A small dent was still visible in the wood at hip height.

I smiled before I could stop myself.

"This will be the entrance to the café," Michał had once said, leaning a roll of plans against those doors.

"This is the entrance to the auditorium."

"For now. You think too short-term."

"I'm twenty-four. I'm allowed."

"Then think long-term for five minutes."

After that, he took my pencil and I tried to grab it back. He pulled his hand away. I shoved him. His hip hit the door handle.

We laughed so loudly that the cinema manager came out of his office and threatened to throw us both out.

Twenty years.

I ran my finger over the dent.

I didn't know why that one small mark was harder to bear than all the photographs I had deleted years ago.

I opened the doors.

The smell was exactly what I expected: dust, damp, old upholstery, and the wood of the stage. The auditorium sloped gently toward the screen. Two hundred and seventy-eight seats, one hundred and nine of which needed restoration, thirty-four likely needed replacing, and the rest required professional cleaning. I knew because I had spent the last two weeks analyzing every meter of the building the way I analyzed every investment.

Numbers were safe.

Numbers didn't remember that we had once sat in the last row after a late screening and designed a future we had no money to afford.

A cinema. A café. A small stage. Films shown late into the night. Meetings, concerts, exhibitions. A place that would stay alive while the rest of the city went to sleep.

Our place.

The most absurd thing was that, twenty years later, my current design was not all that different from the sketches we had drawn in Michał's notebook.

Only he was no longer in it.

A light flickered.

I froze.

It wasn't the light from my phone.

One of the emergency lights above the side aisle came on.

Then another.

"Great."

The electrical installation was supposed to be disconnected except for the technical circuit. That was what the administrator had assured me.

I started toward the exit when a soft mechanical click came from the back of the auditorium.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

I knew that sound.

I turned toward the projection booth.

"Impossible."

The clicking accelerated.

A white rectangle appeared on the screen.

Light cut through the darkness above my head, revealing particles of dust spinning in the beam. For several seconds, the image trembled, then steadied.

I saw the Meteor ticket booth.

The old one. Before the 2004 renovation.

The footage was grainy, recorded on an amateur camera. Someone panned across the empty lobby until a girl in a red sweater stepped into frame.

Me.

Twenty years younger.

Laughing.

I held a sheet of paper up to the camera.

At the top, handwritten in large letters, were the words: METEOR 2.0.

Below them were our sketches.

A chill went through me that had nothing to do with the temperature.

I had never seen this recording before.

On the screen, my younger self turned and began saying something to the person holding the camera. The film had no sound, but I remembered the way I used to shape my mouth when I spoke, even remembered that sweater. The camera shook, then the image moved toward the mirror hanging opposite the ticket booth.

In the reflection, I saw a man.

Tall, slim, holding the camera to his face.

Michał.

I stepped back.

The projector stopped.

The image vanished.

The auditorium went dark again.

I heard the projection booth door open.

I didn't move.

The footsteps on the metal stairs were slow and familiar in a way I could not explain rationally. I had not seen him in twenty years. A person should not remember the way someone else came down a flight of stairs for half an adult lifetime.

And yet I did.

First I saw his silhouette.

Then his face.

He was older. Of course he was. His hair was shorter, gray at the temples, and the lines beside his mouth made him look more severe than the boy I had carried for years in the most unnecessary corner of my memory.

But it was him.

Michał stopped a few yards away from me.

For a moment, he looked at me as though every word he had prepared in advance had suddenly become useless.

"Anka."

No one had called me that in years.

My fingers tightened around the keys.

"What are you doing here?"

He looked at the screen, then back at me.

"The same thing you are."

"Impossible."

"Why?"

"Because I have the keys."

He took one hand out of his coat pocket.

A second metal key ring lay in his palm.

With an identical set.

I didn't yet know which was worse: that someone had given Michał keys to my cinema, that he had a recording from our last autumn together, or that after twenty years the first thing I noticed was the way he said my name.

"Looks like," he said quietly, "this time we're going to have to open it together."

Chapter 1 - The Second Set of Keys

For several seconds, I stared at the keys resting in Michał's palm and wondered whether there was any reasonable explanation for a situation in which a man I had not seen in two decades appeared in the middle of the night inside a building I had just committed a significant portion of my savings to renovating, started an old projector showing footage of our youth, and then announced that we were going to have to do something together.

I couldn't find one.

"No," I said.

Michał raised an eyebrow.

"That was quick."

"What was?"

"Making a decision before you know what we're talking about."

"I've developed a few new skills over the past twenty years."

"I remember you were pretty good at saying no back then too."

"And I remember you were pretty good at disappearing."

The words came out sharper than I intended. That irritated me more than his presence did. I had come here with a folder of measurements, a cost calculator, and a six-month plan. From now on, everything concerning the Meteor was supposed to be measurable. Square meters, deadlines, structural loads, number of seats, the cost of restoring a chair, replacing the wiring, revenue from the café. And yet