

Laura Bellini

Between Guilt and Touch

He Has to Rebuild Her Studio. First, He
Has to Win Back Her Trust.



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ROMANS

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INTRO

I heard the first crack at 6:43, while I was trying to decide whether the thin gold line around the rim of the cup was finally even enough, or whether I had simply convinced myself it was because I had been awake for eleven hours.

I set down my brush and looked toward the ceiling. Something was always creaking in the old factory. Pipes sighed, wooden beams responded to changes in temperature, and the heavy windows trembled when the first trams rolled along the street a few hundred meters away. After five years of running my studio, I had learned to recognize most of those sounds.

This one was different.

Short. Dry. Definitely too close.

I got up from the table.

"Not today," I told the building, as though old brick might appreciate an argument involving deadlines.

Twelve porcelain cups from the beginning of the last century stood on the table in front of me, each worth more than my first car. The museum had been waiting for them for three months. If I finished the conservation work by Friday, I would get another commission - larger, longer, and well paid enough that I could stop checking my bank balance every time I needed to order materials.

For the first time in a long while, I had a chance to move from my studio somehow staying afloat to my studio actually working.

That was why I had slept maybe two hours that night.

That was why I was there before seven.

And that was why, when the first dust fell from the ceiling, instead of leaving immediately, I moved the porcelain to the center of the table and covered it with a soft cloth.

The second crack left no room for negotiation.

A thin fissure appeared above the shelving unit where I kept my pigments.

I knew that crack.

Except yesterday it had been maybe twenty centimeters long, and Jakub Wysocki had told me it was superficial.

I also remembered exactly how he had said it.

Calmly.

Confidently.

Looking straight into my eyes like a man who had spent his entire career earning money because people trusted his judgment.

"You can work here safely, Lena."

Six words.

I should not have remembered them.

The crack moved sideways.

I stepped back.

"Oh, no."

This time I did not try to save the cups. I grabbed my phone and the bag lying beside the door and ran across the studio.

I was already in the corridor when something crashed behind me.

A cloud of dust struck me. I coughed, turning my head away, and then I heard something much worse than breaking plaster.

Water.

At first, individual drops striking the metal table.

A moment later, a rush.

I took two steps back before common sense caught up with my body.

Water was pouring through a hole in the ceiling.

Onto my tables.

Onto the shelves.

Onto the wooden crates containing my documentation.

Onto the covered porcelain cups.

"Damn it."

I started toward the main shutoff valve by the back room, but another crack stopped me. Plaster crumbled above the passageway.

At the same moment, the phone vibrated in my hand.

I did not have time to look at the screen.

"Lena!"

The voice came from the stairwell.

I knew it as well as I knew the crack in my ceiling.

Jakub appeared in the doorway a few seconds later, wearing a dark jacket thrown over his shirt, his hair wet from the morning rain. He must have come straight from home.

I had no idea why that information even registered in my mind.

I was furious, my studio was turning into a swimming pool, and somehow I still noticed that he had not had time to fasten the cuff of his left sleeve.

He stopped when he saw the hole.

And for a moment, he said nothing.

That was enough.

"You said it was safe."

He looked at me.

The last time I had seen that expression was six months earlier, when I first showed him the crack above the window. He had walked over to the wall, touched the plaster, taken photographs and measurements, brought in instruments whose names I never remembered.

Then he had asked me out for coffee, and for two hours we talked about everything except the building.

That was the beginning of my mistake.

We had not kissed.

We had not even held hands.

And yet, within a few weeks, I had somehow learned what coffee he ordered when he was tired, why he did not answer his father's calls, and that whenever he was uncertain about something, he rubbed his thumb along the edge of his watch.

He was doing it now.

"Let's get out of here," he said.

"You told me I could work."

"Lena."

"Yesterday. You were standing right here, and you told me I could stay."

"I know what I said."

It hurt more than it should have.

He did not raise his voice.

He never did.

Jakub was one of those people who became even calmer in a crisis, until you started wondering whether the problem existed only inside your own head.

I pointed toward the studio.

"This is your version of safe?"

His gaze shifted past me.

Then stopped.

I turned.

Water was still running from the ceiling, but Jakub was not looking at it.

He was staring at the wall beside the back room.

At the steel support his crew had installed there three weeks earlier.

Yesterday, there had been a red tamper seal beside the clamp.

I had photographed it by accident while taking a picture of a new shelf for my sister. Jakub had explained that the seal made it possible to tell whether anyone had disturbed the fitting while work was being carried out on the floor above.

Now it was gone.

"What?" I asked.

Jakub stepped inside.

I caught his sleeve.

"You just said not to go in there."

He looked at my hand and then at me.

For a fraction of a second, I was standing too close.

I felt the chill of rain on his jacket and the familiar scent of his soap, which I had spent the last several months trying very hard not to remember.

I pulled my hand away.

"Don't go in," I repeated.

This time, he listened.

He took out his phone and snapped several photographs from the doorway.

"Where's the seal?" I asked.

He did not answer immediately.

"It should be here."

"I know."

I looked at him.

"Then where is it?"

Quick footsteps sounded in the corridor. Someone from the construction crew was calling Jakub's name, but he kept staring at the support.

For the first time since I had known him, I saw something on his face that he could not hide.

Not surprise.

Fear.

"Who had access to the studio last night?" he asked.

"No one."

"Who has a key?"

"Me. The building owner. You."

At last, he looked me in the eyes.

Rain tapped against the tall windows in the stairwell. Behind us, water was destroying five years of my life, and suddenly I stopped thinking about porcelain, paperwork, and money.

Because Jakub had not asked whether someone could have come in.

He had asked who had access.

"What are you hiding from me?" I said.

The muscles in his jaw tightened almost imperceptibly.

"Right now, we need to secure the building."

"That's not an answer."

"I know."

That word again.

Just as quiet.

Just as inadequate.

I looked past his shoulder at the construction worker who had just appeared on the half-landing. Then at the hole in my studio ceiling.

At the missing seal.

At Jakub.

Yesterday, all I had wanted was to finish twelve cups and send the client photographs before noon.

Now I knew two things.

My studio was not safe.

And the man I had believed knew more about that than he wanted to tell me.