

Laura Bellini

Our Last Sleepless Night

One Competition, Two Rivals, and Nights
They Can't Bring Themselves to End.



Our Last Sleepless Night

One Competition, Two Rivals, and Nights
They Can't Bring Themselves to End.

Laura Bellini

ROMANS

CONTENTS

INTRO	4
Chapter 1 - Red Pen.....	10
Chapter 2 - Light After Six.....	28
Chapter 3 - The Second Finalist.....	47
Chapter 4 - What He Didn't Throw Away	62
Chapter 5 - Between Ten and Four	85
Chapter 6 - The Boundaries of Light.....	106
Chapter 7 - The Hallway Footage.....	130
Chapter 8 - The Package for K17	145
Chapter 9 - The Package He Never Collected	167
Chapter 10 - A Night Without the Project	183
Chapter 11 - The Name That Was Missing.....	209
Chapter 12 - Project 214	229
Chapter 13 - The Man from the Footage	249
Chapter 14 - What Remains After the Light	278
Chapter 15 - The Name from My Old Office	300
Chapter 16 - An Honest Defeat.....	317
Chapter 17 - Under My Own Name.....	337
Chapter 18 - When Winning No Longer Matters.....	358
Chapter 19 - The Result.....	380
Chapter 20 - The First Night We Didn't Have to End.....	400

INTRO

At 2:17 in the morning, I began to suspect the building didn't like me.

The old railway power station in Warsaw's Praga district creaked every time the wind forced its way beneath the half-closed skylights. During the day, those sounds disappeared beneath architects' conversations, snapping laptop lids, and presentations from the competition organizers. Now I was alone with four stories of brick, steel beams, and my own project, which in less than six hours would decide whether my studio survived another year.

The ground-floor plan still glowed on the screen.

I moved one light source twenty centimeters.

Undid the change.

Moved it again.

"This isn't designing. It's negotiating with a lamp."

The voice came from the dark passage leading toward the former machine hall.

I jumped hard enough to knock my cup.

Adrian Krawiec stepped out from behind a concrete column carrying two paper cups of coffee and wearing the expression of a man who did not consider appearing soundlessly at two in the morning a character flaw.

"I thought you went back to the hotel."

"That's funny. I thought you did."

"Then I guess we're both disappointed."

He set one of the cups on my desk.

I didn't thank him.

Adrian only smiled and took a step back, as though he knew perfectly well I would accept the coffee only once he could pretend he hadn't left it there for me.

He had been my most dangerous competitor ever since, three months earlier, the five final studios invited to compete for the redevelopment of the power station into a twenty-four-hour cultural center had been announced. His firm was bigger, richer, and had completed projects mine could still only place in presentations under the heading "inspiration."

My name had one advantage.

I knew how to design light in a way that made people want to stay somewhere longer than they had planned.

And that was exactly how I intended to win.

The organizers had allowed the finalists to spend the last two days inside the building. Each team had been given a separate workspace, access to the documentation, and permission to take measurements at night. My colleagues had gone to sleep after midnight. I had made them. At nine in the morning, they needed to look like people who knew what they were doing.

I could look like a ghost.

Adrian sat on the edge of the next table.

"Still fighting with the main hall?"

"I'm not fighting."

He looked at the screen.

"You've been moving the same light for forty minutes."

I turned toward him.

"You've been watching me for forty minutes?"

"I can hear the mouse clicking."

"That's worse."

He laughed quietly.

I didn't like his laugh. It was far too calm for a man whose project could, in a few hours, cost me a contract worth more than every commission my studio had completed over the last two years combined.

I also didn't like the way being around Adrian made me forget that I was thirty-two, owned my own firm, and had enough experience not to react to men just because they rolled up the sleeves of their shirts and knew how to look at you as if a conversation mattered more than merely filling the silence between their own sentences.

I picked up the coffee.

"This doesn't mean I forgive you."

"For what?"

"The coffee."

"I didn't know it required forgiveness."

"Everything from the competition requires suspicion."

His smile disappeared faster than it had appeared.

"Marta."

The fact that he said my name seriously irritated me immediately.

"No."

"I haven't said anything yet."

"That's why I'm saying it in advance."

He slid off the table.

"Come with me."

"Absolutely not."

"I want to show you something."

I looked at the clock.

2:24.

"If it's your project, I'd rather lose honestly."

"It's not about my project."

That stopped me more effectively than any request could have.

Adrian headed toward the old control room. After a few steps, he glanced back, but he didn't urge me to follow.

I should have stayed.

I had a presentation to finish, three visualizations to review, and exactly zero reasons to walk through an abandoned power station in the middle of the night behind a man who, in the morning, would stand before the same jury I would.

I went.

The control room overlooked the main hall. We climbed the metal stairs, every step answering with a dull clang. Adrian switched on the flashlight on his phone.

"I found this behind a cabinet," he said.

A thin gray folder lay on the old control console.

At first glance, there was nothing unusual about it. A city hall stamp. An archive number. A date from seven years earlier.

Then I saw the name of the competition.

I stopped.

"Where did you get this?"

"I told you."

"I'm not asking where it was lying."

Seven years earlier, I had entered the first major competition of my life. I had been twenty-five, had far too much faith in people, and had spent four months working on the project.

I didn't win.

Six months later, I saw pieces of my concept in another team's completed design.

I was never able to prove where they had gotten them.

That had been enough to make me stop working for anyone else.

Adrian opened the folder.

The first page listed the jury members.

The second contained the scoring table.

My name was on the third.

Beneath it, someone had written in red ink:

"Project recommended for the final. Withdraw before publication of results."

The coffee I had drunk a few minutes earlier seemed to turn into something heavy and cold inside me.

"This document wasn't in the official archive."

"I know."

I looked at him.

I didn't ask how he knew.

I didn't have to.

At the bottom of the page, beneath the handwritten note, were three initials.

A.K.

For several seconds, all I could hear was the wind striking the control-room windows.

"Tell me that isn't you."

Adrian didn't answer right away.

And that brief hesitation was enough for me to understand that our current competition was no longer the only thing we could lose that night.

Chapter 1 - Red Pen

Adrian said nothing for several seconds.

He stood on the other side of the console, one hand braced against its metal edge, the light from his phone angled downward as though he wanted me to see the document rather than his face. The easy late-night manner he had used only minutes earlier to disarm me over coffee was gone. Suddenly he looked exactly the way my competitor should have looked - focused, closed off, and dangerously difficult to read.

"Those are my initials," he said at last.

I couldn't decide what made me angrier: the admission or the fact that he didn't even try to deny it.

"Great. Now give me the second half of that sentence."

"Marta..."

"Not my name. It's two-thirty in the morning, we're standing in a building where tomorrow we're supposed to compete against each other, and you've just shown me a document suggesting that seven years ago someone removed my project from a competition. Your initials are under the decision. Don't start using the voice of a man who wants me to calm down."

I pushed the sheet toward him. The paper was dry and yellowed around the edges, but the red writing had retained its intensity.

"Project recommended for the final. Withdraw before publication of results."

Underneath were the letters A.K., small and slanted.

Adrian looked at them as though he were seeing them not for the first time, but the hundredth.

I noticed that too.

"You knew about this."

He raised his eyes.

"I knew a document existed."

"Since when?"

"Seven years."

I let out a short laugh without any humor in it.

"That may be a record. And here I thought the worst thing you could do today was beat me."

I turned away from the console because the control room had suddenly become too small. Its glass walls overlooked the main hall, now almost entirely black, with only the emergency lights burning near the entrance. I could see my own reflection in the glass - exhausted, pale, and far too still.

Seven years.

For seven years, I had told myself that maybe I had overreacted. That architects often arrived at similar solutions. That a public interior, timber partitions, and a diffuse lighting system did not belong to me. That perhaps feeling wronged had simply been easier than admitting that I had lost.

Then I saw the photographs of the completed project and I could no longer make myself believe any of that.

No one else had wanted to believe me either.

"What exactly did you do?" I asked.

"Not what you think."