
Laura Bellini
The Night Has Your Initials
Someone else's words can shine too close to the heart

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ROMANS

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INTRO

The first time I saw my surname on a wall, it was a wall I had never wanted to illuminate.

The white letters trembled across the damp brickwork of a tenement building in Toruń, just above the heads of passersby. GAJ. Someone had added it to the test projection, even though the file I had approved the previous evening contained no names whatsoever. Only fragments of anonymous letters, dates, and places preserved in their authors' memories. Nothing that could identify a person. That was the most important rule of my project.

I stood in the middle of the narrow street, holding a cup of cold coffee, and watched my surname dissolve into pixels of light.

"Turn it off," I said into the radio.

Static crackled through the earpiece.

"Ilza, we've still got seven minutes of testing."

"Then we can spend seven minutes looking at a dark wall."

The light went out. In its place, the uneven surface of the old brickwork returned, bringing with it a familiar sense of relief. Darkness had never frightened me. For six years, I had made a living convincing people that not everything needed to be visible to have meaning.

I was thirty, had my own design studio, and possessed enough experience to know that the most expensive mistakes usually began with someone's innocent idea for an improvement.

The Toruń Festival of Light was supposed to be my first project completed entirely on my own terms. No larger studio taking credit for my work. No boss revising my concept five minutes before a presentation. No man assuring me that he believed in my talent until I started making decisions for myself.

I took out my phone and opened the schedule. Nine days remained until the festival's official opening. The installation, titled Letters After Dark, was designed to lead visitors through three courtyards and end on a wall overlooking the Vistula. Anonymous sentences would appear slowly, as though someone had only found the courage to speak them once darkness fell.

It was an idea I had waited a long time to bring to life. I wanted people to stop and linger over someone else's words instead of immediately reaching for their phones. To feel something of their own for a moment, without being told whom they should thank for it.

"Ms. Gaj?"

I turned around.

A man stood a few steps away, resting a camera against his hip. He wore a dark coat, the sleeves of his sweater casually pushed up, and his hair was tousled by the wind coming off the river. He didn't look like a member of the technical crew. He had no identification badge and none of the characteristic urgency with which everyone working on the festival seemed to move.

"Depends who's asking."

"Karol Witek. Photographer."

I knew who he was. His name had appeared that morning in a message from the festival coordinator, along with the

information that the organizers had invited him to document the installation. I hadn't asked for a photographer. Especially not one whose portfolio consisted largely of portraits of people who looked as though they had just decided to tell the truth.

"If you're here about accreditation, the festival office is on Szeroka Street."

"I'm not here about accreditation."

He glanced at the darkened wall.

"Why did you have the projection switched off?"

"Because someone changed the file without my knowledge."

"And if it hadn't been your name?"

I didn't like the question. I liked it even less that he asked it without the slightest hint of provocation, as though he genuinely wanted to know the answer.

"I would still have had it switched off. Anonymity is a condition of participation, not a decorative feature."

Karol studied me carefully for a moment. He was in his mid-thirties, perhaps thirty-six, and had the gaze of someone accustomed to waiting for the moment when other people stopped posing. Finally, he nodded.

"Good."

"What's good?"

"I wanted to know whether you were protecting only your own name or everyone else's as well."

I should have been offended. Instead, I felt a reluctant flicker of curiosity.

"Do you usually test people before saying hello?"

"Usually, I say hello. Today, you'd already given three orders before I even approached you."

"Two."

"The third was the look."

He smiled faintly. It wasn't the smile of a man trying to make himself liked. More the smile of someone who had noticed a small detail and decided to keep it to himself.

Before I could respond, my phone rang. Marta, the coordinator of the artistic program, appeared on the screen.

"Tell me you've found whoever swapped the file," I said as I answered.

"Not yet. But I've got another problem."

I closed my eyes.

"How different a problem?"

"The committee wants to see complete documentation of the text sources tomorrow morning. One of the festival partners has raised concerns about consent. We need to verify the materials again before the installation can be approved for public screenings."

My gaze shifted to Karol. He hadn't walked away, although he had discreetly turned toward the street.

"All the consent forms are in the archive," I said.

"I know. But some of the letters came from a paper collection donated by an association. The documentation isn't consistent. Karol will help you verify the provenance of the materials and prepare the visual documentation."

"Karol?"

"Witek. He's already there."

I looked at him again. This time, he raised his camera, presenting it as though it were evidence of his innocence.

"We never agreed to this."

"I know, Ilza. I'm sorry. But if we can't demonstrate a credible verification process tomorrow, the committee will suspend the letter projections."

The call ended before I could find a response that didn't sound like a swear word.

For a moment, all I could hear were the distant conversations of the technicians, the rattle of a suitcase being dragged over cobblestones, and the laughter of a couple passing beneath a stone archway. The woman adjusted the man's scarf. She did it instinctively, without taking her eyes off his face. I envied them the ease with which they could care for each other without having to negotiate the terms.

"I'm guessing you're not thrilled," Karol said.

"That's putting it mildly."

"I can come back tomorrow. We don't have to talk now."

I could have let him leave. I could also have spent the entire night going through binders on my own, trying to establish whether thirty-seven strangers' confessions had sufficiently documented origins. Either way, I probably wouldn't have slept until morning.

"First, I want to see your archival photographs," I said. "Not your portfolio. Materials that can actually be used to verify documents."

"I'll send them."

"And no photographs of the letter writers without their consent."

"Agreed."

He didn't try to negotiate my conditions. That surprised me more than his earlier questions.

He took a folded sheet of paper from his coat pocket. I noticed a small catalogue number printed on it.

"The association sent me some sample materials today. One of them has an incomplete catalogue record. I wanted to ask whether you'd seen it."

He unfolded the paper only partway. I caught sight of several lines of handwriting, uneven edges, and a date from eight years earlier. Between the sentences were patches where the ink had faded almost completely.

Karol looked down at the sheet, then folded it again with more care than necessary.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"I don't know yet."

He answered too quickly. For the first time since we'd met, he lost the calm self-assurance that had been irritating me earlier.

I held out my hand.

"May I see it?"

For a second, he kept the paper between his fingers. Then he handed it to me.

Only one passage remained completely legible:

"If I can't find the courage to tell you in daylight, look for my initials where the night ends."

I didn't know the writer. I had no idea whom the words were addressed to or why the person hadn't signed their name. Even so, I read the sentence twice. There was

something painfully private about it, like a message left in a place only one person knew how to find.

"It's beautiful," I said quietly.

Karol didn't answer.

When I looked up, he was watching me differently. The amused curiosity had vanished from his face. What remained was a tension I couldn't yet name.

"Not every letter belongs on a wall," he said at last.

"Even if someone agreed to share it?"

"That's exactly when it's worth checking who actually had the right to give that permission."

I handed the paper back to him. Our fingers brushed for a moment, and he was the first to withdraw his hand, leaving me space and a choice.

I could have interpreted his behavior as professional caution. Common sense told me that was precisely what I should do.

But as he walked away toward the illuminated market square, the final sentence of the letter still echoed in my mind. I watched his retreating figure and wondered why a stranger who had looked me so easily in the eye only moments earlier had been unable to meet my gaze when I spoke about someone else's unspoken feelings.

And why I wanted so badly for him to tell me the truth the next time we met.

Chapter 1 - Boundaries of Light

At eight the following morning, the conference room at the festival office smelled of coffee, damp coats, and paper that had spent years stored under less-than-ideal conditions. Thirty-seven folders lay across the long table. Each contained a copy of a letter, an archival reference number, and documentation of the materials transferred by the association. Some folders held several pages; others barely one. I had spent half the night arranging the documents in the order of the installation's planned route. Now I looked at them with the unsettling realization that organization alone would not be enough.

Marta appeared carrying two paper bags of breakfast pastries and wearing the expression of someone about to apologize for something she could no longer change.

"I brought you a sweet bun."

"If that's a bribe, you should have bought the entire bakery."

"We can't afford it. We finalized the budget last week."

She sat opposite me. We had known each other for three years, but only during this project had I discovered how much pressure she could endure without raising her voice. She was thirty-four, had two children, and possessed a remarkable talent for delivering catastrophic news as though she were announcing a change in the lunch schedule.

"The committee will be here at eleven," she said. "They want to see not only the consent forms but also how we verify that the published excerpts match the originals."

"Everything is ready."

"Ilza, I know you think it is."

I looked up from the documents.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning you've prepared an excellent visual project. But you can't resolve every question concerning the archive on your own."

"I don't intend to. That's what the association is for."

"The association supplied the materials. We're responsible for their public use."

I didn't like where the conversation was going, because I understood her reasoning. The hardest arguments to fight were the ones that made sense.

I opened the file concerning letter number seventeen. It was the same letter Karol had shown me the previous evening. The permission to share it had been signed by the person who donated the correspondence, but there was no explicit confirmation that the writer had consented to its public display. The association's register listed the author as unidentified.

"I'm putting this one on hold," I said.

"Just this one?"

"For now. I need to check the others."

"Which is exactly why we need a photographer."

"Photography doesn't replace consent."

"No. But it allows us to document the condition of the originals and check whether anything has been added, cropped, or transcribed incorrectly."

The door opened before I could answer.

Karol walked in carrying a large canvas bag and a black camera case. This time, he wore a charcoal shirt and dark trousers, and looked like a man who had actually managed to get some sleep. He placed a laptop on the table, followed by a small portable scanner.

"Good morning," he said. "Today I'm starting according to the rules."

Marta smiled with relief.

"Excellent. I'll leave you two for a moment. I need to speak to the technical crew."

She disappeared with surprising speed.

Karol looked at the folders I had prepared.

"I see you didn't sleep."

"I see you enjoy commenting on the obvious."

"Only when it matters."

I put down my pen.

"Let's establish something immediately. I'm responsible for the artistic concept. You're responsible for the photographic documentation and technical analysis of the materials. We won't change the content or order of the projections without my approval."

"I agree with the first part."

"And the second?"

"I won't put my name to documentation if it's going to be used to justify displaying material of uncertain origin."

I felt a familiar irritation returning. Over the past few years, I had encountered plenty of people who described interfering with someone else's project as concern for quality. I didn't want another one.

"Nobody is asking you to sign off on something untrue."

"Then we don't have a problem."

"We have a problem with you imposing conditions before you've reviewed all the materials."

Karol sat down on the other side of the table.

"I'm setting a condition for my own work. Not yours."

For a moment, we looked at each other in silence. Up close, I noticed a small scar beside his left eyebrow and a crease that appeared when he was suppressing a smile. He didn't look like someone easily embarrassed. Worse, he didn't look like someone who needed to win every conversation, either.

"Fine," I said at last. "We'll review everything. But the decisions about composition are mine."

"That's exactly what I'm hoping for."

"Why?"

"Because if I wanted to design illuminations, I wouldn't have come here carrying a camera."

Despite myself, I smiled.

For the next two hours, we worked at the table, occasionally interrupting each other with questions. Karol photographed the documents under diffused light, checked catalogue numbers, and compared copies against the archival descriptions. He was patient in a way I hadn't initially appreciated. He never moved papers without asking, never touched fragile sheets with his bare hands, and always left me room at the table whenever I wanted to examine a particular passage.

What surprised me most was his ability to say "I don't know" without the slightest embarrassment.

When we reached folder number nine, he noticed a discrepancy between the date on the envelope and the date in the register.

"Something doesn't match here."

I leaned over the document.

"Maybe the letter was mailed later."

"Possibly. But the description gives the date of receipt, not the postmark. We need to clarify it."

"Does every difference of a few days really matter?"

"Not every difference. But if we're telling people real stories, we can't simply choose the details that happen to be convenient."

I raised my head.

"It's an art installation, not a historical exhibition."

"I know."

"Then why do I get the impression you can't tell the difference?"

Karol put down his camera.

"Because to you, the text is also light, rhythm, and space. To me, it was someone's life first. I'm not saying one approach matters more than the other. I'm saying we need to find a way to keep them together."

That sentence stopped me more effectively than his earlier objections. Not because it revealed something entirely new. After all, I had wanted to protect the writers' anonymity from the beginning. But his words reminded me

that someone else's confessions did not become any less personal simply because they looked beautiful on a wall.

I opened the project file.

"Come into the other room for a moment."

In the adjoining room stood a small projector I used for testing typography. I switched off the overhead light and directed the beam toward a white wall. A fragment of one of the letters appeared: "I waited for you longer than I could admit even to myself."

The letters emerged one by one, remained fully illuminated for several seconds, then disappeared.

"You've seen the documents," I said. "Now I want to show you why this form matters to me."

Karol stood beside me, leaving a sensible distance between us.

"I'm listening."

"If I projected entire letters, people would read them like ordinary messages. They'd look for a beginning, an ending, an explanation. I want them to hear their own response to a single sentence. To be alone with it for a moment."

I started the next excerpt. The letters appeared lower down, almost level with our hands.

Karol remained silent for a while.

"Now I understand," he said.

"What exactly?"

"Why you don't want signatures. A name would immediately turn the experience into curiosity about the writer."

I felt a satisfaction I had no intention of showing.

"Exactly."

"But that gives us an even greater responsibility to verify that every writer would genuinely have agreed to this form of presentation. Because they can't stand beside the text and say they've been misunderstood."

I turned toward him.

"Do you really always have to find the other side of an argument?"

"No. Only when the first side is so convincing that it's easy to forget the rest."

His face looked different in the dim light. Softer. The almost provocative expression he'd worn when entering the conference room had disappeared. He was watching the projection rather than me, and that allowed me to study him without feeling self-conscious. His hands were strong, yet he handled small objects with extraordinary delicacy. A thin graphite smudge marked the cuff of his shirt.

"You're a difficult colleague, Mr. Witek."

"So I've heard."

"Often?"

"From people who don't like being told they can't do everything their own way."

"And from everyone else?"

He looked at me.

"Sometimes I go for coffee with everyone else."

I didn't answer immediately. A small smile passed between us, and for a moment the conversation ceased to be about work. It was a dangerously pleasant feeling,

especially since I had no intention of complicating my life with a new acquaintance.

At eleven, we returned to the conference room, where Marta and two members of the program committee were waiting. We presented the results of our verification. Nine texts required additional documentation, three contained minor discrepancies in their catalogue records, and letter number seventeen had been placed on hold pending clarification of the rights to use it.

The chairwoman of the committee, a silver-haired woman with an exceptionally calm voice, examined the report.

"Can you prepare the installation without those excerpts?"

"Yes," I answered. "The structure allows us to change the number of projections."

"And if the association fails to provide the documents?"

"We'll use only materials whose status is unambiguous."

Karol sat beside me. He added nothing and made no attempt to improve my answer. Only after the committee had left did he slide a sheet of paper toward me, containing three additional technical observations.

"You handled that well."

"I don't need an evaluation."

"It wasn't an evaluation."

I looked at the paper.

"Then what was it?"

"An acknowledgment that you can defend your project without sacrificing the people whose words made it possible."

I felt something considerably more troublesome than professional satisfaction. Recognition from Karol carried a weight I hadn't expected.

That afternoon, we went to inspect the final courtyard along the installation route. The rain had stopped, but the cobblestones still gleamed, reflecting the grey sky. I showed Karol the wall where the concluding fragments of the letters would appear. The tenement building was old, its facade uneven, with windows behind which residents went about their ordinary lives.

"The ending should be almost a whisper here," I said. "One line. No music. No additional effects."

Karol took several photographs and crossed to the opposite side of the courtyard.

"What if someone sees the text from their window?"

"That's precisely why I chose this height. The projection will be visible from street level, not from the apartments."

He nodded.

"You've thought this through."

Only a moment later did I realize he had switched to the informal form of address.

"I don't remember us agreeing to stop being formal."

He lowered his camera.

"You're right. Sorry."

The immediacy of his reaction surprised me. He didn't turn it into a joke or try to prove I was overreacting.

"I didn't say I minded," I replied.

"Then I'll wait for your decision."

I studied him thoughtfully.

"Ilza."

"Karol."

He held out his hand. I shook it, fully aware of how absurd this little ceremony was after several hours of working together. His hand was warm, his grip confident, without any unnecessary display of strength.

When we parted, I knew two things. Karol Witek wasn't going to let me carry out the project exactly as I had planned. And for the first time in a very long while, I wasn't sure I truly wanted someone who always agreed with me.

Chapter 2 - An Agreement Over Someone Else's Words

The following morning, I woke to a message from Marta, three missed calls from my studio, and a photograph Karol had sent at six forty-two.

The photograph showed the brick wall of the final courtyard. There were no people in it, no illuminated words. Only a narrow band of morning sunlight cutting across the wall at exactly the spot where the projection was planned. Beneath the photograph was a single sentence: "Even in daylight, you can see where the light ought to stop."

For several seconds, I stared at the screen longer than ordinary professional correspondence warranted. Then I replied that the morning sun was not included in the festival schedule.

His answer arrived almost immediately.

"Excellent. Then we won't have to ask it for accreditation."

I smiled, although there was nobody in the apartment to notice.

I rented a small apartment in Bydgoskie Przedmieście, with tall windows and floors that creaked beneath every step. For the duration of the festival, I had turned the living room into a makeshift studio. Samples of projection film, notes, and printed maps of the courtyards covered the table. Two cups from yesterday's coffee stood in the kitchen. Under normal circumstances, the mess would have bothered me, but now I had the impression that every object testified to something that finally belonged entirely to me.

Before opening my own studio, I had worked for a large set-design company. I designed installations, signed dozens of documents, and watched my ideas change under the influence of people who had never spent a night beside a projector. When I decided to leave, I was told I wasn't ready to manage major projects independently.

Toruń was supposed to be my answer. Not revenge or a public demonstration, but proof presented first and foremost to myself.

At nine, I called Karol.

"We've got a scheduling problem," I said without greeting him.

"Good morning, Ilza."

"Good morning. We've got a scheduling problem."

He laughed quietly.

"I'm listening."

I explained that the association could make the originals of certain letters available for only the next two days. After that, the documents had to be returned to conservation storage. If we wanted to complete the documentation, we needed to work quickly.

"I can be there in an hour," he replied.

"I need you tomorrow as well."

There was a brief silence.

"I've already got a photo shoot booked for tomorrow."

"Can you reschedule it?"

"I don't know. I need to speak to the people I've already promised that time to."

I bit my lip. I was accustomed to people who instinctively declared themselves available in situations like this and only afterward explained why they couldn't keep their promises. Karol did the opposite.

"I understand," I said, although I didn't particularly want to.

"I can come to the archive tomorrow after three. If that's too late, I'll help you find someone to handle the earlier documentation."

"I don't want another person I'd have to explain everything to from the beginning."

"That almost sounded like a compliment."

"Don't get used to it."

We met at the association's archive, located on the first floor of a small tenement building. We were greeted by Helena, an older woman with glasses hanging from a chain and hands that smelled of lavender cream. For more than a dozen years, she had been collecting private correspondence donated by residents of the region. She spoke about it with affection, but also with particular caution.

"Sometimes people give us things they can no longer bear to keep at home," she said. "That doesn't mean they've stopped loving them."

Karol nodded.

"Which is exactly why we want to verify every consent."

Helena led us into a room with a large table and lamps designed for working with documents. She had prepared gloves, supports, and folders. Karol began setting up his equipment while I spread out the inventory.

For the first hour, we worked almost without speaking. He photographed the letters while I checked them against the versions intended for projection. Gradually, we developed a rhythm: number, photograph, comparison, decision. Whenever we encountered a question, we set the folder aside in a separate pile.

Helena lingered over one particular letter.

"This was given to us by a man who found it inside his wife's cookbook after she died. They wrote to each other for thirty years. They didn't always live together."

I read a passage written in small, slanting handwriting: "I don't need you to come home earlier. I need to know you still want to come home."

Karol looked at me across the table.

"Will you keep the whole sentence?"

"Yes. Without the rest, the meaning would change."

He made no comment. I noticed, however, that he recorded the decision in his notes.

When Helena left to prepare the next batch of documents, Karol moved his camera aside.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Depends whether it's a professional question."

"Partly."

I leaned against the edge of the table.

"Take the risk."

"Why did you choose letters? You could have worked with poetry, recordings, or texts you'd written yourself."

I looked down at the scattered pages.