Laura Bellini

A Room with a View of You



A romance where attraction has consequences



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ROMANS

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ALL-IN Rafał Płonkowski



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INTRO

I took my first photograph before I even took off my coat. Through the tall window at the end of the corridor, I could see the snow-covered ridge of the Karkonosze Mountains, dark spruce trees, and a narrow road disappearing between them. The light had that particular winter quality, when white stopped looking white and began to resemble diluted silver. I raised my camera and pressed the shutter. Only then did I notice my reflection in the glass. I looked more tired than I wanted to admit, but also like someone who finally knew where she was going. I was twenty-nine years old, had my own photography business, and had a very specific plan for the next twenty-four hours. Not one part of it involved the man who was about to appear in the doorway.

The hotel smelled of wood, freshly ground coffee, and something sweet, probably a cake recently taken out of the oven. It was nothing like the luxurious places I photographed for interior design catalogues. Here, the floorboards creaked, the stair railing had been polished smooth by thousands of hands, and ceramic pots stood on the windowsills, each one slightly different. In the lounge, a fireplace faced with pale stone stood opposite two deep sofas. Everything looked as though someone had furnished this house over many years rather than ordered its personality from a catalogue.

That was precisely why I had accepted the assignment.

"Ms. Maja Lis?" called a woman from behind the reception desk. Her grey hair was gathered into a loose bun, and her glasses hung from a chain around her neck. "I'm Zofia. Mr. Orski said you'd be arriving before noon."

"I wanted to make the most of the light. There'll be less and less of it after three."

"We might lose it earlier today. They're forecasting quite a snowstorm."

I glanced at my phone. The forecast certainly wasn't encouraging, but I had seen similar warnings throughout the journey from Wrocław. I'd worked in the mountains often enough to know how quickly the weather could change. At the same time, I had no intention of allowing a few inches of snow to ruin my carefully prepared schedule.

My train was leaving Jelenia Góra at 6:06 that evening. At precisely 9:30 the following morning, I had a meeting in Wrocław with an editor at a magazine for which I'd spent months developing an independent photography project. It wasn't going to be another collection of beautiful apartments. I wanted to tell the stories of people who were rebuilding places others had condemned to oblivion. The project had a working title: The People Who Stay. It was supposed to be the first thing I would put my name to without an agency's name beside it, without a client's creative supervision, and without someone else being convinced they knew better than I did what I ought to show.

"Don't worry," I said, putting my phone away. "I'll need four hours at most."

Zofia smiled indulgently.

"In that case, I'll show you the rooms before Filip comes back from the boiler room."

I followed her upstairs. On the landing, we passed an old photograph of the hotel. Back then, the building had a dark exterior, smaller windows, and an enormous sign bearing the

name "Pod Świerkami." I stopped for a moment, trying to find traces of that earlier place in the present interior.

"Did the renovation take long?" I asked.

"Longer than it should have. Filip wanted everything done properly." She adjusted her glasses. "You can't always have enough time, enough money, and good ideas all at once."

She said it lightly, but there was something different about that last sentence, as though she knew its weight from experience.

Room seven was at the end of the corridor. It had a wide bed with a charcoal-grey bedspread, a low armchair upholstered in rust-coloured fabric, and an enormous window overlooking the valley. An amber-shaded lamp stood on a small desk. When I switched it on, warm light spilled across the wall, bringing out the uneven texture of the plaster.

"Beautiful," I said, this time without any professional calculation.

"Filip decorated this room himself. He insisted on keeping the old window instead of replacing it."

I stepped closer. The wooden frame had been carefully restored, but I noticed a tiny crack in the varnish near the lower hinge. It didn't bother me. Details like that were exactly what gave a place its own history.

"It'll look wonderful in photographs," I said.

"Let's hope it looks wonderful for more than the photographs," Zofia replied.

Before I could ask what she meant, I heard a door closing downstairs. She glanced at her watch.

"Filip's back. I'll tell him where you are."

She left me alone.

I unfolded my tripod and took my camera out of its bag. For several minutes, I moved the armchair, checked the angle of the light, and considered whether to leave the small glass carafe on the desk. I disliked photographs that promised more than a place could deliver. A good composition should reveal the truth, not conceal it beneath a layer of carefully arranged decorations.

I was bent over the camera's screen when someone knocked.

"Come in," I answered without looking up.

"If you move that armchair another four inches, you'll block the only electrical outlet in the room."

I turned around.

A man stood in the doorway, wearing a dark sweater with the sleeves rolled up. He had broad shoulders, short, slightly tousled hair, and several days' worth of stubble. He held a toolbox in one hand. There was nothing about his face that resembled the carefully polished image of a hotel owner. He looked more like someone who could fix a leaking tap and then sit down at the same table as his guests.

What surprised me most, however, was his gaze. Attentive, calm, and free of the usual professional haste.

"And what if I move it six inches?" I asked.

The corner of his mouth twitched.

"Then I'll have to install another outlet."

"I appreciate the staff's flexibility."

"Filip Orski," he introduced himself, setting down the toolbox. "Owner, maintenance man, and currently the person responsible for just about everything."

"Maja Lis. Photographer, and someone who usually decides for herself where the armchairs go."

"So we already have something in common."

"What's that?"

"Neither of us likes people moving our things around."

I didn't answer immediately. Not because I couldn't think of anything to say. I simply liked that he wasn't trying to impress me with his position or shower me with compliments. He studied the room as carefully as I did, noticing details that other people would have overlooked.

Filip walked over to the window and checked the lock. He had to pull the casement more firmly before the mechanism clicked into place. I was standing close enough to feel the brief rush of cold air and catch the faint scent of wood on his sweater.

"The frame shifts a little in severe frost," he explained. "I didn't want to replace it. It's been here since the beginning."

"I understand why."

He looked at me as though he genuinely wanted to hear my answer.

"Why?"

"Because if you replaced it, the room would still be lovely. It just wouldn't have quite the same view."

He was silent for a moment. Then he glanced at my camera before looking back at me.

"Do you photograph things that can't be seen, too?"

"I try not to remove the things that make something real."

He smiled, but this time something more serious entered his expression.

"That might be harder than you think."

A phone rang in the corridor. Filip took his mobile out of his pocket and glanced at the screen. I saw him hesitate for a moment, deciding whether to answer. In the end, he silenced the call.

"I need to check the installation downstairs," he said. "If you need anything, just ask Zofia."

"What I need most is good light and a passable road to Jelenia Góra."

He started towards the door but stopped at my last words.

"The second one might be a problem."

At that very moment, the wind lifted snow from the windowsill outside. The valley, clearly visible only minutes earlier, began disappearing behind a thick white curtain. My phone vibrated in my pocket. A weather warning appeared on the screen.

Filip read something in my expression before I could say a word.

"I'll check the road and come back with a definite answer," he promised. "I don't want to worry you unnecessarily."

I nodded. He wasn't trying to make decisions for me, and to my surprise, that brought me relief.

After he left, I stood by the window for a long moment, watching the snow. The glass reflected the amber lamp, the empty armchair, and the place where Filip had stood only

moments before. I had a carefully prepared schedule, a train ticket, and a meeting that mattered to me more than any assignment I'd ever had.

And yet, as I listened to his footsteps fading along the corridor, I found myself thinking about something I hadn't planned.

If I had to spend the night here, would I be able to let someone close when, after only a few minutes, he'd already made it so difficult for me to maintain a safe distance?

Chapter 1 - The Road That Had Disappeared

By 1:47 p.m., I knew my perfect plan was beginning to resemble a bad joke. My phone displayed yet another weather warning, the internet connection kept cutting out, and snow was falling so heavily beyond the window of room seven that I could barely make out the spruce trees growing a dozen yards from the building. Still, I had no intention of abandoning my work. During the previous hour, I'd photographed the bedroom, the bathroom, and part of the corridor, as well as prepared three different compositions of the view across the valley. I still had the lounge, restaurant, upstairs suite, and exterior shots to complete. The exterior photographs mattered most. Without them, the entire shoot would lose its context, and the hotel might just as easily have been somewhere in the Beskids or on the outskirts of Warsaw.

I was folding my tripod when Filip returned. This time, he didn't knock immediately. I heard his footsteps and a brief telephone conversation conducted in a subdued voice. I couldn't make out the words, only the tone of a man trying to remain calm despite receiving increasingly bad news. A moment later, someone knocked. I opened the door before he could do it again. He stood there with his phone in his hand, his expression more serious than during our first meeting.

"The road down to the valley is temporarily impassable," he announced.

"Temporarily meaning how long?"

"We don't know. The snowplough is trying to clear the stretch by the bend, but the wind is covering it almost as quickly. The police are advising people not to attempt the descent."

"My train leaves at six oh six."

"In that case, you should check whether you can change your ticket."

For a moment, I stared at him, convinced I'd misheard.

"Do you honestly think it's that simple?"

"No. I think it's simpler than having someone retrieve you from the roadside."

I closed my camera bag rather more forcefully than necessary. His answer made sense, but the way he'd delivered it sounded like a decision he'd already made on my behalf. And I couldn't stand that. I'd spent the previous four years building my business precisely so nobody else could arrange my life according to their own schedule. I knew the snowstorm wasn't Filip's fault, but that didn't mean I had to accept his instructions with gratitude.

"I'm not planning to set off blindly. I want to know what my options are."

"That's sensible."

"I'm glad I have your approval."

He raised his eyebrows. For a fraction of a second, I was certain he'd respond just as sharply. Instead, he leaned one shoulder against the doorframe.

"Ms. Lis, you don't need my permission. But as long as I'm responsible for this building and the people inside it, I'm not going to pretend the road is safe."

"And I'm not going to pretend my commitments have suddenly ceased to exist."

"I'm not asking you to."

It was irritating. Arguing was much easier with someone who insisted on having his way simply for the sake of it. Filip apparently knew the difference between disagreement and an attack, and he didn't need to win every exchange. His gaze travelled over my equipment before settling on the camera screen.

"Have you managed to photograph everything you planned?"

"About half of it."

"If this weather continues, the exterior shots will have to wait."

"I know. I'd still like to see the restaurant before it gets dark."

"Let's go. But I should warn you, not everything looks the way it should yet."

We went downstairs. The hotel was quiet apart from the crackling wood in the fireplace and the steady hum of the heating system. Zofia was speaking on the telephone at reception. When she noticed us, she raised a hand in a brief gesture, then pointed towards the door leading to the service area. Filip nodded as though he understood without needing an explanation. I noticed the exchange of glances. There was something more to it than the ordinary understanding between an employer and an employee.

The restaurant turned out to be a modest room overlooking the forest. Light wooden tables stood beside the windows, earthenware dishes lined the shelves, and old

photographs of mountain shelters in the Karkonosze covered the long wall. What caught my attention most was a tiled stove in a deep shade of green. I went closer, touched its cool surface, and immediately knew it had to feature in the main composition. Only one thing spoiled the effect: an extension cable ran across the centre of the room, and boxes of equipment were stacked beside the door.

"Can those be moved?" I asked.

"The boxes, yes. We leave the cable alone until the electrician finishes checking the circuit."

"I could set up the camera on the other side."

"Then you wouldn't see the windows."

I looked at him in surprise.

"Do you know much about composing photographs?"

"No. But I know what I'd want to see if I were coming here as a guest."

He walked over to one of the tables and moved a chair.

"I'd want to know that I could sit right here in the morning, drink my coffee, and spend half an hour thinking about absolutely nothing."

I studied him more closely. He'd said it without any advertising exaggeration, almost wistfully. I wondered when he'd last allowed himself half an hour like that. There was a small smear of grease on his wrist and a tiredness beneath his eyes that suggested too little sleep. The hotel looked wonderfully inviting, yet its owner gave the impression of a man who hadn't had time to enjoy that comfort himself in a very long while.

"In that case, sit down," I suggested.

"Now?"

"Yes. Right now."

"I thought you photographed interiors, not people."

"I photograph whatever gives an interior meaning."

He hesitated, then sat. He didn't try to pose, which immediately worked in his favour. Resting his forearms on the tabletop, he looked through the window at the wind tugging at the spruce branches. I took several shots, changed lenses, and moved closer to the stove. Filip watched me with discreet amusement.

"Should I smile?"

"Please don't do anything you wouldn't normally do."

"Normally, I sit here with invoices."

"Then think about invoices."

He laughed. It wasn't the polite, practised laugh of a hotel owner entertaining a guest, but a genuine sound that briefly transformed his whole face. I pressed the shutter. The photograph was better than the previous ones, although I wasn't about to tell him that straight away.

"Done," I announced.

"Already?"

"Not everyone needs an hour to look good."

"I'm not sure whether that's a compliment."

"I'll let you decide."

I turned the camera around and showed him the screen. He leaned towards it, and I felt the warmth of his arm close to mine. He didn't touch me, yet suddenly the distance between us seemed impossible not to notice. In the photograph, he looked different from how he appeared in

person: calmer, almost gentle. He studied the image for a long time before I moved the camera back to a safer distance.

"That's a good photograph," he said quietly. "But I wouldn't want it used in any promotional materials."

"Why not?"

"The hotel should matter more than I do."

"You're its owner."

"All the more reason."

I didn't press him. I saved the image in a separate folder and returned to work. Half an hour later, I had a complete series of photographs of the restaurant, although some would need retaking once the electrical work was finished. Filip helped me carry the boxes into the service area, then brought over a small lamp, which I placed on one of the tables. Not once did he try to dictate how I should work. Whenever I asked him to move an object, he did so without comment. I was beginning to understand that his determination didn't come from a need to dominate. It seemed to come from a conviction that certain things simply shouldn't be left to chance.

Just before three, my phone rang again. This time it was Iga, the editor I was supposed to meet the following morning. I stepped into the corridor so we could talk properly. I told her about the snowstorm, the closed road, and the transport problems. There was a brief silence at the other end.

"Maja, I understand the situation. But we have to make a decision about the project tomorrow."

"I know. I've prepared the presentation and selected the photographs. I can join remotely."

"If you have a stable internet connection, we'll do that. But I need confirmation by this evening at the latest."

"You'll have it."

"And one more thing. I don't want another beautiful portfolio. I want to see why these stories matter to you."

After the call ended, I stared at my darkened phone screen for a moment. Iga was right. For years, I'd learnt to photograph interiors according to what clients expected. I could make an ordinary flat look like a luxury magazine apartment. More and more often, though, I found myself wondering whether that was why I'd bought my first camera. The People Who Stay was supposed to be my answer, and tomorrow's meeting could open the door to the work I'd wanted to do for years.

When I returned to the restaurant, Filip was talking to Zofia. A sheet of paper covered in handwritten telephone numbers lay on the counter. I caught part of their conversation about a delivery that hadn't arrived and two employees waiting to hear whether they should come in the next day. Filip asked Zofia to tell them not to risk the journey if conditions failed to improve. Then he called someone and arranged for their wages not to be reduced because of the delay.

I waited until he'd finished.

"Doesn't look like a particularly peaceful day," I observed.

"I've had better."

"When are you opening?"

"In less than two weeks."

"And how much is left to do?"

He looked at me as though trying to decide whether he was allowed to answer honestly.

"Enough that I really shouldn't be standing here talking to a photographer."

"Then you'd better get back to your responsibilities."

"Unfortunately, one of them is standing right in front of me."

I smiled despite my exhaustion. Filip smiled too, but his expression quickly grew serious.

"We've had confirmation. The road will remain closed until at least tomorrow morning. I can't promise conditions will be any better then."

I let out a long, slow breath.

"So I'm trapped here."

"You're safe. That's not quite the same thing."

"To someone with an important meeting tomorrow, there's not much difference."

"I can let you use the office. It has a wired internet connection. If you need to make a video call, that should be enough."

I looked at him in surprise. I hadn't realised he'd heard any part of my telephone conversation, but I quickly understood that he'd probably just noticed my agitation and drawn his own conclusions. His offer was practical, free of unnecessary sympathy.

"That could help," I admitted. "I'd like to test the connection beforehand."

"Of course. But there's one other thing we need to establish first."

"What's that?"

"I don't want you photographing unfinished rooms as though they're ready. I'm not going to promise guests something they won't be able to enjoy on opening day."

"I've never suggested falsifying reality."

"I'm not saying you have. It's just that the last agency I spoke to wanted to add a terrace to the photographs that doesn't actually exist."

"Then it's a good thing you didn't hire them."

"I think so too."

For a moment, we stood facing one another in the empty restaurant. Outside, the wind drove snow against the windows, and I tried to decide whether to feel grateful for his help or annoyed by yet another condition. In the end, professional curiosity won.

"Do you know the worst thing about photographing hotels?" I asked.

"The owners, I imagine."

"Some of them. But mostly it's that everyone wants to look perfect. And perfect places are terribly boring."

Filip studied me for a moment.

"Then perhaps it's a good thing you ended up here."

He said it calmly, but I noticed something in his gaze that I couldn't yet name. It wasn't ordinary flirting. It was more like the interest of someone who suspected another person might see more than he'd intended to reveal.

At four thirty, I sent Iga a message confirming our video call the next morning. Filip took me to a small office behind reception, where I checked the internet connection and downloaded my presentation to the computer. Everything worked perfectly. There were binders, notes, and a closed folder bearing the logo of an advisory firm on the desk. I didn't examine it more closely. I'd been running my own business long enough to know how many complications could exist behind an apparently peaceful setting.

As we were leaving, Filip stopped by the door.

"Room seven is yours for the night. There won't be an additional charge. You couldn't have done anything about this situation."

"Neither could you. You don't control the weather."

"But I do control how I treat people who happen to be caught in a snowstorm while working for me."

I didn't know what to say. In the end, I simply nodded.

That evening, as I stood by the window of my room, I saw Filip go outside to help Zofia close a heavy ground-floor shutter. Snow settled on his hair and shoulders. They spoke for a moment, and then he slipped an arm around the older woman's shoulders and escorted her back to the door.

I put down my cup of tea and returned to my camera. Among the photographs I'd taken that day, I found the portrait of Filip sitting beside the restaurant window. I hadn't selected it for publication.

Even so, I couldn't bring myself to delete it.

For the first time in a very long while, I wondered whether someone I'd met entirely by chance could interest me more than the place I'd come to photograph.

Chapter 2 - The Rules of Closeness

At 7:20 p.m., I discovered that in this hotel, it was just as easy to lose track of time as it was to lose your phone signal. Outside, darkness had fallen completely. Only the lamps beside the entrance illuminated the swirling snowflakes, while the dull sound of wind striking the roof carried from somewhere beyond the windows. I'd spent the previous hour reviewing photographs and marking those suitable for further editing. I'd also prepared a list of adjustments and a shooting plan in case the weather allowed us outside the following day. Instead of resting, I was checking my presentation for Iga for the third time. Eventually, exhausted by my own need to control everything, I closed the computer.

My phone vibrated. A message from my sister contained a photograph of her cat stretched across the entire bed and a question about whether I'd made it back to Wrocław. I replied that a snowstorm had stranded me in the mountains. Less than a minute later, she called.

"Tell me you're at least staying somewhere decent," Lena said.

"Somewhere very decent. There's a fireplace, beautiful rooms, and an owner who has an opinion about absolutely everything."

"Is he handsome?"

I rolled my eyes, although she couldn't see me.

"Don't start."

"So he is handsome."

"Lena, I have a meeting tomorrow that could determine the future of my career."

"I know. That's why I'm asking about something that might distract you a little."

I laughed softly. Lena was three years younger than me and had always believed I treated life like a calendar filled with compulsory appointments. She didn't understand why being independent mattered so much to me. Or perhaps she understood better than I wanted to admit. She was one of the few people who remembered how my job at the photography agency had ended: someone else's name beneath my pictures, followed by an offer to extend my contract if I agreed to stop insisting on my own ideas.

"I'll call you after the meeting tomorrow," I promised.

"All right. And Maja?"

"What?"

"You don't have to earn everything by working for it."

The call ended before I could find an answer. I sat motionless on the edge of the bed for a moment, looking at the camera on my desk. Then I pulled on a sweater and went downstairs. I needed something warm to eat and, more than anything, a little distance from my own thoughts.

Only a few lamps were lit in the restaurant. Zofia was arranging plates on a trolley, while Filip stood beside the tiled stove, speaking on the phone. When I entered, he ended the call and put the device in his pocket. He no longer looked quite as formal as he had during the afternoon's work. He'd changed his sweater for a navy-blue shirt with the top button undone. His sleeves were still rolled up. I noticed he seemed to do it almost instinctively, like a man prepared to tackle another repair at any moment.