Almost Like Home

Two ways of living. One place for closeness



Laura Bellini

Almost Like Home

Two ways of living. One place for closeness

Laura Bellini

ROMANS

ISBN: 9788384904503

ALL-IN Rafał Płonkowski



TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRO 4
Chapter 1 - A Man with a Plan of His Own 9
Chapter 2 - Conditions That Were Never in the Contract 20
Chapter 3 - The Road Doesn't Always Run Straight 33
Chapter 4 - Beyond the Map 44
Chapter 5 - The Line Between Work and Desire 57
Chapter 6 - A Place Where You Can Stay 65
Chapter 7 - The Morning After Something Changed 77
Chapter 8 - His World 88
Chapter 9 - A Test on My Own Terms 103
Chapter 10 - When You Stop Being a Guest 114
Chapter 11 - The Morning Light 124
Chapter 12 - A Place I Hadn't Chosen 133
Chapter 13 - The Price of a Shared Plan 145
Chapter 14 - The Things We Don't Say 154
Chapter 15 - A Home Built Without Asking 163
Chapter 16 - When It's Time to Drive Away 175
Chapter 17 - Two Sides of the Same Road 187
Chapter 18 - A Place to Return To 195
Chapter 19 - A Place Beside Each Other 205
Chapter 20 - Almost Like Home 216

INTRO

The last stop on my route was by a lake, on the edge of a village whose name I later struggled to pronounce without checking it on a map. That afternoon, however, it didn't matter. Children sat on blankets among the reeds, adults held paper cups of tea, and I was reading aloud an excerpt from a novel about a woman who had spent half her life searching for a place where nobody expected anything from her. When I closed the book, one of the girls approached my van and asked whether I would come back.

"If the road is passable," I replied.

"And what if it isn't?"

"Then I'll find another one."

She smiled as though that was exactly the answer she had been hoping for. I liked it too. It was simple, honest, and had long been the way I chose to live.

My current vehicle, a white van with the words "The Bookshop on Wheels" painted in navy blue along its side, was parked a few metres away, its rear doors wide open. Inside, it smelled of paper, wood, and the coffee I'd managed to spill on the rubber flooring during my morning stop. The shelves were holding up remarkably well, although one had been creaking whenever I took a corner for the past week, and the side door had to be pushed shut with my hip. I loved that van for everything it had made possible, but increasingly, I felt as though I was asking it to give me more than it could.

That was why I'd bought a second one.

It had started with three crates, a folding table, and a vehicle that smelled of damp upholstery after every rainy day. Over time, people began waiting for me in the same places. Some came looking for crime novels, while others returned books they'd bought a month earlier, recommending them with such enthusiasm that you'd think they were entrusting me with a family secret. Sometimes someone stayed to talk long after they'd finished shopping. Those were precisely the moments that made me want a bigger interior. Not so I could carry more stock, but so that nobody would have to stand in the rain while choosing their next story.

The new vehicle wasn't a bookshop yet. It was a used van that had seen better days and undergone several repairs carried out with such imagination that its previous owner probably ought to have become a writer. It was now sitting in a workshop on the outskirts of town, waiting to be converted. It was supposed to get shelves, a folding counter, space for crates of books, and wide doors that would allow people to step inside without having to duck their heads. I wanted it to become something more than a vehicle fitted with bookcases. It was meant to be a little bookshop capable of stopping beside a lake, in a town square, or outside a school, then setting off again before anyone had the chance to ask when I was finally going to put down roots.

I had a plan. A carefully mapped route through Warmia, a list of libraries and local festivals, tentative dates for meetings, and even a reserved spot at the book fair in Olsztyn. The new van was supposed to be ready before the season began. I wasn't asking for a miracle. I needed solid workmanship, a sensible budget, and people who

understood that a mobile bookshop wasn't just an ordinary delivery van with a prettier interior.

That evening, when I returned to the workshop, common sense told me to go home. Instead, I parked outside the gate, switched off the engine, and sat in silence for a moment. The cabin was still warm from the day's journey, and moisture was gathering on the windows. In the distance, I could hear the hum of traffic and the occasional bark of a dog. I still needed to check the interior measurements, compare them with the drawings, and make sure the folding counter would fit into the design. The real work was supposed to begin tomorrow. I didn't want to put anything off until later.

A single lamp was on inside the workshop. The side door hadn't been locked, so I walked in, calling the mechanic by name, but the only answer was silence. My new van stood in the middle of the workshop, stripped of some of its side panels. Without them, it looked bigger and somehow more vulnerable. I ran my hand along the cool edge of the metal, as though I could somehow tell from its surface whether buying it had been a sensible decision.

A printout of the design lay on the workbench. I spread it out beside the measuring tape and began comparing the dimensions. I found the first problem quickly: the recess where I'd planned to put the lowest shelves was narrower than the documentation suggested. The second problem appeared a moment later. If I kept the aisle as wide as I wanted, the folding counter would have to be shorter. If I made the counter bigger, someone would have to squeeze sideways between the shelves.

I sat down on an overturned crate. It wasn't a disaster. I liked solving problems, especially those with precise

measurements that didn't require me to guess what someone else was thinking. I could move the shelves, change the depth of the counter, or give up one of the cabinets. But I wasn't willing to sacrifice the comfort of the people who would be coming inside. Books didn't need luxury. People needed room to feel at ease, even if only for a little while.

I moved the measuring tape across the floor and wrote down another set of numbers. I wanted an aisle wide enough for two people to pass each other without apologising or holding their breath. I also wanted to leave space for a small stool, because older customers often needed a moment to rest before deciding which book to choose. I'd included those requirements in the design from the very beginning. They weren't decorative extras. They were what made the difference between a shop that simply travelled from place to place and somewhere people actually wanted to return to.

I took my notebook out of my bag. On the first page, I'd written down dates, village names, and the names of people who had promised to help with the first events. Beside them, in a different colour, was a list of things that still needed doing. Most of the items had already been crossed off. Looking at it, I felt a brief, unpleasant sense of relief: everything depended on me. If something went wrong, I wouldn't have to wonder whether someone had kept their promise. And if everything worked out, nobody would be able to say I owed it to someone else's generosity.

My phone vibrated on the workbench. It was a short message from the mechanic.

"Witek will be here at eight tomorrow. The designer. You need to work out the layout again because the current design won't work with these dimensions."

I read it twice. I didn't like being informed of a change of plans as though my presence were little more than a formality. I replied that I'd be there at eight and that I wanted to see every possible option before anyone started cutting anything.

For a moment, I was tempted to add that it was my bookshop, my money, and my route. I didn't. I hadn't met the man who was coming yet. I didn't know how he worked or whether he knew how to listen. I wasn't going to start a working relationship with an argument when he might simply turn out to be good at what he did.

I switched off the lamp and stepped outside. The air smelled of wet grass and water. My old van was waiting in the car park, patiently, like a faithful dog that never asked questions, even when I came back later than I'd promised. I leaned against its side and looked towards the road. Tomorrow, I would meet the man who would help determine the shape of my new bookshop. My plan was ready, at least on paper. Only now, for the first time in a long while, it wasn't just about where I would go next.

Would I be able to let someone else have a say in shaping a place that was supposed to be mine without losing the right to move on whenever I chose?

Chapter 1 - A Man with a Plan of His Own

At five past eight, I was already at the workshop, a notebook tucked under my arm, two cups of coffee in my hands, and the firm belief that at least today nothing should take me by surprise. I placed one cup on the table beside the technical drawings. The other was meant for the journey back, assuming my conversation with the designer turned out to be as long as the mechanic's message had suggested. My plan for the morning was straightforward: inspect the van, discuss the measurements, agree on the order of work, and leave with a concrete schedule. I had no intention of spending hours debating whether a bookshop on wheels was a good idea. I had long since moved past that stage.

A radio was playing inside the workshop. Someone was dragging metal components across the concrete floor, and a man in a dark shirt with his sleeves rolled up was standing beside my van. He held a rolled-up sheet in one hand and rested the other against the edge of the open door. He didn't look like someone who had come merely to glance at a design. His expression was focused, his forehead slightly furrowed, and he had the kind of calm that could sometimes be more irritating than impatience.

"Alina Rataj?" he asked before I had a chance to introduce myself.

"That depends. Who's asking?"

He turned towards me.

"Sławomir Witek. I'm supposed to design the interior of this vehicle and make sure it's still roadworthy after the conversion."

He held out his hand. His handshake was firm, but not deliberately forceful. I noticed a few faint traces of grease around his fingernails and a watch with a scratched strap. He didn't look like someone who spent all day behind a desk, although his profession might have suggested otherwise.

"Nice to meet you. I hope you've had a chance to familiarise yourself with the design."

"I have. That's why I wanted to see the vehicle before we talked."

"It's right in front of you."

"Exactly."

I didn't reply. I set my coffee down on the table and spread out the documentation. I had prepared three versions of the shelving layout, two alternatives for the counter, and a list of equipment I wasn't willing to remove. Everything was described, measured, and carefully thought through. I hadn't bought a van just to let some stranger arrange its interior according to his personal taste.

Sławomir unrolled his own drawing beside mine. He studied the plans, then ran a finger along the proposed fittings.

"Is this your final version?"

"Yes."

"Who prepared it?"

"I did. I consulted the previous mechanic about the measurements, but the concept is mine."

"I can tell."

I wasn't sure whether that was supposed to be a compliment.

"Is there something you don't like?"

"Several things."

He moved the documentation towards me and pointed to the lower section of the installation.

"You want to put the heavier crates here. The fridge here, and the water tank on the opposite side. It all looks reasonable on paper, but it doesn't take into account how the vehicle will behave on the road. With a full load, the weight distribution could become a problem."

"That's why I hired a designer."

"In that case, please let me do that part of the job."

He said it calmly, without the slightest trace of irony. And that was precisely why I couldn't dismiss his comment as an ordinary attempt to assert his authority.

I walked over to the van and looked inside. Some of the panels had already been removed and were lying on the floor. At the back, someone had marked the positions of the future shelves with strips of tape. In my imagination, I could already see bookcases filled with novels, a small counter, and two folding seats. I didn't need a luxury camper van. I wanted to create a space where someone could browse a book in peace, talk to me, and never feel that they were getting in the way of other customers.

"I don't want you changing the entire concept," I said. "I want an open aisle, low shelves, and a counter that can be folded out when I'm parked. I'm not planning to live in this vehicle."

Sławomir looked at me over the top of the drawings.

"I'm not designing you a flat."

"Good. I was beginning to worry."

A brief smile appeared on his face.

"I'm designing a vehicle that will carry people, books, equipment, and probably a few other things I'll find out about along the way. I need to know how you intend to use it."

"I'll be travelling around Warmia. Libraries, schools, local events, book fairs. Sometimes small villages, sometimes larger towns. I don't intend to return to the same place every day."

"How long will you be staying at each stop?"

"It varies. Anywhere from an hour to a whole day."

"And overnight stays?"

"Depends on the route."

He watched me for a moment, as though trying to fit my answer into something he had already heard.

"So the vehicle needs to be self-sufficient."

"It needs to be practical."

"Those aren't always the same thing."

I didn't like the way he spoke, as though he needed to explain the basic principles of running my own business to me. I was thirty-six, had been running a bookshop for several years, and knew exactly how much a bad decision could cost. I didn't need a guardian.

"Mr Witek, I didn't come here to have my idea evaluated. I came here for a design that will allow me to make it happen."

"And I didn't come here to draw something that will look beautiful in a visualisation and turn out to be dangerous once it's loaded."

Silence settled between us. From the other side of the workshop came the sound of a hammer striking metal.

Sławomir didn't look away. Nor did he try to soften his words. There was something very direct about him, something that might have irritated me if he hadn't seemed like a man who spoke only when he had a reason.

"All right," I said. "Then show me exactly what you want to change."

He spread his drawing across the bonnet of the neighbouring vehicle. His proposal differed from mine mainly in the way the shelves would be secured and the placement of the heaviest components. He wanted to use modular fittings that could be partially dismantled if I needed to transport a larger number of crates. The counter would be attached to the wall structure rather than to a single cabinet. He also planned additional reinforcement in the lower section.

"That makes sense," I admitted after a moment. "But if we cover the entire wall, I'll lose space for displaying books."

"I'm not proposing that we cover the entire wall."

"That's not how it looks on the drawing."

"Because I haven't drawn all the elements yet. First, I need to know what you actually need."

"I sent you a list."

"The list tells me what you want. It doesn't tell me what you might be willing to give up."

"Nothing that matters to the way the bookshop operates."

He looked at me with unmistakable interest.

"This is going to be a more difficult job than I expected."

"I could recommend an easier one. Apparently, someone in Olsztyn is looking for a designer to fit out an ordinary camper van."

"And apparently, you're looking for someone who can build a bookshop on wheels."

This time, I was the first to smile. Not because he had convinced me, but because I hadn't expected that answer. He hadn't raised his voice or tried to overpower me. He simply wasn't prepared to give way on something for which he was professionally responsible.

"Fine. Let's start with the specifics."

For the next several dozen minutes, we measured the interior. Sławomir worked quickly but without rushing. He checked every measurement twice, marked it on the drawing, and added brief notes. When I asked why he was moving a shelf's mounting point by several centimetres, he showed me a section of the structure I hadn't noticed before. He pointed out where a body reinforcement beam ran and explained that he had no intention of interfering with any component responsible for the vehicle's structural rigidity.

I listened, although I wasn't going to make it easy for him.

"What about here?" I asked, pointing towards the back of the van. "I'd like to be able to take out two crates without having to move the others."

"We can make a pull-out module."

"I don't want heavy runners. This vehicle is supposed to travel, not sit in a furniture showroom."

"I agree. That's why we'll use stops and runners designed for the load. I'm not going to install a kitchen drawer for you."

"Good. I don't like kitchens on wheels."

"And I don't like bookshops where the books fall out at the first sharp turn."

I looked at him. He held my gaze for a moment before returning to his measurements. I wondered whether he always had to have the last word, or whether it was only with clients who refused to accept his solutions without a discussion.

An hour later, Marek, the owner of the workshop, walked in with his phone pressed to his ear. He greeted us with a nod and put a folder on the table.

"I see you've already met."

"We're starting from scratch," Sławomir replied.

"Don't exaggerate. The van hasn't been stripped down to the last screw yet."

"But the design needs changes."

Marek looked at me questioningly.

"Nothing we can't work out," I said.

"Exactly. That's why I brought you two together. Sławek knows more about this kind of conversion than anyone else I could bring in. And Alina knows exactly what she wants. You should be able to reach an agreement."

"We're working on it," I replied.

Marek chuckled under his breath and returned to his office.

Meanwhile, Sławomir spread several more sheets across the table. One showed a cross-section of the van with its centre of gravity marked. Another contained a sketch of the modules he wanted to build using lightweight plywood and aluminium profiles.

"I have one more observation," he said. "We can't design this vehicle with parked use as our only consideration."

"Why not?"

"Because you'll be spending most of your time in it while it's moving. If the shelves are too deep, you'll have to secure the books individually. If the counter is too wide, it'll obstruct the aisle. And if we don't leave enough room by the entrance, people will end up queuing outside during events."

He traced a line across the plan with his finger.

"I'd like to see your current bookshop in operation."

"Why?"

"To see how you serve your customers. How you arrange the stock, where you put books when someone wants to browse several titles at once. Designing without observing would just be guesswork."

I hadn't expected that suggestion. Most people I spoke to about the bookshop immediately asked about the number of books, the floor space, or the projected turnover. He wanted to see what an ordinary working day looked like.

"I have an event tomorrow in one of the villages near Olsztyn," I said. "But this isn't a sightseeing trip."

"I wasn't suggesting a sightseeing trip."

"And you won't be deciding where I go."

"I have no intention of doing that."

"Good. Because the route has already been arranged."

He glanced at my notebook.

"For how long?"

"A few weeks. I have more dates after that."

"And the van needs to be ready before your first trip?"

"Yes."

"Then we have less time than I thought."

"Which is why I need concrete decisions."

Sławomir rolled up some of the drawings.

"In that case, I suggest we start by checking the load distribution. I won't approve the final installation without that. I can prepare two versions, but I need information about the actual number of books and the equipment you'll be carrying. I don't want to base the design on estimates."

"I can bring some crates tomorrow."

"All of them?"

"I'm not planning to move the entire bookshop into the workshop."

"A few representative ones will be enough. Different sizes, different weights."

"That I can do."

I closed my notebook. We hadn't achieved everything I'd planned, but at least I knew where we stood. Sławomir wasn't going to approve my design without changes, and I wasn't going to let him transform the interior however he pleased. Still, we had one thing in common: the vehicle had to work, not merely look good.

As I gathered my documents, I noticed that he had drawn a small folding stool near the entrance on one of the sheets.

"That wasn't in my design," I said.

"You mentioned that some of your older customers needed somewhere to sit while they looked through the books."

I stopped, my folder in my hand.

"You remembered?"

"We're discussing a bookshop, not a bedroom wardrobe."

I didn't know why that small detail made a stronger impression on me than all his technical arguments. Perhaps because I had expected us to fight over every centimetre, yet he had remembered something I hadn't even marked on the drawing.

"The stool has to fold away," I said.

"Of course."

"And it can't block the entrance."

"I know."

"And it has to be comfortable."

"You really do like setting conditions."

"It's my bookshop."

"I'm beginning to understand."

He picked up the sheet and added a few measurements. He didn't try to convince me that his idea was better. He simply incorporated my comments.

I paused once more at the workshop door.

"I'll be here tomorrow after nine. I'll bring the crates."

"All right. I'll prepare the structural options."

"And please remember, I don't want to turn this into a camper van."

"And please remember that I'm not building shelves for a camping trailer."

I shook my head.

"I can already see you're going to be a difficult person to work with."

"Likewise, Alina."

I walked out before I could think of a reply. In the car park, I found my keys in my coat pocket and sat behind the wheel for a moment. I had several weeks of work ahead of me, a limited budget, and a designer who seemed to treat every idea I had as an invitation to debate. I should have been annoyed. I was annoyed.

And yet, as I drove away, I found myself thinking about his comment on the folding stool.

He hadn't forgotten who the bookshop was actually meant to serve.

And that was far more dangerous to my peace of mind than I cared to admit.

Chapter 2 - Conditions That Were Never in the Contract

The following day, I arrived at the workshop with three crates of books, a rolled-up protective mat, and a bag containing a measuring tape, my notebook, and a few small items I needed to recreate the bookshop's usual layout. One crate held heavy art books and hardcovers, another contained paperbacks, and the third was filled with books in various formats that most often caused problems when arranging them on shelves. I didn't want Sławomir designing the space based on measurements alone. Books came in different sizes, and customers didn't always put them back where they had found them.

The workshop was already busy that morning. Marek was talking to a supplier, two mechanics were preparing the vehicle for further dismantling, and Sławomir was standing beside my van. He was wearing a dark sweater and work trousers. The table was already covered with new drawings, this time with the mounting points clearly marked.

"Right on time," he said when he saw me.

"Is that a good thing?"

"Definitely. Especially since you've brought half the bookshop with you."

"Only the part I thought might interest you."

He picked up one of the crates before I could reach for its handle.

"Heavier than it looks."

"Architecture and photography albums. Some of them weigh more than a small dog."

"In that case, we won't be putting them on the highest shelf."

"Finally, a decision we agree on."

He smiled but didn't reply. He placed the crates near the entrance and asked me to show him how I usually arranged the books. I spread out the protective mat, took out several titles, and began explaining why some needed to be immediately accessible while others could be stored in the lower modules. I talked about readers who came looking for a specific title and those who needed a little encouragement. About children who chose books by their covers and older customers who preferred to read an excerpt first.

Sławomir listened, moving the books around on the table. He didn't interrupt or immediately offer his own solutions. Only when I had finished did he pick up one of the albums.

"You can't comfortably browse through this while standing."

"That's why I want a counter."

"And what if two people want to look through it at the same time?"

"Then I need enough room for them to stand next to each other."

He examined the width of the crate, then measured the space between the doors and the planned fittings.

"We'll make a pull-out counter with an additional fold-out section. But the mounting will need reinforcement."

"How much will that add to the cost?"

He gave me an approximate figure.

"That's more than I had budgeted for."

"I can look for a cheaper material, but I don't want to cut corners on the mounting."

"I'm not asking you to compromise on safety. I'm asking you to make sensible use of the budget."

"That's fair. I'll see what I can do."

He bent over the drawing and began making adjustments. I noticed that when he was working, his face lost some of the reserve I'd seen the previous day. He became more focused and, at the same time, more relaxed. He didn't need to tell me about his experience. All I had to do was watch the way he arranged each component and checked whether the measurements actually made sense.

A few minutes later, he handed me one of the sheets.

"Take a look."

The shelves in the drawing were lower than in my original version, but their arrangement made it possible to use the entire width of the wall. The counter was closer to the entrance, and the folding stool had its own mounting point on the side panel. The lower section included space for transport crates.

"This looks better," I admitted.

"Don't praise it just yet. We haven't checked whether everything will fit."

"But it's a good idea."

"I'll make a note of this moment."

"Don't get carried away. I don't want to get into the habit of complimenting your work."

"I'm not expecting that. It's enough if you tell me when something doesn't work."

I took the drawing and examined it more closely. Some of the solutions were different from what I'd imagined, but I could still recognise my bookshop in them. That mattered. I didn't want to step into the finished vehicle and feel that someone had arranged everything for me without asking what I thought.

"I have one more thing I'd like to discuss," I said. "I'd like us to agree on the rules of our cooperation before we start ordering materials."

Sławomir put his pencil down.

"I'm listening."

"I'll be responsible for the bookshop's function, the stock, the budget, and the route. You'll be responsible for the structure, safety, and technical solutions. Any change affecting the cost or the interior layout has to be agreed with me. I don't want to find out afterwards that something has been ordered or made differently from what we discussed."

"Agreed. But I have one condition."

I placed both hands on the table.

"What is it?"

"If I believe one of your ideas creates a safety risk or fails to meet technical requirements, I won't implement it simply because you're the owner of the vehicle."

"I don't expect you to do anything unsafe."

"Then there shouldn't be a problem."

"I do want every objection to be justified, though. It won't be enough for you to say that you don't like something."