Autumn Stays on Your Hands

Autumn was meant to be just a season. He changed her plans



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ROMANS

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INTRO

The first apple fell from the tree at the exact moment I decided I wouldn't stay here a single day longer than my contract required.

It hit the ground beside my boot and split into two uneven halves. I stopped between the rows of old apple trees and looked at the scattered seeds. The air smelled of wet bark, ripe fruit, and earth that the night's rain had turned into heavy, dark clay. Beyond the trees stretched the gentle hills surrounding Sandomierz. The mist had not yet lifted from the valley. It was the last week of September, and I had eight weeks of work ahead of me and a flight to Lisbon booked for November twenty-eighth.

Everything had been planned.

That was how I liked things best.

I crouched beside the roots of an apple tree, brushed the wet leaves aside with my hand, and examined the soil. The roots were exposed, and the trunk bore the marks of pruning that had been neglected for years. A dozen or so metres away, beyond a rusty gate, lay the display garden of the Lis nursery. Only a few years earlier, apparently, guesthouse owners, landscape architects, and people looking for inspiration for their own gardens had come here. Now grass was swallowing the paths, the flower beds were losing their shape, and a wooden pergola leaned towards a dried-up pond.

My job was to bring this place back to life without pretending that time could be reversed.

That was precisely why I had accepted the commission.

My phone vibrated in my jacket pocket. My friend's name appeared on the screen.

"Don't tell me you're already working," Iga said before I could get a word out.

"I'm surveying the grounds."

"Dagna, it's seven in the morning."

"Plants don't keep office hours."

"But you should understand the concept of rest. Let me remind you that this trip was supposed to be your last assignment before Portugal. No extensions, no extra projects, and absolutely no rescuing people who can't get their own lives in order."

I smiled despite myself.

Iga had known me for fifteen years. She had watched me build my design studio from my first balcony projects to gardens whose owners could spend more on a single tree than I once earned in a month. She had also witnessed my most recent breakup. She had seen how long I had tried to convince myself that building a future together didn't have to mean giving up my own.

"I'm not planning to rescue anyone," I assured her. "I have a project, a fee, and a completion date. After that, Lisbon."

"And the owner?"

"I haven't met him yet."

"Apparently, he's handsome."

"Where do you get this information?"

"The internet. There are photographs from the nursery. Early forties, dark hair, looks like the kind of man who can fix a roof and break a heart."

"A very scientific assessment."

"That's what you have a best friend for."

I ended the call before she could elaborate on her theory.

Truthfully, I wasn't interested in what Beniamin Lis looked like. I was interested in why a man who ran one of the region's better-known tree nurseries had allowed the garden that served as its showcase to fall into ruin.

I took a folder of printed plans from my bag. My design called for preserving the oldest apple trees, restoring the stone paths, and creating a space where the display garden would flow naturally into the orchard. No exotic ornaments, no plants chosen purely for photographs. I wanted people entering this place to smell earth and fruit rather than expensive decoration.

This was supposed to be my last project in Poland before I began working with a Portuguese studio specialising in the restoration of historic gardens. I wasn't running away from my life. At least, that was what I kept telling myself. I simply wanted to discover who I might become if, for a while, nobody expected me to stay.

When I tried to open the gate, its lower hinge creaked and refused to budge.

"You need to lift it a little."

A man's voice came from behind me.

I turned.

He stood a few steps away, holding a mug of coffee in one hand and a pair of pruning shears in the other. He wore

a dark shirt with the sleeves rolled up, worn work trousers, and mud-covered boots. His hair, touched with grey at the temples, looked as though he ran his fingers through it instead of using a comb. He wasn't smiling, but there was something attentive about his gaze that made me hold his eyes longer than I usually would with a stranger.

"The gate or the standards of maintenance around here?" I asked.

For a moment, he watched me without speaking.

Then he set his mug on a fence post.

"Depends which one is easier to fix."

He approached, lifted the metal gate, and opened it with a single unhurried movement. Instead of walking through ahead of me, he stepped aside, leaving me room to pass.

"Dagna Rataj?" he asked.

"And you must be Beniamin Lis."

"That's right."

I held out my hand. His handshake was firm without being too strong. His palm was rough and warm, marked by the kind of work that couldn't be done from behind a desk. There was a small cut on his thumb, covered with a plaster. I noticed it only because, for a brief moment, I looked at our hands longer than an ordinary greeting required.

"You're earlier than we agreed," he said.

"I wanted to see the garden before you started telling me what it ought to look like."

He raised his eyebrows slightly.

"And what if I have my own opinions?"

"Good. The hardest people to work with are those who don't know what they want."

"And those who know exactly what they want?"

"That depends on whether they're capable of listening."

This time, he smiled. Not broadly. Just enough to soften the severity of his face and make me understand why Iga had taken an interest in his photographs.

Beniamin picked up his mug and glanced at my plans.

"Before we begin, there's something you need to know. Not all the trees you've marked for preservation can stay."

I felt the familiar prickle of irritation.

"I make my final decisions after inspecting the site. That's precisely why I've come."

"I understand. But the intended use of part of the property may change."

"How much of it?"

He didn't answer immediately. He looked towards the nursery building, where a light had come on behind the large windows. I could make out the blurred silhouette of a woman standing beside a table. Beniamin noticed her too and looked away.

"We don't know yet," he said. "I want the garden to regain its former value. For now, that's all I can promise."

"And I need something more than a promise."

Instead of taking offence, he nodded.

"Fair enough."

Those two words surprised me more than his earlier resistance. I was accustomed to owners who treated a designer as someone hired to confirm their own ideas. He

looked like a man used to making decisions, yet he made no attempt to talk over my objections.

We entered the garden. Beniamin stopped beside one of the oldest apple trees and snapped off a dead twig. In the morning light, I noticed particles of soil embedded in the creases of his hands. He studied the tree with an attentiveness that could never have been mistaken for indifference.

"My father planted this one," he said. "Forty years ago. Back then, there were only fields beyond the fence."

"Do you want to keep it?"

"More than the others."

I examined the trunk.

"Then we'll start with this one. But without proper testing, I can't promise we'll save it."

"I don't expect promises you can't keep, Ms Rataj."

The way he said my name felt unexpectedly personal coming from a man I had met only minutes earlier. He had done nothing to overstep the boundaries of politeness. And yet I had the strange feeling that our conversations would not end with trees.

The sound of a door opening came from the building.

"Beniamin!" a woman called. "We need to talk before the others arrive."

I saw his jaw tighten for a moment.

"I'll be right there, Marta."

The woman looked at me, then at the plans spread out before us. Her expression remained unreadable.

"Is that the designer?" she asked.

"Yes," Beniamin replied.

"So we're really going ahead with it."

There was no enthusiasm in her voice.

Beniamin offered no explanation for her remark. He merely bent down, picked a ripe apple off the ground, and offered it to me on his open palm.

"Before you decide what gets to stay here, try this. The variety isn't particularly attractive, but it has character."

I accepted the fruit. Our fingers brushed for a fraction of a second, and he made no attempt to hold on to my hand. A dark smear of earth remained on the apple's skin.

I took a bite. The flesh was firm and sweet, with a distinct tartness.

"It's good," I admitted.

"I know."

I smiled.

"Is modesty another of your virtues?"

"I wouldn't put it in my top five."

I laughed before I could stop myself.

Beniamin looked at me with such concentration that it seemed my laughter had told him something important. Then he turned towards the building, where a woman was waiting for him, along with a conversation he clearly didn't want to have in front of me.

I remained among the trees, an apple in my hand, my plans in my bag, and the uncomfortable awareness that this commission held far more uncertainties than the documents had suggested.

I should have started by checking the property boundaries and the terms of the contract.

Instead, I watched Beniamin walk away along the path and found myself wondering about something entirely different.

Why, after all those months in which I had so carefully taught myself not to need anyone, had this particular stranger made me wish he would say my name just one more time?

Chapter 1 - Roots Don't Like Being Rushed

Over the next twenty minutes, I managed to discover three things. The garden was in worse condition than the documentation suggested. Someone had recently marked several trees for removal, even though they showed no signs of disease. And Beniamin Lis apparently had a habit of making difficult decisions alone, then presenting them to the world as matters that were no longer open for discussion.

The last discovery came when he returned.

I was walking along the remains of a path leading to a small pavilion when I heard the distinctive crunch of gravel behind me. Beniamin stopped beside me. He didn't look like a man who had just enjoyed a pleasant conversation.

"We have a problem," he announced.

"Only one? That's good news. I've counted seven."

He glanced at the plans spread open in my hands.

"The one along the western boundary."

"Could you be more specific?"

"We can't plant anything there."

I turned the design towards him. The western section of the garden was the most important part of my concept. I had planned a strip of perennial plants, a sensory path, and a small educational area where visitors could learn about traditional varieties of fruit trees. Without that section, the entire design would lose its natural connection to the orchard.

"Why?" I asked.

"I need that land for something else."

"What exactly?"

He was silent for a moment.

"Something connected with the future of the nursery."

I folded the plans very slowly.

"Mr Lis, we agreed on the scope of work three weeks ago. You received the concept documentation, made two minor comments, and approved the design. Now you're telling me that almost a third of the site isn't available?"

"I didn't say it was permanent."

"But you can't tell me how long it will be unavailable."

"Not yet."

I looked around the garden, trying to control my irritation. I was thirty-nine years old, owned my own design studio, and had enough experience to recognise a situation in which a client was trying to change the rules after a project had begun. I had no intention of proving my worth yet again by compensating for someone else's indecision.

"In that case, I'll suspend work on that section until I receive a written decision."

"We can't afford a delay."

"Then I suggest you make your decision sooner."

He watched me for a long moment. The wind stirred the leaves of a nearby walnut tree, sending several drops of water onto his shoulder. He didn't even notice them.

"Do you always speak to your clients like that?"

"Only the ones who pay me to design something and then won't let me build it."

Unexpectedly, he let out a short laugh.

"Fair enough. I deserved that."

"This is only the beginning of our collaboration. I wouldn't jump to conclusions."

The smile remained on his face a little longer than I expected. Then Beniamin walked towards the old pergola and rested his hand against one of its posts.

"There's something I'd like to show you."

"If it's another part of the property I'm not allowed to touch, I'd rather find out here."

"This time, it's something you ought to save."

He led me behind the pavilion, into a neglected section of the garden concealed by tall grasses. Against a dark brick wall grew old rose bushes, almost completely overwhelmed by wild shoots and nettles. A few branches still carried small, deep-pink flowers. Their fragrance was delicate, with a faintly spicy note.

I crouched beside the nearest bush.

"These are old varieties," I said. "Probably part of a historical collection."

"My mother collected them."

I turned my head.

Beniamin was looking at the roses differently from the other plants. His rough self-assurance had disappeared. He was forty-four, yet for a moment he looked like a boy standing before something he could never recover.

"How many were there?" I asked more gently.

"Twenty-six varieties. At least, that's how many she recorded in her notebook. After she died, we tried to

maintain the collection, but eventually there wasn't enough time."

"Do you still have the notebook?"

"Yes."

"I'd like to see it."

He looked at me with obvious surprise.

"Really?"

"If I'm going to decide what can be saved, I need to know what used to grow here. You can't reconstruct everything from photographs."

Beniamin knelt beside the neighbouring bush and carefully moved a branch aside.

"This variety used to flower well into October. My mother said it was stubborn."

"Clearly, she had good taste."

"In plants?"

"In things that don't give up at the first frost."

He looked at me over the branches. He didn't reply, but amusement appeared in his eyes, mixed with something I couldn't quite identify.

We worked almost without speaking for the next half hour. I assessed the condition of the bushes, photographed the shoots, and marked the plants that urgently needed attention. Beniamin brought gloves, pruning shears, and a container for garden waste. He made no attempt to direct my work. When I asked about the age of the plants or how they had previously been maintained, he answered plainly and precisely.

At one of the bushes, however, I noticed a serious problem.

"Look at this."

I showed him the damage near the base of a stem. The wood was rotten, and the soil around the roots was far too wet.

"If we leave it like this, we'll lose the plant before winter."

"Can we move it?"

"Not now, not in this condition. First we need to improve the drainage and check whether the roots are healthy."

"And if they aren't?"

"We'll try taking cuttings for propagation. But I won't promise they'll survive."

Beniamin accepted the answer without protest.

It wasn't until I stood up that I noticed a long smear of earth on his sleeve. There was also a scratch on his forearm. Instinctively, I reached towards my pocket for a tissue, then stopped myself. He hardly needed looking after, and I had no reason to touch him.

Nevertheless, he noticed the gesture.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

"Roses aren't particularly grateful to their owners."

He glanced at the scratch.

"I'm used to it."

"That's not always a virtue."

For a moment, we stood close enough that I could smell his shirt, carrying the scents of cool air and wood. He didn't

step back, but neither did he do anything that would force me to move away.

I was the first to turn aside, reaching for my camera.

At noon, the maintenance crew arrived. Two nursery employees were due to begin clearing the paths and removing dead branches. When we reached the western part of the garden, I saw red ribbons tied around six apple trees.

"Who marked these?" I asked.

The older employee, Mr Stefan, glanced uncertainly at Beniamin.

"We were told yesterday to prepare this row for felling."

Anger rose inside me.

"On what grounds?"

"That's the information we were given."

"By whom?"

Stefan hesitated.

"The office."

Beniamin removed his gloves.

"Nobody is cutting anything down for now," he said.

"But it was scheduled for Friday," the employee pointed out.

"That's changed."

Stefan nodded and walked away with the other man towards the pavilion.

I remained beside the trees with Beniamin.

"Did you know about this?"

"I knew their removal was being considered."

"Considered? Someone has already issued instructions."

"Without my final approval."

"So people in your company can prepare trees for felling without the owner's decision?"

Impatience appeared on his face.

"It's more complicated than that."

"Not for the trees. Either they stay or they don't."

I walked over to the first marked apple tree. Its crown was uneven, but the branches looked healthy. I lifted a loose piece of bark, examined the trunk, and took a photograph.

"There's no obvious reason to remove this one," I said. "I need an arborist's assessment before anyone makes a decision."

"I have my own specialists."

"Excellent. Then I'd like their written opinion."

"Dagna..."

For the first time, he used my name without any formal title.

I turned immediately.

"Yes?"

He sighed.

"I don't want to fight you over every tree."

"Neither do I. But if my name is going on this project, I won't allow healthy plants to disappear simply because they're inconvenient for a plan nobody is willing to explain."

For a moment, he looked at me sternly. Then he walked over to the first tree and untied the red ribbon.

He did the same with the remaining five.

It wasn't a grand gesture. It didn't solve our problems. And yet something changed when I saw that he was capable not only of listening to my arguments but of changing his actions because of them.

"They stay until we've had the expert assessment," he said.

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me. I still think the western section needs a different solution."

"And I still think you ought to tell me why."

He smiled without much pleasure.

"At least we're being honest about where we stand."

That afternoon, I spread my documentation across the large table in the pavilion. The temperature had dropped. Light streamed through the dirty windows, turning the dust suspended in the air an almost golden colour. Beniamin brought two mugs of tea, although I hadn't asked for anything.

"No sugar," he said, placing one in front of me.

"How did you know?"

"I didn't. The sugar's beside you."

I laughed.

I examined the possible alternatives for the path. If the western section really had to remain unavailable, I could move some of the planting closer to the pavilion. But that would require changes to the composition and additional groundwork.

"I have a proposal," I announced.

Beniamin sat opposite me.

"I'm listening."

"We'll keep the old orchard as the centre of the design. The rose garden will become a quieter section. We'll temporarily exclude the western strip from the work, but not from the project itself. Its final arrangement will remain open until a decision is made."

"How much will that cost us?"

"Financially, less than starting everything again. Organisationally, a little more patience."

"Which isn't always my strongest quality."

"I've noticed."

He leaned over the plans. His shirt sleeve slipped farther up his arm, revealing a scar near his wrist.

"What if I told you I needed a space that was useful above all else, rather than beautiful?"

"I'd ask why you think those two things are mutually exclusive."

He studied me carefully.

"No one's ever answered me like that before."

"Perhaps you've been asking the wrong people."

Rain began to fall outside. Drops struck the pavilion roof, and the air filled with the smell of damp wood. Beniamin rolled a pencil between his fingers for a moment, then placed it beside my plans.

"There's one more condition," he said.

I felt my patience genuinely beginning to run out.

"I'm all ears."

"I want the garden to function properly after you've gone. I don't want it to be beautiful for the first three months and then fall apart."

"Every one of my projects includes a maintenance plan."

"I'm not only talking about maintenance. I mean the people who'll work here. They need to understand why things have been created and what makes them valuable."

I studied him more closely.

"That actually makes sense."

"Really?"

"Please don't look so surprised. I am capable of agreeing with you."

"I'll remember this moment."

I pushed a blank sheet of paper towards him.

"I'll prepare two training sessions for the team. One before winter begins and another after the main planting work is completed. In return, I expect full access to the documentation and one person responsible for decisions."

"Me."

"That's precisely what I was hoping to avoid."

He laughed more openly than before.

For a moment, he wasn't the stern owner of a nursery or a man concealing family problems. He was simply a man whose laughter transformed his face in a dangerously attractive way.

When the rain eased, we stepped outside the pavilion. A delicate mist hung over the orchard. Beniamin stopped beside the steps while I put my documents back into my bag.

"Tomorrow at eight?" he asked.

"Eight."

"And bring something warmer. They're forecasting frost in the morning."

"Do you check the weather forecast for all your colleagues?"

"Only the ones who arrive before seven and try to force open a broken gate."

I answered with a smile I hadn't intended to show him.

I started towards my car. After a few steps, I heard his voice again.

"Dagna?"

I turned.

"Yes?"

"I'm glad you came."

I didn't answer immediately. There was no flirtation in his words, at least nothing obvious. There was gratitude, perhaps a little relief. Even so, I found myself wanting to hear him say it again.

"Tell me that in eight weeks," I replied.

As I drove away, I saw in my rear-view mirror that he was still standing outside the pavilion.

That evening, I sat at the desk in my rented apartment on the outskirts of Sandomierz and opened my calendar. Beneath the date of my flight to Lisbon were two words: "New beginning."

I stared at them longer than I should have.

Then I closed my laptop before I could think of adding any questions beneath them.