Laura Bellini

Don't Ask If I Missed You

They both remember the kiss.
Leaving was more complicated



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ROMANS

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INTRO

The first thing I saw when I walked onto the set was a bed standing in the middle of an empty apartment. The second was a piece of paper taped to the video monitor, on which someone had written in red marker: "LOVE DOESN'T FORGIVE LIES."

I stopped in the doorway.

"Whose idea was that?" I asked.

"The production designer's," replied Marta, my assistant. "Apparently, it's supposed to create atmosphere."

"Tell him to create atmosphere with lighting. Take the sign down."

Marta smiled and obediently peeled the paper off the monitor. It was 8:17 in the morning. A fine rain was falling outside the windows of an old tenement building on Gdańska Street in Bydgoszcz, and I had exactly forty-three minutes to convince the crew that we could shoot the most intimate scene in the film without turning it into a cheap spectacle.

I had been working on this project for six months. The film's working title was Distance, and it told the story of two people who had lived under the same roof for years without noticing when they had stopped talking to each other. I wasn't interested in infidelity or dramatic confessions. I wanted to capture the moment when someone sits beside a person they once loved and suddenly realizes they have no idea what that person is thinking.

I was thirty-four years old, owned my own production company, and had enough failed projects behind me to know that a good story wouldn't defend itself. This was

supposed to be my first feature-length production made on terms I had genuinely helped establish. I had signed the agreement with the producer after months of negotiations, turning down a permanent position that offered security but would have taken away my right to make decisions about my own projects.

I had no intention of giving any of that up now.

"Emilia, we've got a problem," Marta said.

I looked up from the shooting schedule.

"If it's about the coffee machine, deal with it yourself."

"It's about the cinematographer."

I should have asked for details immediately. Instead, I straightened the papers in my binder, as though aligning their edges might somehow bring order to reality.

"What about him?"

"Michał officially pulled out last night. The producer has approved a replacement. Apparently, he's excellent."

"Name?"

Marta glanced at her phone.

"Rataj. Konrad Rataj."

For several seconds, all I could hear was the rain striking the metal windowsill.

I hadn't seen Konrad in six years.

I knew he was still working as a cinematographer. Occasionally, I came across his name in the closing credits of films I watched for professional reasons. Once, I had seen a photograph of him on a set somewhere abroad. He was standing behind a camera, leaning forward in concentration,

with that familiar crease between his eyebrows. I had closed the page much faster than the situation warranted.

"Emilia?"

"Who approved him?"

"Robert. He says he tried calling you."

I took out my phone. Three missed calls from the producer and a message sent at 11:48 the previous night.

We've found a replacement. Konrad Rataj. He's read the material and has availability. We'll discuss it in the morning.

I stared at the screen, feeling a familiar, unpleasant mixture of anger and helplessness. Robert knew I wanted final approval over key members of the crew. I had fought for that during negotiations. What he didn't know was why this particular man was someone I wouldn't even invite for coffee.

"Is he here already?" I asked.

"Apparently, he's looking over the locations with the gaffer."

I walked to the window. In the courtyard, technicians were unloading equipment, shielding the cases from the rain. Through the wet glass, I could make out only blurred figures and the headlights of parked vehicles.

"Push the rehearsal back fifteen minutes. I want to speak to Robert first."

"And the cinematographer?"

"I'll speak to him too."

Marta nodded, but she didn't leave immediately.

"Do you know him?"

I considered my answer for a moment.

"We worked together once."

It wasn't a lie.

It was simply an exceptionally small part of the truth.

Six years earlier, Konrad had been thirty-two and I had been twenty-eight. The apartment we shared smelled of coffee, photographic developing chemicals, and basil that neither of us could manage to keep alive. We worked on small productions, argued about framing, and ate dinner at ridiculous hours.

I also remembered our last kiss.

It hadn't been a goodbye.

That was precisely why it had been so difficult to forget.

I had been standing in the kitchen, leaning against the counter, when Konrad took my face between his hands and kissed me as though we had our entire future ahead of us. The following day, he told me he was leaving. He didn't ask whether I might go with him. He didn't suggest we sit down together and work out what would happen next.

He announced his decision.

And I, too proud to beg for a place in the life of a man who had apparently already closed that place to me, let him go.

"Emilia, Robert's downstairs," Marta said.

"I'll be right there."

I was left alone beside the monitor. A test shot of the empty bed was frozen on the screen. Soft light entered through the window, revealing the creases in the sheets. Someone had placed a book with a folded page corner on the pillow.

That was the kind of detail I cared about.

A trace of someone's presence.

Proof that life continued beyond the frame.

"I'd move the camera half a meter to the left."

The voice came from behind me.

I didn't need to turn around to know who was speaking.

Over six years, I had managed to forget countless things: telephone numbers, former friends' addresses, details of conversations that had once seemed terribly important. But I hadn't forgotten his voice. Low and steady, with a slight rasp at the ends of his sentences.

I turned slowly.

Konrad stood in the doorway wearing a dark sweater, an equipment bag slung over one shoulder. He was thirty-eight now. There was a little gray at his temples, and his features had become more sharply defined, but the way he looked at me hadn't changed.

He had always seemed capable of seeing more than people intended to reveal.

"Good morning, Konrad," I said.

His gaze moved over my face, lingering briefly on my lips.

He didn't smile.

"Hi, Emilia."

Neither of us took a step.

Finally, I gestured toward the monitor.

"Why to the left?"

He came closer, keeping a safe distance between us.

"Because then you'll see the door. The woman will have the option of leaving, even if she chooses to stay."

I looked at the frame.

I hated that he was right.

"Have you read the screenplay?"

"Twice."

"Did you know this was my project?"

"Yes."

He answered without hesitation. For a moment, I waited for an explanation, but none came.

"And you accepted the job anyway?"

"I accepted a job, Emilia. If you don't want to work with me, say so plainly. Robert can find someone else."

It should have been simple. I could have refused, invoked the relevant clause in my contract, and ended the conversation before old memories had a chance to do any damage.

Except Konrad had spotted something essential in my scene within minutes.

And the film needed a cinematographer who understood silence as well as dialogue.

"We are not discussing the past on set," I declared.

"Agreed."

"And you won't change my decisions behind my back."

He acknowledged that with a nod.

"I expect the same from you."

For the first time since he'd entered, I caught a glimpse of his old smile.

Anger rose in me. Not because he was being insolent, but because I remembered how much I'd loved that quiet

courage of his, the way he could stand up to people he cared about.

"Rehearsal starts in ten minutes," I said. "Prepare your proposed camera setup."

I was already turning away when he spoke again.

"Emilia."

I stopped.

"I know you have no reason to trust me."

I didn't look at him immediately. On the monitor, I could still see the empty bed and the doorway that, according to his suggestion, ought to be included in the frame.

"That's true."

"I'm not going to ask you to pretend otherwise."

At last, I lifted my eyes.

He stood motionless, ready to accept my answer, even if it meant the end of our working relationship.

For six years, I had imagined meeting him again in dozens of different ways. In none of those imagined encounters had I expected the hardest part to be not confronting him about leaving, but resisting the question that had gone unanswered that morning.

Why hadn't he let me make that decision with him?

Chapter 1 - Terms of Engagement

Konrad hadn't even finished setting up his camera when Robert walked into the apartment with a phone pressed to his ear and the expression of a man preparing to present a catastrophe as a minor scheduling inconvenience.

I stood beside the table with the shooting schedule, marking changes to the order of the shots. Around me, the crew was preparing for the first rehearsal. Someone was moving a tripod, the costume designer was checking the contents of a wardrobe, and Marta was speaking to the production manager over her radio. Everything looked perfectly normal, provided I ignored the fact that a few yards away stood the man I had cut out of my life six years earlier.

"Emilia, give me two minutes," Robert said, ending his call.

"I have exactly one."

He offered me a conciliatory smile.

"I know the situation is uncomfortable, but Konrad has excellent references. His last two projects..."

"I'm not asking about his references. I'm asking why you hired a cinematographer without my approval."

Robert glanced toward the crew. I pointed to the empty hallway.

"Over there."

We moved out of earshot of the technicians.

"Michał dropped out at the last minute," Robert began. "We've already paid for the locations, the actors, and the

equipment. Every day we lose costs us tens of thousands of złoty. Konrad was available, and he knew the screenplay."

"Since when?"

"What?"

"Since when did he know the screenplay?"

Robert adjusted his glasses.

"I sent him the material yesterday afternoon. I was hoping Michał would reconsider, but I had to prepare an alternative."

I studied him carefully.

"So before you informed me there was a problem, you'd already found a solution and handed someone a confidential screenplay."

"Emilia, we really don't have time..."

"That's precisely why we established procedures. So decisions made in a hurry wouldn't wreck the following six weeks."

Robert sighed. He was accustomed to negotiations, but he disliked being reminded of the terms of an agreement he had signed himself.

"You can reject him. But if you do, we won't start shooting until Monday at the earliest."

I looked through the open doorway.

Konrad was kneeling beside the camera, talking to a young assistant. He wasn't issuing orders. He was showing the young man something on a small monitor, patiently waiting while the assistant corrected the setup himself.

I remembered that way of working. Konrad could spend half an hour explaining something without once raising his

voice, then decide to change the entire visual concept in a matter of seconds.

That second quality used to drive me mad.

"I'm not rejecting him," I said. "Not yet. But his appointment requires my signature, not your conviction that everything will work out."

Robert visibly relaxed.

"Excellent."

"I didn't say everything was excellent."

I returned to the set before he could answer.

Konrad looked up from the camera. He didn't ask what Robert and I had discussed. Instead, he stepped away from the monitor to make room for me.

"Would you like to see the framing I'm proposing?"

I stood beside him.

On the screen, the bed occupied the right side of the frame, with the doorway on the left. An expanse of empty space separated them. Light fell across the sheets, leaving the entrance in shadow.

"There's too much empty space," I said.

"That's the point."

"In the screenplay, she sits on the bed. The camera should stay with her."

"If it does, the audience will only see a woman who can't make a decision. If we include the doorway, they'll see a woman who has a choice."

I turned toward him.

"This isn't a story about running away."

"I didn't say it was."

"You're suggesting that she leave."

"I'm suggesting that she has the option of leaving. There's a difference."

I wanted to argue with him. Not because his reasoning was wrong, but because he delivered it with that infuriating confidence I remembered from years ago. Konrad never needed to raise his voice. He simply looked at me calmly and waited.

"We'll shoot two versions," I decided. "Mine and yours. Then I'll choose."

"On one condition."

I raised my eyebrows.

"I'm listening."

"We don't pretend the second version is merely a backup. If we're going to test it, we give the actress room to approach the scene differently."

"This is my film, Konrad."

"I know."

"And my responsibility."

"I know that too. But if you expect me to do nothing except position the camera wherever you point, you've hired the wrong man."

Several people turned their heads.

I disliked having a discussion about authority in front of the crew. What I disliked even more was recognizing the professional integrity in his words, something I had once admired.

"Next room," I said.

Konrad nodded and followed me.

I closed the door to a small dressing room. Two coats prepared for the actors hung on a rack, while cosmetics and a box of tissues lay on the table. I caught sight of my face in the mirror. I looked considerably calmer than I felt.

"Let's establish something," I began. "You will not challenge my decisions in front of the entire crew."

"If I think something isn't working, I need to be able to say so before we shoot."

"You can tell me earlier."

"Then I need time to discuss each major scene beforehand. Not five minutes between setting the lights and bringing in the actors."

I studied him.

"You're setting conditions before I've even signed your contract?"

"I'm telling you how I work."

"You always had a talent for presenting your personal expectations as objective necessities."

He fell silent.

For a brief moment, I could see that my words had touched something deeper than professional pride.

"Perhaps," he replied. "But I don't want us fighting over every decision for the next six weeks."

"That depends on you too."

"Which is why I'm proposing a simple rule. We talk before rehearsal. If we disagree, we test both solutions when time and budget allow. The final decision is yours."

I hadn't expected that last sentence.

"And if you think I'm making a mistake?"

"I'll tell you."

"And then?"

"I'll follow your decision. Unless it's a matter of safety or crossing an actor's boundaries. In that case, we stop work regardless of anyone's position."

I rested my hands on the edge of the table.

The screenplay contained three scenes that required particular sensitivity. They weren't about nudity or explicit eroticism, but physical intimacy during which the actors had to portray something much more difficult: two people who no longer knew whether they were allowed to touch each other.

"I agree to that rule," I said. "With one addition. No improvised changes to physical contact between the actors. Everything gets agreed in advance with the intimacy coordinator."

"Of course."

The speed of his answer surprised me.

"You're not going to argue?"

"Not about that."

I exhaled.

"Good."

Konrad glanced at the closed door, then back at me.

"There's one other thing."

I knew we would have to reach this subject sooner or later.

"If it's about our past, not now."

"It's about the fact that I don't want to use work as an excuse to force private conversations on you."

I said nothing.

"If you tell me we're only going to speak professionally, I'll respect that," he added. "But I need to know you'll judge my work on what I do here."

For a moment, all I could hear was the distant hum of a ventilation fan.

"Do you think I'm planning to punish you for what happened six years ago?"

"I don't know, Emilia."

The answer was more honest than any reassurance I had expected.

"I'm not," I said. "But I'm not going to pretend you're just another colleague either."

"I'm not asking you to."

Then he did something I hadn't anticipated.

He stepped back and opened the door, leaving me free to end the conversation.

He didn't try to stop me or prolong the moment.

I should have felt relieved.

Instead, I was irritated by how acutely aware I was of his gesture.

Lena, the actress playing the lead, was already waiting on set. She wore a pale shirt and soft trousers, with her hair loosely tied at the nape of her neck. Her screen partner, Filip, sat in a chair reading the screenplay.

"Ready?" I asked.

Lena nodded.

"I'd just like to know whether I'm supposed to look at the door in this version."

I glanced at Konrad.

"First we'll play the scene the way we discussed. Then we'll try the alternative."

Konrad didn't comment on my decision. He positioned the camera, handed the assistant his headphones, and checked the lighting.

The first rehearsal followed my concept. Lena sat on the bed, Filip stood beside the window, and he delivered a single line that, according to the screenplay, was meant to end their characters' shared story.

"I don't even know when we stopped looking for each other."

Lena remained silent. The camera stayed on her face. I saw hesitation, pain, and that subtle movement of her lips that betrayed the struggle to form an answer.

It was good.

I should have ended the rehearsal there.

"Now the second version," I said.

Konrad moved the camera. He asked Lena not to change her dialogue or her actions, but to allow herself to notice the doorway if she felt the need.

"You don't have to look at it," he explained. "What matters is knowing it's there."

Lena nodded.

During the next rehearsal, she remained motionless longer than before. Then, very slowly, she turned her head. Not toward Filip, but toward the darkened entrance.

She no longer looked like a woman waiting for a man to make a decision.

She looked like someone who had just recognized that she could make her own.

"Cut," I said quietly.

For a moment, nobody moved.

Marta looked up from her notes.

"Which version are we keeping?"

I studied the monitor.

"The second."

I didn't look at Konrad, but I heard him putting down his headphones.

"Good decision," he said.

"Don't get used to it."

The corner of his mouth twitched.

"I've never been in the habit."

The next few hours passed in a succession of adjustments. The scene required three camera setups, lighting changes, and several difficult transitions. At one point, Lena asked for a break because a gesture Filip was supposed to make felt too unambiguous.

I stopped the rehearsal.

"What exactly is bothering you?" I asked.

"If he touches my shoulder at that moment, it looks as though he's trying to stop me. And I don't know yet whether she wants to stay."

Konrad stepped away from the camera.

"We can remove the touch. Let his hand stop on the back of the chair."

Lena tried the gesture without physical contact. It worked better. The tension between the characters became almost tangible, although neither did anything that might have seemed especially romantic.

I watched Konrad during the following rehearsal.

He wasn't interested in creating a striking image at the actors' expense. He asked questions, listened to the answers, and didn't defend an idea merely because he had proposed it.

I remembered why I had once been able to fall in love with him during an ordinary working day.

It was a dangerous thought.

At five o'clock, Robert appeared on set.

"Are we signing the contract?"

"After I've reviewed the footage," I replied.

"Emilia..."

"As agreed."

Konrad stood nearby and heard everything. He made no attempt to persuade either Robert or me.

Only when we were alone beside the monitor did he speak.

"You have every right to decide you don't want me on this project."

"I know."

"You don't need to prove to me that you're being fair."

I looked at him.

"I'm not doing this for you."

"That's exactly why I wanted to say it."

I moved the recording back to the beginning of the scene.

"I want to see how you work over an entire day, not judge you by one good shot."

"Sensible."

"And don't expect me to be grateful for a sensible suggestion."

"I'm not expecting gratitude."

For a moment, we looked at each other across a distance that crossed no boundaries and yet felt strangely intimate.

"Then what are you expecting?" I asked.

Konrad lowered his eyes to the monitor.

"For us to make a good film."

It was a simple answer.

Only later did I understand that what disturbed me most was how badly I wanted to believe him.

That evening, I reviewed the footage once more. The version with the doorway visible was clearly stronger. I had no reason to dispute it. I sent Robert a message confirming my approval of Konrad as cinematographer, on the condition that his contract include mandatory consultations before scenes requiring changes to the visual concept.

Then I closed my laptop.

Marta was waiting by the exit.

"Everything all right?"

"Yes."

"Because all day you've looked as though you were planning either to fire someone or kiss someone."

I gave her a sharp look.

She burst out laughing.

"I'm not asking which one."

"Good. Don't."

On the stairs, I passed Konrad, who was talking on the phone. He stepped aside to let me pass without a word. By the time I reached the floor below, I caught another fragment of his conversation.

"I'm not making a decision before the shoot is finished. I've already told you."

I didn't stop.

I had no right to know who he was speaking to.

Even so, those words stayed with me longer than all the professional agreements we had made that day.

Chapter 2 - Outside the Frame

The following morning, I found two copies of the shooting schedule on my desk and a note written in small, even handwriting.

"Before rehearsal: twenty minutes to discuss the scene. After rehearsal: five minutes for decisions. Changes only by mutual agreement. K."

I read the note twice.

Konrad had always written like that. No unnecessary words, no flourishes, just the distinctive letter K, whose lower stroke resembled a reversed hook. He used to leave similar notes on our refrigerator. He would tell me he'd bought bread, fixed the tap, or that he'd be home late because he needed to finish editing.

I could no longer remember most of what those notes had said.

What I did remember was that he had never left one explaining why, after our last morning together, he hadn't been able to stay long enough to talk to me.

I put the note down.

There was no room for those memories on set.

At nine o'clock, we were due to discuss one of the film's most important scenes. Lena and Filip would sit opposite each other at a kitchen table, and a conversation about household bills would gradually reveal something far more painful: the realization that they had spent months avoiding conversations about their own lives.

I had prepared a detailed shooting plan. I wanted long takes without excessive cutting, so that every pause would acquire meaning.

Konrad arrived on time.

"Good morning," he said, setting a cup of coffee on the table.

"Good morning."

He glanced at the note beside my laptop.

"Did you get my note?"

"Yes."

"Anything you want to change?"

"Five minutes after rehearsal might not be enough."

He sat opposite me.

"How much do you need?"

"Ten."

"All right."

He lifted his coffee cup as though we had just concluded an exceptionally straightforward negotiation.

I couldn't help myself.

"Really?"

"Really what?"

"You're not going to bargain?"

"If you need ten minutes, you need ten minutes."

I regarded him suspiciously.

"You once spent half an hour arguing about moving a light two centimeters."

"I still could. But I'm not going to argue about everything merely because I'm capable of it."

I smiled despite myself.

Konrad noticed but said nothing.

We opened the screenplay.

For the next twenty minutes, we talked exclusively about the film. Konrad wanted to limit camera movement. I insisted on a particular tracking shot meant to emphasize the growing distance between the characters.

"If the camera moves, you're telling the audience when they're supposed to feel the change," he said.

"And if it stays still, we might lose the tension."

"Or we could allow the actors to create it."

I slid the screenplay toward him.

"Show me where you want the camera to stop."

He leaned over the page.

His hand came close to mine. I noticed a small scar near his thumb that hadn't been there before. For a moment, I wanted to ask how he'd gotten it.

I didn't.

Konrad pointed to one of Filip's lines.

"Here. When he says he doesn't know whether he'll come home tonight. If we start moving at that moment, the scene loses its ambiguity."

"And if Lena looks at him?"

"Let's leave that decision to her."

I raised my eyes.

"You've been talking a lot lately about letting people make their own decisions."

His finger went still against the paper.

"I'm trying."

I didn't answer.

A silence settled between us that had nothing to do with the screenplay.

Eventually, I closed my binder.

"Let's establish one more thing. If we need to discuss the project after work, we do it somewhere public. No visits to hotel rooms, and no private calls after midnight."

Konrad nodded.

"Agreed. And if we want to talk about something else?"

His directness took me by surprise.

"I don't know whether we will."

"That wasn't what I asked."

I studied him.

"In that case, you'll ask whether I actually want to have that conversation first."

"Fair enough."

"And we won't use memories as ammunition in professional disagreements."

"That's particularly important."

"Why?"

Konrad turned his coffee cup slowly between his hands.

"Because I know you well enough to recognize when you're tired. I don't want to use that against you."