Laura Bellini

Don't Close the Door Yet

A second-chance romance



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ROMANS

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CONTENTS

INTRO 4
Chapter 1 - The Terms of Returning 11
Chapter 2 - Between What We Once Had 22
Chapter 3 - What Lies Beneath the Surface 36
Chapter 4 - The Things We Never Said 46
Chapter 5 - The Right to Say No 58
Chapter 6 - The First Step 67
Chapter 7 - Between Desire and Trust 79
Chapter 8 - Inside His World 89
Chapter 9 - The Price of a Shared Decision 100
Chapter 10 - Stay Until Morning 110
Chapter 11 - Room for Two 123
Chapter 12 - The Return of Old Decisions 133
Chapter 13 - What Cannot Be Put Off 144
Chapter 14 - The Truth We Don't Yet Know 154
Chapter 15 - Everything We Never Said 165
Chapter 16 - The Distance We Needed 176
Chapter 17 - Separate Paths 186
Chapter 18 - The Letters That Changed Everything 196
Chapter 19 - Not Everything Has to Be Left Behind 208
Chapter 20 - The Doors We Opened Together 218

INTRO

At six forty-two in the evening, I pressed the first strip of blue masking tape onto the frame of a door we'd once promised to open only together. Three years after making that promise, I stood in our empty apartment with a roll of architectural plans tucked under my arm and a pencil behind my ear, wondering how much it would cost to erase the last traces of the life we'd shared.

November rain fell beyond the windows of the old Gdańsk tenement. Raindrops blurred the headlights of passing cars, and the wind pushed damp air through a poorly sealed window. The apartment smelled of old wood, dust, and something familiar I couldn't quite identify. Perhaps the soap Adam used in his workshop. Perhaps memories had simply acquired a scent of their own over the years.

I spread my documents across the windowsill. I had six weeks to prepare the apartment for sale. The estate agent assured me that a properly executed renovation would increase its value. All I knew was that the proceeds would finally allow me to open my own architectural studio, without a business partner, a loan, or the need to explain my decisions to anyone. I'd already found premises in Wrzeszcz. The landlord was expecting a deposit by the end of December, and I had no intention of letting that opportunity slip away.

Over the past three years, I'd learned to plan everything down to the nearest fifteen minutes. Deadlines, meetings, bank transfers, holidays. I even put Sunday lunches with friends in my calendar. Not because I was incapable of spontaneity. Spontaneity simply reminded me of a time when

I'd allowed someone else's decisions to change my life before I'd had the chance to express an opinion.

My phone vibrated on the windowsill.

The message from Marta, my best friend, contained a single sentence.

Remember, you're renovating an apartment, not your marriage.

I smiled crookedly. We'd never been married. We had, however, shared a mortgage, owned two sets of keys, and possessed an extraordinary talent for hurting each other in the name of good intentions. I replied that everything was under control, although the fact that I was standing there suggested otherwise.

I walked into the living room, stepping carefully across the wooden floor. The wide floorboards had witnessed every argument, reconciliation, and evening we'd spent eating pizza on the floor because we didn't yet own a table. A lighter patch remained on the wall where the bookcase Adam had built himself once stood. I remembered him working on it until three in the morning, convinced he'd fitted the shelves incorrectly. I'd fallen asleep on the sofa. The following morning, I'd woken to the smell of coffee and his kiss against my temple.

I looked away.

"Walls to repaint, wiring to inspect, doors to replace," I said aloud.

In the empty rooms, my voice sounded more decisive than I felt.

I stopped in front of the door to our former bedroom. It was heavy oak, with carved panels and a brass handle that

had lost its shine over the years. Near the bottom was a small dent. I'd made it while carrying a desk into the apartment, a desk I hadn't been able to lift on my own. Adam had laughed and said that, as an architect, I ought to know how to calculate the width of a doorway.

Later, he'd spent an hour teaching me how to sand the damaged wood.

He'd stood behind me, guiding my hand in slow, steady movements, while I paid far more attention to his breathing near my ear than to the sandpaper. I even remembered what he'd said when I lost patience.

You don't have to replace everything straight away, Lena. Sometimes all it needs is a little attention.

Now I pressed my fingers against the old dent. The wood was cool and rough. In the renovation estimate, I'd specified new, lighter doors that would complement a contemporary interior. Replacing them would improve the apartment's visual consistency. I could justify that decision professionally in five different ways.

What I couldn't explain was why I still hadn't marked them for removal.

In the kitchen, I found a cardboard box left by the crew who had cleared out the apartment. Inside were old catalogues, several screws, and a small metal tin of wood wax. Beneath the tin lay an envelope bearing a foreign postmark. On the back was the name of a conservation workshop in Bergen.

I knew that name.

Adam had once dreamed of working with them. Of an opportunity that would open the door to restoring historic interiors across Europe. I remembered his excitement when

he'd received their first reply. I also remembered how, a few months later, he'd stopped talking about it.

The envelope was addressed to him. I didn't open it. Instead, I placed it on the windowsill, away from the documents destined for the rubbish.

A tram passed outside. Its metallic rattle reminded me of the evening I'd told Adam I had accepted a contract abroad. He hadn't shouted. He hadn't even tried to stop me. He'd simply asked whether I'd made the decision before discussing it with him.

I'd said yes.

I could still remember how long he'd stared at my packed suitcase.

Then I heard a key turning in the front door.

I froze.

I wasn't expecting anyone. The renovation crew wasn't due until Monday, and Adam was supposed to arrive the following morning. At least, that was what our brief exchange of messages had suggested. We'd discussed nothing beyond times, costs, and deadlines.

The front door opened with its familiar creak.

"Lena?"

That voice stopped me more effectively than any memory.

I stepped out of the kitchen.

Adam stood in the hallway, holding a leather tool bag. He wore a dark coat, his hair was wet, and several days' worth of stubble covered his jaw, something he hadn't worn before. He looked older, more mature. I noticed a few new

lines on his face, but the way he surveyed the apartment was painfully familiar. He'd always examined the details first, as though he needed to understand a place's history before deciding what should be done with it.

Only then did he look at me.

"I thought you were coming tomorrow," he said.

"I thought the same about you."

The corner of his mouth twitched. That tiny movement was enough to remind me of things I'd spent three years trying not to think about. The way he looked just after waking. How he frowned when concentrating. How he could unsettle me with a single, perfectly calm sentence.

"I wanted to check the windows before we meet the contractor," he explained. "Apparently one of them leaks."

"It's on my list."

"Of course."

I didn't like the way he said it.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. You always had a plan."

He took off his coat and hung it on the old hook. The gesture was so natural that he might have been coming home after an ordinary day at work. Irrational anger rose inside me. He had no right to make everything feel familiar, even for a moment. Not after how long it had taken me to learn to live without him.

"This time, I intend to stick to it," I replied.

Adam noticed the drawings spread across the floor. He approached the bedroom door and ran his fingers along its frame, stopping at the strip of blue tape.

"You want to throw these away?"

"The apartment is going on the market. It needs renovating, not turning into an exhibition of sentimental keepsakes."

"This is original woodwork. More than a hundred years old. Replacing it will lower the value, not increase it."

"I understand the difference between restoration and replacement."

"I know you do."

He studied me carefully. His composure irritated me most of all. Once, being near him had allowed me to set down the weight of an entire day. Now that same calmness felt like a locked door, concealing decisions he'd made without ever letting me know.

"We're not arguing about this today," I said.

"All right."

Adam stepped away from the doorframe but didn't leave. For a moment, we stood facing each other, separated by barely two paces and three years of silence. I noticed a small scar on his hand that I'd never seen before. I wondered when he'd injured himself and who had tended the wound.

That curiosity hurt more than it should have.

"Lena," he said quietly. "We can do this differently from last time."

I knew he was talking about the renovation.

Or at least, I tried to believe he was.

My gaze shifted to the open front door, where cold air drifted in from the stairwell. Adam followed my eyes and stepped back to close it.

"Wait," I said.

His hand stopped on the handle.

I didn't yet know why I'd stopped him. Rain whispered against the windows, my carefully prepared plans lay scattered across the floor, and the man I'd taught myself not to need stood barely a step away.

Did I really want him to close that door when, for the first time in three years, what frightened me wasn't his presence, but the possibility that he might leave again?

Chapter 1 - The Terms of Returning

Adam stopped with his hand on the door handle and glanced at me over his shoulder. Behind him, the stairwell stretched into shadow, illuminated by a weak bulb above the wooden stairs. For a moment, he looked exactly as he had after our last argument, standing in that same doorway with a backpack slung over his shoulder. That evening, I hadn't asked him to stay. Now the word had escaped before I'd had time to consider what it meant.

"I meant, don't leave just yet," I explained. "There are a few things we need to sort out."

Adam glanced at the door he'd been about to close.

"I wasn't leaving, Lena. I was trying to stop the draft."

I felt ridiculous. He'd been here for barely five minutes, and already I was interpreting the simplest gestures as though they concealed messages intended for me alone. I retreated into the living room and picked up the plans from the windowsill. The paper rustled in my hands, restoring a little of my professional confidence. I knew how to deal with architectural drawings. Adam Rudzki had never been quite so straightforward.

"All right. Since you're here, we might as well discuss the work."

"Now?"

"Have you got something more urgent to do?"

"No. I just wasn't sure whether you actually wanted to talk to me or intended to show me a list of things you'd already decided."

He'd struck precisely where I didn't want to let him.

I spread the drawings across the living-room floor. The table already belonged to its new owner, who had bought it online. Adam crouched opposite me. He wore a charcoal sweater I didn't recognize and dark work trousers. He smelled of rain and something faintly resinous. That scent had always belonged to his workshop, to planks stacked against the walls, to the little pieces of wood he brought home and abandoned in the most inconvenient places.

"Six weeks," I began, indicating the schedule. "That's how long we have to get the apartment ready for the market. The electrical installation will be inspected during the first week. Then we'll repair the plaster, paint, deal with the kitchen, and work on the floor. We can do the smaller finishing jobs at the same time. The estate agent wants the photographs taken before Christmas."

Adam listened without interrupting. When I finished, he ran a finger over the drawing showing the layout of the rooms.

"And the woodwork?"

"Replace the interior doors. Inspect the windows, possibly replace some of them. Keep the skirting boards if they're in good enough condition."

"Why replace the doors?"

"Because restoring them could cost more than buying new ones."

"Could. But we don't know that yet."

"I have a preliminary quote."

"From whom?"

I handed him the estimate. He read it carefully, then laid it on the floor.

"The company quoting for new doors concluded that new doors would be the best solution. What a surprise."

"Don't start."

"I haven't started yet."

"Adam, we don't have time to spend weeks debating every piece of wood."

"And I'm not signing off on throwing away original doors just because someone offered you a ready-made product from a catalogue."

I looked at him over the paperwork.

"It's my apartment too."

"I know. That's why we're sitting here."

"Then stop behaving as though your opinion matters more."

He was silent for a moment. Then he picked up one of the sheets, turned it around, and pointed to the drawing of the bedroom door.

"I'm not saying my opinion matters more. I'm saying we shouldn't make irreversible decisions without finding out what we actually have. You prepare the design. I'll assess the timber. If restoration doesn't make sense, I'll tell you myself."

"And if you decide it does make sense, but it'll take three months?"

"Then we'll discuss the time and the money."

I laughed without amusement.

"You always make it sound so simple."

His gaze settled on my face.

"You used to think that was one of my good qualities."

I knew what he meant. Adam could spend hours patiently repairing things that made me lose my temper after ten minutes. I remembered a crooked kitchen drawer I'd reached the point of refusing to look at. He'd dismantled the entire mechanism, found the damaged component, and fixed it in a single afternoon. The next day, the drawer slid open without the slightest resistance. I'd been so delighted that I'd kissed him in the middle of the kitchen, still holding a spoon covered in jam.

"I used to think a lot of things," I replied.

Adam didn't try to turn that into a joke.

"So did I."

He put the estimate aside, stood up, and went to the window. He ran his fingers along the bottom of the frame, then knelt to inspect where the wood met the sill.

"Have you got a flashlight?"

I handed him my phone. He illuminated a corner where the paint was beginning to peel away in thin flakes. Beneath it, I noticed a darker stain.

"Water's getting underneath the finish," he said. "If it's only the seal and the lower part of the frame, we can repair it without replacing the whole window. But I need to find out how far the damp has spread."

I leaned down beside him. For a moment our shoulders were so close that the smallest movement would have brought them together. Adam didn't pull away abruptly. Instead, he made room when I reached toward the sill. I

appreciated that ordinary gesture more than I wanted to admit.

"We can start by measuring the moisture levels," I suggested. "If the damage is localized, I'll include the repair in the plans. If it affects most of the frame, I'll need an alternative quote."

"Agreed."

"And no making decisions for me."

He looked at me.

"For us," he corrected. "I don't want to make decisions for us."

There was no irony in his voice. Still, the words stung, because they were exactly what I'd wanted to hear from him three years earlier.

I stood and returned to the drawings. Rather than tell him what had crossed my mind, I opened the calendar on my phone.

"The contractor's coming at nine on Monday. I want you here for the inspection of the woodwork."

"At nine, I'm collecting some finished pieces from my workshop. I can be here at eleven."

"The crew isn't going to wait two hours."

"They don't have to. You can discuss the electrical work and the walls with them. I'll handle the wood when I arrive."

"I'm not rearranging the entire schedule around your work."

Adam rested his hands on his hips and studied me in silence.

"And I'm not cancelling commitments to my clients just to prove I'm available whenever you need me."

His voice remained calm, but for the first time I heard a firmness I didn't remember. In the past, Adam had often moved his own deadlines to accommodate mine. Sometimes I'd been grateful. Later, I'd begun to feel guilty, even though I'd never asked him to make those concessions.

"I'm not expecting that," I said.

"Good. Because I don't want to work that way again either."

Silence settled between us. The rain grew heavier, striking the glass in an uneven rhythm. I noticed Adam tightening his fingers around the strap of his leather bag. It was one of the few signs by which I could recognize when he was upset.

"You can come at eleven," I decided. "I'll ask the contractor to leave the woodwork inspection until last."

"Thank you."

"You don't need to thank me. It's a sensible solution."

"That's precisely what I'm thanking you for."

I went to the kitchen for a glass of water. Only as I filled it did I remember the envelope I'd found in the box. It still lay on the windowsill, separate from the other papers. For a moment I wondered whether I should simply hand it over. I didn't know why I'd been putting it off. Perhaps because its presence reminded me of conversations we'd never finished.

Adam appeared in the kitchen doorway.

"Everything all right?"

"Yes. I found some of your things. They're in the box beside the cupboard. You can take them."

He looked in that direction but didn't approach.

"I thought I'd already taken everything."

"Apparently not."

He noticed the envelope. For an instant, his face lost the expression I'd come to recognize as ordinary professional concentration.

"Was that in the box too?" he asked.

"Under a tin of wood wax. I didn't open it."

He nodded but made no move to pick it up.

"Good."

"Good that I found it, or good that I didn't open it?"

"Both."

I didn't like that answer. I liked even less the fact that I wanted to keep asking questions. The envelope belonged to him. So did his old plans. I was no longer the person to whom he owed an explanation of everything.

"Take it when you leave," I said.

We returned to the living room. Adam took a notebook and a carpenter's pencil from his bag, its graphite worn almost to nothing, and began listing the elements that needed assessing. I watched his hands. They were broad, with small traces of his work around the fingernails. I'd always liked that he could do more with them than swipe a phone screen. He had patience for things that were fragile and heavy at the same time, and his precision had never been a way of showing himself superior.

"What do you suggest?" I asked.

"Two days to assess the condition of the timber. No dismantling until we've agreed on the scope. I'll give you a written breakdown so you can compare the costs with other quotes."

"And who would do the restoration if we approve it?"

"We'll decide that separately. I can do some of the work, but I don't want you to feel obliged to accept my price just because we're joint owners."

I looked up.

"Really?"

"Really. You can ask another workshop for a quote."

I wondered whether I'd have heard a similar suggestion from him three years earlier. Back then, he'd often done things himself before I could say I didn't need help. He repaired, organized, anticipated, and solved problems. From the outside, it had looked like the perfect partnership. Except that sometimes I discovered what he'd sacrificed only when it was too late to undo it.

"All right," I said. "But let's establish a cost limit too. I don't want surprises."

"Neither do I."

I pushed the provisional budget toward him. He reviewed it, then pointed to the labor costs. We spent another half hour discussing the figures, adjusting deadlines and dividing responsibilities. In the end, we agreed that neither of us would commission additional work or authorize an expense without the other's approval. By Monday, I would prepare a revised schedule, and he would draw up a list of everything requiring a detailed assessment.

By the time we finished, the apartment had grown cold. Adam returned to the window and checked whether he could close it more tightly. Then he fetched an old towel from the kitchen and placed it beneath the leaking corner.

"This isn't a repair," he warned. "Just a temporary measure for tonight. On Monday, we'll find out exactly where the damp is coming from."

"You don't need to explain the difference."

"I know. But if I didn't, tomorrow you'd send me a message accusing me of using a solution that violated proper building practice."

I laughed before I could stop myself.

Adam looked surprised. For one brief moment, his face lit up with a familiar smile. Not the polite one he offered clients, but his real, slightly mischievous smile, the one I'd once seen most often when we were alone.

"See?" he said. "I can still anticipate your objections."

"That doesn't mean you're always right."

"I never claimed to be."

"Adam."

"All right. I did claim it. Just not as often as you remember."

The smile disappeared almost as quickly as it had come. Caution returned between us, a caution we'd never needed before. Once, we could joke about our faults without fearing that every word might be presented as evidence in an unresolved argument. Now even an ordinary conversation required care.

Adam gathered his tools. In the kitchen, he collected the envelope and a few small belongings from the box, leaving the rest to sort through later. I didn't ask what the letter contained. He offered no explanation.

At the front door, he paused.

"Lena, there's one thing I want to make clear."

"I'm listening."

"I don't expect you to trust me just because we used to be together. But if we're going to work in the same place for several weeks, I don't want every suggestion I make to be treated as an attempt to take control."

I swallowed the answer that rose to my lips. I could have reminded him of everything he hadn't told me. I could have asked why he'd taken so long to speak openly about his expectations. Instead, I looked at the agreements we'd amended together.

"Then don't make decisions I only find out about afterward."

Adam nodded.

"That's a fair condition."

He opened the door, this time genuinely intending to leave. An unexpected urge to stop him with one more question rose in me, although I couldn't have said what I wanted to ask.

"Adam?"

He turned.

"Yes?"

"I'm not agreeing to delay the sale just because we're trying to save every old floorboard."

He studied me for a moment before answering.

"And I don't want to save every floorboard, Lena. I just want us to know what we're losing before we decide to throw it away."

He closed the door behind him.

This time, I didn't try to stop him.

I remained in the hallway, listening to his footsteps recede down the stairs. Then I returned to the living room and looked at the drawings spread across the floor. Everything appeared much as it had before his arrival: deadlines, costs, stages of renovation. Only beside the entry for the doors was a condition written in his handwriting: Assessment before decision.

I underlined it in pencil.

Not because I considered it particularly important to the project. I simply knew that over the coming weeks, I'd have to learn to distinguish Adam's reasonable arguments from my own fear of what might happen if I truly began listening to him.

And there was no allowance for that in any cost estimate.

Chapter 2 - Between What We Once Had

The following morning, I was woken by a call from the estate agent. It was 8:17 on Saturday, and I was still beneath the duvet, trying to convince myself that the previous evening had been nothing more than an ordinary meeting between two joint property owners. Unfortunately, my mind refused to cooperate. I remembered the exact sound of Adam's voice, the way he'd looked at me when I mentioned making my own decisions, and the several seconds he'd spent staring at the envelope from Bergen.

"Lena, I've got good news," Ms. Michalina announced before I could even say hello. "I've spoken to the photographer. If you finish the work before December twentieth, we can arrange the photo shoot before Christmas."

I sat up and reached for my notebook.

"That's the plan."

"Just remember, the apartment has to be ready. We can't show prospective buyers floors that have been torn up and doors that haven't been finished."

"I know. I've prepared the schedule."

"And you're both in agreement about selling?"

The question sounded innocent enough. But with two joint owners who hadn't managed a calm conversation about their past in three years, the answer wasn't entirely obvious.

"Yes. We both want to sell the apartment."

"Excellent. In that case, I'll need confirmation from both of you regarding the date and the scope of the preparations. I

don't want a situation later where one of you accepts an offer and the other changes their mind."

I promised to reply after we'd agreed on the details. When I put down the phone, I stared at the ceiling of my rented apartment. It was perfectly white, smooth, and devoid of history. That was precisely why I'd chosen to live here after returning to Gdańsk. I hadn't wanted another place where every scratch on a wall reminded me of someone who was no longer there.

I opened my laptop and revised the schedule. I added two days for the woodwork assessment and a separate column for decisions requiring joint approval. I also established a budget threshold above which any additional work would have to be discussed in advance. It took less than an hour. Deciding what to write to Adam took considerably longer.

Eventually, I kept the message brief.

I've revised the plan. We also need to agree on costs and the sale. Could we talk somewhere other than the apartment today?

He replied a few minutes later.

Yes. I'll be near Długa Street at one. I know somewhere quiet we can get something to eat.

I read his message twice. Not because there was anything suggestive about it. Quite the opposite: its ordinariness surprised me. Three years ago, a sentence like that would have marked the beginning of an afternoon together. Now I had to remind myself that I'd invited him to discuss practical arrangements, not to go on a date.

Before leaving, I called Marta. She answered on the second ring, with the unmistakable sound of a coffee machine running in the background.