# Don't Come Back for Your Shirt

*Things Left Behind Can't Replace an Honest Confession*



Laura Bellini

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## Things Left Behind Can't Replace an Honest Confession

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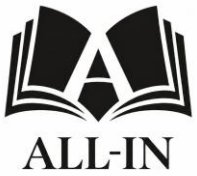

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# INTRO

At 9:17 p.m. on Friday, the apartment looked exactly the way I had imagined it. The pale walls reflected the warm glow of the lamps, the oak flooring had just the right shade, and the final armchair stood at an angle that allowed anyone sitting on the sofa to admire the view of Kraków's historic townhouses. Everything had found its place. Even the small vase holding an olive branch, which I had spent the entire day shifting a few centimeters at a time, had finally stopped irritating me.

The project was finished. The photographs were ready, the list of adjustments had been completed, and the owner was happy. The following day, I was supposed to hand over the complete set of documents and the keys. After that, I planned to drive home, take a long bath, order something delicious, and spend the entire evening without thinking about work.

It was a perfectly reasonable plan.

The problem was that Miłosz Brzoza was still in the apartment.

He was standing by the window, checking the latest photographs on his camera screen. He wore dark trousers and a white T-shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His hair, usually carefully styled, had fallen slightly over his forehead. He looked as though he had absolutely no intention of hurrying. Then again, I had never known Miłosz to let anyone dictate his pace.

"Is that the last one?" I asked, pointing at the camera.

"The last one, unless you come up with one more thing that needs fixing."

"I'm not coming up with anything. I simply notice things."

He turned his head and smiled to himself.

"That's exactly why I enjoy working with you."

I didn't answer immediately. The remark sounded innocent enough, but coming from him, it had an irritating quality. It could mean everything or absolutely nothing. Miłosz had a talent for saying something that would keep coming back to me for hours, at the most inconvenient moments, and then behaving as though it had been an ordinary comment about professional cooperation.

We had met a few weeks earlier, through this very project. I was responsible for the interior design, while he handled the property photography. At first, our conversations revolved around furniture arrangements, lighting, and deadlines. Later, they began to include coffee, music, and why I disliked people who confused confidence with a lack of manners. Miłosz had a fairly elaborate theory of his own on that subject.

And then there had been evenings that had nothing to do with work.

I hadn't been planning a romance. I wasn't looking for someone to fill my spare time. I was thirty-two, had my own career and apartment, and had enough experience to understand that an enjoyable evening didn't automatically signal the beginning of something serious. But I had no interest in pretending that intimacy meant nothing when both people involved knew perfectly well that it did.

Miłosz seemed to take a more flexible approach to that particular question.

"I'm finished," I announced, removing the fabric samples from the countertop. "I'll hand over the keys tomorrow. You can send me the photographs in full resolution, and I'll forward them to the owner."

"I've already sent them."

"Of course." I looked at him. "So we can officially consider ourselves free."

"That sounds rather serious."

"It's just information about the completion of the project."

"I know."

He went back to reviewing the photographs, and I turned towards the table. That was where the one thing I hadn't managed to fit into any of my carefully prepared plans was waiting.

Miłosz's shirt.

Navy blue, made of soft cotton, with a slightly rumpled collar. I'd found it that morning draped over the back of a chair. Before that, it had been lying on the floor beside the sofa, but I'd decided I wasn't going to leave it there. I also wasn't going to wash it, iron it, or pretend I didn't know who it belonged to.

I'd folded it neatly and placed it beside his camera bag.

"Yours," I said.

Miłosz looked at the shirt, then at me.

"You remembered."

"It's difficult to forget an item of clothing that takes up half a chair."

"I thought you might have thrown it away."

"Why would I throw away your things?"

"I don't know. Some people enjoy dramatic gestures."

"Some people leave their clothes behind as if they intend to come back."

He was silent for a moment. Very little changed in his expression, but I noticed that he had stopped turning the camera over in his hands.

"I could come back for it tomorrow," he said.

I shook my head.

"You can take it now."

"I'm not in a hurry."

"I am, a little."

There was nothing in that sentence I couldn't justify. I'd had a long day, a client meeting awaited me in the morning, and afterward I simply wanted to get back to my own life. Except we both knew it wasn't just about the shirt.

Miłosz approached the table. He picked it up, smoothed the fabric, and studied the cuff for a moment.

"It smells nice," he remarked.

"It's clean."

"I didn't mean the detergent."

He said it calmly, without smiling. I remembered how, a few days earlier, he'd stood behind me in the kitchen while I was making coffee and told me he liked the smell of my hair. I also remembered turning towards him instead of pretending I hadn't heard. Miłosz had a gift for noticing little things other people overlooked. He knew when I needed a moment of silence, when I was angry despite still smiling, and when it was time to stop joking.

That was what attracted me to him far more than his appearance.

It was a shame that he was so good at recognizing other people's needs and so terrible at putting his own into words.

"Miłosz..."

"Natasza."

He said my name with a hint of amusement, as though he already knew what I was about to do.

"Don't start."

"I'm not starting anything."

"That's exactly the problem."

His smile disappeared. For a moment, we looked at each other across the table, where my notebook, two pencils, and fabric samples lay beside the shirt. Ordinary objects, an ordinary apartment, the ordinary end of a project. Everything should have been simple.

"We don't have to talk about everything right now," he finally said.

"I didn't ask to talk about everything."

"Then what do you want to talk about?"

I wanted to tell him that I meant us. About what exactly we were doing when work ended and we found ourselves alone together. About why he could show up after midnight just to have tea with me, then talk about his belongings the following morning as though they were the only reason he'd come over. About why he always found an excuse to prolong our time together but never suggested anything that would require us to give our relationship a name.

Instead, I closed my notebook.

"Whether you're actually planning to come back for that shirt tomorrow."

Miłosz looked at me attentively.

"If you want me to."

"I don't want you coming here just because you left a piece of clothing behind."

"What if I have another reason?"

It was the first thing he'd said that evening that sounded like something more than a joke or a convenient exchange of words. I didn't, however, take a step towards him. I had no intention of making it easier for him to retreat from his own words before he'd had a chance to finish them.

"Then you can tell me what it is."

For a few seconds, I thought he really might. I watched him lower his gaze to the shirt before looking back at me. Something appeared in his expression that I couldn't quite identify. Hesitation? Caution? Perhaps he was simply tired.

In the end, he slipped the shirt into his bag.

"Good night, Natasza."

I didn't try to stop him. Not because I didn't want him to stay. Quite the opposite. I wanted him to stay so badly that I couldn't bring myself to pretend, once again, that his presence was enough of an answer.

I walked him to the door. Before leaving, he turned around one last time.

"Shall we talk tomorrow about the photographs?"

"About the photographs, yes."

He nodded. He didn't kiss me, or even touch my hand. For a moment, he stood in the doorway as though waiting for something neither of us wanted to say out loud. Then he left.

I closed the door and leaned my back against it.

Silence returned to the apartment. The scent of coffee lingered, along with the warmth of the lamps and the faint trace of someone's presence. The back of the chair was empty now, the place where his shirt had been that morning left bare. I hadn't expected such a small object to leave behind such a noticeable absence.

I returned to the living room and switched off the light above the table. I had everything I needed to close this chapter of my life: a completed project, prepared documents, plans of my own, and finally an empty coat rack where his jacket had been hanging for the past few days.

There was only one question I still couldn't answer.

Did Miłosz really want to come back to me, or had he simply never learned how to decide when it was time to leave?

# Chapter 1 - Terms of Return

On Saturday morning, Kraków looked like a city that had absolutely no intention of caring about my plans. Traffic moved along the streets as usual, trams cut across intersections, and people carrying paper coffee cups hurried towards whatever business they had to attend to. Meanwhile, I was standing in an apartment on Krupnicza Street, holding a folder of documents in one hand and my phone in the other. A message from the owner had been sitting on the screen for ten minutes.

Marta Kulesza was supposed to arrive at ten thirty to collect the keys and sign the final handover report. After that, all I had to do was go home. I wasn't planning to adjust the cushions again, move the lamps, or wonder whether the curtains might have looked better in a shade of off-white. The project was finished. At least as finished as any project could be when the client had an apparently unlimited ability to discover new possibilities.

Marta's message was brief.

I'll be fifteen minutes late. There's one more thing I'd like to ask you both about. Will Miłosz be there too?

I read it again.

I didn't reply.

Not because I didn't know the answer. Miłosz had no reason to come here. The photographs had been taken, the materials sent, and he'd even collected his shirt the previous evening. If Marta wanted to discuss something concerning the photography, she could contact him directly.

That was exactly what I intended to suggest when I noticed a small black case lying beneath the coffee table in the living room.

I crouched down and picked it up. It was flat, made of a hard material, with a small zipper. I knew what was inside. Memory cards and a compact card reader Miłosz used for work. It must have slipped out of the side pocket of his bag while he was packing his equipment the night before.

For a moment, I considered leaving it at the building's reception desk. Then I decided I shouldn't make that choice for him. It contained work materials, perhaps even photographs from private assignments. I had no right to assume they could wait until Monday.

I took out my phone.

You've left your card case here. I'll be in the apartment until eleven.

His reply arrived sooner than I expected.

I'll be there in twenty minutes.

I glanced at my watch.

"Of course," I muttered to myself.

I could have written that I'd leave it with Marta. I could also have asked whether a courier would do. Instead, I put my phone down and returned to checking the documents, as though Miłosz's appearance on the stairs somehow depended on how well I concentrated.

He arrived eighteen minutes later.

I heard the doorbell before I had time to close the folder. When I opened the door, I found him standing there in a dark jacket, his camera hanging from his shoulder. He was holding two paper cups, one in each hand.

"Good morning," he said.

"I didn't realize collecting a card case came with catering."

"It doesn't. One of these cups is for me."

"Wonderful. At least I won't feel obliged to play hostess."

He smiled, and I stepped aside to let him in.

"Still in space-management mode?" he asked, looking around the living room.

"Still in the process of handing the apartment over to its owner."

"So everything is in its proper place?"

"Except you."

"That one I can fix quite quickly."

He placed a cup on the countertop and reached for the case lying beside the documents. I handed it to him without comment. He checked its contents, opened the zipper, counted the cards, and only then slipped everything into his camera bag.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

He could have left then. He had what he'd come for, and I had my own things to attend to. Yet instead of heading towards the door, Miłosz stopped by the window and looked at the light falling across the wooden floor.

"Do you know I didn't take one photograph yesterday?" he asked.

"I didn't know that. I thought you'd finished the entire set."

"I did. But there's one more shot I'd like to get."

"What for?"

"For myself."

"Miłosz, the apartment has practically been handed over already."

"I know."

"Then I don't think we should start another session."

He turned towards me.

"Do you always have to get the last word?"

"Only when someone tries to extend a project without agreeing on the terms."

"Then we have something in common."

I didn't answer. He was right, but I wasn't going to make it easy for him.

"Marta wants to talk to both of us," I finally said.

"I know. She messaged me."

"And naturally, you didn't think to let me know."

"I didn't know whether you'd come."

"I've been here since this morning."

"That's not what I meant."

His tone had changed. There was no longer any teasing in it, and I sensed that the conversation we'd avoided the previous evening had just found another opportunity to take place.

"Then what did you mean?" I asked.

Miłosz put his cup down and slipped his hands into his jacket pockets.

"Marta received an offer from Wnętrza Krakowa magazine. They want to publish a feature about the apartment. They'll need a few additional photographs, a short description of the project, and permission to use the images."

"How do you know?"

"She called me last night."

"She messaged me too, saying she had something to discuss. She didn't mention the magazine."

"Maybe she wanted to tell us together."

I glanced at my phone. It was true that Marta hadn't provided any details. What I did know was that a publication like this could be important to me. I'd spent several months working on this interior. It was the first project in which I'd been allowed to bring my own concept to life completely, from the functional layout to the choice of the smallest finishing detail. Being featured in an industry magazine could help me secure new commissions and, more importantly, demonstrate that I was capable of managing a project independently.

"That's good news," I said cautiously.

"That's what I think."

"In that case, we need to establish exactly what they're expecting."

"That's why I'm here."

"No. You're here because you left your card case."

"One thing doesn't exclude the other."

I looked at him in disbelief.

"Are you really planning to use every possible opportunity to show up in this apartment?"

"Not every opportunity."

"Only the ones with an appropriate excuse?"

"Depends on how convincing the excuse is."

I didn't smile, although I felt like it.

"I don't want us mixing professional matters with personal ones."

"We don't have to."

"We didn't have to yesterday either."

For a moment, he looked at me without saying anything. I wasn't going to take back that remark. I hadn't said anything I didn't believe.

"You're right," he finally replied.

That surprised me more than any joke could have.

"Good. At least we agree on something."

"But I'm not going to pretend I don't enjoy spending time with you."

He said it calmly. No attempt to ease the tension, no escape into humour.

For a second, I forgot about the documents.

"That's nice of you."

"That didn't sound like I was giving you a compliment."

"Maybe because I don't know what I'm supposed to do with it."

"You don't have to do anything."

That was precisely what made conversations with him so difficult. He could say something deeply personal and then

leave me entirely responsible for deciding what his words meant.

Before I could answer, the intercom rang.

Marta.

I let her upstairs while Miłosz returned to his coffee. A few minutes later, the owner walked into the apartment with a broad smile and a large bag slung over her shoulder.

"You're both here! Perfect."

Marta was around forty, with the energy of someone who always had three more ideas than she could possibly carry out, and an extraordinary ability to make decisions at the last minute. Working with her wasn't always easy, but I appreciated her enthusiasm. She didn't treat interior design as though it were simply a matter of buying cushions for a new apartment.

She took another look around the living room, praised the lighting, and admitted that the previous evening she'd shown the photographs to a friend who worked in an editorial office.

"And guess what? They liked them so much that they want to turn this into a bigger feature. Not just a property presentation, but a story about an apartment that has preserved the character of its historic building while being given an entirely new life."

I smiled.

"That actually sounds interesting."

"They want eight photographs, perhaps nine, along with a description of the concept. The deadline is next Thursday. If you agree, the editorial team will prepare the feature for publication at the beginning of next month."

"Eight photographs?" Miłosz asked.

"Yes. But I don't want a simple repetition of what we already have. I'd like a few detail shots, perhaps with slightly different lighting. And some text explaining why we chose these particular solutions."

Marta turned to me.

"Natasza, this was your concept. I'd like you to prepare the description. And Miłosz, could you take the photographs? Of course, both of you will be credited in the feature."

At first, I felt a rush of excitement. Then I immediately began calculating how much work it would involve.

"I'll have to check my calendar," I said.

"Of course. I don't want to impose anything on either of you."

"It's not about imposing. I already have another project scheduled."

Marta nodded.

"Then discuss it between yourselves and see whether you can make it work. I'd really like you to collaborate again. The apartment looks the way it does because of the two of you."

Miłosz looked at me.

"I'm interested."

Of course he was.

"I haven't made a decision yet," I replied.

"Natasza is right," Marta said. "First the terms, then the commitments. I'll send you both a message with the editorial team's requirements."

A few minutes later, we signed the documents, and Marta collected the keys. When she left, I was alone with Miłosz again. There was no longer any reason for either of us to stay.

"You don't have to agree," he said.

"I know."

"But it would be a shame."

"For the project or for you?"

He looked at me with a slight smile.

"I'm not going to pretend it's only about the project."

I tucked the folder under my arm.

"I have one condition."

"I'm listening."

"If we're going to work together, everything gets agreed in advance. The scope, deadlines, image rights, and how the feature will credit us. I don't want any surprises later."

"Agreed."

"And I'm not going to spend extra hours with you just because you decide to adjust the lighting for the tenth time."

"That I can promise, with one small reservation."

"Which is?"

"If you move that vase another three centimetres, I might lose my patience."

This time, I laughed.

"It wasn't a vase. It was a composition."

"Of course."

We left together and walked down the stairwell. At the entrance, I stopped beside the front door.

"I'll message you when I've made my decision."

"All right."

"Don't call before then."

"I won't."

"And don't leave anything else in the apartment."

"I'll do my best."

"Miłosz."

"Yes?"

"I'm serious."

He looked at me for a moment, then nodded.

"I know, Natasza."

I stepped out onto the street first. I had a free Saturday ahead of me, a few errands to run, and an apartment of my own to return to without having to think about someone else's furniture. I wasn't going to let one professional opportunity turn my schedule upside down.

Yet as I got into my car, my phone vibrated.

A message from Miłosz.

Regarding the project: I have a few ideas for additional shots. Regarding the personal side of things: I'm not going to pretend I'm not waiting for your decision.

I read it twice.

I didn't answer immediately. I put the phone on the passenger seat and started the engine. It wasn't until the first set of traffic lights, when the cars came to a standstill in a long line, that I returned to his message.

Send me your ideas. Let's leave the rest for later.

His reply arrived almost instantly.

That's already something.

I wasn't sure whether he meant the project or us. And for the first time in a long while, I wasn't certain I actually wanted to know the answer.

# Chapter 2 - Eight Frames

On Monday at five thirty in the afternoon, I was sitting at my desk in my apartment, trying to decide whether eight photographs were enough to tell the story of an interior that had occupied the last four months of my life.

The editorial requirements were open on my computer screen. Marta had sent them the previous evening, and I'd already read them three times. The magazine wanted more than photographs. They also needed a short description of the design concept, information about the materials we'd used, and a few sentences about the history of the building. The deadline was genuinely tight, but manageable.

Under normal circumstances, I would have started working immediately.

This time, however, I was waiting for a message from Miłosz.

I wasn't going to pretend otherwise, even to myself. He'd sent me a link to a gallery of proposed additional shots that morning, but instead of attaching the images, he'd invited me to his studio so we could look at them on a larger monitor. He claimed that some of the details required comparing several versions, and I didn't want to make decisions based on small previews.

It was a rational explanation.

At least halfway.

At 5:40, I closed my laptop, changed clothes, and left. Miłosz had given me an address on Józefa Street, in one of the tenement buildings in Kazimierz. His studio was on the

first floor, above a small ceramics workshop. When I arrived, the stairwell smelled of wet clay and freshly brewed coffee.

I knocked twice.

The door opened almost immediately.

"Right on time," he observed.

"I didn't want to give you another reason to make comments."

"Shame. I've prepared several."

"Save them for later."

He stepped aside to let me in.

The studio was larger than I'd expected. It didn't resemble a typical photography office. Along one wall stood shelves filled with books on architecture, photography, and art. A large worktable sat beneath the window, covered with prints, notebooks, and several cameras. At the back of the room was a computer workstation with two monitors. Everything was organised, but not sterile. It looked like a place where someone actually worked, rather than somewhere designed merely to receive clients.

"I thought photographers had more equipment on display," I said.

"I do. Not everything has to be left in the middle of a walkway, though."

"So there's something you don't photograph after all."

"I don't photograph my own mess. I'd rather not ruin my reputation."

He took off his jacket and pointed towards a chair beside the table.

"Coffee?"

"Only if you promise not to tell me yours is the best in Kraków."

"I wasn't going to. It's merely good enough that I don't have to advertise it."

He handed me a cup and sat opposite me. Only then did I notice the printed contact sheets of the apartment photographs he'd prepared. Each image had a number, with a short note on the back. Beside them lay a floor plan with the intended camera positions marked.

"You did all this since Saturday?" I asked.

"I already had some of it. I prepared the remaining shots yesterday."

"You didn't have to print the entire set."

"I know. But I find it easier to compare images on paper. Everything looks a little too perfect on a screen."

He slid the first print towards me.

The photograph showed the living room in a wide composition, capturing the windows, sofa, and part of the shelving unit. Light entered from the side, highlighting the texture of the wooden floor. It was a good photograph, but it lacked something that would distinguish it from an ordinary property listing.

"We're keeping this one," I said. "It shows the layout."

"I agree."

"The second one too. The kitchen looking towards the dining table."

"I had some doubts about that one."

"Why?"

"It's technically correct, but it doesn't tell us anything new."

I studied the photograph. He was right. The kitchen looked attractive, but a similar shot could have been taken in dozens of other apartments.

"We could take one from the other side, so the connection between the kitchen and living room is visible."

"That's exactly what I'm suggesting."

For the next several minutes, we discussed composition. We disagreed on a few things, but the conversation flowed surprisingly well. Miłosz didn't defend every photograph simply because he'd taken it himself. He could admit when my suggestion made sense, and whenever he disagreed, he explained why.

It was a pleasant discovery.

I'd met plenty of people who treated criticism as a personal insult. Miłosz listened before answering. He didn't need to be right about everything to feel confident in his work.

I stopped for longer at the third print.

"This one is good."

The photograph showed a small section of the hallway. An old door, its original handle preserved, a new lamp, and a pale wall. It didn't show the entire space, only the combination of materials and light.

"That's exactly why I took it," he said.

"Because you wanted to show the handle?"

"Because I didn't want everything to look new."

I studied the photograph again.

"Most clients expect precisely that effect. Everything new, straight, perfectly matched."

"And you?"

"I think an apartment should look as though someone could actually live in it. Not like a catalogue."

"I know."

I looked up.

"How?"

"Because throughout the entire project, you made sure we didn't remove things that mattered to the place. Even when Marta wanted to replace the old doors, you convinced her to preserve their original structure."

I hadn't expected him to remember that. We'd discussed the doors during one of our first visits, when I was showing him the floor plan and explaining why I didn't want to replace them with new ones. After that, the subject had disappeared among dozens of other decisions.

"It was the right decision," I said.

"It was yours. That was enough."

I put the photograph back on the table.

"You don't have to convince me of the value of my own project."

"I'm not trying to."

"Then what are you doing?"

"Showing you that I pay attention."

The words hung between us. Miłosz reached for his cup as though he hadn't said anything particularly significant. I, however, felt the conversation moving in a direction I hadn't planned.