Laura Bellini

Everything but Your Number

Without screens, they're easier to see and harder to hide



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INTRO

For the first time in eleven years, I considered closing the bookshop early, not because there weren't enough customers, but because I was afraid someone might actually come in.

It was Thursday, a few minutes past six in the evening. Outside, rain blurred the headlights of cars passing along the Warsaw street. Inside, the air smelled of paper, damp coats, and coffee I had already reheated twice. I was standing on a stepladder, trying to attach a navy-blue sign reading Conversations Begin Here to a bookshelf, when my phone rang.

My landlady's name appeared on the screen.

I climbed down the three steps more carefully than necessary. I had been waiting a week for an answer about extending my lease. For three months, I had been putting money aside to renovate the back room. And for two years, I had been trying to convince myself that a thirty-one-year-old woman could run an independent bookshop in central Warsaw without looking for a wealthy business partner.

"Ms. Bielska," Mrs. Malinowska began. "We need to postpone signing the lease extension."

I looked at the folder I had prepared on the counter.

"But we agreed on Friday."

"The situation has changed. There's been some interest in the premises."

"What kind of interest?"

For a moment, all I could hear was the faint tapping of a keyboard.

"Commercial interest. Please don't worry prematurely. Your current lease is still valid."

"Until the end of January."

"I'm aware of when your lease expires, Ms. Bielska."

There was an impatience in her voice I had never heard before. We had always spoken calmly, even on the two occasions when I had asked to spread a rent increase over several payments. Now I had the uncomfortable impression that I was interrupting something more important.

"Have you received a specific offer?"

"I'm not in a position to discuss that yet. I'll contact you next week."

The call ended.

I stared at the dark screen for a moment. Then I put the phone in a drawer and returned to the sign. The tape peeled away from the wood before I could even climb back onto the ladder.

"Perfect," I muttered.

My plan had been simple, at least on paper. I wanted to turn the back room of the bookshop into a space for intimate gatherings, open literary evenings, and conversations in which nobody checked their phone every thirty seconds. The Poza Zasięgiem club, which I had been running with my friend Marta for the past month, was supposed to be the first step. If we could attract regular visitors, I might increase revenue, hire someone part-time, and finally stop working six days a week.

I didn't dream of building a bookshop empire. I wanted to be able to lock the doors at seven, go out for dinner, and not spend the entire evening calculating how many books I needed to sell to cover the following month's expenses.

Twelve people were expected that evening. Marta had suggested experimenting with a meeting without a designated host, allowing participants to choose their own topic of conversation. I had taken

care of the books, chairs, and tea. She had promised to bring the people.

At ten past six, I received a message from her.

Zosia, I'm stuck at work. I'll be there in half an hour. Can you manage on your own?

I replied that of course I could.

It was a small, ordinary lie, so well rehearsed that I didn't even feel guilty about it.

I was arranging the last chair when the bell above the door rang.

"Are you still closed?" a man's voice asked.

I turned around with a box of candles in my hands.

A man stood in the doorway wearing a dark coat, his hair damp from the rain. He held a paper bag whose bottom looked considerably wetter than it ought to have been. He was around thirty-five. He didn't resemble someone rushing in to buy a last-minute bestseller as a gift. He surveyed the room attentively, as though trying to understand the rules of the place he had just entered.

"The bookshop is open," I answered. "The club starts at seven."

"Then I have forty minutes."

"For what?"

"To find out whether I should stay."

I placed the box on the counter.

"That depends on what you're looking for."

"Something I can't find on my phone."

He said it without smiling, although there was amusement in his eyes. I noticed a small scar near his left eyebrow and the way he held the door to keep it from striking the frame. His movements

were unhurried, those of someone who didn't need to draw attention to himself.

"That's a rather broad category," I observed.

"All the better. I don't like having my choices narrowed too quickly."

"And I don't like customers who don't know what they want."

"So we're starting with a disagreement."

This time, I was the first to smile.

He approached the table of books, but instead of examining the covers, he looked at the wicker basket beside it. I had tied a handwritten note to the handle: Phones Take a Break Here.

"Does everyone really hand theirs over?"

"Voluntarily. They can also switch them off and keep them. It's about the principle, not confiscation."

"Sensible."

"You sound disappointed."

"A little. I was expecting something more radical."

"Sorry to disappoint you. We don't confiscate watches either, or make people recite poetry by candlelight."

He laughed softly. It was a pleasant, low laugh that didn't demand a response. Suddenly, I realized I hadn't thought about the phone in the drawer for several minutes.

The man took off his coat and draped it over one arm.

"Kamil Borowski," he introduced himself.

"Zofia Bielska."

"Your bookshop?"

"My business. I rent the premises."

"And the club was your idea?"

"Mine and a friend's."

He nodded, but his gaze lingered on the folder protruding from beneath the counter. Instinctively, I pushed it farther out of sight. I didn't know why I felt the need to hide documents from a stranger who hadn't even asked about my finances. Perhaps, after Mrs. Malinowska's call, anyone showing an interest in the premises seemed like a potential threat.

"Do you work with books?" I asked.

"With apps."

I raised my eyebrows.

"An interesting place to spend your evening, then."

"I know. A professional betrayal."

"More like an attempt at rehabilitation."

"Possibly. I design things that make people look at one another across the dinner table less and less. I thought it might be worth seeing what the opposite looks like."

There was neither pride nor flirtation in his admission. He spoke matter-of-factly, yet for a moment I had the impression that a whole story lay behind those simple words, one he wasn't ready to tell.

"And what do you see?" I asked.

He looked around the modest room, taking in the lamps casting their warm light, the old parquet floor, the cracked paint beside the radiator, and the handwritten book recommendations.

"A place where someone genuinely wants people to stay."

I hadn't expected that answer. I had several ironic remarks about technology ready, but none of them seemed appropriate anymore.

"Usually, I want them to buy a book," I replied.

"And then?"

"To come back."

"Exactly."

For a moment, we looked at each other across the table. He made no attempt to fill the silence. It felt strangely intimate, although almost two metres separated us and I knew nothing about him beyond his name and profession.

A muffled sound came from the phone behind the counter.

I didn't move.

It rang again.

Kamil glanced towards the drawer and then back at me.

"You can answer it."

"I know."

"I didn't mean to interrupt."

"You're not the one interrupting."

The words came out more sharply than I'd intended. His expression grew serious, but he didn't apologize for something he hadn't done.

"Bad news?" he asked after a moment.

I hesitated.

"I don't know yet."

He nodded, accepting my answer without further questions. Then he picked up the fallen sign lying beside the stepladder.

"Would you like me to hold this?"

I looked at the lettering, then at his outstretched hand. I rarely asked strangers for help. Not because I thought they were incompetent, but because every favor I accepted felt like the beginning of a debt whose terms I didn't yet understand.

"Just for a moment," I said.

"As long as you need."

I handed him the sign. Our fingers touched for a second, briefly enough to mean nothing, yet long enough for me to notice the warmth of his hand.

Kamil stood beside the bookshelf, holding the navy-blue cardboard exactly where I indicated. I adjusted the tape, catching the scent of rain on his coat and a faint note of cedar.

"A little higher, please."

"Like this?"

"Perfect."

"I don't hear that word very often at work."

"Don't get used to it."

He smiled, and I thought that for the first time in ages, I genuinely wanted someone to stay in my bookshop longer than it took to buy a book.

Then my phone rang for the third time.

This time, I took it out of the drawer. A short message from Mrs. Malinowska appeared on the screen.

Please suspend any investment in the premises for the time being. I've received an offer I need to consider.

I read it twice.

"Is everything all right?" Kamil asked.

He was standing close, but he made no attempt to look over my shoulder. I only noticed his eyes flick briefly towards the screen before he turned away.

I slipped the phone into my pocket.

"Someone might take this place away from me."

Kamil slowly lowered his hand. The sign was hanging straight now.

"Are you sure?"

"No. And I think that's the worst part."

He was silent for a moment. Outside, the rain grew heavier, and our reflections appeared in the window: mine, with the phone in my hand, and his, standing right beside me.

"If you'd rather cancel tonight's meeting, I'd understand," he said.

I looked at the chairs I had arranged, then at the basket for phones, and finally at the man who had appeared just as my carefully constructed plan began to fall apart.

"I'm not cancelling," I answered. "That's exactly why I have to go ahead with it."

He nodded with something resembling admiration.

"Then I'll stay."

He didn't ask whether I needed rescuing. He didn't promise to solve anything. He simply remained beside the bookshelf while I straightened the last crooked volume.

I should have been thinking only about the bookshop. About the lease. About protecting the place I had worked for throughout my adult life.

Instead, when Kamil turned towards me with a questioning smile, a far less sensible thought came to mind.

Could I let him get close to me when I was only just beginning to lose my sense of security?

Chapter 1 - Rules That Weren't in the Rulebook

At three minutes past seven, there were eleven people in my bookshop, twelve mugs, and one man who had apparently decided to test the limits of my patience.

"I suggest we start with something simpler than introductions," Kamil said after I had explained the club's rules. "Everyone could tell us why they actually came here."

I was standing beside the tea table, wondering whether throwing someone out before the first meeting had properly begun might contradict the whole idea of openness.

"Introducing yourself is a fairly simple exercise," I pointed out.

"For people who enjoy talking about themselves. Not everyone does."

The woman in the red sweater sitting nearest the window nodded. Two students exchanged glances, while an older gentleman with a distinctive grey beard set down his cup as though he had just heard an argument worthy of serious consideration.

I didn't want to admit that Kamil had a point. Especially when he was leaning so casually against a bookshelf that he looked as if he had belonged here for years.

"All right," I said. "Let's try it. But nobody has to share anything personal unless they want to."

"Zofia, isn't it?" the woman in the red sweater asked. "May I start?"

I nodded.

"My name is Irena. I've been working remotely for five years. Yesterday, I realised the only person I'd spoken to all day was a courier. He said, 'Good morning,' and I replied, 'You too.'"

The burst of laughter relaxed the room more effectively than any of the questions I had prepared.

I watched the participants' faces as they took turns explaining what had brought them here. Some were lonely. Others were exhausted by work. One man admitted that the last proper conversation he'd had with a stranger had been during a train breakdown. A young woman said she wanted to learn how to stop checking her phone whenever a silence became awkward.

When Kamil's turn came, he looked at me.

"I came because my job is to capture people's attention. Lately, I've been finding it harder and harder to recognise when someone is genuinely giving me theirs."

He spoke quietly, without trying to make anyone laugh.

For a moment, the room fell silent.

"That sounds a little sad," Irena observed.

"Sometimes it is," he replied. "But I'm hoping it's reversible."

I couldn't have said why I suddenly felt the need to look at him more closely. I'd met plenty of men who knew how to say a few interesting things. I'd also known men who wore their sensitivity as carefully as a well-chosen jacket.

What unsettled me most about Kamil was that he didn't seem to be trying to impress anyone.

And yet he had impressed me.

The meeting gathered momentum. People began talking about places where they felt comfortable, acquaintanceships that ended after three messages, and their inability to tolerate silence. When the older gentleman told us how he'd met his wife while queuing for oranges in the 1980s, everyone listened with an attentiveness no set of rules could have demanded.

Only then did I realise I hadn't thought of checking my phone.

For the first half hour, I hadn't even thought about the message from my landlady.

Marta appeared in the doorway, soaked through and visibly out of breath. She stopped for a moment when she saw the participants leaning towards one another in small groups.

She slipped over to me without making a sound.

"This looks better than I expected," she whispered.

"Thank you for your overwhelming confidence."

"You know what I mean. Who's that?"

She glanced discreetly towards Kamil.

"A participant."

"An ordinary participant?"

"Marta."

"I'm asking strictly for organisational purposes."

I knew that tone. My friend could turn a three-second observation into a love story before the people concerned had even exchanged surnames.

"Help me with the tea," I asked.

She smiled, but this time she didn't comment on my evasion.

At eight o'clock, it was time for the final part of the meeting. I had planned for everyone to choose a book from the selection I'd prepared, something they would like to recommend to another person. They didn't have to have read it. It was enough for the title, cover, or opening sentence to catch their interest.

The idea worked better than I had anticipated. Within minutes, small groups formed between the shelves, and the conversations began to resemble the ones I missed most in my bookshop: relaxed, unhurried exchanges without the need to prove anything.

Kamil approached the travel-writing shelves. He selected an old collection of reportage about cities that no longer existed in quite the form the author had described.

"An interesting choice," I said.

"Why?"

"Most people reach for something new. You've chosen a book that's more than thirty years old."

"I like knowing what survives change."

He looked at me over the cover.

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

"What would you want to save if you could choose only one thing from this place?"

The question struck something I wasn't prepared to expose.

I looked around the bookshop. In eleven years, the shelves, lighting, sales system, and almost all the furniture had changed. Only the old wooden counter remained, the one my mother had stood beside when I first came here as an employee.

"I couldn't choose," I answered.

"That's an answer too."

"Not a particularly useful one."

"Not necessarily."

He returned the book to its place, although a moment earlier he had looked as though he intended to buy it.

"Perhaps you're trying to save something bigger than the furnishings."

I said nothing. He was seeing far too much for someone who had spent less than two hours here.

Towards the end of the meeting, Irena asked when the next one would take place.

I opened my mouth, but before I could answer, Marta looked at me anxiously. She knew about the message from my landlady because I had shown it to her during a short break.

"Next week," I said.

Kamil turned his head.

"Are you sure?"

That one question was enough to irritate me.

"Yes."

"I wasn't trying to question your decision."

"And yet you did."

Several people glanced our way. I smiled at the participants and explained that details of the next meeting would be posted on the noticeboard and the bookshop's website. Then I helped Marta see everyone out.

By the time the last guest left, it was after nine.

They had left behind half-finished cups of tea, a few displaced chairs, and the extraordinary feeling that, for a little while, the bookshop had belonged to something greater than everyday shopping.

Marta began collecting mugs.

"That was a success," she declared.

"Eleven people don't necessarily make a success."

"Eleven people who didn't want to leave count for quite a lot."

Kamil picked up two chairs and carried them over to the wall.

"May I help?"

"You're already helping," I replied.

"So I've noticed."

Marta looked at us, then at her watch.

"I need to call Paweł. I promised I'd be home before ten. Zosia, will you manage?"

"Of course."

She came over and squeezed my shoulder.

"I'll call you in the morning."

After she left, the bookshop suddenly seemed larger. I could hear the rain striking the window and the rustle of paper as Kamil straightened the books scattered around the room.

"You don't have to do that," I said.

"I know."

"I get the impression you say that quite often."

"Because people keep telling me there are things I don't have to do."

I took a stack of books from him.

"Most people understand that as a hint."

"And do you actually want me to leave?"

I didn't answer immediately.

His gaze was steady, but there was no humour in the question. He stood far enough away that I didn't feel crowded, yet close enough for me to notice the tiny raindrops still clinging to his sleeve.

"I want to finish tidying up," I said at last.

"Then we have a common goal."

We worked in silence for several minutes. Kamil didn't ask unnecessary questions. He didn't move things without permission. When he wasn't sure where to put the cups, he asked instead of guessing.

It was only when we reached the last chair that he spoke again.

"Why weren't you certain about the next meeting?"

I rested my hands on the counter.

"Because I don't know whether I'll still be able to hold meetings here in three months."

I hadn't meant to tell him. The words had escaped too easily, as though exhaustion had stripped away some of my caution.

Kamil set down the chair.

"Is it about the lease?"

I examined him more closely.

"What makes you think that?"

"You mentioned that you rent the premises. And property owners rarely ask their tenants what they think when a more attractive offer comes along."

"Do you have experience with this sort of thing?"

For a brief moment, his expression became unreadable.

"I've worked on projects where decisions about premises were made entirely on the basis of numbers."

"How encouraging."

"I didn't say those decisions were always good."

I reached for the folder containing my documents.

"I'm not looking for an investor, a sponsor, or someone to explain why running a bookshop is economically irrational."

"I haven't offered to be any of those things."

"Yet."

He smiled faintly, then grew serious.

"May I say something you'll probably disagree with?"

"That seems to be your favourite way of starting a conversation."

"If you want to save this place, you need to separate what you genuinely need from what you'd like to keep exactly as it is."

I straightened.

"And you shouldn't judge my situation after a single evening."

"You're right."

The ease with which he admitted it threw me off balance.

"Sorry?"

"I don't know enough about your situation. I shouldn't have been so categorical."

He glanced towards the window.

"But I still think it's worth finding out whether the problem is only the rent, or also the way people hear about this place."

"People hear about it from other people."

"That's a good start. Not necessarily enough."

"Do you run a marketing company?"

"I design applications. Some of them help organise events and build communities."

"So you're suggesting I save a phone-free club with an app."

"I'm suggesting technology should finish doing its job before people sit down opposite one another."

I had to admit that wasn't the worst answer.

Kamil approached the corkboard displaying event announcements and photographs from previous reading evenings.

"How many people heard about tonight's meeting by chance?"

"A few."

"And how many might have come if they'd known a place like this existed?"

"I have no idea."

"Then that's where you can start. Not with renovations, advertising, or an expensive system. With conversations with the people who have already come here."

"Surprisingly sensible for someone who makes apps."

"I'll try to disappoint you that way more often."

For a moment, we looked at each other and smiled. The atmosphere had changed almost imperceptibly. We were no longer simply a bookshop owner and a chance visitor. We were talking like two people who had found something worth meeting about again.

But Kamil wasn't finished.

"I have one condition if we're going to work on this."

I stiffened immediately.

"Conditions already?"

"I don't want to make decisions for you. But I won't help develop a plan based on the assumption that everything must remain exactly the same."

"This is my place."

"And your decisions. I'd simply like to be able to say when something isn't working."

"Even if I haven't asked for your opinion?"

"Especially then, I should ask whether you'd like to hear it."

I considered my answer.

There was something irritating about his proposal, but something fair as well. He wasn't trying to convince me he knew

the solution. He was offering a way of thinking that I could accept or reject.

"And my condition is that you don't treat the bookshop as a project to be optimised," I said.

"How should I treat it?"

I looked at the old bookshelves, the lamp beside the window, and the wooden counter bearing the marks of hundreds of books being pushed across it.

"As a place that matters to people."

Kamil nodded.

"That, I do understand."

I didn't know whether I believed him. I did know that I wanted to find out what else he was capable of understanding.

I closed the folder.

"Come back tomorrow after closing. I'll show you the club's figures. We'll see whether you really have anything sensible to say."

His smile broadened.

"Is that an invitation?"

"A working meeting."

"Of course."

"With no obligations."

"Except punctuality?"

"Punctuality is compulsory."

He put on his coat, then stopped beside the door.

"Zofia?"

It was the first time he'd used my name without the formal distance between us.

"Yes?"

"Today, when you said you wouldn't cancel the meeting despite the bad news, I thought I'd like to get to know you when you don't have to keep everything under control."

I hadn't expected such an admission. It was too direct to dismiss as simple politeness, yet it lacked the pushiness that would have made me retreat.

"And I'd like to see whether you can go one evening without analysing my behaviour," I replied.

"That might be harder."

"Then we both have something to work on."

Kamil laughed softly and opened the door.

"Until tomorrow."

After he left, I locked the bookshop and stood motionless among the shelves for a moment.

My phone was in my pocket. I could have called Marta and told her about the meeting, the landlady, and the man who had appeared uninvited at the worst possible moment.

Instead, I took out a piece of paper and wrote down several questions about the club.

Beneath them, I added one I had no intention of asking aloud.

Why does he actually want to help me?

I stared at the words for a long moment.

Then I switched off the lights.

For the first time since receiving Mrs. Malinowska's message, the thought of tomorrow didn't fill me with nothing but anxiety.

Chapter 2 - Everything but Your Number

The following morning, Marta came into the bookshop carrying two coffees and wearing the expression of someone who had arrived to question a witness.

"Before you say anything, I want to know who that man is."

I didn't look up from my invoices.

"Good morning to you too."

"Good morning, Zosia. Who is he?"

"Kamil Borowski. He designs apps."

"And?"

"And he was at the meeting yesterday."

Marta put the coffee on the counter.

"He stayed afterwards."

"He helped clean up."

"He looked at you as if he were trying to read a book that hasn't been published yet."

I glanced at her.

"Do you really have to describe everything like that?"

"I work with books. Being your friend has given me an occupational affliction."

I couldn't suppress a smile.

Marta had known me since university. She was the only person who could identify my mood from the way I arranged receipts. When I was nervous, I sorted them by date. When I was genuinely frightened, I started straightening their edges as well.

That morning, three perfectly aligned piles lay in front of me.

"Has Mrs. Malinowska contacted you again?" Marta asked, more seriously now.

I shook my head.

"No. But I checked the lease. She has to inform me of the terms of any extension no later than a month before it expires. That means I still have a little time."

"And if she doesn't renew it?"

"Then I'll look for another solution."

"What kind?"

I didn't have an answer ready.

The bookshop had been my place for eleven years, ever since I'd started working there as a student. Five years earlier, I'd bought the business from the previous owner when she retired. I'd changed the stock, refurbished the shelving, and begun organising author events. Even so, the business was still operating close to the edge of profitability.

Moving wouldn't just mean additional costs. It could destroy something that couldn't be entered into a spreadsheet: people's habit of coming to one particular place.

"That's exactly why I want to develop the club," I said.

Marta studied me for a moment.

"And Kamil is going to help you?"

"We'll see what he suggests."

"So you've arranged to meet him."

"To discuss organising events."

"Naturally."

"Marta."

She raised her hands in surrender.

"All right. But don't pretend you haven't noticed how handsome he is."

I picked up my coffee.

"I noticed."

My friend froze.

"Sorry, what?"

"He's handsome. He has a pleasant voice and an interesting way of looking at people. Can we get back to work now?"

Marta's smile widened so dramatically that I immediately regretted being honest.

"Zosia, you've just voluntarily admitted that you find a man attractive."

"I didn't say I was attracted to him."

"Of course not. You were conducting a purely objective aesthetic assessment."

The bell above the door interrupted us. An elderly gentleman who had been buying crime novels for his wife from me for years came into the shop. Marta gave me a triumphant look and went to help him.

I was left alone with my invoices and the uncomfortable awareness that I'd spent far too much time since the previous evening thinking about someone I barely knew.

Kamil arrived the next evening after closing, at exactly seven o'clock.

He hadn't brought a laptop.

I noticed immediately.

"I expected you to arrive with a full set of analytical equipment," I said as I opened the door.

"I have a notebook."

He showed me a small notebook with a dark-blue cover.

"Analogue?"

"I'm trying to adapt to the environment."

"And your phone?"

"In my pocket. On silent."

I let him inside.

He was wearing dark trousers and a light-coloured jumper, its sleeves pushed casually up his forearms. Without his coat, he looked different from the previous evening. Less formal, and considerably more dangerous to my conviction that we were meeting for strictly professional reasons.

I had prepared a breakdown of income from events, attendance figures from recent meetings, and projected expenses for the coming months. I had no intention of showing him the bookshop's complete financial records. I didn't mind discussing the club, however.

Kamil sat opposite me and opened his notebook.

"Let's start with what you want to achieve."

"I want to build a lasting community of people who will keep coming back."

"How many?"

"Thirty or forty regular participants to begin with."

"And what do they expect?"

"Conversation. Contact with other people. Somewhere they don't have to pretend."

He wrote down a few words.

"And what do you expect?"

I hesitated.

"I've just told you."

"You've told me what you want for the club. I'm asking about you."

I leaned back.

"I want the bookshop to stop being something I keep alive at the expense of my entire life."

Kamil looked up.

"That's an important distinction."

"I know."

"How long have you been working six days a week?"

"Too long."

"And when was the last time you had an entire weekend off?"

I gave a short laugh.

"I didn't come here for therapy."

"I'm not trying to provide it. But if the club is supposed to help the bookshop, it can't become another responsibility that wears you out."

That was an argument I couldn't dismiss.

For the next hour, we discussed participants, the frequency of meetings, and opportunities to work with local authors. Kamil asked questions I hadn't thought to ask myself. He wasn't interested solely in how many people attended. He wanted to know why they returned and what made them feel they belonged to a group.

When he suggested a simple registration form, I objected immediately.

"No apps."

"A form isn't an app."

"It starts with a form and ends with notifications and reminders."