
Exactly Where You Are
They meant to manage alone. They didn't expect to want each other
Laura Bellini

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INTRO

Three weeks after my first meeting with Baltazar Król, the workshop smelled of bookbinding glue, wood, and coffee that had gone cold long ago. Spread across the table were the pages of our album: photographs of hands at work, paper samples, and short passages of text I had revised so many times that I was beginning to recognize my own sentences by their rhythm alone. I should have felt satisfied. The project was finally taking shape, and I knew how to see things through, even when they demanded more patience than I usually had for people.

That evening, however, my attention kept returning to the envelope tucked beneath my notebook.

It wasn't large. Inside was a printed confirmation that my proposal for a several-month project outside Poznań had been accepted, complete with a start date and terms I already knew almost by heart. I had until Friday to respond. That left me two days to sign the contract, arrange my departure, and tell the people who needed to know. The list was short.

Baltazar wasn't on it.

The offer hadn't fallen into my lap. For years, I had been building my portfolio after hours, taking on assignments other people didn't want, and learning to say no to those that expected me to be available around the clock. This project was the first in a long time that offered me more than money. It promised room to work on my own terms. I would oversee the entire process from beginning to end, without someone else's last-minute corrections appearing on my desk.

Leaving meant taking a risk, but it was also an opportunity I had worked hard to earn.

I wasn't going to give it up simply because someone had appeared in Poznań who could make an ordinary evening feel unexpectedly significant.

I had grown accustomed to a life in which I made my own decisions. Nobody waited for me with dinner. Nobody asked when I would be home. Every empty space in my calendar belonged to me. I liked that freedom. Sometimes, I liked it more than I admitted to my friends.

It wasn't that Baltazar had no right to know. We simply hadn't agreed to share plans that had nothing to do with the album. That was the reasonable version of the story. The version I had been repeating to myself ever since I saw his name in the publisher's message and realized our collaboration would last longer than I had initially expected.

I slid the envelope farther beneath my notebook when footsteps sounded in the corridor. Baltazar no longer knocked as hesitantly as he had during his first visits. Two brief taps against the door were more a polite warning than a request for permission.

"May I?"

"If you've brought the revised sample, you absolutely may."

He stepped inside carrying a flat package wrapped in gray paper. He wore a dark shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and there was a trace of pale dust on one cuff, which he either hadn't noticed or hadn't considered worth brushing away. He stopped beside the table and looked first at the pages spread across it, then at me.

"I didn't realize book designers threatened their guests before dinner."

"It's not a threat. It's a motivational system."

"Effective?"

"Depends on the quality of the sample."

He smiled, and I felt that familiar, thoroughly impractical pleasure that came whenever his face softened. Baltazar never tried to be charming. He didn't fill silences with jokes or compete for attention. He listened before answering, and he usually remembered the little detail everyone else overlooked. Around him, it was difficult to pretend that anything you said was merely for the sake of keeping a conversation going.

He unwrapped the package. Inside was a wooden cover for the sample edition, slender and precisely finished. He had preserved the natural grain along the edge instead of trying to conceal it. I ran my finger over the smooth surface, careful not to leave a mark.

"It's beautiful," I said.

"It's functional. Beauty is a bonus."

"You say that as if you didn't spend half a day choosing the shade of wood."

"I didn't spend half a day. Just a few hours."

"Completely different, then."

He sat opposite me. For a while, we discussed the proportions, the fastening mechanism, and whether the spine would withstand frequent opening. He was right about the hinge; I was right about the width of the margins. We no longer had to explain every decision from the beginning.

That ease was one of the things I hadn't planned on enjoying.

When he leaned over the double-page spread, his arm came close to mine. He didn't touch me. He didn't need to. I already knew his scent: wood, soap, and something cool that reminded me of the air drifting into the workshop whenever someone opened the door. I moved the sheet aside to make room for him, even though there was plenty of space already.

"You've changed the order of the photographs," he observed.

"Yes. At first, I wanted to start with the tools, but now I think it's better to begin with the hands. The reader should see the person before the object."

"That makes sense."

"Don't get used to it. I have unreasonable ideas sometimes, too."

"I've noticed."

He said it calmly, without teasing. I looked at him, trying to decide whether he meant the way I sometimes changed my mind or something he hadn't quite put into words yet. Baltazar turned his attention back to the photograph of a luthier bending over a guitar's soundboard. He always gave me time when I didn't want to answer. I was beginning to suspect that his attentiveness wasn't simply one of his virtues. It might also be a way of concealing his own questions.

"The publisher wants to finalize the layout before the end of the month," I said. "If we keep up this pace, we'll make it."

"We will, provided you stop revising every caption six times."

"Would five be acceptable?"

"I might be willing to negotiate."

I laughed, and he watched me for a second longer than the conversation required. In that second, I thought I could tell him about the envelope. I wouldn't have to explain the entire plan. One sentence would be enough: I'd received an offer, I would be leaving for a few months, and I didn't yet know what would come of it. I wouldn't be asking for his permission or advice. I simply wanted to see how the truth would sound when spoken in his presence.

Instead, I closed my notebook.

"I'll have to leave early tomorrow," I said. "I have a few things to take care of."

"Of course."

His answer came too quickly. He didn't ask what those things were. He didn't try to keep me at the table, even though only moments earlier we'd been talking as if the evening had no end. He stood and began folding the gray paper, carefully smoothing out the creases.

"Leave the cover here. I'll take photographs in the morning light."

"All right."

"And Baltazar?"

He raised his head.

"Yes?"

For a moment, the words that could have changed the course of our conversation were right there on the tip of my

tongue. I could have asked whether he wanted to know where I was going before I had even made my final decision. I could have told him that I wasn't sure the departure still seemed so simple now that I had begun looking forward to his visits.

Neither sentence fitted the rules I had set for myself.

"Nothing. See you tomorrow."

He nodded. At the door, he turned back once more, as though he, too, were searching for the right words. In the end, he left without saying them.

I remained at the table with the wooden cover in front of me and the envelope whose corner was once again sticking out from beneath my notebook.

I had a plan. It was sensible, specific, and entirely my own.

So why had his silence sounded like something I might lose before I had even found the courage to admit that I wanted it?

Chapter 1 - Conditions That Were Never in the Brief

I walked into Baltazar Król's workshop with a folder tucked under my arm, two printed copies of the album concept, and the conviction that the most difficult part of the meeting would take no more than half an hour. I had already spoken with the publisher, prepared an initial budget and schedule, and spent several weeks developing an idea that I was growing increasingly fond of. All I needed was the approval of a man whose name had been recommended to me as belonging to one of the finest luthiers in Poznań. I had reserved forty-five minutes in my calendar for the meeting, leaving another fifteen for any possible negotiations.

I hadn't considered the possibility that my host might be interested in neither my schedule nor the publisher, nor even the money.

The workshop occupied a ground-floor space in an old tenement building, with tall windows overlooking a small courtyard. The moment I stepped inside, I caught the scent of wood, varnish, and something faintly resinous. Shelves lined one wall, holding boards in various shades, each carefully identified by a small label. At the other end of the room stood a workbench, with a row of tools hanging above it in such precise alignment that someone might have thought an architect had designed their arrangement. Nothing here seemed accidental. Even the cup holding the pencils stood exactly at the edge of the table.

The man bent over an instrument didn't raise his head when I entered.

"Mr. Baltazar Król?"

"Depends who's asking."

"Inga Domańska. I called about the album."

"I know. Please don't stand in the doorway. The draft interferes with my work."

I closed the door behind me, took off my coat, and hung it on the rack. Then I looked around for somewhere to put my folder. The man straightened and set down his tool. He was taller than I had expected, with dark hair and distinct streaks of grey at his temples. His face bore signs of fatigue, but it hadn't softened the definition of his features. He didn't look like someone who needed reassurance about his own worth. More like someone who had long since stopped seeking anyone else's approval.

"Good morning," I said.

"Good morning."

We shook hands. His palm was warm, rough in places that no amount of ordinary grooming could smooth away. His grip was firm but brief. He gestured towards a chair beside a small desk.

"The publisher said you wanted to make a book about craftsmanship."

"An album about handmade work. Not just the objects themselves, but also the people who create them. The decisions, the techniques, the time involved, and everything you can't see in the finished product."

"Sounds nice."

"Thank you."

"I didn't say it would look good on paper."

My hand stopped on the folder.

"I usually prefer to assess projects after I've had a chance to look at them."

"So do I."

He didn't smile, and for a moment I wasn't sure whether he was joking. I decided not to begin by explaining how the publishing industry worked. Instead, I spread the first concept board out in front of him.

The album was meant to have an elegant but restrained design. Large photographs, short passages of text, and a clear rhythm to the pages. I didn't want to create a catalogue of objects or yet another publication presenting handmade craftsmanship as a fashionable alternative to industrial production. What interested me was everything that happened between the initial idea and the finished object. The hands, the tools, the mistakes, the corrections, and the decisions that couldn't be made by following a ready-made set of instructions.

Baltazar examined the boards in silence. He didn't interrupt while I explained the chapter structure, the proposed photography approach, and the scope of the written material. I noticed that he spent longer looking at a photograph of a workshop where unfinished objects lay scattered across a table.

"Is this the kind of photograph you have in mind?" he asked.

"Yes. I want to show the work, not just the result."

"Then why are all the tools in this photograph clean?"

I glanced at the board.

"It's a reference image."

"I see. So the tools were cleaned, arranged, and photographed to look used, but not too used."

"Not everything we need is available in stock photography exactly as we imagine it."

"Then perhaps you should visit a real workshop."

I leaned back in my chair.

"That's exactly why I'm here."

"Just don't expect me to rearrange my work so everything looks good in the frame."

"I don't."

"And I won't pretend that every instrument is made without mistakes."

"I wouldn't expect you to."

For the first time, he looked at me with something approaching genuine interest.

"Good. Because last week I spoke to a man who wanted to make a film about traditional craftsmanship. He was only interested in the beautiful moments. He expected me to repeat the same gesture three times because the first attempt hadn't produced a sufficiently impressive shot."

"We won't stage the work."

"Everyone says that at the beginning."

"And every craftsman assumes a designer wants to organise his entire life for him?"

"Not everyone. Only those who've already dealt with designers."

This time he allowed himself a slight smile. It was a small movement at the corner of his mouth, but it changed his face more than I had expected. He wasn't particularly talkative,

yet he had a way of listening that made you want to be precise. I was beginning to find that irritating.

And, at the same time, rather appealing.

I slid the second board towards him. It showed a proposed double-page spread about the process of making a string instrument.

"I'd like to build one of the main chapters around working with wood. Not a general overview, but a specific example. From choosing the material to the final adjustments."

"What instrument?"

"That depends on what you consider the best example."

"You don't choose an instrument to fit a chapter."

"What do you choose it for?"

"For the person who's going to play it. Their needs. Their hands. The way they hear sound. You can make a beautiful instrument that isn't right for a particular musician."

I wrote the sentence in the margin of my notes. Baltazar noticed my pen moving.

"Already taking notes?"

"It's a good point."

"Don't write it down as a quotation just yet. First, we should make sure I actually said what you think I said."

"And how am I supposed to check that?"

"Come back. Listen. Watch."

For a moment, we looked at each other across the spread of concept boards. There was nothing particularly extraordinary about his suggestion, yet for the first time since the meeting began, I felt we were talking about the same thing. Not about promoting craftsmanship or

producing a beautiful book, but about something that genuinely mattered to him.

"I'd also like to take a few portraits," I said.

"I don't like having my photograph taken."

"You don't have to like it."

"Then why do it?"

"Because I don't want the album to be a collection of anonymous hands. I want to show the people behind the work."

"Not everyone wants to see themselves in print."

"I'm not going to force anyone."

He pulled one of the boards closer. For a moment, he studied the figure standing beside a carpenter's workbench.

"And if I refuse?"

"I'll find another solution."

"Without trying to convince me I'm throwing away the opportunity of a lifetime?"

"Without that. I'm not here to sell you dreams of fame."

"Good. I don't have time for fame."

I laughed before I could stop myself. Baltazar smiled too, this time a little more freely.

Just then, a woman entered the workshop carrying a large bag over her shoulder. She greeted him and placed a small box on the desk.

"I'm leaving this here, as we discussed. Have a look when you get a moment."

"All right. Thank you."

The woman glanced at me with polite curiosity.

"A new project?"

"Possibly," Baltazar replied.

There was neither enthusiasm nor refusal in his voice. The woman said goodbye and left. I noticed that Baltazar waited until the door had closed before returning to our conversation.

"Do you have many clients?" I asked.

"Enough."

"Are you worried that taking part in the project will take up too much of your time?"

"I'm more worried that someone will take up my time and then turn my work into something I won't want to put my name to."

That was the first thing he had said without any kind of protective layer. I understood then that his reluctance wasn't really about being photographed. He wanted to be certain that he wouldn't become a decorative detail in someone else's story.

I closed my folder, but left the concept boards on the table.

"Let me suggest something else. We start with one trial visit. No commitment to publication. You show me the process, and I'll present a proposed double-page spread. If you decide I don't understand what you're doing, we end the conversation."

"And if I decide you don't understand books?"

"Then I'll have to try harder."

He studied me for several seconds. There was no hostility in his expression, but neither was there any easy agreement.

"Do you always negotiate like this?"

"Only when a project matters to me."

"And does this one?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

The question caught me more off guard than it should have. I could have answered that the subject was interesting, the publisher had a reasonable budget, and the album would be a valuable addition to my portfolio. All of that would have been true, but none of it fully explained what had drawn me to the project.

"Because I'm tired of books that pretend things simply come into existence on their own. I want to show the people who invest their time, knowledge, and patience in making them. I want someone who picks up this publication to see more than a beautiful object."

Baltazar nodded, as if considering my answer.

"I'm working tomorrow from eight."

"I can be here at nine."

"Eight thirty. I'll be starting work on an instrument later, and I won't have as much time."

"All right."

"Please come without a photographer."

"I wasn't planning to bring one."

"And without a finished photography script."

"That will be difficult."

"Then please try."

I stood and gathered my materials. As I reached for my coat, I noticed that Baltazar had already returned to his workbench. He didn't walk me to the door, but there was nothing dismissive about it. It simply seemed that he had resumed the task I'd interrupted.

"See you tomorrow," I said.

"See you tomorrow, Ms. Inga."

Outside, the air was colder than it had been that morning. I took out my phone and immediately opened my calendar to rearrange two appointments. Having to change plans shouldn't have surprised me. In my work, I often had to adapt to people who didn't operate according to a publishing house's office schedule.

And yet, as I walked towards my car, I kept returning to his last question.

Why did this project matter to me?

I knew the answer. I simply wasn't prepared to admit that part of my curiosity had begun to extend to the man sitting at the workbench, the one who could undermine a carefully prepared concept with a single sentence.

The next day, I would find out whether I could work with someone who had no intention of making my job easier.

And whether I even wanted him to.

Chapter 2 - What You Cannot See

I arrived at eight twenty-five. I disliked being late, but I disliked even more the idea of arriving too early at a place where I wasn't sure I was welcome. This time, I decided not to test my host's patience. I carried a small notebook, my camera, and a printed sheet outlining the proposed scope of our collaboration. I hadn't brought my laptop or a folder full of inspirational images. Baltazar had made it clear that he didn't need another presentation.

The door was ajar. I knocked and stepped inside after a moment.

"On time," he said without turning away from the workbench.

"Is that a compliment?"

"Just a statement of fact."

"I'll take it."

A pale, slightly golden board lay on the workbench. Baltazar was working on it with a small tool, making movements so calm and repetitive that for a moment I forgot why I had come. There was nothing performative about them. He wasn't making gestures for an observer. Every movement had a specific purpose, and his hands stopped precisely where they needed to in order to check the result.

I didn't want to interrupt him. I took off my coat and hung it on the rack.

"You can come closer," he said after a while. "Just please don't touch the surface."

I stood on the opposite side of the workbench.

"What kind of wood is it?"

"Spruce."

"For the soundboard?"

"Yes."

"It looks different from the photographs I've seen."

"Because photographs usually show finished instruments. What you have here is material that's only beginning to tell its story."

"Do you always talk like that?"

"Like what?"

"As if wood has a mind of its own."

"Sometimes it does. You just have to know when to stop ignoring it."

He put down his tool and moved the board slightly towards me, without allowing me to touch it.

"Look at it against the light."

I leaned forward. In the wood, I noticed thin, irregular lines that I would previously have considered imperfections.

"Is that a problem?"

"No. But you need to know what to do with it. You don't choose material simply because it looks good. You also have to consider how it will behave."

"So the first decision is made before the actual work even begins."

"The first decision comes when you stop assuming everything can be fixed later."

I wrote that down. This time, he didn't object.

I asked if I could take a few photographs. He agreed, on the condition that I wouldn't ask him to repeat any movements. I set up my camera, chose a lens, and started with a wide shot showing the workbench, the tools, and the light coming through the window. I didn't want to photograph only his hands. I preferred to capture the relationship between the craftsman and the space in which he worked.

Baltazar paid no attention to the camera. He returned to what he had been doing, leaving me free to observe him without having to keep the conversation going. I noticed that he put every tool back in the same place, but it didn't seem like some rigid ritual. He simply knew where he would need it next. When he stopped working, it wasn't because something had distracted him. He paused to examine the result.

After several minutes, he moved the board aside.

"So, what do you see?" he asked.

I lowered the camera.

"A man who doesn't like being interrupted."

"You already knew that yesterday."

"A man who doesn't hurry just because someone is waiting for a result."

"Better."

"And someone who takes the material more seriously than most people take the finished product."

"That's not a bad answer."

I sat on a chair against the wall. I took a few more photographs of the shelves, the small tools, and the labels identifying the materials. One of them bore a date from several years earlier. I asked him about it.

"The wood was waiting its turn," he explained. "Not every piece is ready to be used immediately."

"How long can it wait?"

"That depends on what it's going to become and how it's been prepared."

"So patience is part of the profession."

"Patience is part of many professions. Not everyone has the opportunity to make use of it."

I didn't ask what he meant. Instead, I showed him the first set of photographs on my camera screen. He scrolled through them slowly, pausing at the ones that showed his hands. He didn't comment immediately.

"You're not showing the whole workbench."

"Because then we'd lose what's important."

"And what's important?"

"What you're concentrating on at any given moment."

He looked at me over the camera.

"You observe well."

I didn't reply. I accepted the remark with more satisfaction than I probably should have. Compliments weren't unusual in my line of work, but they were usually about the finished result. Here was someone who had noticed the way I approached finding a solution.

We moved to the desk, where I laid out the sheet describing the proposed collaboration. I didn't want to postpone the discussion about the terms until later. I knew that if we were going to create something together, we needed to establish boundaries before we became accustomed to each other's presence.

"I suggest we treat this part of the album as a separate story," I began. "Not a catalogue of instruments, but an account of a single process. From choosing the wood to completing the instrument. With text, photographs, and short technical explanations."

"And the other craftsmen?"

"They'll have separate chapters. Each will have space of their own. I don't want every chapter to follow exactly the same template, though. In your case, the most important thing will be the process of making the instrument."

"I don't want to talk about a specific client."

"You don't have to."

"We won't show any instrument whose owner hasn't given permission."

"Of course."

"And no names."

I wrote down the additional conditions.

"I'll consult you on all the technical material before publication. I don't want to make a mistake that could later be repeated by someone treating the book as a source of information."

"Good. But I don't want to be correcting your writing style, either."

"I'm not expecting you to. You're responsible for the facts, and I'm responsible for how they're presented."

"And what if the way they're presented is dishonest?"

"Then we'll talk about it."

"That's not an answer."

I put down my pen.

"I won't promise you the right to approve the entire book. I'm responsible for the editing and the final shape of the publication. What I can guarantee is that I won't publish false information about your work or use photographs in ways we haven't agreed to."

He studied me for a long moment. I had the impression that he wasn't so much examining the content of my answer as testing whether I could stand by my position when someone disagreed with it.

"So you won't have the final say," I added.

"I don't need the final say. I need to know that what I say first will be heard."

That sentence made me pause. There was no complaint in it, no attempt to gain the upper hand. He said it calmly, as though he were describing a condition without which no collaboration could make sense.

"In that case, we can work together," I replied.

I pushed the sheet towards him. We added a few more points: visit dates, the option to stop photographing at any time, a prohibition on interfering with his private commissions, and rules governing the use of promotional materials. Baltazar didn't want his name appearing in advertisements before he had seen the finished section of the album. I agreed. In return, I needed access to the workshop during agreed hours so that I wouldn't have to build the entire concept around occasional, unpredictable visits.

"The publisher will want a schedule," I said.

"Let them have one."

"I'll need to give them specific dates."