# I'm Not Your Intermission

*She doesn't want his spare time. She wants room in his life*



Laura Bellini

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ROMANS

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# INTRO

The first time I saw Sergiusz Wilk was at 10:17 p.m., when I was standing on a ladder with an upholstery stapler in one hand and a piece of navy-blue velvet in the other, stubbornly refusing to fall the way it was supposed to.

It wasn't an ideal moment to meet someone new. My hair was pinned up with a pencil, there was a streak of graphite on my cheek, and the phone in my trouser pocket had been reminding me for the past ten minutes that I should already be home. The following morning, at eight thirty, I had a presentation of my set design for a new theatre in Warsaw. It was the commission I'd been working towards for the past four months. My first real chance to stop being the woman who rescued other people's sets and start putting my own name on productions.

Instead, I was backstage at a small concert hall in Łódź, where preparations were under way for an intimate opera festival. The curtain was the colour of the night sky, the air smelled of fresh timber and dust, and one of the spotlights stubbornly went out after five minutes of use.

"Please come down from the ladder."

The voice came from behind me. Low, calm, accustomed to giving instructions that nobody questioned.

I didn't turn around.

"Please wait."

"That could be dangerous."

"Opening the festival with a curtain that looks like a badly made bed would be considerably more dangerous."

I heard a brief snort of laughter, almost immediately suppressed. Only then did I look down.

A man stood a few steps away from the ladder. He wore a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, dark trousers, and a jacket draped over his forearm. His dark hair looked as though he'd run his fingers through it repeatedly. There was nothing particularly deliberate about his elegance. He gave the impression of a man who had forgotten that other people paid attention to his appearance.

He looked at me with interest, but without the slightest trace of embarrassment.

"Sergiusz Wilk," he introduced himself.

I knew the name. Over the past week, I'd heard it dozens of times. A conductor, thirty-seven years old, the musical cornerstone of the festival, a man supposedly blessed with extraordinary hearing and rather less extraordinary patience.

"Emma Borek. Set design."

"I gathered."

"From the ladder?"

"From the way you're talking to that curtain as if it could understand you."

"At least it doesn't interrupt."

He smiled. Not broadly, just with one corner of his mouth, as though he wanted to keep the reaction to himself.

"I need the stage for twenty minutes."

I glanced at my watch.

"And I need it for another forty."

"Orchestra rehearsal."

"Set installation."

"The festival opens in three days."

"I know. That's why I'm standing here instead of sleeping."

For a moment, we studied each other in silence. Finally, Sergiusz laid his jacket across a seat in the front row and came closer.

"What exactly is wrong?"

The question surprised me. Most people who walked onto a stage during installation saw only the mess. He was looking at the fabric, the rigging, and the lighting.

"The left side hangs four centimetres too low. When we switch on the side spotlight, the fold will cast a shadow across the soloist's face."

"During her second entrance?"

I turned my head.

"You know the stage layout?"

"I looked at the design yesterday."

"And you remembered the lighting positions?"

"I remembered that you'd planned darkness at precisely the point where the music becomes most delicate."

I didn't answer immediately. I was used to conductors who treated set design as an expensive obstacle between themselves and the orchestra. Sergiusz spoke about my work as though he'd actually studied it.

"Darkness can tell a story too," I said.

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

I felt a reluctant flicker of curiosity. This man wasn't trying to impress me with his knowledge of technical details. He'd

asked a question because he genuinely wanted to know the answer.

I climbed down from the ladder, and he stepped back, leaving me plenty of room. I noticed that small courtesy, just as I noticed that he didn't reach out to help me without asking.

"I can show you the lighting," I offered. "But only for five minutes. Then I have to finish the installation."

"Ten."

"Seven."

"Are you always this uncompromising?"

"Only when someone tries to negotiate my time."

His gaze lingered on my face a fraction longer than the conversation required.

"Seven minutes," he agreed.

I switched on the spotlights from the control panel in the wings. The navy-blue velvet darkened, and a narrow band of amber light appeared against the backdrop. My imagination had always been full of images, but only now, standing beside the man responsible for the music, did I feel how those images might be filled with sound.

Sergiusz walked onto the stage and stopped where the soloist was supposed to stand.

"Here?" he asked.

"Half a step to the left."

He moved.

"Now?"

"Perfect."

He looked towards me. At that distance, his face was partly in shadow, while the bright light picked out the line of his cheekbone.

"That's a very precise word."

"I don't use it often."

"I feel honoured."

I should have gone back to work. Instead, for several seconds, I watched a man I'd known for less than fifteen minutes standing in the middle of a space I'd created, looking as though he belonged there in a way that surprised me.

My phone vibrated.

A message from my friend Julia appeared on the screen.

You remember you have Warsaw tomorrow morning, right? Don't save the entire world at your own expense.

I smiled to myself. Julia knew my worst habits. For years, I'd taken commissions nobody else wanted, corrected designs left behind by people far more famous than I was, and convinced myself that one more effort would finally be enough for someone to notice my work. Tomorrow's presentation was supposed to mark the beginning of something different.

"I have to finish up," I said, switching off the lights.

Sergiusz stepped down from the stage.

"Tomorrow at nine in the evening, I'd like to run through the whole thing with the music."

"I won't be here tomorrow evening."

"It won't take long."

"I didn't say I didn't have time. I said I wouldn't be here."

I saw his lips tighten briefly. He didn't look offended. More like someone who had encountered an unexpected limitation in a familiar musical score.

"I have a free slot between rehearsals," he explained. "That's when we can work without interruptions."

"And I have a meeting in Warsaw, and I don't know what time I'll be back."

"Perhaps you'll manage to make it."

There was no arrogance in his voice. That was precisely what made the suggestion harder to reject. He said it with such natural conviction, as though my schedule were simply a flexible part of his own arrangements.

"I'm not going to promise something I have no control over."

He studied me for a moment. Then he nodded.

"I understand. We'll talk tomorrow."

"Preferably before six. I may be unavailable after that."

"I'll try."

That single word remained between us as he turned to collect his jacket.

Before leaving, he paused by the door.

"Ms Borek?"

"Yes?"

"That darkness really does tell a story. I wouldn't change it."

I hadn't expected those words to give me so much pleasure. I turned my eyes towards the curtain so he wouldn't see the smile that had appeared on my face.

"Good night, Mr Wilk."

"Sergiusz."

"Good night, Sergiusz."

The door closed quietly.

I climbed back onto the ladder and adjusted the final fastening. The left side of the velvet finally hung evenly. I checked the time. It was later than I'd intended, and yet, for a while, I couldn't concentrate on my work.

I kept thinking about how attentive he'd been, about the fact that he'd recognised the meaning in something I'd spent weeks creating. About the way his interest in my design had unexpectedly become entangled with an interest in me.

And then I remembered his suggestion.

I have a free slot between rehearsals.

I knew how much it had cost me to build a life of my own. I didn't want to start rearranging it around someone else's needs again, simply because that someone knew how to speak beautifully about my work.

When I switched off the final spotlight, the only light left in the empty hall came from the small lamp on the conductor's music stand.

Looking at it, I thought of Sergiusz and asked myself a question I didn't yet know how to answer.

Could a man who listened to music so attentively learn to listen to me with the same care?

# Chapter 1 - Time I Won't Give Away

At eight twenty-six, I stood outside the glass doors of a Warsaw architectural studio, wondering whether the coffee stain on my blouse was small enough to pass for a deliberate fashion statement. Four hours of sleep, an early-morning train journey, and a hot drink I'd spilled over myself when the train braked were hardly the ideal beginning to the most important professional meeting of my life.

I adjusted the collar of my jacket in the mirrored glass. My phone vibrated.

A message from the festival coordinator appeared on the screen.

Emma, Sergiusz is asking you to confirm whether you'll be at the rehearsal at nine tonight. Please let me know.

I read it twice. Only the previous evening, I'd explained that I couldn't promise to be back at any particular time. I was thirty-one, ran my own business, and had enough experience to know that other people's urgency could swallow an entire calendar if you allowed it to happen without objection, even once.

I replied that I'd be available by phone after six but wasn't confirming my attendance. Then I silenced my notifications and went inside.

I gave my presentation to four people who studied my visualisations with professional restraint. The project involved the stage of a new theatre, where movable walls would transform the space without requiring the curtain to come down. I'd prepared a scale model, a cost estimate, and a technical solution that would allow two people to move the

elements instead of requiring an entire stage crew. It was that last detail that interested the panel most.

"Have you designed a space of this size before?" asked the artistic director, Katarzyna Rudzka.

"Not independently," I answered. "But I've spent six years developing solutions for larger productions. I understand the limitations technical crews work under, and I know where designers most often make their lives unnecessarily difficult."

"And what's the greatest risk in your concept?"

I pointed to a section of the model.

"This connection. If the contractor uses a cheaper mechanism, the wall will start moving unevenly. That's why I haven't reduced the cost of this particular component. I could have done that to make the proposal look more attractive, but then I'd have been misleading you from the very beginning."

For the first time that morning, Katarzyna smiled.

The meeting lasted almost two hours. When I stepped outside, I still didn't know whether I'd get the contract, but I knew I hadn't undervalued myself to secure it. That was enough to improve my mood.

Julia answered on the second ring.

"Are you alive?"

"Probably. I haven't checked my pulse."

"How did it go?"

"Well. Actually, very well."

"Then why do you sound as though you're about to strangle someone?"

I leaned against the building's wall.

"The festival. The conductor would like me to come back for a rehearsal tonight."

"The one with the curtain?"

I'd managed to tell her about Sergiusz the previous night, although I'd originally intended to limit my account to the completed installation.

"That's the one."

"Handsome?"

"Julia."

"That's not an answer."

"He's interesting."

"Even worse."

I laughed, but the sound died when an unfamiliar number appeared on my screen. A Warsaw landline? No. A mobile number from Łódź.

"I'll call you back," I said.

I answered.

"Emma Borek."

"Sergiusz Wilk. I hope I'm not interrupting."

His voice was as calm as it had been the previous evening. I hadn't expected to recognise it instantly, and yet I did.

"I've just finished my meeting."

"How did it go?"

The question sounded genuine. For a moment, I wondered how he knew the meeting had been important before remembering what I'd told him about Warsaw.

"Promisingly. Thank you."

"Then congratulations on your first success."

"I haven't heard their decision yet."

"Sometimes it's worth celebrating before all the signatures are in place."

In the background, I could hear the distant notes of a piano and someone's voice counting bars.

"I'm guessing you didn't call just to congratulate me."

"I'd like you to look at one change today. We've shortened the transition between scenes. The lighting needs to come in earlier."

"By how much?"

"Eleven seconds."

"Eleven seconds could mean an entirely different arrangement of the scenery."

"I know. That's why I need you."

The simplicity of that sentence caught me off guard. He hadn't said he needed someone from the set design team. He'd said he needed me.

"My train leaves after five," I replied. "I'll be in Łódź before seven if there aren't any delays. Then I have to collect some materials from the workshop."

"We start at nine."

"Sergiusz, I haven't confirmed that rehearsal."

"I'm trying to change that."

"And I'm trying to explain that my day isn't a blank sheet of paper."

There was silence on the other end. It wasn't long, but it was long enough for me to imagine his expression.

"You're right," he said at last. "I should have asked instead of assuming."

That disarmed me more effectively than another argument would have.

"Send me a recording of that section and the updated schedule. I'll see what we can do without my being there."

"I'd really like your perspective in the auditorium."

"And I'd really like to have enough energy to work tomorrow."

"I understand."

That word again. This time, however, he didn't end the conversation.

"May I suggest something else?" he asked.

"I'm listening."

"I'll come to the hall early. If you can make it, we'll look at the change before the rehearsal. If you can't, I'll prepare a recording and you can make the decision in the morning."

I considered his proposal for a moment. It wasn't perfect, but for the first time, it acknowledged the possibility that my time had limits too.

"That could work."

"Good. And Emma?"

"Yes?"

"I didn't mean to diminish the importance of your meeting."

I didn't answer immediately. There was something less formal in his voice, as though he'd set aside the role of the man responsible for managing an entire ensemble.

"Then next time, start by asking," I said more gently.

"I'll try to remember."

The train back to Łódź was twenty-three minutes late.

By the time I reached my workshop, it was already dark. My studio occupied the ground floor of an old tenement building not far from Piotrkowska Street. It had neither an impressive reception area nor a large logo on the door. What it did have were tall windows, a worktable covered in marks left by craft knives, and shelves filled with fabric samples. Every centimetre of the place belonged to me, even if the bank regularly reminded me of its financial interest in the venture.

I collected the prepared pieces of scenery and sat down at my desk for a moment. There was a message from Katarzyna Rudzka.

Ms Borek, thank you for your presentation. We would like to proceed to the second stage of discussions. Would you be able to prepare preliminary technical documentation by next Thursday?

I read the email, then read it again, more slowly.

I hadn't won the contract. Not yet. But my name was on the shortlist.

I dialled Julia.

"Say something sensible before I do something ridiculous."

"What happened?"

"I made it through to the next stage."

Her delighted shriek nearly deafened me.

"I knew it! Emma, this is huge!"

I smiled at the empty workshop. It was only when Julia began asking questions that I realised how badly I'd needed someone to share the news with.

We talked for another fifteen minutes or so. Then I checked the time. Eight forty.

A message from Sergiusz was waiting on my screen.

I'm already here. If you can't make it, don't come all this way just for this. I'll send you the materials.

I read it in surprise. Then I realised that nobody had ever waited for me in an empty concert hall simply so we could work out what to do with eleven seconds.

I replied that I could be there in twenty minutes.

Not because I had to.

Because I wanted to.

I found him beside the conductor's stand. The hall was almost dark, illuminated only by a few technical lights. Sergiusz was wearing a black turtleneck, its soft fabric accentuating his broad shoulders. His jacket lay on a chair. A score covered in coloured markings was spread out in front of him.

He looked up when I entered.

"I thought you weren't coming."

"So did I."

He didn't smile immediately. He watched me for a moment, as though checking whether my presence really meant that I was willing to work with him.

"Thank you for making the time."

"I have forty minutes."

"Have you set a timer?"

"Almost."

I noticed two paper cups beside the music stand.

"I bought tea," he said. "I wasn't sure whether you drank coffee this late."

"I don't. Unless I want to spend the night until four in the morning thinking about every mistake I've ever made."

"Then I made the right choice."

He handed me a cup. It smelled of ginger and lemon. It wasn't an extraordinary gesture, and yet I felt a quiet pleasure that he'd thought about something not directly connected to the rehearsal.

I spread out the documentation.

"Show me the change."

Sergiusz played the recording. For several minutes, I listened to the music while following the lighting sequence on the plan. At the third transition, I stopped the playback.

"We can't shorten the entire movement of the scenery," I said. "The operators won't have enough time. But we can start it earlier, while the soloist is still in shadow."

"Then we'll hear the mechanism."

"Not if we change the order. We move the right panel first, then the left. The second will conceal the first."

Sergiusz studied the sketch.

"That works."

"We don't know that yet."

"I can see the principle."

"And I can see three things that might go wrong."

"Then let's test all three."

He didn't try to persuade me through authority. He didn't say that the music mattered more than the mechanics of the stage. Instead, he pulled up a chair, sat beside me, and began to listen.

We worked together for more than half an hour. I showed him the structural limitations, and he explained which musical moments genuinely required silence. At first, we spoke quickly, sometimes interrupting each other. Then our ideas began to complement one another. He found a rhythm for the panel's movement that I hadn't previously considered, and I changed the angle of one spotlight to strengthen his idea without adding to the cost.

When we finished, the clock read nine forty-eight.

"We've gone over time," he observed.

"By eight minutes."

"Was it worth it?"

I looked at the revised design. Then at him.

"Yes."

He gave me that restrained smile of his.

"You have an extraordinary way of thinking about space, Emma."

"And you treat silence as though it were an instrument."

"Because it is."

For a moment, we looked at each other without speaking. A small table, two cups of tea, and something I couldn't yet name separated us. There was nothing intrusive about his

closeness. Still, when he leaned over the drawing, I caught the scent of cedarwood and clean fabric.

I was the first to stand.

"I have to go."

Sergiusz got up too.

"I'll walk you out."

"You don't have to."

"I know."

He said it so simply that I couldn't think of a reason to refuse.

We walked along the empty corridor. At the exit, he paused and glanced at my phone, which had just lit up with another message.

"Important?"

"Very."

I didn't turn the screen away. I told him myself about the second stage of the Warsaw discussions.

"Congratulations," he replied immediately. "It looks as though you're going to have a busy week."

"I hope so."

"I'll have to learn to schedule our meetings in advance."

The word our surprised me. He'd said it without hesitation.

"That might be difficult for you," I replied.

"Why?"

"I get the impression you're used to the world adjusting itself to your baton."

He laughed quietly.

"And you're not planning to?"

"No."

He studied me for a long moment.

"Good," he said at last. "Then I'll have to learn something new."

A fine rain was falling outside. I opened my umbrella before he had a chance to offer any assistance.

"Good night, Sergiusz."

"Good night, Emma."

I started towards my car. I didn't look back immediately, although I wanted to. Only when I reached the pedestrian crossing did I glance over my shoulder.

He was still standing beneath the entrance.

And this time, he wasn't waiting for me to confirm another rehearsal.

# Chapter 2 - Room for Two Voices

The following morning, I was woken by the sound of an incoming email rather than my alarm clock. It was seven forty. I lay in bed convinced I'd closed my eyes only five minutes earlier, although almost seven hours had passed. Beyond the window, the November light filtered through the curtains so timidly that it seemed uncertain whether beginning the day was worthwhile.

The message came from Warsaw. Katarzyna Rudzka had sent detailed requirements for the second stage of the project. Seven pages of documentation, three variations of the cost estimate, a safety analysis, and a deadline that couldn't be moved.

I sat up in bed and began to read.

Halfway through the second page, I understood that the coming days would demand my complete concentration. This wasn't an ordinary commission. If I secured the contract, I'd be able to hire a second person permanently for the workshop. Perhaps I could finally stop turning down larger projects simply because I didn't have enough hands to do the work.

Julia called at nine.

"I hope you're sleeping."

"Then you shouldn't be calling."

"How was last night?"

I opened my laptop.

"We fixed the scene transition. Saved eleven seconds without increasing the costs."

"Fascinating. And the conductor?"

"He was there."

"Emma."

I sighed.

"He's intelligent. He listens. He can admit when someone else is right. And he has this incredibly irritating habit of looking at you as though he wants to remember every word."

"So you like him."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to."

Julia knew me well enough to recognise the moments when I tried to turn emotions into technical analysis. I'd been doing it for years. I found it easier to talk about feelings when I could present them as problems to be solved.

"I have a lot of work," I said.

"Handsome men don't have to be a second full-time job."

"You don't know Sergiusz."

"Do you?"

That question stayed with me after the call ended.

I arrived at the festival hall in the afternoon. A technical rehearsal was under way onstage, and the corridors were filled with musicians' voices, the rustling of instrument cases, and the unmistakable smell of coffee from a vending machine. The organisers moved quickly, each with a phone in hand, as though the success of the entire event depended on how fast they walked.

The production coordinator, Marta Lis, was waiting for me near the entrance.