Laura Bellini



No Instructions for *Coming Back*

To Stay Together, They Must Stop Planning for Each Other

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ROMANS

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INTRO

The first thing I did when I entered the old warehouse was lay a strip of blue painter's tape on the floor. The second was move it seventeen centimetres because the light was falling differently than I'd anticipated.

It was eight in the morning. November rain hung beyond the windows of the warehouse in Łódź, and I had exactly forty-eight hours to convince six craftspeople that creating a shared workshop wasn't the worst idea of their professional lives.

On my tablet, it looked magnificent. Six workstations, an open workshop area, a small gallery near the entrance, and a communal table where people could talk, argue about projects, or simply drink coffee. I'd even chosen the colour of the walls. A warm white with a hint of grey, the kind that wouldn't rob the old brickwork of its character.

In reality, the warehouse smelled of damp wood, dust, and something metallic I couldn't identify. One of the tall windowpanes was cracked, the radiator beneath the north wall didn't work, and an electrical cable hung from the ceiling, ending in a terminal block.

Even so, I felt that familiar excitement.

I'd always loved places other people had written off. Empty industrial halls, forgotten shopfronts, premises left behind by businesses whose signs had disappeared long ago. As an exhibition designer, I'd learned to see a future where most people saw nothing but renovation costs.

This time, that future was supposed to belong to me, too.

After years of taking commissions for other people's galleries and institutions, I wanted to create a place I would return to not because another contract had been signed, but because I'd chosen the address myself.

I spread the floor plan across a makeshift table and weighed down its corners with four pieces of brick. I was marking the position of the ceramics display when I heard a man's voice behind me.

"If you put a shelving unit there, you'll be taking it down along with the plaster in six months."

I didn't turn around immediately.

"Good morning to you, too."

"Good morning. The wall's damp."

I looked up from the plan. A man stood in the doorway wearing a dark work jacket, a wooden toolbox in one hand and a paper cup of coffee in the other. He had short, slightly tousled hair, several days' worth of stubble, and the face of someone who had no intention of apologising for offering an unsolicited opinion.

"I know," I replied. "That's why the shelving unit will stand away from the wall."

"How far?"

"Twelve centimetres."

He studied me more closely.

"We'll need at least twenty until we establish where the moisture is coming from."

"Are you a building inspector?"

"A carpenter."

"Then I'm delighted we've already had a preliminary assessment from the carpentry department."

The corner of his mouth twitched. Not enough to call it a smile, but enough to make me suspect he understood my tone perfectly.

He set his toolbox on the floor.

"Jan Brzozowski. I'm supposed to set up the carpentry workstation here. And apparently help build the fittings for the others."

"Kamila Żur. I'm designing the entire space."

"I noticed."

He glanced at the tape stretched between the columns, then at my tablet and the carefully arranged material samples.

"I can also see that everything already has its place."

"That's rather the point of a design."

"Sometimes it's worth asking the place what it will allow before making all the decisions."

I disliked people who confused experience with the right to make decisions for others. I disliked them even more when they could undermine several hours of my work with a single sentence.

And yet, instead of ignoring him, I asked:

"So what do you think this warehouse wants?"

Jan put down his coffee and walked towards the enormous window. He crouched beside an old wooden beam, touched its surface, then glanced at the light filtering through the dirty glass.

"Not to be treated like an empty box."

It was an infuriatingly good answer.

I recognised that kind of observation. He wasn't trying to impress me with his expertise or win an argument. He spoke about wood the way I thought about space: as something with its own history, limitations, and possibilities.

For a moment, I watched him run his hand along the beam, his fingers pausing at an old joint. His hands were broad, marked with the small traces of everyday work, yet the gesture was surprisingly gentle.

"The beam stays," I said.

"Good."

"I've designed lighting around it."

"Even better."

"And the shelving unit will stand twenty centimetres from the wall if we confirm the source of the damp."

This time, he actually smiled.

"So you can change your mind."

"Don't get used to it."

He laughed quietly, and I felt an unexpected flicker of satisfaction. Not because I'd won his approval. Rather, because for the first time in weeks, someone had treated my design as the beginning of a conversation instead of a finished product to be accepted without question.

My phone vibrated in my pocket.

I looked at the screen and regretted it immediately.

A message from Magda Rosińska, an exhibition producer I'd worked with several years earlier.

Kamila, Copenhagen is back on the table. This time we really do have the budget. I need your answer before Friday.

Three months, with the possibility of an extension. I'll call you tonight.

I read the message twice.

Copenhagen.

It wasn't the first time someone had offered me work abroad. It wasn't the first time I'd imagined myself in an unfamiliar city, working with a large international team on an exhibition I could add to my portfolio without the slightest hesitation.

Except this time I was standing inside a warehouse that was supposed to become my first truly independent venture.

I slipped my phone away before Jan could see the screen.

"Something wrong?" he asked.

"No. Work."

"That usually means something is wrong after all."

"Or that someone has more than one project."

"That I understand."

He didn't press me.

That small act of restraint surprised me more than his earlier directness. I was accustomed to people who treated curiosity as an entitlement to information, and interest as justification for asking one question after another.

Jan simply went back to examining the beam.

For the next fifteen minutes or so, we checked measurements. He measured, and I marked corrections on the plans. We disagreed about the positioning of two workstations, the width of the passageway, and where the heavier machinery should go. He never tried to talk over me.

Every time, he offered a specific reason, and when my argument proved stronger, he accepted it without wounded pride.

That was more attractive than I wanted to admit.

Near the western wall, we needed to move a large wooden panel. I grabbed one end before he could offer to help.

"It's heavy," he warned.

"I noticed."

"I wasn't suggesting you couldn't manage it."

"And I wasn't suggesting I needed rescuing."

He looked at me over the edge of the panel.

"Good. Then we can simply carry it together."

When we leaned the wood against the wall, we found ourselves standing closer than the task required. I caught the scent of his jacket, freshly brewed coffee, and wood. He didn't step away abruptly, nor did he take advantage of our proximity to make some suggestive gesture.

He looked at me calmly, as though waiting for me to decide whether I wanted that brief moment to end.

I was the first to move away.

"I still need to check the back rooms," I said.

"It's colder back there than it is here."

"That's not particularly encouraging."

"I can show you where the roof leaks."

"Are you always this good at ruining people's moods?"

"Only when I care about them building something properly."

He headed towards the back of the warehouse, leaving me free to follow.

For a moment, I watched his back, his confident stride, and the way he stepped around the uneven patches in the floor as though he'd known them for years.

Then I looked at my phone.

The message from Copenhagen was still waiting for an answer.

I could stay in Łódź and build something lasting. I could leave before anything had a chance to hold me back. Both possibilities belonged to me, and that was precisely why neither was simple.

"Kamila?" Jan called from deeper inside the warehouse. "Are you coming?"

It was the first time he'd used my name without the formal distance we'd maintained until then. It sounded natural, as though he didn't need permission to change his tone, while at the same time making no assumption that it gave him any other rights.

"Coming."

I put my phone away and followed him.

But I stopped for a moment in the passageway. Jan stood a few steps ahead, beneath the only working light. When he turned his head, our eyes met in the half-darkness.

It occurred to me then that danger didn't always come in the form of grand promises or people determined to change our lives.

Sometimes, all it took was someone who simply made room beside them.

And there I stood, holding the plans for an entire workshop, unable to answer one question: could I ever make room for him in my own life without giving up any part of myself?

Chapter 1 - Conditions That Weren't in the Plan

The following morning, I arrived at the warehouse carrying three printed versions of the design, a travel mug of coffee, and a firm resolution not to let Jan Brzozowski get under my skin.

At nine thirty, I was due to present the concept to everyone who would eventually be using the workshop. The previous day, I'd adjusted the arrangement of the workstations to incorporate several of his suggestions, but I had no intention of handing him control of the project simply because he could speak convincingly about wood.

At first glance, the warehouse looked exactly as it had the day before. It was only when I approached the table that I noticed someone had arranged six different chairs around it. One was made of pale wood, two were metal, and the others probably dated back to when the building had been used to store textiles. A sheet of paper bearing a future occupant's name lay on each seat.

Beside my place stood a mug with the words The Designer Is Always Right printed on it.

"Is this a provocation?" I asked when Jan emerged from behind a shelving unit.

"More an attempt to improve the atmosphere before the meeting."

He was wearing a dark sweater with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He looked less severe than he had the previous day, although the way he glanced at my printouts suggested another argument was on the horizon.

"How did you know where I'd sit?"

"I chose the spot with the best view of everyone. I assumed you'd choose it too."

"And what if I wanted to sit somewhere else?"

"Then you'd move the name card."

I picked up the mug and discovered it was empty.

"At least you haven't chosen my coffee for me."

"I don't know your preferences yet."

The word yet lingered between us with surprising clarity. I put the mug down and pretended to be interested in my documents. Jan made no attempt to exploit my momentary embarrassment.

Zofia arrived first, a ceramicist in her fifties who had run a small studio in Bałuty for years. She was followed by Natalia, who worked with artistic textiles, Michał the bookbinder, Lena the jewellery maker, and Paweł, who restored antique lamps. Jan was the sixth craftsperson. They all had different needs and an equally strong conviction that their particular work deserved the best possible conditions.

I presented the design on a screen positioned near the entrance. I talked about the shared gallery, workshops open to local residents, and a space intended to combine the making of objects with the presentation of finished pieces. At first, the discussion followed my plan. Natalia was delighted by the light near the south-facing window, Michał asked about lockable cabinets, and Lena wanted to know whether she could receive clients without taking them through the workshop area.

I had anticipated every one of those questions.

What I hadn't anticipated was what Jan said when we moved on to the schedule.

"I can't agree to the opening date until we've established who's responsible for preparing the installations and carrying out the technical inspections of the workstations."

The screen displayed the planned opening date: 23 January.

"The schedule includes contingency time," I replied.

"Ten days."

"Twelve, if the fittings supplier delivers on time."

"And if they don't?"

"Then we'll make adjustments."

Jan placed both hands on the table.

"Which is exactly why we need to establish some ground rules before we start building anything."

Zofia put down her pen.

"Jan's right. I need to give notice on my current lease well in advance. I can't move my kiln into a place only to discover afterwards that the electrical installation isn't ready."

I felt the ground beginning to shift beneath my carefully prepared presentation.

"I'm not suggesting anyone should move into unfinished premises," I explained. "The date is an organisational target, not an order."

"Then let's put down what needs to happen for that target to be realistic," Jan said.

He hadn't raised his voice. He hadn't tried to make a fool of me. Even so, I wanted to remind him that I was the one who had spent the previous four months negotiating with the

building's owner, developing the concept, and searching for funding to adapt the property.

"We can discuss that after the presentation," I suggested.

"We can. But everyone should know what they're agreeing to."

Michał nodded. Natalia gave me an apologetic smile. I knew that if I stubbornly returned to my slides now, I would lose something more important than control of the meeting.

I switched off the projector.

"All right. Let's talk about the conditions."

For the next hour, we gathered requirements I'd previously treated as implementation details. We needed separate electrical inspections, a clear allocation of responsibility for ventilation, rules governing access to the warehouse, and written confirmation of which equipment could be operated before the renovation was complete. Zosia couldn't give up her existing studio too early. Paweł needed time to move his heavy equipment. Lena could begin working at her jeweller's bench before the shared gallery was ready.

I listened, took notes, and gradually discovered that my project wasn't falling apart after all. It was changing from one person's vision into a space six other people could genuinely use.

It was an uncomfortable discovery.

When the others went to inspect the back rooms, Jan stayed at the table. He ran a finger down the printed schedule, pausing at various dates.

"You could have told me beforehand that you intended to challenge the opening date in front of everyone," I said.

He looked up.

"I wasn't intending to challenge it. I wanted to know what it was based on."

"You know perfectly well what effect it had."

"I know we now have six people who won't be making decisions based on things left unsaid."

"And I've got an extra week's work ahead of me."

He put down the sheet of paper.

"I can take some of that work off your hands."

"That's not the point."

"Then what is?"

I pushed back my chair and walked over to the window. A tram passed outside, and the wet asphalt reflected the lights of passing cars. For a moment, I wondered how much I could tell a man I'd met only the day before.

"The point is that this project is mine," I finally answered. "Not in the sense that I own the building. It's my idea, my responsibility, and my reputation. For months, I've been hearing that it won't work, that the place is too difficult, that I should do something safer. Now that it's finally beginning to take shape, I don't want someone else taking the reins."

Jan was silent for a moment.

"I don't want to take the reins."

"Then what do you want?"

"For you to let people tell you what they need before you promise them a finished solution."

It wasn't only the substance of his answer that struck me. For the first time, he'd addressed me informally, as though

our conversation had entered territory where formalities no longer made sense.

"Easy for you to say," I replied. "You're not responsible for the whole thing."

"But I am responsible for my part. If I plan the workshop badly, I won't be able to fulfil my orders. I have clients, people who work with me on larger commissions, and obligations I can't postpone with a single phone call."

"I understand."

"I'm not sure you do."

I shot him a sharp look.

"Careful."

He held my gaze.

"Kamila, I'm not questioning your work. That's precisely why I want this project to survive its first difficult week, not just look impressive on opening day."

The reply I'd been preparing suddenly seemed childish.

Instead of saying it, I reached for a pencil.

"What solution do you suggest?"

Jan came over to the table and laid a sheet of paper beside my plan. He didn't move my documents without asking. He pointed out three stages: preparing the space, getting the workstations operational, and only then opening the gallery. Each stage would have its own date and completion requirements.

"You want to postpone the opening by a month," I observed.

"I want to avoid announcing a date and then pretending everything's ready when it isn't."

"I have commitments to the owner."

"What kind?"

I explained the terms of the agreement. The rent was reduced for the first three months, but it would increase from February. Every delay would mean covering the costs without any income from the gallery or workshops.

Jan didn't comment immediately. He picked up a calculator and began comparing the expenses.

"If we get some of the workstations running earlier, people will be able to work even if the gallery isn't ready yet," he said after a few minutes.

"And the opening?"

"We could do it in two stages. First for the craftspeople's clients, then a public event."

I leaned over the paper. His idea was practical, but it lacked something fundamental to the purpose of my project.

"I don't want the gallery to become an afterthought we might eventually find time for."

"Then let's agree on a date that can't be changed without a joint decision."

"And a budget that can't be diverted to the workshops."

He nodded.

"Agreed."

For the next half hour, we revised the schedule. With each new agreement, the tension between us changed. We were still arguing, but we'd stopped treating every difference of opinion as an attempt to gain the upper hand.

Jan proved patient with technical matters and merciless when it came to vague statements. Whenever I said

something "should work out," he asked precisely what I meant. Whenever he claimed something would be "safer this way," I demanded a specific explanation.

At one point, our hands met over the same pencil. We both withdrew almost simultaneously.

"Be my guest," he said, pushing the pencil towards me.

"What an elegant concession."

"Don't get used to it."

I smiled before I could stop myself.

When the others returned, we presented our joint proposal. Everyone received their tasks and an opportunity to suggest amendments by Friday. Zofia visibly relaxed, and Natalia offered to take care of temporary curtains to separate the workstations.

After the meeting, I stayed behind to organise the documents. Jan closed his toolbox but made no move to leave.

"Are you still angry with me?" he asked.

"I'm still considering it."

"Do you have a deadline for that decision?"

"Unlike you, I don't need a schedule for everything."

He leaned against the table.

"That's good. I was beginning to worry."

I studied him more closely. He was thirty-nine, according to the project participants' records, and there was something about his face I couldn't quite define. He didn't look like a man life had spared from disappointment. Yet there was nothing cynical about his smile.

"Why did you decide to join this workshop project in the first place?" I asked.

"Because I want somewhere I won't have to leave every two years."

"You've moved your workshop before?"

"Three times in seven years. Rising rents, changing landlords, a building being sold. Every time, I've had to dismantle everything I'd built."

He glanced at the beam beneath the window.

"I'd finally like to make something with more than a single season in mind."

His answer was calm, but it didn't sound like an insignificant detail.

"And I'd like to create a place that doesn't lock me into one way of living," I said.

He looked at me with interest.

"That might be the hardest part of our project."

"Why?"

"Because I always start with the foundations, and you start with the open doors."

I laughed softly.

"Maybe one doesn't rule out the other."

"Maybe."

For a while, we stood facing each other across a table covered in crossed-out notes. There was nothing urgent left to settle, and yet neither of us reached for a coat.

"Kamila?"

"Yes?"

"Next time I want to change the course of a meeting, I'll tell you beforehand."

I accepted the promise with a nod.

"And I'll try not to treat every suggestion you make as an attack on my competence."

"An ambitious plan."

"Don't ruin the moment."

He smiled, but this time he didn't answer with a joke. He looked at me so intently that I had to lower my eyes to the plans.

When he finally left, I noticed he'd written his phone number and a short message on the back of one of the printouts.

If you change anything in the schedule, call me. If you feel like arguing, you can call me then, too.

I read it twice.

Then I saved his number, even though I already had his business contact details in the project records.

This time, I wanted a reason to call him of my own free will.

Chapter 2 - The Distance Between Two Chairs

On Friday at seven in the evening, Jan sent me a photograph of a wooden table.

It wasn't particularly spectacular. It had a rectangular top made of pale ash, four solid legs, and a small patch of discolouration near one edge. In the photograph, it stood in an almost empty room, with only a window and a section of dark flooring visible nearby.

A message appeared beneath the photograph.

I've found a solution for the workshop's communal area. The table is available for inspection, not a blind purchase. I can show you how it's constructed tomorrow.

I replied that if he intended to persuade me to accept yet another heavy piece of furniture, he'd better prepare some very good arguments.

I'll make coffee. I've already got the arguments.

I smiled at my phone, then put it down on my desk and returned to revising the cost estimate. For three days, we'd been working separately on the arrangements we'd made at the meeting. Jan had sent over a list of technical requirements, while I'd prepared a new workstation layout and an option for opening the space in stages. We hadn't discussed anything personal, although several times I'd caught myself looking for his name among my notifications.

The following morning, I drove to the address he'd given me in Stare Polesie. His workshop was located in the courtyard of an old tenement building, beyond a heavy gate

that opened onto a long passageway. A small sign bearing Jan's surname and opening hours hung on the wall.

The door was ajar.

Inside, the air smelled of wood, oil, and freshly ground coffee. On the left stood machines whose names I didn't know; on the right were rows of neatly stacked boards. Against the back wall stood a small table with two ceramic mugs on it.

Jan was working at a vice. When he saw me, he put down his tool and removed his safety glasses.

"Right on time," he observed.

"Surprised?"

"Pleased, actually."

He was wearing a grey T-shirt and dark work trousers. Without his jacket, he looked different, more relaxed. I noticed a small scar on his forearm and the way he instinctively adjusted his sleeve before handing me a mug.

"No sugar," he said. "If I've guessed wrong, there's some on the shelf."

"You guessed right."

"First success of the day."

The coffee was strong and hot. I looked around the workshop, trying not to reveal quite how interested I was in its owner. Almost everything in the room seemed to say something about Jan. The tools had their designated places, but unfinished projects lay across the workbench. In one drawer, I spotted furniture sketches; in another, samples of different kinds of wood.