Laura Bellini



Stay Until the First Snow

Sharing a life doesn't have to mean sharing an address

Stay Until the First Snow

Sharing a life doesn't have to mean sharing an address

Laura Bellini

ROMANS

ISBN: 9788384900840

ALL-IN Rafał Płonkowski



CONTENTS

INTRO 4
Chapter 1 - Conditions I Had No Intention of Changing.....12
Chapter 2 - The Space Between Us 25
Chapter 3 - When Rain Changes the Plans 39
Chapter 4 - Things You Don't Say by Accident 51
Chapter 5 - The Right to Say No..... 63
Chapter 6 - The First Sign of Closeness 73
Chapter 7 - What the Kiss Left Unsaid 85
Chapter 8 - Between the Notes..... 96
Chapter 9 - Everything We Stand to Lose 108
Chapter 10 - When You Stay 120
Chapter 11 - The Doors I Choose to Open 131
Chapter 12 - When Boundaries Begin to Hurt.....142
Chapter 13 - The Price of Other People's Expectations 152
Chapter 14 - Between What's Mine and What's Ours 162
Chapter 15 - Not Everything Can Be Called a Compromise 174
Chapter 16 - The Distance Between Two Homes.....186
Chapter 17 - What I Won't Take With Me 195
Chapter 18 - Two Homes, One Decision 206
Chapter 19 - A Place for Two 217
Chapter 20 - Stay as Long as You Like 228

INTRO

On the first Friday in October, I decided to close the guesthouse for the winter and spend three months doing nothing that required anyone else's permission.

I made the decision at six in the morning, standing barefoot on the cold kitchen floorboards, a mug of coffee in my hand and a bill for roof repairs spread across the table. Outside, the Beskid Niski mountains were shrouded in mist. Wet leaves clung to the porch steps, and the wind stirred the branches of an old apple tree that had been producing fruit out of sheer habit for years.

The booking calendar glowed on my laptop screen. My last guests were due to leave on October twenty-fifth. After that, I intended to close the rooms, turn down the heating in the guest wing, and get on with my own life. No more other people's breakfasts, broken hairdryers, or questions about whether they could bring a dog that supposedly never barked.

I was forty-two, divorced, and experienced enough to know that peace and quiet weren't gifts life handed you. You had to arrange them for yourself.

So I made a plan.

In November, I would renovate two rooms. In December, I would spend a week in Kraków, visit my sister, and finally see an exhibition I'd been meaning to attend for three years. Above all, I intended to rediscover the pleasure of living in a house that had served everyone but me for the past decade.

I closed my laptop when I heard a car.

I wasn't expecting anyone. The bread delivery wouldn't arrive until seven, and my weekend guests were still asleep upstairs. I looked out of the window.

A dark green car towing a small trailer had stopped outside the neighboring house. A man climbed out, wearing a charcoal sweater with a jacket draped casually over his shoulders. His dark hair was noticeably gray at the temples, and he moved with the easy composure of someone who had no need to prove he belonged wherever he stood.

He opened the trunk, lifted out a long wooden case, and carefully set it beneath the porch roof.

Then he looked toward my guesthouse.

I didn't turn away from the window quickly enough.

He raised a hand in greeting.

I waved back, annoyed by my own curiosity.

The neighboring house belonged to Mrs. Halina, who had gone to Wrocław to stay with her daughter. I knew she intended to rent it out for a few weeks, but I hadn't asked for details. After my divorce, I'd adopted a simple rule: as long as other people's business stayed on their side of my fence, I didn't need to know their stories.

Ten minutes later, someone knocked.

I opened the door, expecting a request for directions or the owner's telephone number.

The man from next door stood on the porch with a paper bag in one hand and his phone in the other. Up close, he looked about forty-five. His face belonged to someone more accustomed to concentrating than smiling, though a hint of mischievous warmth lingered at the corners of his mouth.

"Good morning. Rafał Szubert. I'm your new neighbor. Temporarily."

"Marta Kryń," I replied. "If you're here about the heating, the circuit breakers are in the basement, and I have Mrs. Halina's number."

He smiled.

"Do you always begin new acquaintances by solving problems?"

"It usually saves time."

"Then I'll try not to cause any. I only wanted to ask whether you'd mind if I worked with my windows open over the next few weeks. I work on musical instruments. Sometimes I use tools."

Only then did I notice the faint traces of wood dust on his fingers.

"What kind of instruments?"

"Mostly violins and violas. I'm a luthier."

I glanced at the neighboring house, then back at him.

"I didn't realize Mrs. Halina rented out a workshop with the house."

"She doesn't. I brought my own. A smaller version."

"That sounds worrying."

"I promise it'll be quieter than renovating."

"How do you know I'm planning renovations?"

His gaze drifted toward the paint samples and rolled-up measuring tape beside the door.

"An educated guess."

Despite myself, I laughed softly.

"Go ahead and work. As long as you don't start testing trumpets at six in the morning, we'll get along."

"I don't repair trumpets."

"Then we already have something in common. Neither do I."

This time his smile widened. There was something unexpectedly personal about it, as though he'd genuinely appreciated the joke rather than merely responded out of politeness.

"I brought some pastries," he said, lifting the bag. "I bought too many at a bakery in Gorlice. Perhaps they'd go well with your coffee."

"You don't have to bribe your neighbors."

"I know. But I'd rather begin with something pleasant."

I should have refused. Not because a pastry posed any danger, but because I disliked the little obligations that sometimes arrived disguised as innocent kindness.

Instead, I opened the door wider.

"As it happens, I've made too much coffee."

Rafał hesitated.

"I wouldn't want to intrude."

"You aren't intruding yet. Take advantage while that remains true."

He stepped into the kitchen, removed his jacket, and paused beside the window overlooking the valley. He didn't comment on the decor or the size of the house. Instead, he noticed an old sideboard whose cupboard door hadn't closed properly in years.

"Beautiful wood," he said.

"Inconvenient wood. I have to be careful not to catch my hip on it every day."

"The hinge could be adjusted."

"I know."

He turned toward me.

"That wasn't an offer to fix it."

"Good. I don't accept free services from strangers."

"What about friends?"

"Depends how long they stay friends."

Silence fell, uncomfortably honest for a conversation over our first coffee.

Rafał made no attempt to fill it. He sat only after I indicated a chair. I noticed that, just as I noticed him placing his phone facedown and giving me his undivided attention.

"Have you come here to rest?" I asked, setting a cup before him.

"To work a little differently. I have commissions I can finish away from my workshop. I needed a change of scenery, too."

"For how long?"

"Until the first snow, more or less."

I looked outside. Autumn had only just begun coloring the hillsides, but the mornings were growing colder.

"The first snow can arrive earlier than expected around here."

"Then I'll have to be flexible."

I said nothing. Flexible was a word my ex-husband used most often when he expected me to rearrange my plans around his.

Rafał seemed to notice the change in my expression, because he let the subject drop. He reached for a pastry, and I found myself studying his hands. They were large, marked by small scratches, yet they moved with remarkable delicacy.

"Do you enjoy your work?" I asked.

"More than some of the things I've lost because of it."

He looked at me as though his own answer had surprised him.

"Sorry. That sounded rather serious for our first pastry."

"I'm under no obligation to keep conversations light," I replied. "That's one advantage of running my own home."

"Your own home," he repeated, with the slightest emphasis. "It sounds important to you."

"It is."

He didn't ask why. And that, strangely enough, made me want to tell him.

Before I could decide whether I really wanted to, my phone vibrated on the counter.

It was Irena, chairwoman of the local association. I answered, giving Rafał an apologetic gesture.

"Marta, save us," she said instead of hello. "The venue owner has pulled out of the autumn festival. We have nowhere to hold the concerts or workshops. There are only three weeks left."

I closed my eyes.

"Irena, I told you I'm closing for the season."

"I know. But your guesthouse has the fireplace room, a covered porch, and the biggest veranda around. It's supposed to be a small festival, nothing enormous. Music, local artists, a few gatherings. We don't want to cancel."

"I don't have the staff or the budget to organize it."

"I know. What we mainly need is a place. We'll try to arrange the rest. Can you come to a meeting today?"

I glanced at my winter renovation plan, then at Rafał, who was politely pretending he couldn't hear the conversation.

"I'm not promising anything," I said. "I need to see what can be done without adding another job to my workload."

When I ended the call, Rafał indicated a photograph of the old fireplace room standing on the sideboard.

"A music festival?"

"A small one. At least, that's what the organizers claim."

"Do they need instruments?"

I gave him a suspicious look.

"Are you genuinely incapable of eating breakfast in peace?"

"Perfectly capable. But whenever I hear about music, I get curious."

For a moment, we held each other's gaze across the table. He was handsome, but what unsettled me more was his refusal to persuade me. He left room for me to decide. After years with a man who treated every refusal as the beginning of negotiations, such simple restraint was suspiciously attractive.

"Leave me your number," I finally said. "If I decide to help, someone who knows about music might come in handy."

Rafał took out his phone but didn't pass it across the table.

"Or I could simply come over whenever you invite me."

I should have considered that the most sensible suggestion of the morning.

Instead, I felt a strange disappointment at the thought that he might not come.

Outside, the wind shook wet leaves from the apple tree. Rafał finished his coffee, stood, and reached for his jacket, and I suddenly realized that my carefully arranged plans had acquired their first unknown.

I didn't yet know whether it was the festival, my neighbor, or the part of me that, for the first time in ages, wanted someone to stay a little longer.

When he reached the doorway, I asked:

"What if the first snow comes in two weeks?"

He turned. For a moment, he studied me without smiling, more intently than before.

"That will depend on whether I find a reason to stay."

I didn't stop him.

But I remained on the porch long after he'd crossed the wet garden to the neighboring house. Only when his door closed did I realize I was still holding his empty coffee cup.

And that, for the first time in months, I wasn't sure what I wanted more: the peace I'd worked so hard to reclaim, or the man who might disturb it.

Chapter 1 - Conditions I Had No Intention of Changing

At five thirty on Friday afternoon, I walked into the village community hall convinced that I would give the festival organizers exactly twenty minutes of my time. That would be long enough to hear about their problem, explain my conditions, and return to the guesthouse before the last of my guests started asking about dinner.

Irena greeted me as warmly as if my very presence meant I had already agreed.

"I knew you'd come!"

"I came to listen."

"Of course. You'll listen first."

I didn't particularly like the emphasis she placed on first.

Six people sat around the long table. I recognized Mr. Adam, a retired music teacher, two women who owned local craft workshops, and a young man responsible for promoting the event. The remaining chairs were occupied by people I knew only by sight.

At the far end of the table sat Rafał Szubert.

He was wearing a dark shirt with the sleeves rolled up. A notebook lay in front of him, with a small wooden box beside it. When he saw me, he put down his pen and smiled in a way that immediately reminded me of our conversation that morning.

"Mrs. Kryń," he said. "So you've decided to be flexible after all."

"More curious about how much people can promise before they know what it'll cost."

Irena indicated an empty chair opposite him.

"Which is exactly why we need you."

I sat down, determined not to react to the amusement in Rafał's eyes. A man who knew how to listen but also apparently enjoyed provoking people was a dangerous combination. Particularly for a woman who had spent the past several years choosing predictability whenever possible.

Irena spread a printed program across the table. The festival was called Jesienne Głosy, or Autumn Voices, and was scheduled to take place over two days on the third weekend of October. The program included small acoustic concerts, violin-making workshops, meetings with local craftspeople, and an evening devoted to traditional songs from the Beskid Niski region.

It looked beautiful.

Far too beautiful for an event without a venue or enough money.

"Can't you use this hall?" I asked.

"The electrical system is being renovated," Irena replied. "The owner of the other venue withdrew his permission, and the municipal offices don't have any space available."

"So now you want to move everything to my guesthouse."

"Not everything. Just the main events."

I looked at the schedule.

"In other words, almost everything."

Rafał lowered his head, but not quickly enough to conceal his smile.

"We've had about sixty expressions of interest," the young man responsible for publicity said. He had introduced himself as Kuba. "Although not everyone will attend every part of the program."

"And how many people can your room hold at once?" Rafał asked me.

"Forty if everyone is seated. Thirty if we want a reasonable amount of space. And before anyone suggests putting extra chairs in the corridor, I should warn you that I have no intention of arranging an emergency evacuation through my kitchen."

Rafał nodded.

"Then we shouldn't sell more than thirty tickets for any individual concert."

Irena looked at him in surprise.

"I thought you'd want a bigger audience."

"I want an audience that can actually hear the music. Not people standing in the doorway trying to see over someone else's shoulder."

I studied him more closely.

He didn't speak like someone trying to impress the group. His manner was calm and practical, and he never raised his voice. Yet there was something uncompromising about his tone. He knew what he needed and had no intention of pretending that every suggestion was equally good.

I recognized that quality.

I sometimes possessed rather too much of it myself.

"Before we start deciding how many chairs we need," I said, "I'd like to know who's paying for the additional heating, cleaning, and any damage. I have bookings until October twenty-fifth. The guesthouse will still be operating normally."

Irena began leafing through her documents.

"We could allocate part of the budget to organizational expenses."

"How much?"

Silence fell.

"Exactly," I said.

Rafał pushed his notebook toward the center of the table.

"I suggest dividing the expenses into three categories. Venue rental, event staffing, and equipment. Each category needs its own budget and someone responsible for it."

I looked at him.

"Do you do accounting as well?"

"No. But twenty years of running a workshop have taught me that enthusiasm doesn't pay the bills."

"Finally, someone who speaks my language."

"And I thought we'd only known each other since this morning."

Several people laughed. I felt a flash of irritation, though I couldn't honestly say whether it was caused by his remark or by my immediate desire to answer him with something equally provocative.

For the next half hour, we examined the possibilities. The fireplace room could accommodate the concerts, the veranda could hold a small exhibition, and the covered porch

could provide space for a stall serving tea and local baked goods. My kitchen, however, would remain part of the guesthouse's facilities, not become the festival's catering department. Nor was I prepared to offer rooms to the performers without ordinary reservations.

When Irena suggested moving some of the furniture, I objected.

"We are not carrying an antique table out into the rain."

"We could protect it with plastic sheeting."

"Irena, this isn't about plastic sheeting. It's about the assumption that you can rearrange someone else's home to suit your needs."

My words came out more sharply than I intended.

For a moment, nobody spoke.

Rafał broke the silence.

"There's another solution. We could arrange the chairs in a semicircle and use the room's natural acoustics. With the right repertoire, we wouldn't need a stage."

"You haven't seen the room yet," I pointed out.

"Which is precisely why I'm not claiming it will work. I'd like to take a look."

Irena immediately brightened.

"Excellent! Marta, how about tomorrow morning?"

"Tomorrow I have bedding to change, shopping to do, and four guests arriving."

"Sunday, then?"

"On Sunday, I intend to have a Sunday."

Rafał looked at me with unmistakable appreciation.

"That sounds like a very good argument."

"I've been using it for years."

"Successfully?"

"Unfortunately, not always."

This time he laughed openly.

The discussion returned to organizational matters, but I noticed something that made it increasingly difficult to remain indifferent. Rafał wasn't trying to take control of me or my property. At the same time, he didn't automatically agree with every objection I raised. When he thought I was rejecting an idea out of habit rather than for a specific reason, he asked directly.

"Is there really no way we could hold a rehearsal on Saturday afternoon?" he asked at one point.

"It might disturb the guests."

"What if we asked them first?"

"I don't want them to feel obliged to agree."

"Then let's ask whether they'd like to attend. If they don't, we'll find another time."

I didn't answer immediately.

Not because I lacked an argument.

Simply because his suggestion was reasonable.

"All right," I eventually said. "But no rehearsals without my confirmation."

"Agreed."

"And no instruments left overnight in the common areas."

"Agreed to that as well."

"Aren't you being a little too accommodating?"

"I'm waiting for a condition I can't accept."

He got one ten minutes later.

Irena proposed that Rafał take responsibility for the entire musical program. He agreed on one condition: participants would be able to use the instruments provided for the workshops free of charge, and everyone conducting the sessions had to be paid.

"Even if that means fewer concerts," he added.

"We could ask the performers to play for charity," Kuba suggested.

Rafał shook his head.

"We can ask whether anyone would like to perform without payment. We can't simply assume they should."

"But it's for the local community."

"Which is precisely why I don't want us to begin by assuming someone's work is worth less just because they're passionate about it."

I watched Irena press her lips together. The budget was tight, and Rafał had just made her job considerably harder.

"We might not be able to make it happen," she said.

"Then we'll organize a smaller festival," he replied. "But we'll do it fairly."

He looked at me. He wasn't seeking approval, though perhaps he wanted to know whether I understood his position.

I understood it all too well.

For years, my former husband had believed that because I enjoyed running the guesthouse, I had no right to complain about working sixteen-hour days. Passion was a convenient

argument whenever he needed to explain why my exhaustion mattered less than his relaxation.

"I agree with Rafał," I said.

Irena sighed.

"You two are going to be a very difficult team."

"We aren't a team yet," I reminded her.

Rafał leaned slightly toward me.

"Do you think we stand a chance of becoming one?"

The question sounded perfectly ordinary.

Only his expression made me think, for a second, about something other than the festival.

"That depends on the conditions," I answered.

"Then we'll negotiate."

The meeting ended shortly after seven. Irena agreed to prepare a preliminary budget, Kuba would investigate online booking options, and Rafał would draw up a list of performers and technical requirements.

I still hadn't promised to make the guesthouse available.

As I gathered my papers, Rafał approached with his notebook in his hand.

"May I ask you something?"

"As long as it isn't about additional chairs."

"Why did you actually come to this meeting?"

I looked at him in surprise.

"Irena asked me."

"That explains why she called you. It doesn't explain why you came."

I didn't like how quickly he had spotted the distinction.

"I care about this place," I said after a moment. "And the people who live here. When I opened the guesthouse, they helped me more than I expected. I don't want to refuse just because I happen to be dreaming of a quiet autumn."

"But you don't want to give up your time again without anyone asking, either."

My hand stopped on the strap of my bag.

"You don't know me well enough to draw conclusions like that."

"You're right. I'm sorry."

He said it immediately, without trying to explain that I'd misunderstood his intentions.

We walked outside together. The air smelled of wet earth and smoke from wood-burning stoves. Low mist hung over the rooftops, and the yellow streetlights spread across the shining asphalt.

"I didn't mean to pry," Rafał said.

"I know."

"Sometimes I ask questions I should think about first."

"I suppose that's an occupational hazard of working with wood."

"Sorry?"

"At least wood doesn't answer back."

He laughed quietly.

"I assure you, it does. You just have to know how to listen."

There was a softness in his voice I hadn't heard before. I imagined him in his workshop, bent over an instrument, concentrating on something small and delicate. The thought was unexpectedly pleasant.

"Why did you choose the Beskid Niski region?" I asked.

Rafał slipped his hands into his jacket pockets.

"I used to come here often. Then I went several years without finding the time. Eventually, I decided that if I kept putting certain things off, one day I'd discover there was nothing left to wait for."

"That sounds like the beginning of a serious story."

"Perhaps I'll tell you someday."

I didn't press him.

We walked a few steps in silence. My car was parked by the fence, his a little farther away.

"Marta," he said suddenly.

It was the first time he'd addressed me by my first name.

I stopped.

"Yes?"

"Don't agree to host the festival out of obligation. If your guesthouse is going to be the venue, you have to genuinely want it."

I looked at him for a moment.

"And if I refuse?"

"We'll find another solution."

"Even if it's worse?"

"Even then."

Something about his answer made me want to believe him.

"In that case, you may come and see the room tomorrow after four," I said. "Just look at it."

"No moving furniture?"

"No touching furniture."

"Even if I notice a crooked hinge?"

"Especially then."

He smiled.

"See you tomorrow, Marta."

As I got into my car, I realized I hadn't objected to his use of my name. More than that, I liked the way he'd said it considerably more than I was willing to admit.

When I returned to the guesthouse, my guests were finishing dinner. I helped Mrs. Elżbieta find an extra blanket, checked the temperature in two rooms, and closed the kitchen. Everything followed the rhythm I'd known for years.

And yet, when I opened my calendar late that evening, instead of crossing the festival off my list of possible commitments, I wrote an entry for Saturday:

"4:00 p.m. - Rafał. Fireplace room."

I stared at those few words longer than organizing any event could possibly require.

Later, my sister called.

"Has something happened?" she asked after we'd been talking for a few minutes.

"Why?"

"Because you've spent the last five minutes telling me about a man who repairs violins, and you haven't mentioned the bills once."

"He's just a neighbor."

"Marta, I didn't ask who he was. I asked what happened."

I sat on the edge of my bed and looked out of the window. One window in the neighboring house was illuminated. Rafał's silhouette moved past it.

"I think I've met someone interesting," I admitted.

My sister fell silent.

"And?"

"And I have absolutely no intention of doing anything about it."

"Of course."

I didn't like her tone.

"I'm forty-two. I have a guesthouse and more than enough on my plate. I don't need another man who wants to tell me how to live my life."

"Does he want to?"

I looked toward the neighboring house again.

"That's just it. He doesn't."

That was the strangest part.

Rafał hadn't tried to enter my life without an invitation. He hadn't offered to rescue me, repair me, or teach me how to rest. He had his own opinions, his own work, and principles he had no intention of abandoning merely to win someone's approval.

I should have considered that an excellent foundation for a comfortable neighborly acquaintance.

Instead, I began wondering what his voice sounded like when he wasn't discussing the organization of concerts.