Laura Bellini



The Empty Seat Beside Me

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Then they met

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ROMANS

ISBN: 9788384900703

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INTRO

For the first time in eleven years, I bought two coffee cups, and it wasn't until I reached the checkout that I realized what I'd done.

They stood side by side on the counter, white with a thin green line around the rim. The shop assistant wrapped them separately in paper, and I didn't ask her to put one back. I told myself the second would be useful for guests. After all, people had guests. Even women who had spent the last decade learning not to leave an empty place at the table.

Now both cups were in a cardboard box on the back seat of my car, and I was standing outside the enormous, misted-glass doors of a greenhouse near Wrocław, wondering whether fifty-five was an appropriate age to do something entirely for myself again.

"Mrs. Wójcik?"

I turned.

The man emerging from behind the side wing of the building was carrying a wooden crate filled with small potted plants. He wore a dark sweater with the sleeves rolled up and trousers marked with soil at the knees. His short gray hair was slightly disheveled. He didn't look like a man who worried much about his reflection in the glass.

"Teresa Wójcik," I confirmed. "I've come to look at the space."

"Wojciech Kania. Come inside before we let all the heat out."

He didn't offer his hand. Both were occupied, but he smiled in a way that caught me pleasantly off guard. There

was no professional politeness, no excessive warmth. He seemed genuinely pleased I'd arrived, although he couldn't yet know whether we'd get along.

I followed him inside.

The smell struck me immediately: damp earth, leaves, a faint bitterness of citrus. Above us stretched a roof of metal ribs and old glass panes. The afternoon light filtered through unevenly, leaving patches on the stone floor that looked like washes of watercolor.

For years, I'd illustrated plants on commission for publishers, botanical gardens, and private collectors. I could spend hours studying a single leaf until I understood how the light moved across its surface. Yet here I almost forgot about the sketchbook tucked inside my bag.

"It's beautiful," I said.

"Tell me that again when you've seen the heating bills."

I smiled.

"Is this how you always welcome potential collaborators?"

"Only the ones who still have a chance to escape."

He set the crate on a worktable and brushed off his hands. Only then did he offer me one. His handshake was warm and assured, without the awkward caution with which some men treated women over fifty, as though we were somehow both fragile and invisible.

"I'll show you the section we're planning to open for the exhibition."

We walked between rows of plants. He spoke briefly and precisely, pointing out species and the areas where additional lighting was switched on after dark. He didn't correct me when I identified particular varieties. Nor did he

try to impress me with Latin names. When I asked about the nighttime flowering of one cactus, he stopped and regarded me with unmistakable interest.

"You really want to show the moment the flowers open?"

"Not just the flowers. Everything you can't see during the day. The changes in light, scent, and shape. I want people to feel that a plant isn't merely decoration."

"And the illustrations?"

I took out my portfolio. Inside were sketches, paper samples, and the exhibition design I'd been working on for four months. My own project. No publisher asking for brighter colors, and no daughter insisting that I ought to take on fewer commissions and get more rest.

Wojciech examined the drawings slowly. He held a finger a few centimeters above one of them without touching the paper.

"Is this the same flower?" he asked, indicating two studies.

"Six hours apart."

"It looks as though you've captured it in two different moods."

I looked up.

Most people told me my drawings were accurate. Some praised the colors. He had noticed something I'd never tried to explain to anyone.

"That's exactly what I wanted," I replied, more quietly.

For a moment, we looked at each other across the open portfolio. I noticed the fine lines around his eyes and a small scar near his chin. He wasn't handsome in the sort of way

that caught your attention from across a room. But he had the face of a man you would want to listen to over a long dinner.

I cleared my throat and closed the portfolio.

"I've already prepared a schedule. If we can agree on the terms, I could begin work next week."

"A schedule," he repeated, faintly amused. "Sounds serious."

"Because I take this exhibition seriously."

"So do I. Which is why we'll need to discuss a few things."

I didn't like his tone. I knew it all too well. It was how conversations began when someone was about to explain, ever so politely, why my plans needed revising.

Before I could answer, my phone rang.

My daughter's name appeared on the screen.

Magda.

I declined the call.

"Sorry."

"No problem."

My phone vibrated again almost immediately. This time it was a message.

Mom, I've spoken to the woman at the foundation. You really should think about whether you want to take on so much responsibility. We could find someone younger to handle the coordination.

I slipped the phone into my handbag, although Wojciech hadn't even tried to glance at the screen.

I was fifty-five. I ran my own studio, paid my bills, drove a car, and was perfectly capable of buying an airline ticket without assistance. Yet my thirty-year-old daughter increasingly spoke to me as though I needed permission for every new undertaking.

"Everything all right?" Wojciech asked.

"Of course."

He studied me for a moment.

"Good. Because you look like someone who's just developed a powerful urge to argue with somebody."

A laugh escaped me before I could stop it.

"You may be right."

"Then I suggest tea. I'd rather not become an innocent casualty."

He led me into a small room adjoining the greenhouse. It contained a wooden table, several chairs, and an old electric kettle. Pots of herbs stood on the windowsill, and a folded blanket lay beneath the window.

Wojciech pulled out a chair for me but didn't wait for me to sit down. He simply went back to making tea.

I chose the place by the window.

Opposite it stood another chair, slightly pushed back from the table. Empty. Ordinary. Hardly worth noticing.

And yet, for a moment, that was all I looked at.

After Andrzej died, I'd stopped inviting people over without a particular occasion. Eventually, I'd even stopped noticing when my apartment became too quiet. Loneliness hadn't arrived as some great tragedy. It had settled into the smallest things: taking one cup from the cupboard, putting

half a loaf of bread in the freezer, receiving messages that didn't need an immediate reply.

I wasn't unhappy. That, I suspected, was what bothered my daughter most. She believed a woman living alone ought to have her life organized for her before she began regretting that no one was there.

Wojciech set a mug in front of me.

"No sugar. Did I guess correctly?"

"How did you know?"

"I didn't. The sugar's right here."

He pointed to a little jar and sat opposite me.

I laughed again. Twice in barely fifteen minutes. I couldn't remember the last time that had happened in the company of a man I'd only just met.

"Mr. Kania..."

"Wojciech. If we're going to work together in the evenings, all that formality will get tiresome."

"Teresa," I replied, before I could decide it was too familiar.

He accepted this calmly, as though we'd simply agreed on the time of our next meeting. Then he slid a small sheet of paper across the table, showing a rough plan of the greenhouse.

"There's one thing we need to settle from the beginning. I won't agree to closing off part of the collection just to create a more attractive setting."

I looked at him over my mug.

"And I have no intention of creating an exhibition where my illustrations are an afterthought to a stroll among the flowerpots."

He was silent for a second. Then he rested his forearms on the table.

"So we each have our own idea."

"And each of us thinks ours is better."

"I didn't say that."

"But you thought it?"

A slow smile spread across his face.

"Teresa, I'm fifty-eight. I've learned not to answer questions that might get me into trouble."

I was tempted to tell him I had just as much experience avoiding trouble. Instead, I studied his hands resting on the table. They were broad, with small scratches, quite unlike the hands of the men I usually encountered through work.

Then his phone lit up beside the kettle.

I saw only the beginning of the message.

Dad, I've already arranged things with the organizers...

Wojciech turned the phone face down. The movement was quick, almost imperceptible. He immediately returned his attention to my sketches, but for a moment he seemed older than he had a minute before.

I didn't ask. My own phone was full of other people's well-meaning advice.

Outside the window, evening was slowly falling. The light above the table brought out the silver in his hair, while small lamps began coming on in the greenhouse behind him. I

thought of my apartment, where silence, an unfinished illustration, and two new coffee cups were waiting for me.

I'd come here to reclaim something I'd spent years surrendering, piece by piece: the right to decide how to live my own life.

I hadn't planned on anyone wanting to sit beside me.

Least of all a man who, within twenty minutes of meeting me, had managed to make me laugh, irritate me, and make me forget to check the time.

"Will you stay a little longer?" Wojciech asked. "The first flower should open in about half an hour."

I glanced at my phone. I'd intended to be home before dark. A few messages were waiting, along with a bill that wasn't particularly urgent and a dinner I could eat whenever I pleased.

"I'll stay," I said.

Wojciech got up to prepare the lights, and I pushed my chair back from the table.

For the first time in a very long while, I had no desire to return to my safe, perfectly ordered life.

But could I make room in it for someone who had no intention of following my plan?

Chapter 1 - Light After Dark

The flower opened at 9:17 p.m.

Wojciech checked his watch as the first white petals began to lift away from the green calyx. I stood beside him in the half-light of the greenhouse, my sketchbook pressed against my chest and a pencil in my hand that I had been forgetting to use for several minutes. Fans hummed around us, water dripped somewhere beneath the glass roof, and the delicate fragrance of the opening flower gradually filled the humid air.

"I thought it would take longer," I whispered.

"It's been waiting all day. Now it has no intention of taking its time."

I glanced at Wojciech. He was standing close enough for me to make out the silver strands in his hair and the faint traces of soil on the sleeve of his sweater. He didn't try to fill the silence with conversation. He simply let me watch, and I found that unexpectedly pleasant. For years, almost everyone I'd worked with had seemed to believe they needed to explain something, offer advice, or pass judgment. He was content to stand beside me.

I turned back to the flower and began to sketch. With a few quick strokes, I captured the curve of the petals, the subtle movement of their edges, and a shadow that would have been invisible in daylight.

"See?" I asked, showing him the drawing. "This is exactly what I want people to experience. Not the finished flower, but the moment when you still don't know what it's going to become."

Wojciech leaned over the page.

"Except that, at this speed, no one will have time to see everything you've planned."

His words brought me firmly back to reality.

"Which is precisely why I need a carefully designed route."

"And I need the plants to survive that route."

I raised my head.

"I take it we're returning to our disagreement."

"We haven't even had a proper chance to begin it."

He smiled, but the humor had disappeared from his voice.

I suggested moving into the workroom. I had no intention of conducting negotiations between rows of potted plants, particularly when I'd prepared several practical solutions. Once we were seated at the table, I took out my portfolio, unfolded the exhibition plan, and pushed the layout toward him.

"Three sections," I began. "The first shows the plants before dusk. The second focuses on the process of the flowers opening. The third is the most important: nighttime observation, live botanical illustration, and short sessions with visitors."

Wojciech studied the plan without speaking.

"I need space for six large illustrated panels along the central walkway. They can't be arranged randomly because they're meant to tell one continuous story."

"You can't put any of them here."

He indicated an area I'd marked in blue.

"Why not?"

"Because it's the only route we can use to move plants that need to be relocated at night. There's also an air circulation system in this section. If you install display panels there, you'll change the way the air moves."

"The panels aren't walls."

"Not to a person. But sometimes a frame in the wrong place is enough to affect airflow."

I pressed my finger against the drawing.

I'd spent four months refining the composition. I knew exactly how visitors were supposed to move between the illustrations, where their eyes should pause, and the precise point at which they should encounter a living flower instead of its image. Every part of the route had been chosen for a reason. I wasn't accustomed to having someone challenge it before seeing what it could achieve.

"We could measure the airflow," I suggested.

"We could. But first I'd like to understand why that particular walkway matters so much to you."

The question irritated me more than it should have.

"Because it's the best one."

"That's a designer's answer. I'm asking for the reason behind it."

I rested my hands on the table.

"When people enter a botanical garden, they usually look at whatever is biggest or most colorful. I wanted to make them slow down. A narrow passage, illustrations at eye level, then an open space and the actual plants. It's about changing the way people look at things."

Wojciech was quiet for a moment.

"Now I understand."

"And?"

"And I still won't let you block that walkway."

I let out a heavy sigh.

"You're extraordinarily stubborn."

"And you're accustomed to people agreeing with you whenever you've made a convincing argument."

I didn't answer immediately.

His observation had caught me off guard. It wasn't entirely fair, but there was enough truth in it to make me uncomfortable.

"I'm often right," I said at last.

"I believe you. But I'm responsible for these plants even after the visitors have gone home."

He rose and walked to the window overlooking the greenhouse. I could see his reflection in the glass as he studied the illuminated paths.

"My father started building this garden almost fifty years ago," he said. "I developed most of the collection myself. Some of these plants are older than our children. I can't treat them like decorations to be replaced once an event is over."

There was something in his voice beyond professional responsibility.

I closed my portfolio, though I didn't put it back in my bag.

"I don't think of them as decorations either. If I did, I wouldn't have spent so many months preparing this exhibition."

He turned toward me.

"Then at least we have something in common."

"We just disagree about how to get there."

"Routes can be changed."

I gave him a reluctant smile.

"Says the man who just refused to move a few plants."

"I didn't refuse to move the plants. I refused to expose them to unsuitable conditions. There's a considerable difference."

I knew he was right, although I had no intention of admitting it immediately.

Instead, I pulled the plan toward me and began sketching an alternative route. Wojciech moved his chair closer, pointing out places where additional lighting could be installed without interfering with the existing system.

For the next forty minutes, we argued over details.

They weren't pointless arguments, however. Every suggestion required an answer, and every objection forced me to reconsider something. At one point, I realized I'd stopped defending my original design merely because it belonged to me.

That was unusual enough to be worth noticing.

"What if we used the side gallery?" I asked. "We could create a passage through the illustrations there, then lead visitors into the main greenhouse."

Wojciech leaned over the plan.

"The gallery is cooler."

"That wouldn't matter to the artwork."

"It might matter to the visitors if they're standing there for an hour."

"They won't be. Fifteen minutes at most."

He looked at me.

"You've already worked out the visiting times?"

"I've worked out everything."

"Including answers to questions I haven't asked yet?"

"Especially those."

He laughed, deeply and without restraint.

The sound gave me an unexpected sense of satisfaction, greater even than the pleasure of winning an argument.

By half past ten, we had agreed on a preliminary layout.

It wasn't exactly the one I'd planned, but I was beginning to recognize its advantages. Wojciech suggested inspecting the side gallery again the following day, when we could assess it in daylight. I agreed on the condition that he send me the installation documentation beforehand.

"You have a particular fondness for paperwork," he observed.

"Documents help prevent misunderstandings."

"Not all of them."

He closed his notebook and leaned back in his chair.

"You know, Teresa, sometimes I think people argue most fiercely not about what they want, but about what they're afraid of losing."

I looked at him more closely.

"That sounds like experience talking."

"More like age."

"Age doesn't automatically make anyone wise."

"I know. I've met several excellent examples of that."

I laughed, but his earlier remark stayed with me.

I didn't want to lose control of the exhibition because it was the first undertaking in years that I'd been able to develop without having to consult anyone else.

After Andrzej's death, I'd spent a long time allowing other people to organize my daily life. At first, it was because I hadn't possessed the strength to object. Later, everyone had simply grown accustomed to believing they knew what was best for me.

Only recently had I begun reclaiming the space I'd surrendered almost without noticing.

My phone vibrated.

Magda had left a voice message.

I didn't listen to it.

"I should get going," I said.

Wojciech glanced at his watch.

"I'll walk you out."

"I know the way."

"I don't doubt it. But I have to lock the side entrance."

I heard the amusement in his voice and gave him a look intended to be severe. Judging by his expression, it failed completely.

Outside, the air was cool and damp.

A thin mist hung over the fields, and the illuminated greenhouse looked like a glowing ship in the darkness. I stopped beside my car and searched my handbag for the keys.

"Thank you for tonight," I said.

"For the argument or the flower?"

"Both."

Wojciech slipped his hands into his pockets.

"I hope you don't regret coming."

The question surprised me. It didn't fit the confidence he'd shown throughout the evening.

"I don't. Although for a while I wondered whether I'd come to meet a man who was going to make my life difficult."

"And what did you decide?"

I glanced toward the glowing glass walls.

"That you probably will make my life difficult. But perhaps the exhibition will be better for it."

He accepted the answer with a smile.

"A reasonable compromise."

I unlocked the car.

Inside, I noticed the cardboard box containing the two coffee cups. One had shifted during the drive, so I straightened the box before sitting down.

"Good night, Teresa."

"Good night, Wojciech."

I drove slowly along the gravel road.

For a little while, I could still see his figure in the rearview mirror. He didn't move away immediately. He stood near the entrance until I turned beyond the row of tall trees.

It wasn't until I was several kilometers down the road that I noticed I was smiling.

At home, a message from Magda was waiting.

Mom, please call me tomorrow. I don't want you exhausting yourself. It's about time you started thinking about yourself.

I sat at the kitchen table, unwrapped the new cups, and placed them side by side. For a long moment, I studied their delicate green rims.

Magda meant well. I'd never doubted that.

But it was becoming increasingly difficult to explain that thinking about myself didn't necessarily mean resting, giving things up, or spending quiet afternoons in front of the television.

Sometimes it meant taking a risk.

I opened my notebook and examined the revised exhibition plan.

In the margin, beside the sketch of the side gallery, Wojciech had written in his uneven handwriting:

Check the light at dusk. Teresa is right.

I read the words twice.

Not because he'd admitted I was right, but because he'd done so without the slightest need to defend his pride.

I put one cup on the shelf and left the other on the table.

We were meeting again the following day.

And although my thoughts ought to have been focused on the exhibition, I found myself wondering whether Wojciech had also noticed how quickly the evening had passed.

Chapter 2 - Tea for Two

The following morning, I woke earlier than usual, although I hadn't set an alarm.

For several minutes, I lay still, listening to the sounds of the city outside my window. Cars passed along the wet street, someone closed a door on the staircase, and from the apartment upstairs came the scraping of a chair being moved across the floor.

An ordinary working day lay ahead of me.

I ought to have been finishing illustrations for a catalog of medicinal plants, answering two emails, and preparing the revised exhibition layout. Instead, I kept thinking about the greenhouse and a man who could tell me no without feeling the need to prove he was superior.

I got up, made coffee, and sat down at my desk.

My studio occupied the largest room in my apartment. Shelves along the walls held paper, paints, and framed illustrations. I had a wide drawing table beside the window and a small sofa nearby, which hardly anyone had sat on for years.

I loved this space.

It belonged to me. Everything had its place, and no one questioned why I sometimes left my paintbrushes standing in a glass that had once held tea.

At nine o'clock, Magda called.

"Mom, finally," she said before I could even say hello. "I was worried about you yesterday."

"I was at a meeting."

"About that exhibition?"

"Yes."

"And what did you decide?"

"That we're going to work on it."

There was a brief silence at the other end.

"You know you don't have to do this, don't you? You've got enough commissions already. You could take a little time to rest."

I leaned back in my chair.

"Magda, I want to do it."

"I know, but sometimes you take on too much. I spoke to the woman at the foundation that's helping organize the event. She said they could find someone to assist you."

"You spoke to her about me?"

"I only asked whether everything really had to be your responsibility."

I closed my eyes.

I didn't want to start the day with an argument, particularly because I understood my daughter's intentions. After her father's death, Magda had learned very quickly to look after me, as though our roles had reversed without either of us agreeing to it.

I knew where her concern came from.

That didn't make it any easier to live with.

"I appreciate that you're worried," I said calmly. "But please don't make arrangements on my behalf."

"I haven't arranged anything."

"Not yet. I'd like to keep it that way."

I heard her sigh.

"Fine, Mom. I won't interfere."

I knew she was offended.

I wasn't particularly happy with the conversation either. For a moment, I held the phone in my hand, wondering whether to call back and soften what I'd said.

In the end, I put it down.

I hadn't said anything unfair.

A few minutes later, a message arrived from Wojciech.

Good morning. I'll send the installation documentation before noon. The gallery is available from four. If you still want to prove you're right, you're very welcome to come.

I smiled.

I don't need to prove anything, I replied. We only need to check the facts.

His answer came almost immediately.

That sounds threatening. I'll prepare a tape measure and a little humility.

I looked at the screen for a moment, then returned to my work.

This time I managed to concentrate.

I arrived at the greenhouse a few minutes before four.

The sun was already sinking low over the fields, and the glass roof reflected the pale, cool sky. Wojciech stood near the side entrance, speaking on the phone.

When he saw me, he raised a hand in greeting.

"No, I don't need any changes right now," he told the caller. "We'll talk about it over the weekend. Yes, I heard you. Goodbye."

He put the phone away.

"Problems?" I asked.

"Family. Which can sometimes be more difficult than faulty ventilation."

I didn't press him.

I remembered the message he'd received the previous evening. Instead, I showed him a printed copy of my revised layout.

"I've prepared three possible arrangements for the panels."

"Three?"

"I thought I'd better be ready for your objections."

"I'm beginning to suspect that you really enjoy winning."

"I enjoy being well prepared."

We entered the side gallery.

It was narrower than the main greenhouse, with high windows overlooking the garden. Along one wall were old metal brackets that might be suitable for mounting lightweight panels.

Wojciech brought a tape measure and a small work lamp.

For almost an hour, we checked distances, marked mounting points, and compared possible lighting arrangements. We didn't agree about everything, but the conversation had a different rhythm from the previous evening.