Laura Bellini

Try Me on for Tomorrow

Not everything fits. Not everything should be left behind



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ROMANS

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INTRO

The needle caught exactly where it shouldn't have.

For several seconds, I stared at the thin, silvery line running through the navy-blue silk. The fabric had cost more than my first month's rent on the atelier, belonged to a costume older than my mother, and was supposed to go on public display in less than three weeks. One careless tug would have been enough to turn several hours of work into a disaster.

I set down the needle and pulled the lamp closer.

"Easy, Wera," I told myself. "This isn't quite a reason to change careers."

The atelier was filled with the kind of silence I loved most. Outside the window, rain blurred the lights of a Łódź street. My coffee was growing cold on the windowsill, and the old clock above the door measured out the minutes with indecent precision. I was twenty-nine, owned my own workshop, had a loan to pay off on an industrial sewing machine, and was working toward a plan that required another six months of saving.

More than anything, I wanted to stop living from one commission to the next.

I didn't dream of a large house or seeing my name printed on the labels of luxury dresses. I wanted to establish a small costume-restoration studio, a place where old garments could regain their meaning instead of ending up in dusty storage rooms. I needed regular commissions, enough space for a second worktable, and the courage to hire someone to help me.

The exhibition at the independent cinema was supposed to be my first serious step.

Which was precisely why I couldn't afford to ruin the dress.

I ran a finger over the damaged weave and breathed a sigh of relief. The thread hadn't snapped. With patience, I could ease it back into place.

My phone vibrated beside the box of pins.

A message appeared from Iga, my best friend and occasional guardian of common sense.

Remember, you're supposed to inspect the exhibition room today. And please don't try moving the display cases by yourself. Last time, you ended up with your arm in a sling.

I smiled, although the memory wasn't particularly funny.

I replied that I had everything under control.

That wasn't entirely true.

For the past week, I'd been trying to contact the owner of the cinema I was supposed to be working with. So far, I'd dealt mainly with his programming manager, Marta, a woman of inexhaustible energy whose voice suggested that even the end of the world could be rescheduled for a more convenient time.

The owner, meanwhile, remained a mystery.

Oskar Zieliński.

Thirty-three years old. A cinema inherited from his father. A reputation for being able to rescue an ancient projector but not always answer his phone. That was everything I'd gathered from conversations and a brief planning meeting he hadn't attended.

I didn't need to know anything else.

At least, that was what I kept telling myself.

I lifted the dress from the mannequin, secured it inside a garment bag, and checked the contents of my tote. Measuring tape, notebook, fabric samples, costume documentation, exhibition layout. Everything had its place.

I liked things that could be put in order.

People seldom proved quite so easy to arrange.

The cinema stood on a side street near Piotrkowska, inside a building that remembered a time when going to the movies meant dressing for the occasion. An old neon sign reading "Kadr" hung above the entrance, and beyond the glass doors lay a foyer with dark tiled floors. The air smelled of wood, dust, and freshly ground coffee.

I arrived a few minutes after six.

There was nobody at the ticket counter.

"Hello?" I called.

From somewhere down the corridor came the muffled scrape of furniture being moved.

Then a man's voice.

"If you're here for tonight's screening, we start in an hour. If you're here to complain, please give me a moment to prepare my defense."

I smiled despite myself.

"And if I'm here about the exhibition?"

A man appeared in the doorway leading to the auditorium, wearing a dark shirt with the sleeves rolled up. He had light brown hair, several days' worth of stubble, and a face that betrayed no sense of urgency, although he'd just been

carrying a heavy wooden frame. He set it against the wall, straightened, and regarded me with interest.

"Then the situation is considerably more serious."

"Wera Kłos."

"Oskar Zieliński."

I stepped closer and offered my hand. His handshake was firm without being needlessly forceful. He noticed the fine pinprick marks on my fingers before raising his eyes to mine.

"The costume woman."

"And you're the man who doesn't answer his phone."

He was silent for a moment. Then he laughed softly.

"Fair criticism."

"Three messages and two emails."

"Four messages. The last one arrived this morning."

"So you do read them."

"I read everything. Answering is where I struggle."

I couldn't yet decide whether he was disarming or irritating me. I didn't particularly like that both possibilities seemed equally likely.

I took out my notebook.

"We need to agree on the placement of the display cases, the lighting, and the installation date. I've prepared a proposal, but I need confirmation that the space will be available for at least eight weeks."

Oskar didn't answer immediately.

Instead, he glanced toward the empty foyer.

"Eight weeks?"

"That's the period I agreed on with Marta."

"I see."

Something about the way he said it made me look up from my notes.

"Is there a problem?"

"I'm not sure yet whether I can guarantee the full period."

"Why not?"

He rubbed the back of his neck.

"We have a few organizational matters to sort out."

I disliked that expression. Organizational matters usually meant somebody had made a decision but wasn't ready to accept the consequences.

"I need specifics, Mr. Zieliński."

"Oskar. If we're going to work together, surely we can dispense with the formalities."

"Formalities don't interfere with my work."

"I've noticed."

He smiled, but this time I didn't smile back.

"I've invested my own money and many hours of work preparing this exhibition. If the schedule is at risk, I need to know now."

His expression grew serious.

"I'm not going to leave you with a problem."

"That isn't an answer."

For a moment, we regarded each other in silence. The quiet hum of ventilation drifted from the neighboring auditorium. Oskar was the first to look away, although it didn't feel like surrender.

"There's something I'd like to show you," he said.

He led me into a small room beyond the main foyer. Old film posters covered the walls, and beneath the window stood a glass-fronted cabinet filled with metal film canisters. In one corner, I spotted an antique projector, partly concealed beneath a dust sheet.

"This is where I wanted to display the most important costumes," he explained. "Not in a corridor where people would walk past them on their way to buy popcorn. Here, they'd have a chance to really look."

I approached the window. The fading afternoon light came through the tall pane, drawing rectangles across the floor.

"Natural light will damage the fabrics. We'll need filters."

"That can be arranged."

"And humidity control."

"That too."

"What about the display cases?"

"I'll provide them."

I gave him a sidelong look.

"Do you always answer questions that quickly before you've found out what things cost?"

"Only when the answer really matters to me."

I resisted the urge to smile. Instead, I spread my exhibition plan across the wooden table.

Oskar stood opposite me. When he leaned over the drawing, I caught a faint scent of rain on his shirt and something warmer, reminiscent of cedar. He didn't crowd me. In fact, he took half a step back so I could unfold the documents properly.

That small concession told me more about him than his earlier jokes had.

"Why costumes?" he asked.

"Because we often remember the actors and forget the people who created the way they looked."

"And you want to give those people their names back?"

"I want to show that a costume tells a story too. Sometimes better than dialogue."

He studied me thoughtfully.

"That sounds like something worth preserving."

There was a note in his voice I couldn't quite identify.

Only then did I notice a folder lying beside the plan. The name of a commercial real estate company was printed on its spine. Beneath it, I could make out the cinema's address.

Oskar calmly closed the folder.

He didn't do it abruptly.

That was precisely why the gesture stayed with me.

"I still need to check a few dates," he said. "But I'd like us to begin with this room."

I ran a finger along the edge of the plan.

"And I'd like to know whether I'm building something that will still have a place here in two months."

He didn't answer for a long moment.

Then he looked at me as though he could see not only a seamstress with a notebook full of demands, but a woman who had staked an enormous amount on a single opportunity.

"Wera," he said more quietly, "what if I can't promise you that?"

I remained where I was, one hand resting on the plan, caught by his gaze and the unexpected desire not to have to leave just yet.

Because what was I supposed to do if the man who couldn't promise me a tomorrow for this place had just made me want to discover what his own tomorrow might hold?

Chapter 1 - Terms I Hadn't Bargained For

The following morning, I found an email from Oskar Zieliński in my inbox. It had arrived at 6:42 a.m., which struck me as a suspicious hour for a man who ran a cinema. Attached was a floor plan, followed by three suggested meeting times and a single sentence I read twice.

I'd like us to find a solution that works for the exhibition, even if it isn't exactly what either of us originally imagined.

It sounded reasonable. Far too reasonable for someone who, the previous evening, had been unable to guarantee me eight weeks of exhibition space. I replied that I would come at ten, but that I expected us to make concrete arrangements. I said nothing about the folder containing real estate documents. I had no grounds for drawing conclusions from a name I'd happened to notice. I did, however, have every right to protect my work.

Before leaving, I checked the navy-blue dress I'd been working on the day before. The damaged thread was back in place. Viewed from the right angle, there wasn't even a trace of the repair. I ran my finger over the silk, satisfied with the result. In my profession, the most important skill was knowing when to intervene and when to stop. People rarely understood that good restoration wasn't about turning everything into something new.

I reached the cinema ten minutes early. Oskar was standing on a ladder beside one of the lights in the foyer. He wore a navy sweater and trousers stained with something that looked like paint. When he noticed me, he set down his screwdriver.

"Good morning, Wera. Punctuality really does matter to you, doesn't it?"

"As does lighting that actually works."

"Then we've already established that we share certain values."

He climbed down the ladder, and I couldn't help noticing how different he looked from the previous evening. Less formal, more approachable. A man who repaired the lighting in his own cinema didn't fit my mental picture of an owner issuing orders from behind a desk.

"I hope we don't spend too much time discovering the rest of them," I replied. "I'd like to get down to business."

He smiled, but this time he didn't try to prolong the exchange. He led me into the room intended for the exhibition. Two cups of coffee, a printed floor plan, and a list of available equipment were waiting on the table.

"No sugar," he said, indicating one of the cups.

I looked at him.

"How do you know?"

"Yesterday, there was a coffee cup in the photograph of your atelier that you sent Marta with the dress documentation. There was a sugar bowl beside it, but it was closed."

"That's a remarkably detailed observation."

"I notice things sometimes."

I took the cup, trying not to attach too much significance to the remark. Oskar handed me a sheet of paper covered with revisions. Instead of eight weeks, he was proposing a

three-week exhibition, with the possibility of an extension subject to written confirmation.

"No," I said.

"You haven't even looked at the rest."

"I don't need to. Three weeks aren't enough."

"They're enough to display the costumes themselves."

"But not enough for what I intend to do."

I spread my own plan beside his proposal. In addition to the exhibition, I'd arranged meetings with costume designers, short demonstrations of textile conservation, and workshops for students from the film school in Łódź. The exhibition was supposed to attract people over several weeks, not just on opening night. I wanted visitors to return, bring their friends, and discover more of the stories hidden in the garments.

Oskar studied the schedule with growing interest.

"There was no mention of workshops in the original proposal."

"Because it was originally going to be a straightforward exhibition. I changed the concept when I saw how interested the costume owners were."

"And you didn't discuss that with us?"

"I sent an update two weeks ago."

"To Marta?"

"To the address specified in the agreement."

For a moment, he looked as though he was about to say something, then thought better of it. He reached for his phone and checked his correspondence. I watched him scroll through the screen, frowning.

"You're right. The message arrived. I should have read it sooner."

The admission surprised me more than any excuse could have. I was accustomed to clients who could stand over their own signatures and still insist that nothing had been agreed. Oskar didn't try to shift responsibility onto his programming manager or blame his workload for everything.

"Then you understand why three weeks aren't enough."

"I do. But I still can't sign up for eight."

I put down my coffee.

"Which means we have a problem."

"We have different needs. It becomes a problem when we stop listening to them."

I resented how much calmer his answer was than the situation deserved. I planted both hands on the table and looked him straight in the face.

"I need stability. I can't invite people to collaborate, pay the preparation costs, and then find out a week before an event that something has changed. This is my reputation, Oskar. I can't put it at risk because you won't tell me what's causing the problem."

His expression grew serious.

"This isn't about disrespecting your work."

"Then what is it about?"

"Commitments I haven't managed to sort out yet."

"That's extremely vague."

"I know."

For a while, all I could hear was the noise of the street outside. I had no intention of arguing that my dreams

mattered more than his problems. But neither was I prepared to surrender control of a project to someone who kept offering me shorter and shorter deadlines without an explanation.

"Let me propose something else," I said at last. "Six weeks of guaranteed exhibition space. We keep the opening date. We'll schedule the workshops during the first four weeks and leave the final two for visitors. If you genuinely need flexibility, we can include an option for early closure, but only with sufficient notice and reimbursement of the costs already incurred."

Oskar shook his head.

"I can't promise six weeks either."

"Then tell me what you can promise."

"Four. Unconditionally."

I stared at him, trying to decide whether I'd just heard an offer or an ultimatum.

"And if I refuse?"

"Then we'll look for another venue. I'll help you find one."

"I don't want another venue. These costumes come from films whose histories are connected with Łódź. This place is part of the story."

Oskar walked over to the window. For a moment, he watched the street, where the rain had left dark patches on the pavement. He didn't look like a man who gave up easily, but nor did he possess that irritating certainty of owners convinced that having the money made them right.

"That's exactly why I want the exhibition to happen," he said. "I want people to see this cinema differently. Not just as a room where they buy a ticket."

"And I don't want it to end with a single event."

He turned around.

"You have bigger plans?"

I hesitated. I disliked revealing my ambitions to people who might use them to negotiate lower fees. But his question didn't sound like an attempt to gain the upper hand.

"I'd like this to be the first of several exhibitions. The cinema could regularly host events devoted to costumes and the people who work behind the scenes. I'd take care of the specialist content and conservation. You'd provide the space and film programme."

He was silent for a long moment.

"That sounds good," he said eventually.

"Then why do you look as though I've suggested moving to Mars?"

He gave a short laugh.

"Because not everything good is immediately possible."

Before I could respond, Marta came into the room carrying a stack of leaflets. She looked like someone who had already spent the morning solving several other people's crises.

"Wonderful, you're both here. I've had confirmation from two costume designers, and there's a message from the university. The students want to attend the workshops."

"If the workshops happen," I pointed out.

Marta looked at Oskar.

"You still haven't agreed on the dates?"

"We're working on it," he replied.

"Oskar, we can't keep postponing decisions indefinitely."

There was something in her voice I hadn't heard before. Not ordinary impatience, but the weariness of someone dealing with a problem much older than our exhibition.

Oskar rested his hands on the back of a chair.

"Wera wants six weeks. I can guarantee four."

Marta sighed.

"Four weeks isn't much, but we can make the programme work."

"Not at the expense of quality," I said.

"Of course."

For the next half hour, we rearranged dates, calculated costs, and checked room availability. Oskar offered additional technical staff at no extra cost to my budget. Marta agreed to handle the invitations. I agreed to prepare a four-week version of the programme, provided all the financial consequences of shortening the exhibition were covered in the contract.

It wasn't the victory I'd hoped for. At least I'd regained some control over the decisions.

When Marta stepped outside to answer a call, Oskar remained beside me at the table.

"You're a tougher negotiator than I expected."

"And you're less irritating than your emails suggested."

"Is that a compliment?"

"A very cautious one."

He smiled, then glanced at my hands. There were small scratches on my fingertips, left by hours of working with old fabrics.

"Do all seamstresses have hands like that?"

"Only the ones who don't know when to stop working."

"I know the problem."

"I just watched you repair a light that you could probably have asked someone else to fix."

"Probably."

We regarded each other with amusement. There still wasn't anything I could confidently call flirting without exaggerating. And yet I noticed that Oskar seemed in no hurry to end our conversation, even though someone in the corridor had already called his name twice.

"Wera," he said, "there's one thing I want you to know. I'm not trying to restrict your project because I think it doesn't matter."

"And I'm not trying to take over your cinema."

"I know."

The way he said it sounded almost confidential. For a moment, I felt as though we were standing on the same side of something neither of us could quite name.

Then his phone vibrated.

He glanced at the screen, and his expression changed so noticeably that I instinctively looked away. I didn't want to intrude on his private affairs.

"I need to take this," he said.

"Of course. I'll send the revised schedule this evening."

I started toward the door, but his voice stopped me.

"One more thing. I don't want you to abandon the idea of future exhibitions just because I can't promise anything right now."

I turned around.

"That's rather unusual encouragement from the man who's just shortened my first exhibition."

He accepted the comment without objection.

"I know. Even so, I think it's worth trying."

I left the cinema with a contract that still needed revising, a list of new responsibilities, and the strange realization that his final words mattered to me more than they should have.

That afternoon, Iga arrived at the atelier with two sweet pastries and an expression that promised an interrogation.

"Well?" she asked, settling on the windowsill. "What's this owner of yours like?"

"Indecisive."

"I know that from your messages. I'm asking what he's like."

"Stubborn. Irritatingly calm. He has good ideas and a terrible habit of leaving things unexplained."

Iga tore a piece off her pastry.

"Handsome?"

I looked up from the sewing machine.

"What does that have to do with the exhibition?"

"So, very handsome."

"Iga."

"All right. I'll be quiet."

She wasn't quiet for long.

"But seriously, Wera, can you manage this project? You've taken on so much work, and you keep talking about more commissions."

I set down my scissors. Her question struck closer to the truth than I wanted to admit.

"I have to manage it. If the exhibition succeeds, I'll have something substantial to show when I approach other institutions. I don't want to spend the next ten years altering dresses people have bought online."

"There's nothing wrong with altering dresses."

"I know. But I didn't study textile conservation just to spend my whole life shortening trousers."

Iga nodded.

"Then make sure this Oskar doesn't start making decisions for you."

"I won't let him."

I said it with more certainty than I felt. Because although I knew how to protect my professional interests, I was becoming considerably less certain about my ability to protect myself from my own curiosity.

That evening, while I was finishing the revisions to the schedule, another message arrived.

Thank you for today's conversation. It isn't often that someone defends an idea so firmly without stopping to listen to the other person. Oskar.

I read it twice.

Then I replied.

Don't get used to it. I still intend to fight for every day of the exhibition.

His answer arrived almost immediately.

Then we're in for an interesting month.

I smiled at the screen before I could stop myself.

Chapter 2 - The Space Between Us

On Thursday morning, Oskar sent me the revised contract. The document ran to seven pages, included three appendices, and contained one clause I examined so carefully that I nearly arrived late for an appointment with a client. The cinema owner undertook to provide the exhibition room for four weeks, cover the costs of basic lighting and technical support, and make no changes to the schedule without my written approval.

There wasn't a single sentence about future collaboration.

I couldn't reasonably hold that against him. After all, I was the one who'd demanded concrete commitments instead of vague promises. And yet the absence of even a mention of continuing the project disappointed me. For several minutes, I stared at the screen, trying to establish whether this was professional frustration or something to do with the fact that I'd begun wondering increasingly often what Oskar Zieliński was really thinking.

At ten, Mrs. Halina arrived, my oldest client, carrying a coat from an era when shops sold clothes intended to survive more than one season.

"Ms. Wera, the lining's coming apart again," she announced.

I examined the coat and smiled.

"The lining's older than I am. It's entitled to be tired."

"But I'm fond of this coat."

"Then we'll replace the lining."

Mrs. Halina settled into the chair by the window and watched as I marked the areas that needed attention. I liked her visits. They reminded me why I'd chosen a profession so many people considered impractical. Clothes weren't merely objects to me. They carried traces of decisions, journeys, encounters, and losses. Sometimes people kept a garment not because it was beautiful, but because they couldn't bear to part with the history it held.

When my client left, I called Oskar.

He answered on the second ring.

"Good morning, Wera. Should I prepare myself for another round of negotiations?"

"For a short conversation about boundaries."

"That sounds more serious."

"Because it is. I want to clarify several points in the agreement. First, the rights to photographs of the costumes. Second, responsibility for any damage. Third, the rules for contacting the owners of the exhibits."

"All right. We can meet this afternoon."

"I'd rather handle it over the phone."

"We can. But there's something else I'd like to show you."

I fell silent.

"What?"

"The storeroom where we keep old promotional materials. Marta found something there that might work for the exhibition."

I hesitated. Unfinished commissions, bills, and a calendar with too few free hours passed before my mind's eye.

"Four o'clock," I said. "I have forty minutes."

"I'll do my best not to waste a single one."

This time, the cinema was full of people. A display rack of posters stood in the foyer, several customers were waiting at the ticket counter, and music from an old film drifted out of one of the auditoriums. Oskar stood beside the coffee counter, talking to an elderly man who held a small box.

He didn't notice me immediately.

"Mr. Leon, you don't have to give these away," he was saying quietly.

"I don't want them going to waste. They only sit around at my place."

"Then we'll find a good home for them."

The man nodded, evidently pleased, and headed toward the exit. Oskar looked up.

"You're here."

"On time."

"I'm beginning to suspect you do that deliberately to embarrass me."

"You don't need my help. You're perfectly capable of embarrassing yourself."

He laughed and indicated the box.

"Mr. Leon worked here as a projectionist for thirty-seven years. He's brought some old photographs. A few show premieres where the actors appeared in their original costumes."

He lifted the lid. Inside were black-and-white photographs, carefully separated by sheets of thin paper. In one of them, I recognized a dress similar to the one I was restoring.

"These could be incredibly valuable," I said.

"That's what I thought."

I studied him more closely. It wasn't only about the photographs. Oskar remembered the elderly man's name, knew his history, and spoke to him without the slightest trace of condescension. He hadn't tried to hurry their conversation, although he knew I was waiting. It was a quality I couldn't dismiss.

"Thank you for thinking of this."

"Don't thank me yet. We still need to check whether we're allowed to use them."

We headed toward the back of the building. The storeroom proved to be a small space crowded with metal shelving. Boxes of posters, catalogues, and old decorative pieces filled the shelves. The air smelled of paper and the kind of dust that reminded me of my grandfather's library.

Oskar switched on an additional lamp.

"I found a few things here that might interest you."

He took out a cardboard tube and carefully unrolled a large poster. It showed a woman in a pale dress standing against a theatrical curtain. The costume had a distinctive collar that I recognized immediately.

"I have part of that dress," I said in surprise. "The upper section, actually. A private collector brought it to me."

"Really?"

"Yes. I thought the rest had been destroyed."

Oskar studied the poster.

"Then perhaps it's worth telling the story of what's no longer there as well."