We're Not in the Rulebook

The rules are clear. Their desires aren't



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ROMANS

ISBN: 9788384903513

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INTRO

What I liked most about rulebooks was that they didn't have to love anyone.

They could be strict, merciless, sometimes even unfair, but at least they never pretended their decisions were driven by feelings. Paragraph three didn't change its mind because of a pair of beautiful eyes, and clause seven didn't make promises it had no intention of keeping. People were considerably less predictable in that respect.

That Friday afternoon, however, as I stood in the foyer of the Centre for the Meeting of Cultures in Lublin, I felt an overwhelming urge to strangle whoever had written the regulations for the literary residency applications.

Preferably with a printed copy of their own masterpiece.

"This is impossible," I said into my phone, reading the same passage for the third time.

"I know," replied Marta, my best friend and the only person I allowed to call me while I was working. "Which is precisely why you should stop reading it."

"Clause four says applications will be accepted until June thirtieth, but clause nine says the list of successful applicants will be published on the twenty-eighth."

"Maybe they have access to the future."

"And there's another date in the appendix."

"Melania, you were supposed to finish work at four today."

I glanced at my watch. It was almost five.

Marta was right. Of course she was. For the past three months, I'd been working on changing my life. More specifically, I'd been trying to make sure my work stopped being my entire life. I'd resigned from my permanent position at a Warsaw agency, registered my own business, and started building an independent reputation as an editor specialising in competition and application documents. I wanted to choose my own clients, set my own hours, and stop answering calls from people who believed that describing something as "urgent" somehow relieved them of responsibility.

I had an important meeting scheduled for Monday with a foundation that could offer me several months of steady work. I'd intended to spend the weekend preparing my proposal, not rescuing other people's oversights.

"I'm leaving in ten minutes," I promised.

"You said exactly the same thing half an hour ago."

"I mean it this time."

I ended the call and slipped my phone into my blazer pocket.

The foyer was gradually emptying after the festival's final panel discussion. The scent of coffee mingled with the smell of freshly printed programmes, while warm late-afternoon sunlight streamed through the towering glass windows. A handful of attendees remained at the tables, absorbed in conversations about literature, which they probably took considerably less personally than I took regulations.

I closed my laptop.

That was when I heard someone speak.

"Ms Okoń?"

I turned around.

A man stood a few steps away, holding a phone in one hand and a crumpled festival programme in the other. He had dark hair, the sleeves of his pale-blue shirt rolled up slightly, and the appearance of someone who'd spent the entire day solving problems nobody else even wanted to look at.

He wasn't particularly elegant.

What he did possess was an irritating confidence in his own presence.

"That depends who's asking," I replied.

He smiled. But instead of delivering one of those polished compliments that usually marked the beginning of an unnecessary acquaintance, he said, "Patryk Jeż. I'm responsible for organising the festival. I hear you've found a few mistakes in our application regulations."

"A few?"

He glanced at my laptop.

"I take it that's an understatement."

"I'd say the regulations are one enormous mistake that accidentally contains a few correct sentences."

He laughed quietly.

It wasn't the laugh of a man offended by criticism. It sounded more like someone who'd just heard confirmation of something he'd suspected for a long time.

"I appreciate your honesty."

"Don't get used to it. Only the first consultation was supposed to be free today."

"And the second?"

"That depends on the scale of the disaster."

Patryk placed the programme on the table and slipped his phone into his pocket. Only then did I notice the exhaustion beneath his eyes. He looked about thirty-eight, and there was something in the way he watched people that suggested he'd learned to notice considerably more than they actually said.

"Could you show me the most serious problem?" he asked.

I should have refused.

Instead, I opened my laptop.

"Look here. The regulations say all adult authors are eligible, but the application form requires evidence of at least two published books. It's also unclear whether the residency includes payment, accommodation, or both. And you haven't specified who evaluates the applications or what criteria they're supposed to use."

Patryk leaned closer to the screen.

I caught the faint scent of his cologne, something between cedarwood and bitter orange. I didn't move away immediately, which was my first unprofessional decision of the day.

"It was supposed to be simple," he said.

"The things that are supposed to be simple usually cause the most trouble."

"Do you always tell your clients they've done everything wrong?"

"Only when they've done everything wrong."

He looked at me with amusement, but a moment later his expression grew serious.

"The call for applications has already been announced. We've received dozens of submissions. Our partners are expecting results, and the authors are asking about selection criteria we can't even explain to them. We have to fix this."

That final sentence sounded different from everything he'd said before.

No smile. No attempt to lighten the mood.

For the first time, I saw something more in him than another organiser hoping a specialist would clean up his mess.

"You also need to consider cancelling the current application process," I said. "Or at least suspending the evaluation until you've established a procedure that's both lawful and fair."

Patryk straightened.

"Cancellation is out of the question."

"This isn't a matter of personal preference."

"Perhaps not for you."

That should have irritated me.

Instead, I found myself wondering why a man who'd accepted such sharp criticism only moments earlier had suddenly drawn such a firm line.

"Have you promised someone this application process would go ahead?" I asked.

He was silent for a brief moment.

"A lot of people."

It wasn't a lie.

But it didn't sound like the whole truth, either.

I glanced at his phone as the screen lit up with an incoming message. I caught only part of the notification:

Kuba: I understand everything is still going ahead...

Patryk turned the phone facedown.

I said nothing. I had no right to pry into his correspondence, and a single unfinished sentence wasn't proof of anything.

"I have a proposal for you," I said. "I'll send you a risk assessment and an outline of the necessary changes by Monday. Then we can decide whether I can take on the assignment. But if you expect me to adjust the rules to produce a result you've already chosen, you should find someone else right now."

He studied me for longer than an ordinary professional conversation required.

"Do you know what's most dangerous about you?"

"We don't know each other well enough for you to make that judgment."

"That's exactly why I'm asking myself why I want to try."

I closed my laptop a little too forcefully.

Patryk smiled, but this time he didn't take advantage of my embarrassment. He stepped half a pace back, giving me room.

"I won't keep you any longer," he said. "Send me your quotation. We'll pay for the analysis whether or not you decide to take on the rest of the work."

That was reasonable.

Professional.

Exactly what I expected from a potential client.

So why did I feel a flicker of disappointment that he was already leaving?

I picked up my bag and headed towards the exit. Just as I reached the doors, his voice stopped me.

"Melania?"

I turned, surprised by the sudden absence of formality.

"Yes?"

"What if we met here tomorrow? Without the laptop. I'd like to show you why these residencies matter so much to me."

Behind him, the foyer lights were going out one by one.

He could simply have emailed me the documents, invited me to a formal meeting, or called on Monday. Instead, he stood there waiting, making no attempt to conceal the fact that he was suggesting something more personal than reviewing the competition regulations.

"I have plans of my own tomorrow," I replied.

"I understand."

He didn't insist.

And that was precisely why, after several seconds, I added, "But I could find an hour at six."

His smile spread slowly.

"Then I'll see you tomorrow."

I stepped out onto the square in front of the building. The evening air was warm, and the city smelled of rain that hadn't yet fallen.

My phone vibrated in my hand.

Marta wanted to know whether I'd finally come to my senses.

I glanced back through the glass doors.

Patryk was still standing in the foyer, speaking to someone on his phone. This time he didn't look amused. He ran a hand over the back of his neck, then looked towards the exit.

Our eyes met through the glass.

I didn't look away.

I was thirty-three years old. I had my own business, a meticulously planned weekend, and more than enough experience to recognise when someone had the potential to complicate my life.

So why, more than anything else, did I want him to look at me exactly the same way tomorrow?

Chapter 1 - The Price of an Exception

At 8:17 on Saturday morning, I received a message from Patryk Jeż.

"Good morning. I don't want to ruin your weekend, but the situation with the applications has become more complicated. Could we talk before this evening?"

I stared at my phone while standing in the kitchen of my rented apartment on Narutowicza Street. Outside, Lublin was only just waking up. The pavements glistened after the overnight rain, and my coffee was growing cold beside the materials I'd spread out for Monday's meeting with the foundation.

I was about to reply that Saturday wasn't a working day when another message arrived.

"Actually, no. I'm sorry. We agreed on six o'clock. I'll respect that."

I read it twice.

I didn't often meet people capable of withdrawing an unreasonable request before I'd even had the chance to say no. Even fewer of them were men accustomed to managing major events.

I replied, "Thank you. I'll be there at six sharp."

I put my phone down, but for the next several minutes, I couldn't concentrate on my presentation.

My friend Marta claimed I had a weakness for men who resembled complicated contracts. The more clauses and reservations they contained, the stronger my urge to

understand them. I usually responded that I had no interest in men who required legal interpretation.

Patryk was beginning to put that declaration to the test.

At nine, my prospective client called. She was a representative of the Warsaw-based New Voices Foundation and wanted to confirm Monday's meeting, as well as make sure I was still interested in developing a consistent set of rules for their scholarship programme.

"Absolutely," I assured her. "I've already prepared an initial concept."

"We need someone who can tell us when our ideas are bad," Ms Elżbieta said.

I smiled.

"In that case, I suspect we'll get along."

When the call ended, I looked at my open calendar. The foundation could become my most important client. It meant regular income and the possibility of working on my own terms, exactly what I'd left the agency for three months earlier.

Lublin was supposed to be a short consulting assignment, not the beginning of another professional sacrifice.

So I decided that, that evening, I would present Patryk with clear conditions and refuse to let his smile complicate matters.

Eight hours later, I was standing in a small conference room behind the festival foyer, wondering why my preparations hadn't included a strategy for ignoring a man who looked exceptionally good with his sleeves rolled up.

Patryk greeted me at the door.

"Thank you for coming."

I noticed he'd switched to the informal form of address, but I didn't object.

"I promised you an hour. I haven't decided yet whether you'll use it wisely."

"I'll do my best."

Two glasses of water, a pot of tea and printed documents were waiting on the table. There was no laptop. Only after a moment did I notice the boxes of books stacked against the wall and a display board featuring projects by previous festival participants.

"You were going to show me why the residencies matter so much to you," I reminded him.

"I still want to. But first I need to tell you we received another six applications this morning. Some are from debut authors who don't have two published books."

"So people who are eligible according to the announcement but ineligible according to the form."

"Yes."

"Then we can't keep pretending this is just a cosmetic problem."

We sat opposite each other. Patryk slid a summary of the applications towards me. The applicants' names had been replaced with numbers, which I took as a good sign.

"Our coordinator, Iga, prepared it," he explained. "I didn't want you working with personal data straight away."

"Sensible."

"I'll make a note of that. The first compliment from Ms Okoń."

"Don't get used to it."

He smiled, then bent over the summary.

Over the next twenty minutes, we established that the faulty regulations affected not only the deadlines but the evaluation process itself. The organisers had advertised an open competition for new authors, the application form required a publishing record, and the partnership agreement stipulated that two residents had to be selected before the end of the month.

Patryk wanted to preserve the deadline and honour the commitments made to the sponsors.

Above all, I wanted to ensure that nobody would be assessed according to rules they hadn't known in advance.

"We could publish a correction," he suggested. "Give people another three days."

"Three days to do what? Write two books?"

He laughed, although there wasn't much amusement in it this time.

"To complete their applications."

"If that requirement stays, you're excluding debut authors. If you remove it, you also have to give an opportunity to people who didn't apply because they saw the requirement in the first place."

"How much time do we need?"

"First, we need to decide exactly what applicants were promised. Then we need a new procedure, approval from the organiser, and clear, reliable information for everyone concerned."

He rubbed a hand over his face.

"We have commitments to our partners. The programme's completion date is written into the contracts."

"I understand. But I can't create a document that merely looks fair."

He raised his eyes.

"And I can't allow the festival to lose its funding."

At last, we'd stopped being polite.

I stood and walked over to the display board showing previous editions of the programme. It featured photographs of young authors, extracts from their writing, and short statements about what the opportunity to work somewhere peaceful had meant to them.

"Do you really believe these people would prefer a quick competition to a fair one?" I asked.

Patryk came closer but stopped at a respectful distance.

"I believe most of them needed the opportunity when they received it. Not after a six-month dispute over paperwork."

I turned my head.

"I'm not proposing six months."

"And I'm not proposing fraud."

For a moment, we looked at each other in silence.

I noticed the tension in his jaw, even though his voice remained calm. He cared more than he wanted to show. The problem wasn't that he didn't understand my arguments. He understood them perfectly, yet he still couldn't abandon his own objective.

"Then let's approach it differently," I said. "You don't have to choose right now between cancelling the entire programme and pretending the regulations are correct. We

can prepare alternatives and show the partners the consequences of each one."

"What alternatives?"

We returned to the table. On a blank sheet of paper, I outlined three possibilities: resuming the application process under corrected rules, reopening applications with a sufficiently long deadline, or cancelling the procedure and announcing a new competition. Beside each option, we listed the risks, costs and organisational requirements.

Patryk no longer tried to hurry the conversation. He asked specific questions, admitted when he didn't know the answers, and wrote everything down in his own handwriting, which was uneven and surprisingly small.

"If we extend the application period by two weeks, we might still be able to complete the evaluation on time," he said eventually.

"Provided you appoint an independent committee and don't change the criteria after applications close."

He hesitated.

"What if there were someone whose application required special consideration?"

I put down my pen.

"What exactly do you mean by 'special'?"

"Someone with an unconventional background, for example. A worthwhile project that doesn't fit neatly into the application form."

"Then the rules must allow all such projects to be evaluated, not just one person's."

"Even if that person genuinely deserves a chance?"

"Especially then."

He fell silent for a moment, turning his pen between his fingers.

"You're a difficult negotiator."

"I'm not negotiating whether the rules should apply to everyone."

Patryk looked at me with something that might have been admiration or frustration.

"I'm beginning to understand why someone recommended you specifically."

"Who?"

"Our lawyer. She said you're capable of saying no even to someone who's paying you to agree."

"That's not a particularly good advertisement for my services."

"It's becoming a better one as far as I'm concerned."

I didn't reply.

Through the open door came the voice of a member of the technical staff looking for Patryk. He stepped out for a few minutes, leaving me with the documents. I occupied myself with the schedule and noticed something else: the draft timetable included a preliminary meeting with one of the applicants long before the application period was due to close.

There was no name.

Just a note: "Author consultation — K."

It could have meant any number of things, including an ordinary festival event. I made a note to ask about the purpose and scope of such consultations.

When Patryk returned, he looked more tired.

"Sorry. The sound system has failed in one of the rooms."

"The life of a festival organiser sounds exceptionally romantic."

"I could also show you the schedule for exchanging identification badges and the report on missing microphones."

"Spare me the excitement."

He smiled, then checked his watch.

"We've gone over the hour."

It was already past seven thirty.

"So we have."

"I should apologise."

"You should pay for the additional time."

"Gladly."

This time, I laughed genuinely.

I wasn't accustomed to men who took my work seriously without abandoning their attempts to make me laugh. Patryk didn't seem intimidated by my determination. He seemed interested in it.

That distinction mattered.

I packed away the documents, aware that I should end the meeting before I started inventing more reasons to stay.

"I'll prepare an initial proposal," I said. "But you need to know I have an important meeting with another client on Monday. If I take on this project, I won't be available around the clock."

"I don't expect you to be."

"And I won't postpone my own commitments simply because something has suddenly become urgent here."

"I understand."

"One more thing. I won't put my name to a procedure designed to approve a predetermined decision."

This time, he didn't answer immediately.

"I want this programme to survive," he said at last.

"I could want that too. But we need to establish honestly what price we're willing to pay."

He walked to the door and opened it for me.

"Melania, may I say something that has nothing to do with the regulations?"

I stopped.

"You may."

"I like the way you refuse to be pleasant at the expense of what you actually think."

I hadn't been prepared for that. Especially not when it was delivered so calmly, without a smile to disguise the sincerity as a joke.

"That's a rather risky quality in someone you're working with," I replied.

"Possibly."

"And not always convenient."

"I've already discovered that."

We looked at each other for a brief moment. In the empty corridor, I could hear distant footsteps and the hum of the ventilation system. Patryk didn't move closer or attempt to

prolong the conversation with a gesture. He simply allowed the silence to remain between us.

I was the first to look away.

Before I left, he handed me a slim book with a photograph of an old Lublin courtyard on its cover.

"It's a collection of short stories by one of our former residents," he explained. "If you want to understand why I'm fighting so hard for this programme, read the first story."

"Bribery through literature?"

"More like supporting evidence."

I accepted the book.

"I'm not promising to change my mind."

"That's not what I'm asking."

Evening had already fallen outside. I walked towards the city centre, feeling the weight of the documents and the slim volume in my bag. The book shouldn't have meant anything more than an ordinary gift.

On Krakowskie Przedmieście, I stopped beneath a streetlamp and opened it. On the first page was a dedication from the author to the festival organisers.

"For taking my story seriously before anyone else was willing to read it."

I ran my finger over the words.

I understood then why Patryk defended the residencies so fiercely.

What I didn't understand was why he was equally determined to reject a solution that might save them without compromising the fairness of the competition.

I took out my phone and wrote him a message.

"I'll read it. But on Monday, I need the complete schedule, including information about individual consultations with applicants."

His reply arrived almost immediately.

"You'll get everything necessary for a thorough assessment."

I noticed his choice of words.

Everything necessary.

Not simply everything.

I put my phone away and continued walking, trying not to think about the man who could inspire both curiosity and caution in me with a single sentence.

The worst part was that I wanted answers to questions I didn't even know how to formulate yet.

Chapter 2 - An Hour Without Obligations

On Monday morning, I woke up convinced that sleep ought to come with a complaints procedure.

For most of the night, I'd dreamed about forms without fields, lists of applicants without names, and Patryk Jeż standing on the other side of a long table, patiently waiting for me to find a solution. He didn't even touch me in my dreams. It was enough that he looked at me in a way that made all my carefully prepared arguments lose their order.

Marta called at seven.

"How was the date?"

"It wasn't a date."

"Then tell me about the business meeting after which you spent forty minutes yesterday analysing the way a man says your name."

"We also discussed the regulations."

"For three minutes."

I held the phone against my shoulder and poured myself some coffee.

"Patryk organises a festival that needs specialist assistance. I have a business. He has a problem. That's all."

"And the book?"

I glanced at the slim volume lying beside my bed. I'd read almost all of it the previous evening, although I'd only intended to read the first story.

"Good."

"Melania."

"Very good."

"I wasn't asking about the book."

I sighed.

"He's interesting. That doesn't mean I'm planning to do anything with him outside work."

Marta was silent for a moment.

"Do you know what I dislike most about the way you plan your life?"

"The fact that it usually works?"

"The fact that you treat every unexpected feeling as an error in your schedule."

I didn't answer. I had a more important conversation ahead of me, and I had no intention of starting my day by admitting she was right.

The meeting with the New Voices Foundation took place online at ten. Ms Elżbieta and two members of her team explained the scope of the work, their expectations and the proposed budget. After an hour, I had the feeling I was speaking to people who genuinely wanted to improve their programme, rather than merely obtain a specialist's signature beneath a decision they'd already made.

"We need you to be available over the next six weeks," Ms Elżbieta said. "Not full-time, but with the possibility of consultations at short notice."

I wrote down the timeframe.

Six weeks.

Exactly as long as the Lublin festival project might take if we decided to reopen applications.

"I can guarantee specific consultation days and response times," I suggested. "What I can't promise is constant availability by phone."

"That suits us very well."

When the meeting ended, I felt a familiar sense of satisfaction. Just a few months earlier, I wouldn't have dared to set such conditions so calmly. At the agency, I'd learned that the client always came first, even before sleep, health and my own life. Now, for the first time, I could say: my work is valuable, but nobody has an unlimited claim on it.

At eleven thirty, I received a message from Patryk containing the complete set of organisational documents.

This time, everything was arranged, labelled and numbered.

"Iga has tidied up the folders. If anything's missing, let me know. No pressure to reply today."

I smiled at the screen.

Patryk listened.

Not only to what I said about procedures, but also to what I said about my time.

I replied that I'd review the documents once I'd finished my work for the foundation.

It wasn't until the afternoon that I opened the folder he'd sent.

Among the partnership agreements, schedules and forms, I found a table describing the roles of the various members of the competition committee. Patryk was listed as the organisational coordinator, without formal voting rights. That was a sensible arrangement, although it wouldn't be enough

if he'd previously attempted to influence the selection of applicants.

I also noticed that the document concerning contact with authors contained a section labelled "individual consultations", but didn't explain who had been given access to them.

I wrote a question in the margin.

I didn't want to jump to conclusions. In literary competitions, contact between organisers and participants wasn't unusual. What mattered was whether those contacts gave anyone an advantage.

An hour later, I had a draft of the terms of our cooperation ready.

I sent Patryk a proposal covering the audit, the development of a corrective procedure and consultations with the committee. It also contained several conditions I considered non-negotiable: the independence of my professional opinion, full access to documents relating to the application process, written approval of changes, and no possibility of introducing exceptions for selected individuals.

He replied twenty minutes later.

"The conditions are clear. I have one question. Could we discuss them in person tomorrow after five?"

I hesitated.

"At the festival office?"

"Initially, yes. Afterwards, if you'd like, I'd like to show you somewhere I go when I need reminding that life exists outside schedules."

I read the message and felt a smile spreading across my face.