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ROMANS

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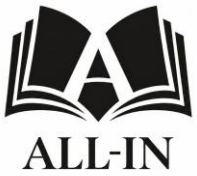
ALL-IN Rafał Płonkowski



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INTRO

For the first time in seventeen years, I decided to close my antiquarian bookshop before six o'clock. Not because I was ill, because something had broken down, or because of a family celebration. I simply wanted to leave before dark, take a walk along the Oder, and have dinner somewhere I wouldn't have to cook it myself. At forty-five, a decision like that shouldn't have required any particular courage. And yet, as I turned the sign on the door from "Open" to "Closed," I felt as though I were about to commit a minor crime against my own life.

Druga Strona, my antiquarian bookshop, occupied the ground floor of an old tenement building on one of Szczecin's side streets, not far from Wojska Polskiego Avenue. It had tall windows, creaking floorboards, and a scent no perfume could ever reproduce. Paper, wood, a little dust, and coffee I regularly forgot to drink. Over the years, I had arranged the place so that every object had a reason to be there. Even the dark-green velvet armchair by the window wasn't merely decorative. It was for people who needed a few minutes of peace before returning to the world.

That afternoon, my navy-blue dress lay across the armchair.

I had brought it that morning in a garment bag, intending to change after work. I had a reservation for one at a small restaurant on Łasztownia. I wasn't planning to explain to anyone why a woman who ran a successful bookshop needed such a carefully planned evening alone. I had spent the past few months organising other people's lives: orders,

valuations, appointments, searches for rare editions, and helping friends who always seemed to have some urgent problem. Now I wanted to do something entirely for myself.

At five twenty-seven, my phone rang.

Maria's name appeared on the screen. She was my friend and former partner in every undertaking that began with the words "It's just a small favour."

"If you're about to ask me to store another six boxes of books, the answer is no," I said instead of hello.

"Three. But that's not why I'm calling."

"Maria."

"Do you remember the Pod Żurawiem bookshop?"

I glanced at the bookcase behind the counter. On its highest shelf stood an old clothbound volume of poetry I had bought there when I was still a student. The bookshop had occupied a building in a courtyard off Jagiellońska Street. It had closed more than a decade earlier, and its windows had long been covered with yellowing sheets of paper.

"Of course I remember."

"The new owner wants to open it for one evening before deciding what to do with the premises. Invite some former customers, recreate a little of the atmosphere. I thought you might help with the books."

I felt the familiar prick of interest. Pod Żurawiem hadn't been an ordinary shop. It was where I had discovered that you could spend an entire afternoon among shelves of books without feeling lonely for a single moment. The former owner, Mrs Helena, had let us sit on the floor with volumes we couldn't afford. I had no desire to see that place transformed into yet another café with fashionable chairs.

"I can lend a few period editions. And help put together a selection of titles. But I'm not taking responsibility for organising the entire event."

"That's exactly why I'm calling. Someone else is handling the displays."

I heard papers rustling, followed by Maria's unmistakable hesitation.

"Who?" I asked.

"Zenon Leśny."

I rested my hand against the countertop. For a moment, all I could hear was the distant rattle of a tram and the quiet hum of the fan above the door.

I hadn't seen Zenon in almost nine years. He had once been one of those people who could walk into a room and immediately notice something everyone else had overlooked. He would move a lamp, open a window, or shift a chair, and suddenly the entire space would make sense. He designed exhibitions, museum displays, and small interiors, giving each of them a personality of its own. He also had an irritating habit of asking questions that couldn't be answered without revealing something personal.

"I thought he lived in Poznań," I said.

"He's moved back to Szczecin. He's been here for a while."

"I see."

"Delfina, you don't have to turn this into a historic occasion."

"I'm not."

"I can hear that."

I said nothing. I remembered the last evening we had spent talking for any real length of time. We had been sitting in an empty gallery after an exhibition had ended, and Zenon had told me about a project that was supposed to transform his professional life. He had a wife, plans, and a clearly defined future. I had a newly opened bookshop and the conviction that becoming close to the wrong person could cost more than being alone.

Nothing had ever happened between us that we would have needed to hide.

Perhaps that was precisely why I remembered that evening with such uncomfortable clarity.

"I'll send you the details tomorrow," Maria announced. "And don't worry, nobody's going to disturb you today."

I ended the call without believing her final sentence.

At five forty-two, I heard the bell above the door.

I was standing in front of the mirror in the back room, with one button of my blouse undone. I hurried back into the shop, ready to politely inform a late customer that we were closing.

But the words died on my lips.

Zenon Leśny stood in the middle of the bookshop with a flat portfolio tucked beneath his arm. He wore a charcoal-grey coat and a light-coloured shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His hair, once dark, had turned noticeably grey at the temples. I also noticed the fine lines around his eyes. He looked every one of his forty-nine years, and there was something unexpectedly attractive about that.

He didn't immediately look around at the books.

He was looking at me.

"Delfina."

He said my name so naturally that it might have been only yesterday since we'd last seen each other.

"Zenon. I hear you're in charge of the displays."

A faint smile appeared on his face.

"Maria's already called?"

"She warned me about a certain undertaking. She didn't mention that its representative would be turning up today."

"I was nearby. I wanted to ask whether you happened to have any old photographs of the bookshop."

"A phone call would have been easier."

"Definitely."

He made no attempt to come up with a better answer. Instead, he glanced at the dress lying on the armchair, then at the clock above the counter.

"I'm interrupting something."

"I was just closing."

"Then I won't keep you."

He said it without the slightest trace of offence, but he remained where he was. There was something in his expression I didn't remember. Uncertainty, perhaps. Or tiredness. The Zenon I had known always had a plan ready. This man looked as though he had come intending to say something important, only to lose his nerve at the last moment.

"I do have one photograph," I said. "From when the bookshop reopened after its renovation in 1998. Wait here."

I took the photograph from a drawer labelled "Szczecin — Places."

Zenon approached the counter. He stood close, but left enough space between us for me to decide whether I wanted to make it smaller. I recognised his scent, subtle and woody, and remembered how I used to prolong our conversations because of it, long after we had exhausted whatever subject we were discussing.

He leaned over the photograph.

"Mrs Helena always put that little table by the entrance," he said. "Remember? The one with the books nobody wanted to buy."

"Because she believed unwanted books needed a good place more than any others."

"You believed that too."

"I still do."

He looked at me with a smile that, this time, was more than merely polite.

"I'm glad not everything has changed."

I could have asked about his life, his wife, the years he had been away. Yet none of those questions seemed appropriate at the counter, between the cash register and a stack of unpaid invoices.

I only noticed that he wasn't wearing a wedding ring.

I didn't know what that meant, and I had no intention of inventing a story to explain it.

Zenon slipped the photograph into the envelope I had prepared.

"I'll return it tomorrow. Could I stop by in the afternoon?"

"You can leave it with Maria."

He hesitated.

"Of course."

I held the door for him as he left. The evening air smelled of rain and wet paving stones. He stopped on the pavement and turned back towards me.

"You look lovely, Delfina."

I glanced down at my ordinary blouse and unbuttoned cuff.

"I haven't had a chance to change yet."

"I wasn't talking about the dress."

For a moment, we stood facing each other, separated by the threshold of the bookshop. Then Zenon nodded, wished me a pleasant evening, and walked away towards the intersection.

I closed the door but left the lights on.

My navy-blue dress was still waiting on the armchair. My restaurant reservation was still valid. I had everything I needed for the quiet, enjoyable evening I had been looking forward to for so long.

And yet, for several minutes, I stood watching the empty pavement through the window.

Not because I wanted Zenon to come back for another photograph.

I wanted to know whether, if he no longer had any professional reason to visit, he would be capable of coming simply because he wanted to see me.

And another question troubled me even more.

If he finally found the courage to ask, would I have the courage to invite him into my life?

Chapter 1 - The Terms of Returning

The following morning, I arrived at the bookshop half an hour earlier than usual. Not because I was waiting for Zenon. At least, that was the explanation I gave myself as I rearranged the books in the window display for the third time and wondered whether my dark-green blouse looked too elegant for an ordinary working day.

The previous evening, I had eaten dinner alone, exactly as planned. I had enjoyed a glass of wine, ordered dessert, and spent most of the evening watching the lights reflected in the water. It had been pleasant. Very pleasant, in fact. Except that when the waiter asked whether I was waiting for someone, I had answered no with unnecessary firmness. Only later did I realise how much the question itself had irritated me.

Now, standing between the bookshelves, I had a much more immediate problem. Maria had sent me a preliminary plan for reviving the Pod Żurawiem bookshop during the night. Three pages full of enthusiasm, vague ideas, and sentences beginning with "We could." There was no budget, no schedule, and no indication of who would be responsible for which tasks. There was, however, a list of thirty-seven people Maria intended to invite, along with a handwritten note: "Delfina will definitely come up with something beautiful."

That was precisely what I wanted to avoid.

I loved old books, their histories, and people who could recognise value in things others considered useless. But that didn't mean I wanted to devote every spare moment to rescuing other people's ideas. In seventeen years of running

Druga Strona, I had learned that the most exhausting responsibilities were often those nobody had officially given us.

At ten o'clock, Maria walked in carrying two cups of coffee.

"You look as though you're preparing for peace negotiations," she observed.

"If you're planning to organise an event without a budget, negotiations might come in handy."

She set the coffee on the counter and looked around with the expression of someone who had noticed something suspicious.

"New blouse?"

"Old."

"But you haven't worn it in ages."

"Maria, I'm forty-five years old. I'm perfectly capable of choosing my own clothes."

"I'm not questioning your abilities."

She perched on the edge of the armchair and examined the printout I had prepared. Maria had a particular talent for launching ventures that encouraged other people to discover their own capabilities. The problem was that sometimes they discovered them against their will.

"I spoke to the owner of the premises," she said. "Her name is Natalia Borkowska. She inherited the tenement building from her aunt. She wants to see whether the old bookshop could become a meeting place again."

"So she doesn't know whether she's going to reopen it?"

"That's why we're organising this evening. To show there's interest."

"And if there isn't?"

Maria put down her coffee.

"Then at least we'll give the place a proper farewell."

I couldn't deny that the argument appealed to me. I remembered Mrs Helena sitting behind the counter with a pencil tucked into her hair. I remembered winter afternoons when she let us read beside a little heater. She had been one of the first people to tell me I should make a career out of books.

"I can put together a selection of a hundred titles," I said. "Some from my own collection, some on consignment. But I want control over where they're displayed and how they're protected."

"Zenon has his own concept."

"I know. And that's exactly why I intend to establish boundaries from the beginning."

The bell above the door interrupted us.

Zenon entered carrying a drawing tube and a large paper bag. He wasn't wearing his coat this time. A navy-blue sweater emphasised the breadth of his shoulders, and the grey at his temples was more noticeable in the morning light than it had been the previous day. I also noticed that he was carrying the same portfolio into which he had slipped my photograph.

"Good morning," he said. "I hope you haven't started without me."

"We're just establishing what you're not allowed to do," I replied.

He looked at Maria, then at me.

"Very sensible. It's always better to know the restrictions before making a mistake."

Maria smiled with a satisfaction she didn't even try to conceal.

Zenon spread several sheets across the table. They were sketches of the old bookshop, sectional drawings of the rooms, and proposals for lighting arrangements. He worked with the precision I remembered. Every line had a purpose. He wasn't trying to impress us with complicated solutions. He presented the space as though he could already see its possibilities before the dust and old furniture had been removed.

"I want to uncover the original wall of shelving," he explained. "Leave the traces of how the place was used. People shouldn't walk into a new bookshop pretending to be an old one. They should see somewhere that has genuinely survived."

"I agree," I said.

He raised his eyebrows.

"That quickly?"

"Don't get used to it."

I pointed to the central section of the plan.

"You're proposing open tables of books here. I won't agree to that if they're going to hold my copies."

"Why?"

"Because people will put them back anywhere they please. Some are more than a hundred years old. Others have delicate bindings. I'm not going to explain to the

owners of consigned books that someone used a first edition as a coaster."

Zenon studied the sketch.

"Then we need copies people can handle without worrying about damaging them."

"That changes the nature of the display."

"Possibly. But if we put everything behind glass, we'll create a small museum, not an evening celebrating the revival of a bookshop."

Maria looked from one of us to the other.

"Perhaps we can find a compromise?"

"First, I want to hear exactly what Zenon is proposing," I said.

He turned the sheet over and sketched several rectangles.

"Three zones. The first with books visitors can browse freely. The second with valuable editions, properly protected. The third with a place where former customers can share their stories. But on one condition."

"What condition?"

He looked directly into my eyes.

"I don't want you to treat this as another exhibition you can prepare alone and then hand over once it's finished. We need to work together. From the beginning."

I didn't like his tone. It was calm but firm. I liked it even less that he was probably right.

"I don't need a supervisor," I replied.

"And I have no intention of being one."

"Then why are you making our collaboration dependent on my involvement at every stage?"

"Because you know the history of this place and the people who used to come here. Without you, I'll create a beautiful set. With you, we might bring something real back to life."

For a moment, I didn't know what to say. Zenon wasn't trying to take over my area of expertise. Quite the opposite. He spoke about my knowledge with such conviction that it was difficult to find an argument against his proposal.

"I can give this project two afternoons a week," I announced. "No more."

"That's enough to begin with."

"And no spontaneous visits with more ideas."

A barely perceptible smile appeared on his face.

"That's a particularly difficult condition."

"All the more reason to put it in writing."

Maria laughed, but I remained serious. I knew how quickly I could surrender my time to other people. I could also recognise when someone was interesting enough to make my own rules begin to seem excessive.

For the next hour, we discussed the possibilities for the old bookshop. Maria contacted Natalia by telephone, while I checked the availability of editions that might be included in the exhibition. Zenon listened carefully. When I talked about the value of a particular binding, he didn't interrupt. When he explained the importance of lighting in shaping how people experienced a space, I didn't try to prove I knew better.

That balance was surprisingly pleasant.

Around noon, Maria had to leave for a meeting. Zenon and I remained alone at the table, surrounded by sketches.

He rolled up one sheet but didn't reach for the next.

"Did you really want to leave early yesterday?" he asked.

"I really did."

"Did you manage it?"

"Yes. I had dinner on Łasztownia."

"Was it good?"

"Very."

"I'm glad."

He said it so simply that, for a moment, I couldn't think of an answer. He didn't ask who I had been with. He didn't try to draw conclusions. He was interested in the evening itself, as though the fact that I had done something for myself was important enough.

"And you?" I asked. "What did you do after you left here?"

"I went home. Tried to work on the project, but didn't get very far."

"Why not?"

He rubbed the back of his neck.

"I was thinking about how much Szczecin has changed. And how strange it is to return to places where you've left a part of yourself."

I didn't know whether he was talking exclusively about the city. I felt tempted to ask what had actually brought him back. Instead, I reached for my cup.

"Some places welcome us back," I said. "Others no longer belong to us."

"And people?"

I looked at him.

"People never belong to us, Zenon."

He accepted my answer without smiling.

"You're right."

Silence settled between us. It wasn't awkward, but it carried a weight I couldn't ignore. Zenon watched me for a moment as though he intended to add something. Eventually, he reached for his portfolio.

"I'll prepare a revised version of the design. I'd like to show it to you on Thursday."

"What time?"

"After the bookshop closes would be most convenient."

"For whom?"

He gave a quiet laugh.

"For me, certainly."

"On Thursday, I have a bookbinding restoration class. I finish at six thirty."

"I could come at seven."

"You want to talk about work after hours again?"

He stopped by the door.

"It seems I have a particular talent for that."

I didn't answer immediately. His gaze lingered on my face a little longer than an ordinary professional conversation required.

"Send me the design beforehand," I said. "I'll decide whether a meeting is necessary."

He nodded.

"Of course, Delfina."

After he left, I returned to clearing the table. Only several minutes later did I notice that he had left a small sheet of paper behind. It was a pencil sketch of the entrance to the old bookshop. Among the details of the façade, he had included a small bench beneath the window.

At the bottom, he had written: "For those who aren't ready to leave just yet."

I stared at those words for a long moment.

I didn't know whether he had meant only the former customers of the bookshop. What I did know was that, for the first time in a very long while, someone had challenged my plan without making me feel diminished. Zenon wasn't asking me to abandon my own opinions. He wanted me to bring them into something we could create together.

That was a distinction that could prove dangerous.

Maria called that afternoon.

"So? How did it go?"

"We established the basic terms."

"Is that all?"

"What were you expecting?"

"Nothing. But Zenon called me a little while ago and asked whether you're always this demanding."

I felt a flicker of irritation.

"I hope you told him the truth."

"I said you're even worse when you trust someone."

"Very helpful."

Maria laughed.

"Do you know what he said?"

I didn't ask, but she told me anyway.

"He said that in that case, he'd have to make an effort."

I ended the call shortly afterwards, explaining that I had customers. In reality, the bookshop was empty, and I spent several minutes standing behind the counter, looking towards the entrance.

I didn't like it when someone tried to earn my trust. Too often, it meant they wanted something specific from me.

Zenon wanted something too. My knowledge, my time, and my involvement. I should therefore treat him like any other colleague.

The problem was that no other colleague could make me wonder what I might like to hear next simply by saying one quiet sentence.

That evening, I received a message.

"Thank you for today. And for not throwing me out after the first five minutes."

I replied almost immediately.

"Don't give me a reason, and I won't have to."

Three dots appeared on the screen, disappeared, and then appeared again.

"I'll do my best. Goodnight, Delfina."

I put my phone down. I didn't read the message again until just before bed, when the flat had fallen quiet and I no longer had anything sensible to do that could justify my curiosity.

There was nothing particularly remarkable about it.

That was precisely what unsettled me.

Chapter 2 - After Closing Hours

At five fifty-three on Thursday afternoon, I received a message from Zenon.

"The design is ready. I've emailed it to you. If you decide a meeting isn't necessary, I'll understand."

I read it during my bookbinding restoration class, sitting over a nineteenth-century volume of poetry. The workshop smelled of bookbinding glue and leather, and my teacher, Mrs Alicja, was explaining why the drying process must never be rushed.

"Delfina, are you listening to me?" she asked.

"Of course."

"Then tell me why we don't use a hairdryer."

"Because patience is one of the few things technology can't replace."

Alicja gave me a suspicious look.

"Good answer. Although I have a feeling you're not talking exclusively about books."

I placed my phone face down. For the next half hour, I tried to concentrate on my work, but my thoughts kept returning to the message. Zenon hadn't tried to force a meeting. He had given me the opportunity to refuse, and that only made me want to see him more.

After class, I opened the design he had sent. It was considerably better than the first version. He had incorporated all my comments about protecting the books while still finding a way to keep the space accessible to visitors. Instead of enclosed display cases, he proposed low,