You Can Want Me Tomorrow Too

They don't have to be perfect to let themselves be loved



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ROMANS

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INTRO

At seven forty-three in the morning, I stood in the middle of what would soon be my yoga studio, trying to convince myself that the cracking sound coming from the wall didn't mean disaster.

The renovation was supposed to take another twenty-two days. I knew that precisely because, for the past six weeks, I'd been keeping a spreadsheet in which every day had its own color, every delay earned a red cell, and every expense that exceeded the budget immediately became a bold number. I didn't consider it an obsession. It was simply that, after years of working in rented rooms, arranging my schedule around other people's classes, and apologizing to clients for a changing room the size of a hallway closet, I was finally going to have a place of my own.

Mine.

That was the word I liked best.

I ran my hand over the freshly plastered wall. White dust clung to my fingertips. Large mirrors would hang here. I was planning a row of plants beside the window. Farther back, behind a wooden partition, there would be a small reception area with somewhere to make tea. The floor would be light-colored, warm, and matte. Nothing accidental. No fashionable decorations that would look like something from a decade-old catalog in two years' time.

I knew what I wanted.

Which was why I didn't need an interior designer.

And I certainly didn't need Dariusz Kania.

"Lara?"

His voice made me turn around too quickly.

He stood in the open doorway, holding a case of samples with one hand while adjusting the strap of the bag slung over his shoulder with the other. He wore a dark jacket, a gray sweater, and the same calm expression I remembered from years ago. Except that back then, I'd thought he was simply confident. Now I saw something more irritating: a man who looked as though he always knew exactly how long he could remain silent before the other person started talking too much.

"Dariusz."

He smiled.

"That almost sounded like a greeting."

"I haven't decided yet."

He took off his jacket, surveyed the room, and, instead of answering, walked a few steps toward its center. He wasn't in a hurry. His gaze traveled over the ceiling, the walls, and the windows. The exposed wires, bags of adhesive, and planks stacked in the corner.

That was what I remembered most clearly about him. His attentiveness. Dariusz didn't merely look at rooms. He read them.

We'd met nine years earlier when I was helping a friend open a small café. He was designing the interior. I was only supposed to choose a few accessories, but somehow that had turned into three weeks of discussions about why the lighting above the tables mattered more than the color of the cups.

Afterward, life did what it usually does to people who haven't yet become important enough to each other.

It pulled us apart without any effort at all.

"I thought you'd send someone from your office," I said.

"I could have."

"But you didn't."

He looked at me.

"Because you wrote that you didn't need anyone."

"I still don't."

"Which is exactly why I came myself."

I let out a snort of laughter, although I hadn't intended to give him that satisfaction.

Dariusz approached the wall where I'd taped up a printout of my floor plan. He studied it for a moment, then pointed to the area near reception.

"You want to keep this here?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because that's where reception is."

"I can see that. I'm asking why it's there."

I folded my arms.

"When clients come through the entrance, they see the person behind the counter. The storage area is behind it. The passageway stays clear here. It's the simplest arrangement."

"The simplest arrangement isn't always the best."

"I'm starting to remember why, nine years ago, I wanted to strangle you with a lamp."

"The black one?"

"That very one."

"It was too heavy."

I smiled despite myself.

And that was when the first crack appeared in my perfectly organized morning. Not because Dariusz had questioned my plan. People did that all the time. Not because he looked good, although it would have been dishonest to pretend I hadn't noticed.

It was something far more inconvenient.

Being around him reminded me of a version of myself who hadn't yet planned every detail of her life.

"Show me what you'd change," I said.

I raised one finger.

"Show me. Don't change anything."

"Of course."

He took a laser measuring device out of his bag and began checking distances. For the next few minutes, we moved around the room almost without speaking. I explained my ideas, and he asked short, precise questions. How many people would attend each class? Did I also want to run workshops? Would the studio be open in the evenings? Would clients leave their shoes near the entrance?

He didn't immediately suggest a single change.

That disarmed me more effectively than criticism would have.

Eventually, he stopped beside the wall opposite the windows.

"If you leave reception where you're planning to put it, you'll lose the best natural light in the second half of the day."

"Reception doesn't need natural light."

"You don't need natural light at reception. There's a difference."

I looked at him.

"Interior design philosophy?"

"Functionality. You're going to spend more time here than any of your clients."

"I'm not designing this place for myself."

"That's a mistake."

He said it calmly, but something inside me immediately tightened.

"You don't know my business."

"I know people who design their spaces so completely around everyone else's needs that, a year later, they don't even have anywhere to sit themselves."

"And that's exactly why I didn't hire a designer."

"And yet you called me."

"I called because the contractor says the wall beside the bathroom might require changes to the plumbing. I need a consultation. One consultation."

Dariusz studied me for a moment, as though deciding whether to say something more.

"One consultation won't be enough."

"Five minutes ago, it was."

"Five minutes ago, I hadn't seen that."

He pointed toward the ceiling.

Only then did I notice the thin line running along the corner. The crack looked harmless, but it extended directly above the spot where the cabinets were supposed to go.

"Is that new?" I asked.

"Looks like it."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that before anyone starts installing anything, you need to find out what's happening above it. And I want to see the plumbing beside the bathroom."

"You want to?"

"All right. You should inspect it. I can tell you what to look for."

That single sentence was enough to make me see him differently.

He hadn't said he would take over. He hadn't announced that he'd handle everything. He'd left the decision to me.

"How long?" I asked.

"Today?"

"No. The whole thing. If I agreed to let you review the project."

Dariusz rested a hand on the windowsill.

"Two days for an assessment. Then you decide whether you want to change anything."

"And you?"

"What about me?"

"What do you get out of it?"

For a moment, the faintly amused expression disappeared from his face.

"A job."

"You have your own company. I'm assuming you're not sitting around waiting for a small yoga studio to come along."

My question was playful, but his answer came a fraction too late.

"Any project can be worthwhile."

I noticed the hesitation. Brief, almost imperceptible.

I could have ignored it.

I didn't.

"Very diplomatic."

"I'm learning."

"Since when?"

"Since honesty started costing me dearly."

He looked at me, and this time there was no trace of a smile.

A cool gust of air swept through the open doorway and caught the sheet of paper displaying my floor plan. One corner came loose from the wall, and the page began to tremble slightly.

Dariusz walked over, pressed the tape back into place, and then let his fingers rest on the paper beside my handwritten notes.

"Do you still plan everything?" he asked.

"Do you still think a plan is just a suggestion?"

"Only when someone hasn't left enough room in it to change their mind."

He stood close. Not so close that I had to move away.

Just close enough that I could decide whether I wanted to.

I didn't move.

"Two days," I said.

"Two days."

"You don't change anything without my permission."

"Lara, it's your studio."

"Exactly."

He held out his hand.

I shook it.

His palm was warm from the time he'd spent with his hand tucked into his jacket pocket, while mine was cold from touching the walls. The contrast lasted a second, perhaps two, but long enough to remind me of something I hadn't intended to remember at all: that I'd once liked the way he looked at me, before we each went our separate ways.

I was the first to release his hand.

Dariusz gathered his samples and documents.

"I'll come tomorrow at eight."

"Eight fifteen."

"Why?"

"Because I drink my coffee at eight."

"Still without sugar?"

I froze.

He was already at the door.

"You remember?"

He turned his head.

"I don't forget everything just because nine years have passed."

I was left alone in the middle of the room, surrounded by dust, planks, and my perfect plan, which less than an hour earlier had seemed complete.

I stared at the doorway longer than was sensible.

And for the first time in a very long while, I wasn't wondering whether I'd made the right decision.

I was wondering what I would do if, tomorrow, I still wanted Dariusz to walk through that door.

Chapter 1 - Terms I Hadn't Anticipated

The following morning, at eight fifteen, Dariusz Kania arrived at my studio carrying two coffees and wearing the expression of a man who expected trouble but intended to treat it as an interesting challenge.

I'd been sitting on the windowsill for twenty minutes, going through the cost estimate. During the night, I'd received a message from the contractor. The crack near the ceiling needed to be inspected, and the plumbing beside the bathroom might interfere with the planned cabinetry. No specific amount, no deadline, just a polite assurance that everything could be sorted out.

I hated assurances like that.

"No sugar," Dariusz said, handing me a paper cup. "Although, judging by your expression, I should have brought something stronger."

"If you've got an occupancy permit and an extra thirty thousand złoty in that bag, you can stay."

"I've got a tape measure, a computer, and two sandwiches."

"The sandwiches sound promising."

He smiled, but then his attention shifted to the documents spread out beside me.

"Bad news?"

I handed him my phone with the contractor's message. He read it twice without commenting. Then he set down his coffee and approached the wall he'd examined the previous day.

"First, we'll establish the facts. Then we'll deal with the costs."

"You sound like a man who's never had to check his bank balance before paying an invoice."

He turned around.

"Don't assume that."

There was no smile when he said it. For a second, an awkward silence settled between us, although I couldn't have explained why. Then he took a sketchbook out of his bag and returned to his businesslike tone.

"I want to speak to the contractor, see the plumbing documentation, and check whether the proposed layout makes sense in the first place."

"My layout makes sense."

"It makes sense for someone who's trying to fit as many things as possible into a small space. I'm not sure it makes sense for the person who's going to work here."

"Here we go again."

"I haven't finished yet."

He walked over to the window and pointed to the place where I'd planned the reception desk. He explained that the tall cabinetry would restrict the natural light reaching part of the room, while the narrow passageway could become a problem when one group was leaving and the next was arriving at the same time. He spoke calmly and practically, without that particular tone some men used when explaining obvious things to me.

The worst part was that he had valid arguments.

"I'm not giving up my twelve places," I said.

"I'm not asking you to."

"Then what are you asking?"

"Permission to see whether those twelve places can be arranged more effectively."

"We agreed yesterday that you'd have two days to assess the layout."

"And that's exactly what I'm doing."

"Then stop looking at my walls as if they've personally offended you."

He laughed.

His laughter was different from what I remembered nine years earlier. Lower, shorter, less carefree. I wondered how many things must have happened in his life during those years that I knew absolutely nothing about.

And then I was irritated with myself for caring at all.

At nine, Marek, the renovation contractor, arrived. He was a reliable tradesman, but one of those people who treated every additional question as a personal insult. The moment he saw Dariusz, he frowned.

"And you are?"

"Dariusz Kania. I'm consulting on the functional layout."

"We already have a design."

"Which is precisely why I'd like to see how the plumbing routes have been arranged."

Marek looked at me.

"Ms. Lara, if everyone starts changing things around here, we'll never finish."

I felt that familiar stab of irritation. Since the renovation began, I'd repeatedly had to remind people that I was the one financing the project, not some girl who needed everything patiently explained to her so she'd agree to whatever they suggested.

"No one's changing anything yet," I replied. "We're checking the problem you reported yesterday."

Dariusz didn't interrupt. He stood beside me and let me lead the conversation.

I appreciated that more than I wanted to admit.

Marek showed us photographs of the exposed plumbing. Dariusz asked questions about where the pipes ran, the thickness of the proposed enclosure, and maintenance access. At one point, he requested documentation from the previous renovation. It turned out that the property owner was supposed to send it but hadn't done so yet.

"So we don't know exactly what's behind that wall," Dariusz summarized.

"We have a rough idea," Marek replied.

"A rough idea isn't enough if we're going to close off access for several years."

Silence followed.

I didn't like it when someone confirmed my worst fears.

"What do you suggest?" I asked.

"Put the enclosure in that section on hold until the plumbing has been inspected. The other work can continue. There's no reason to stop everything."

Marek nodded, although without much enthusiasm.

When he left, I leaned against the wall and closed my eyes.

"Have I just lost a week?"

"Not yet."

"Such a comforting phrase."

"I'm not going to comfort you until I know whether there's a reason to."

I opened my eyes.

"Were you always this unbearably practical?"

"No. I used to be more unbearable."

I studied him more carefully. He had short, dark hair with the first threads of gray appearing at his temples, and fine lines around his eyes. He didn't look like a man trying to stop time. He looked like someone who'd learned not to apologize for its passing.

"I want to show you something," he said.

He spread a large sheet of paper across the floor and sketched the rectangular outline of the room. He marked the entrance, windows, bathroom, and planned reception area. Then he moved reception to another position, changed the direction of the passageway, and suggested low cabinetry instead of a tall partition.

He wasn't trying to turn my studio into an elegant showroom. He kept the wooden floor, the muted green accents, and the open space I'd wanted so badly.

But suddenly, everything looked more spacious.

"This is irritating," I said.

"What exactly?"

"That I like it better."

Dariusz looked up.

"I can pretend I didn't hear that."

"I'd appreciate it."

I moved closer to the sketch and knelt beside him. Our shoulders were almost level. I caught the faint scent of his cologne, something woody and warm, without any overpowering sweetness.

I pointed to the area beside the window.

"This space has to stay available for individual sessions. I'm not giving it up."

"Why is it so important?"

I hesitated.

I could have said it was about offering additional classes and increasing revenue. That would have been true, but it wouldn't have been the whole truth.

"Because not everyone wants to exercise in front of twelve other people," I replied. "Sometimes someone comes back after a long break, after an illness, or simply on a day when they don't feel like being watched. I want a space where that person doesn't have to prove anything to anyone."

Dariusz put down his pencil.

"That wasn't in your project description."

"Because you can't put everything into a spreadsheet."

"That's exactly what I've been trying to tell you since yesterday."

I gave him a look of exaggerated severity.

"Don't use my own arguments against me."

"Then stop giving me such good ones."

For a moment, we looked at each other across a distance that suddenly seemed too small for an ordinary consultation. Dariusz was the first to turn back to the sketch, but he did it slowly, as though he'd noticed the shift between us too.

"We'll keep that space," he said. "We'll find another solution."

At noon, I received a call from the property owner. The plumbing documentation was in the building manager's archives and might not arrive until the following day. When I passed the information on to Dariusz, he checked his watch.

"In that case, I can prepare two alternatives today. Tomorrow, we'll check which one can actually be done."

"And if neither works?"

"Then we'll make a third."

"You don't accept defeat?"

"I do. I just prefer to explore every possibility first."

The phone in his pocket vibrated. He glanced at the screen, and his face tightened for a moment. He declined the call.

"Do you need to answer that?" I asked.

"Not now."

"It could be important."

"I know."

He answered too quickly. I didn't want to intrude on his private affairs, but I remembered that brief moment.

Before leaving, he stopped in the doorway.

"Lara, there's one more thing."

"I'm listening."

"If I'm going to continue working on this project, I need something more from you than permission to draw."

"Meaning?"

"You have to let me tell you when your idea doesn't work. Even if you're very fond of it."

I folded my arms.

"And you have to accept that the final decision is mine."

"Of course."

"No taking offense."

"No taking offense."

"And no making changes behind my back."

"I never work that way."

I studied him for a moment.

"In that case, we have a condition."

"Just one?"

"For starters."

He smiled faintly.

"I'll bring you a detailed proposal tomorrow."

"And I'll prepare a list of things you're absolutely forbidden to touch."

"I suspect it'll be a long one."

"Very."

After he left, I looked at the sketch he'd left on the floor. Beside my carefully prepared plan lay his drawing, full of corrections and brief notes. Two different ways of thinking about the same place.

Over the past few years, I'd learned that independence meant being able to make decisions for myself. I didn't need anyone to take responsibility for my life.

But perhaps there was a difference between handing someone control and letting them close enough to see where I was making mistakes.

That evening, as I was closing the studio, I found a short note on the back of his sketch.

"Don't forget to leave room for yourself."

I read it twice.

Then, instead of filing the paper away in a binder, I took it home.