Laura Bellini



This Way to Closeness

Their shared path begins with an honest choice

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ROMANS

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ALL-IN Rafał Płonkowski



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INTRO

The first time I saw Wit Górny was at the exact moment someone moved my design thirty centimetres.

There was nothing romantic about it. I was standing ankle-deep in wet grass beside the Oder River, clutching a folder to my chest and holding a phone that had been trying unsuccessfully to find a signal for the past ten minutes. The November wind kept turning the pages pinned to a makeshift information board, while two construction workers debated whether the concrete foundation of an old rubbish bin was still good for anything.

Thirty centimetres, however, meant more than most people might imagine. In my design, that was precisely the distance between a safe cycle path and a collision with the roots of an old lime tree. After two months of measurements, consultations and revisions to the drawings, I knew exactly why the line ran where I had placed it.

So when I saw a red stake marked with the number seventeen driven into the ground, I felt a surge of anger.

"Who moved this?" I asked.

The worker in the orange jacket looked at me over his coffee cup.

"The path guy."

"Which path guy?"

"Tall one. Navy jacket. Said it'd be better this way."

I had yet to meet the man who thought he could improve someone else's work without making a single phone call, but I already disliked him.

I was thirty-five, owned my own urban planning studio and had enough experience to know that the words "it'll be better this way" were usually spoken by people who wouldn't have to answer for the consequences later. Over the past seven years, I'd built my business on the exact opposite principles: measurements, transparent decisions and putting my name to every solution, including the inconvenient ones.

The redevelopment of the Opole riverside boulevard was supposed to be the project that would finally allow my small studio to stop living from one commission to the next. It wasn't just about the money. I wanted to create a place where an elderly woman carrying her shopping, a child riding a bicycle and someone using a wheelchair wouldn't have to compete for the same metre of pavement.

I took the plan out of my folder and knelt beside the stake.

"I wouldn't recommend doing that."

The voice came from behind me. Low, calm, carrying the irritating confidence of someone who didn't need to raise his voice to be heard.

I turned my head.

The man was around forty, with dark hair touched by grey at the temples and a navy jacket left unzipped despite the cold. He was carrying rolled-up drawings and a paper cup. He didn't look like someone who had just ruined another person's morning.

He looked like someone who knew exactly why he'd done it.

"What wouldn't you recommend?" I asked.

"Pulling out the stake. There's a cable underneath it that isn't shown on the current map."

I looked at the ground, then back at him.

"And how do you know about it?"

"From the technical documentation."

"There was no such cable in the documentation supplied to the competition entrants."

For a moment, he studied me more closely. He didn't look away, but he didn't answer immediately either.

"Perhaps the documentation is incomplete."

"That's quite a serious problem."

"I agree."

That easy agreement irritated me more than an argument would have.

I stood up, brushing the dirt from my knee. He was a good fifteen centimetres taller than me, but he didn't perform that familiar masculine manoeuvre of stepping just a little too close. He stayed exactly where he was and waited.

"Rita Gawron," I introduced myself. "Designer of Option B."

"Wit Górny. Option C."

Of course.

I already knew quite a lot about him, although we'd never met. He'd designed pedestrian and cycle routes in several cities and had a reputation for getting things done. His proposal for the Opole boulevard was the strongest competition for mine. He prioritised the flow of movement and the attractiveness of the routes. I focused on

accessibility, places to rest and maintaining a balance between different users.

"So you're the one who moved my path alignment."

"I marked an alternative route. I didn't change your design."

"The stake is standing directly on my survey line."

"Because I wanted to show the difference."

"You could have used another colour."

He looked at the red plastic, then at me.

"That's a fair point."

He had a dangerous way of accepting criticism. He didn't instinctively defend himself or try to win every exchange. It made him harder to stay angry with, which I decided was another of his faults.

A gust of wind snatched a loose sheet from my folder. Wit caught it before it could fall into the river. There was no dramatic lunge to the rescue. He simply reached out at exactly the right moment.

"Cross-section?" he asked, handing me the drawing.

"Yes."

"You've handled the access down to the water beautifully."

I regarded him suspiciously.

"Is that a compliment or the introduction to another correction?"

"A compliment. I do give them occasionally."

A brief smile appeared on his face. It wasn't particularly broad, but it changed the expression in his eyes. Only then

did I notice that they were grey-green, with fine lines at the corners suggesting he smiled more often than his businesslike tone implied.

I was the first to look away.

Not because I was flustered. At least, that was what I told myself.

"I'd like to see that documentation," I said.

"I understand."

"I'm not asking whether you understand. I'm asking whether you can make it available to me."

This time his smile disappeared.

"I need to check the conditions under which it was provided."

I stared at him for a moment.

"So someone gave you materials that the other designers didn't receive?"

"I said I need to check their status."

"That's not an answer."

"No. Not yet."

There was no superiority in his voice. Rather, there was a caution that seemed completely at odds with the ease with which he'd been placing his markers on my territory just a few minutes earlier.

Before I could press him further, my phone rang.

The name of the official coordinating the competition appeared on the screen.

"Ms Gawron, I'm glad I managed to reach you. There's been an organisational change. We'll be holding a meeting

with local residents next week. The committee has decided that the authors of the two highest-rated proposals will prepare a joint presentation of the possible solutions."

I looked at Wit.

"Joint?"

"Yes. The idea is to show the points of agreement and the differences, without prejudging the outcome of the competition. You and Mr Górny."

Wit had evidently heard his surname because he raised his eyebrows.

"I understand," I answered cautiously.

"We'll send the documents today. I'm counting on your professional cooperation."

I ended the call before I said something I might later regret.

For a while, the only sound between us was the water striking the stone reinforcement along the riverbank. On the opposite bank, someone was walking a dog, and a gull screeched above our heads.

"Looks like we'll be working together," Wit said.

"Looks like we'll be presenting together. There's an important difference."

"To you?"

"To anyone who doesn't want to confuse cooperation with surrendering their own opinion."

He accepted that without taking offence.

"In that case, I suggest we start by establishing what neither of us is prepared to sacrifice."

It was reasonable. So reasonable that I wanted to refuse purely out of stubbornness.

Instead, I slipped the plan back into my folder.

"I won't sacrifice the transparency of the competition."

He looked at me longer than he had before. His fingers tightened around the paper cup until the lid bent slightly.

"And I won't sacrifice the safety of the people who'll use this place," he replied.

"That shouldn't put us on opposite sides."

"It shouldn't."

For a moment, I had the impression he was about to say something more. Instead, he stepped aside, making room for me on the narrow, muddy passage.

I could have left. I should have gone back to the office, checked the documents and prepared an official question for the committee. I had my own work, my own responsibilities, and I certainly didn't need a handsome competitor to make me happy.

And yet I stayed.

"Mr Górny?"

He turned around.

"Please, call me Wit."

"I'll think about that. I wanted to ask whether you have a little time today to show me where that cable runs."

He smiled again, more slowly this time.

"I can spare you a whole hour."

"I need twenty minutes."

"We'll see whether that's enough."

We started walking along the river, keeping enough distance between us for two people who were still strangers.

I didn't yet understand why his presence was so effective at unsettling the calm I'd worked so hard to establish. All I knew was that I wanted an answer about the documentation just as badly as I wanted to hear what he would say when we stopped talking about pathways.

I glanced at his profile and suddenly found myself thinking something far less comfortable.

Could a man I wasn't sure I could trust professionally become someone I would want to let closer?

Chapter 1 - Two Versions of the Same Path

The next morning, my desk held three printouts, two empty coffee cups and one official letter that I had already read four times, each reading leaving me more irritated than the last.

The competition committee expected Wit Górny and me to prepare a joint presentation for the residents of Opole within six days. We were supposed to show the most important differences between our proposals, identify ways they might be combined and present a solution that could be put forward for further consultation. At the same time, the competition remained undecided, and our designs would still be assessed independently.

It sounded reasonable until you started wondering who would actually own the ideas developed during our collaboration.

"You're looking at that letter as though it owes you money," observed Nina, my colleague.

Nina was twenty-nine, had a talent for architectural visualisations and possessed an almost supernatural ability to recognise my mood from the way I put down my pen.

"I wish it would give me back six weeks of my life."

"Is that how long it took you to prepare the design?"

"That's how long it took me to convince myself that all the competition rules were clear."

Nina perched on the windowsill. Outside our office on Krakowska Street, people hurried to work, burying their

faces in their scarves. I liked that view. It reminded me that cities weren't built for impressive visualisations but for all those people who simply wanted to get where they were going.

"And the other designer?" she asked.

"What about him?"

"I hear he's good."

"He is."

"You said that as though you'd just confessed to a crime."

I pushed a sketch towards her, showing the problematic section of the underground utilities. Yesterday's twenty minutes with Wit had turned into almost an hour. He'd shown me where the cable ran, explained the risks associated with the proposed surface construction and admitted that my solution for pedestrians was better than his. He still hadn't shared the document he was referring to, however.

"That's exactly why he's a problem," I replied. "He knows what he's doing. And I don't like competing against people who know what they're doing."

Nina laughed, but I quickly grew serious. I'd submitted a formal request for the latest technical documentation to be made available to all participants. I had no intention of accusing anyone without evidence, but I couldn't pretend the problem didn't exist.

My phone vibrated.

A message from an unknown number contained just a few sentences.

"Good morning, Ms Gawron. Wit Górny here. I suggest we meet at eleven in the council's consultation room. I'll bring

an outline for our joint presentation. I assume you've already managed to prepare a list of things you refuse to agree to."

I smiled despite myself.

"What happened?" Nina asked.

"Nothing."

"Rita, you just smiled at your phone."

"It's a defensive reaction."

I replied: "It's a long list. Please set aside two hours."

His answer came immediately.

"In that case, I'll bring coffee."

At eleven, I entered a small room on the second floor of the municipal offices. Wit was already there. He stood by the window, talking on his phone, but when he saw me, he ended the call and placed the device face down. Two cups of coffee and several neatly arranged sheets of paper were waiting on the table.

"Punctuality," he said. "A promising sign for our collaboration."

"I wouldn't jump to conclusions."

"Quite right. The coffee has no sugar. If you take yours sweetened, we'll be starting with a conflict."

I took a seat on the opposite side of the table.

"I don't take sugar."

"Our first point of agreement."

He handed me a cup, and I noticed that his hands were slightly reddened by the cold. He had strong, work-worn fingers that didn't fit the stereotype of a designer who spent most of his life in front of a computer. I imagined he

probably spent more time on site than most. That small observation struck me as surprisingly personal.

"Before we begin," I said, "I'd like to establish one thing. I won't agree to having my design presented as part of your proposal."

"I wasn't expecting you to."

"Nor will I agree to my solutions being used later in the competition without proper attribution."

"I understand."

"And I want every significant change to be approved by both of us."

Wit sat down opposite me.

"And I have one condition."

I closed my folder.

"I'm listening."

"We won't pretend to the residents that everything is possible when we both know it isn't."

For a moment, I wondered whether he was trying to provoke me.

"Would you care to elaborate?"

"Your design is ambitious. So is mine. But if we simply combine the most attractive elements of both proposals, we'll end up with something that can't be built within the allocated budget. People will see beautiful pictures, and six months from now someone will have to explain why half the promises have disappeared."

"I'm not proposing that we make promises we can't keep."

"I know. That's why I'm suggesting a joint consultation option that shows the real choices involved. If we move the path, we may lose some greenery. If we narrow it, we'll make cycling less comfortable. Let's not turn those decisions into marketing."

I looked at him for several seconds.

It was the first moment when I truly understood why his design had received such a high score. It wasn't about bold visualisations or fashionable materials. Wit thought about space as a series of consequences for which someone had to take responsibility.

"I agree with the principle," I said. "Provided the data is available to both of us."

I didn't need to explain what I was referring to.

Wit set down his cup.

"I've sent an enquiry about the technical documentation."

"To the council?"

"Yes."

"When will we receive an answer?"

"Hopefully before the meeting with the residents."

"Hope isn't a design methodology."

"Good thing I haven't included it in the schedule, then."

I wanted to respond with something equally sharp, but instead I opened my folder. I knew that if I allowed him to keep the conversation light, I'd soon forget why I'd come in the first place.

For the next hour, we compared the two designs. Mine included wider resting areas, gentle access slopes and small gathering places. His provided a smoother route for cyclists

and better connections to existing paths. In some places, the differences were minor; in others, they seemed almost impossible to reconcile.

When we reached the section near the old trees, Wit moved his drawing closer to mine.

"We can use your solution here."

"We can?"

"We can present it as the better option."

I looked up.

"Even if that means abandoning yours?"

"If it's better, yes."

"You surprise me."

"I suppose that's a good thing."

"I haven't decided yet."

He leaned over the plan, pointing to the junction between two routes. The scent of his cologne, subtle and woody, mingled with the aroma of coffee. The distance between us narrowed because we were both trying to see the same detail. He didn't touch me, although it would have taken only the slightest movement.

"Here, on the other hand," he said, "your proposal needs adjusting."

I moved a few centimetres away, more to regain my concentration than because I actually needed the space.

"Why?"

He explained the problem with the surface gradient and drainage. At first, I wanted to object, but after a moment I saw that he was right. It wasn't a pleasant discovery.

"All right," I admitted. "I'll check that section."

"You don't have to say it in that tone."

"What tone?"

"As though you've just signed the terms of surrender."

I looked at him over my glasses.

"Don't get used to winning."

He smiled.

"I don't intend to."

Halfway through the meeting, Katarzyna Domańska, the official coordinating the competition, looked into the room. She had the tired face of someone who had spent the entire morning answering questions she didn't yet know the answers to.

"I see you're working. Excellent. I just wanted to ask you not to present any solution as final. The committee will assess the designs according to the original criteria."

"We'd also like to clarify the rules regarding the use of technical materials," I said.

Domańska looked at Wit, then at me.

"A response to your request is being prepared."

"Could I have a specific deadline?"

"Monday at the latest."

I wrote that down.

"Thank you."

After she left, Wit stared at the closed door for a moment.

"You're persistent," he observed.

"That's a kinder description than the ones I usually hear."

"And what do you usually hear?"

"Difficult. Stubborn. Inflexible."

"Inflexibility can be a problem for someone who designs pathways."

"And excessive flexibility can be a problem for someone responsible for safety."

He laughed softly. It was the first time I'd heard him laugh rather than merely smile. I liked the sound more than I wanted to admit.

By the end of the meeting, we'd agreed on how to divide the work. I would prepare the sections concerning accessibility and public spaces, while he would be responsible for the transport layout and technical analysis. Together, we would develop three alternatives for the disputed section of the boulevard. Each of us would retain authorship of our own solutions, and all materials would go into a shared folder.

As I was packing my documents, Wit stopped me with a question.

"Ms Gawron, why does this competition matter so much to you?"

The answer was obvious, and yet I didn't feel like saying it aloud.

"It's an important commission."

"I know. I'm asking something else."

I fastened my folder.

"And why do you want to win it?"

He didn't answer immediately.

"Because I'd like to finally see a route I've designed and know that I won't be ashamed of it ten years from now."

I hadn't expected that kind of honesty.

"Those are pretty high standards."

"I know. That's why I sometimes lose."

There was a note in his voice I hadn't heard before. It wasn't regret, exactly. More the experience of a man who knew the price of his own decisions.

For a moment, I considered telling him the truth about my studio, the loan and the fact that winning the competition would allow me to hire another person. Instead, I adjusted the strap of my bag on my shoulder.

"I want people to be able to use the boulevard without having to compensate for the designer's mistakes."

Wit nodded.

"That's a good reason."

We walked out into the corridor together. At the stairs, he stopped to let a group of visitors pass. Only when the corridor had emptied did he speak again.

"On Friday, I'd like to check one section of the route on site. If you have time, your opinion would be useful."

"I have a client meeting on Friday."

"Then we'll find another time."

He didn't press me. That simplicity surprised me more than the invitation itself.

"I can do Saturday morning," I said.

He looked at me with clear interest.

"You work on Saturdays?"

"When I have to."

"And when you don't have to?"

I stopped on the stairs.

"Then I try to remember there's a life outside projects."

"Successfully?"

I shook my head.

"Not particularly."

He didn't comment. For a moment, I had the impression he'd like to ask something more, but he respected a boundary I hadn't even needed to draw.

Outside the building, we said goodbye with a brief handshake.

"See you Saturday, Ms Gawron."

"See you Saturday, Mr Górny."

As he walked away, I noticed that he didn't look back. That should have pleased me. Instead, I felt an absurd disappointment, which I immediately attributed to tiredness.

I returned to the office with a complete set of agreements, revisions to my design and the certainty that working with Wit Górny would be more difficult than I'd expected.

Not because he was my competitor.

Because it was becoming increasingly difficult to see him as nothing more than that.

Chapter 2 - The Boundaries We Set Ourselves

On Saturday morning, I woke fifteen minutes before my alarm and lay motionless for a while, watching a pale strip of light move across the ceiling.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd agreed to a professional meeting at the weekend without feeling as though someone had taken away a piece of my freedom. This time, I'd been the one to suggest the day. Even so, I needed several minutes to convince myself it was purely about work.

My phone lay on the bedside table. I checked my messages.

Wit had written the previous evening: "Nine o'clock by the bridge. Please wear comfortable shoes. I don't intend to limit our discussion to asphalt."

I'd replied: "And I don't intend to limit my comments to your ideas."

Now, reading the exchange, I smiled to myself.

I didn't like the fact that I was beginning to look forward to his replies.

For the past three years, I'd carefully kept my work and private life separate. After breaking up with Michał, with whom I'd spent almost a decade, I'd promised myself that I would never again adjust my own ambitions to suit someone else's need for security. Michał wasn't a bad man. He simply couldn't accept that my work might be just as important to me as our plans together. At first, he'd tried to support me. Later, he'd started referring to my successes as obstacles.