
Laura Bellini
Two Tickets Without Promises
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ROMANS

ISBN: 9788384901427

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRO 4
Chapter 1 - The City Belongs to No One..... 11
Chapter 2 - Boundaries Drawn in Pencil 22
Chapter 3 - What the Plans Don't Show..... 34
Chapter 4 - Things You Don't Put in a Calendar 45
Chapter 5 - The Right to Say No..... 59
Chapter 6 - The Space Between Us..... 72
Chapter 7 - A Distance That Hadn't Existed Before 84
Chapter 8 - Among Strangers, We Become Ourselves..... 96
Chapter 9 - The Price of a Single Step.....107
Chapter 10 - Everything We Never Promised..... 119
Chapter 11 - A Morning Without Ready Answers.....130
Chapter 12 - Two Directions..... 141
Chapter 13 - The Limits of Responsibility.....153
Chapter 14 - What We Don't Want to Lose.....163
Chapter 15 - The Price of Staying.....173
Chapter 16 - The Silence Between Two Cities 184
Chapter 17 - A Map of My Own Decisions.....194
Chapter 18 - An Agreement Without Sacrifices.....204
Chapter 19 - Two Tickets in Opposite Directions.....215
Chapter 20 - Room for Us 227

INTRO

On my first evening in Lisbon, I bought two tram tickets, even though I had been travelling alone for the past three years.

It wasn't a romantic gesture, nor did I have some premonition that my life was about to change. The ticket machine at the stop had simply charged me twice, and I had no desire to argue with a machine that apparently knew better than I did how many passengers ought to be taking this journey.

I slipped the tickets into the pocket of my linen blazer and looked up at the illuminated windows of the old apartment buildings. Lisbon smelled of sun-warmed stone, coffee, and salty air drifting in from the Tagus. The evening sunlight lingered on the façades, drawing out colours I could never have captured in a photograph. For a moment, I stood perfectly still, allowing myself a luxury I had barely known in recent months: I didn't have to rush anywhere.

I was thirty-eight years old, carrying a suitcase far too heavy for cobbled streets, and I had six weeks to prove that I could create an exhibition without constantly worrying about other people's expectations.

The curatorial residency in Lisbon was supposed to be more than a professional distinction. I was working on a project devoted to the memory of cities, their hidden passageways, and the places that disappeared from maps faster than they faded from the memories of their inhabitants. Warsaw had taught me how to organise other people's stories. Portugal was supposed to give me the space to finally tell my own.

An unread email from Helena Carvalho, director of Fundação Horizonte, was waiting on my phone. We had already spoken twice about the possibility of my taking a permanent position there. There was no formal offer yet, but the invitation to discuss it seemed to open a door I had been standing outside for a very long time.

I opened the message.

Lidia, we'd be delighted to discuss your plans after the residency ends. Would you have some time next Thursday?

I smiled at the screen. Thursday. A specific day, a specific time, no grand declarations. That was exactly how I liked to make decisions. Facts first, emotions afterwards, assuming the latter were necessary at all.

"Excuse me, does this tram go to Graça?"

I looked up.

The man standing beside me had dark hair, with the first streaks of grey appearing at his temples, and the sleeves of his pale shirt rolled up. He held a paper map of the city in one hand and a small travel bag in the other. He had asked the question in Polish, but not because he had recognised me as a fellow countrywoman.

He had recognised me.

For a moment, I couldn't bring myself to say his name.

"Stefan?"

He smiled slowly, like a man who had anticipated my astonishment but wasn't entirely sure it would be a welcome surprise.

"Lidia Ostrowska. You still look as though you're about to correct someone's badly labelled painting."

"And you still start conversations by provoking people."

"It was a question about a tram."

"In that case, no. This one goes in the opposite direction."

He glanced at the sign at the stop, then at his map.

"So it's a good thing I asked."

I hadn't seen Stefan Wilga in seven years. We had last met at a conference in Kraków, where we'd argued over the redevelopment of a small urban garden. I had defended the historical layout of the space, while he insisted that a city couldn't become a museum of its own past. The discussion had lasted almost an hour, and afterwards we'd spent another two hours over wine, talking about everything except the garden.

What I remembered most was the way he listened. He never interrupted when I was saying something important. He watched me so attentively that I sometimes felt I only began to understand my own arguments as I spoke them aloud.

That evening, he had almost kissed me.

Or perhaps I had almost kissed him.

We had never settled the details.

"What are you doing in Lisbon?" I asked.

"Working. On a project to revitalise the area around a former industrial complex. A foundation invited me to consult."

He named an organisation I couldn't possibly mistake for another.

Fundação Horizonte.

"You've got to be joking."

"I'm afraid I'm not quite that funny."

I took out my phone and opened the residency schedule. The external consultant's name had appeared in an update sent the previous day, one I hadn't had time to read properly.

Stefan Wilga. Landscape architect.

I felt a flash of irritation with myself. I always checked documents. I always knew whom I would be working with. At least, those were the rules of the life I had so carefully arranged for myself.

"So we'll be working together," I said.

"Looks that way."

"I hope you won't try planting trees in the middle of my exhibition this time."

He laughed softly.

"That depends on whether you're planning to put the city's history behind glass again."

I should have answered immediately. I knew this kind of verbal sparring, and I usually emerged victorious. This time, however, I noticed something I hadn't seen seven years earlier: the weariness concealed in his measured movements, the faint tension around his mouth. Stefan looked more mature, less carefree. As though life had taught him that not every space could be rebuilt according to the original plans.

The tram arrived. The old yellow carriage came to a halt with a metallic groan, and its doors opened directly in front of us.

"Is this yours?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm heading to my apartment."

"Then I won't keep you."

He stepped back, leaving the way clear. That small gesture surprised me more than our unexpected reunion. He didn't try to prolong the conversation or demand another five minutes of my time.

He was letting me leave.

I slipped my hand into my pocket and felt the two tickets.

"Stefan?"

He turned around.

"Actually, I've got a spare."

I held out the little paper ticket. He looked at it, then at me.

"Are you inviting me to travel with you?"

"I'm offering you a tram ride. Don't read too much into it."

"I'll try. Although I've always found that difficult around you."

We climbed aboard. I took a seat by the window, and he sat beside me, leaving a small space between us. Warm air flowed through the open window, carrying the scent of roasted chestnuts and the distant murmur of conversations. The tram climbed slowly along a narrow street, passing balconies so closely that I could almost have reached out and touched the laundry hanging from them.

"How long are you here for?" I asked.

"A few weeks. Then I'm going back to Poland."

He said it without hesitation. As though his return date were as obvious as the address printed on a ticket.

"What about you?" he asked.

I looked out of the window at the buildings passing by.

"I don't know yet."

It wasn't the whole truth. I hadn't told him about my conversation with Helena, or that for the first time in years I was considering settling somewhere permanently. I felt no obligation to explain my plans to a man I had only just encountered again.

And yet his presence made my carefully prepared answers suddenly sound unsettlingly incomplete.

The tram braked more sharply as it rounded a bend. Stefan reached forward and gripped the back of the seat in front of me to keep my shoulder from striking the metal handrail. He didn't touch me. When the carriage steadied, he quietly withdrew his hand.

"It's good to see you, Lidia," he said.

I turned towards him. There was no trace of a joke in his voice, nothing he could use to disguise the meaning of those words.

"It's good to see you too, Stefan."

For a moment, we looked at each other without hurrying to fill the silence. Outside the window, Lisbon slipped past in the golden light, and I knew I could get off at the next stop and return to the plan I had brought with me.

I didn't.

"Do you remember that evening in Kraków?" he asked.

"I remember."

"Sometimes I wondered what might have happened if I'd stayed a little longer."

He didn't look away. Nor did he try to turn his confession into a joke.

Beyond the window, the river came into view. The last light of the day reflected off the water, breaking its surface into thousands of shimmering fragments.

I had six weeks of work ahead of me, a possibility that could change my future, and a man who had just reminded me of a question left unanswered seven years ago.

"Stefan," I said more softly. "What if this time you stay long enough for us to have to find out?"

Chapter 1 - The City Belongs to No One

The next morning, I woke six minutes before my alarm, convinced that someone was knocking at the door.

For a moment, I lay perfectly still, listening. Through the open window came the clatter of dishes from the café downstairs, and somewhere farther away, someone was dragging metal chairs across the stone pavement. No knocking. Just an unfamiliar city slowly establishing its own rhythm around my temporary life.

My linen blazer from the previous evening lay across a chair. I stared at it longer than was reasonable. I remembered the last look Stefan had given me when we stepped off the tram, and the answer he hadn't offered immediately to my provocative question.

"I wouldn't want to leave again before finding out something important," he'd finally said.

Then he'd wished me good night.

He hadn't asked for my phone number, although we had already exchanged professional email addresses. He hadn't suggested coffee the following day. He had simply walked towards his hotel, leaving me with the uncomfortable awareness that I'd wanted to keep him there for another few minutes.

I got up and made coffee in the small kitchen. The apartment rented by the foundation was bright, full of plants and books in three languages. From the balcony, I could see a stretch of the river and rooftops where the morning sunlight spread like a thin layer of honey.

I opened my laptop. My schedule for the next six weeks included twenty-three meetings, four site visits, the preparation of an exhibition, and a final presentation to the foundation's board. Everything had its place. I'd even marked my free evenings in pale grey, although I couldn't have said what I actually intended to do with them.

At nine thirty, I was due to meet the team responsible for a former industrial complex on Rua da Junqueira, part of which the foundation intended to open to the public. My exhibition would tell the story of the site's memory through photographs, recordings of local residents, and maps showing the neighbourhood's successive transformations.

I hadn't planned for a landscape architect to become one of the most important people involved in shaping that narrative.

And I certainly hadn't planned for that architect to be Stefan Wilga.

I arrived at the foundation fifteen minutes early. Helena Carvalho greeted me at the entrance and led me into a conference room, where architectural plans, photographs, and material samples had been spread across a long table.

"I hope you slept well," she said in English.

"Better than you might expect after a first night somewhere new."

"That's a good sign. Lisbon usually makes people wait a while before it starts treating them as one of its own."

Helena was a woman in her fifties, with short grey hair and an extraordinary ability to conduct a conversation without unnecessary pleasantries. I'd liked her during our first video conference. She hadn't asked whether my artistic proposal would be sufficiently attractive to sponsors. She'd

asked what visitors should remember after leaving the exhibition.

I'd told her then that a city was more than what survived in photographs.

Now I intended to defend that idea.

"Stefan's already here," Helena announced. "He's reviewing the site documentation."

I stopped in the doorway.

He was standing by the window in a navy-blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up. An unfolded map lay on the table in front of him, with a mug of coffee beside it. When he raised his head, his smile was discreet, almost formal.

"Good morning, Lidia."

"Good morning, Stefan."

Helena looked between us with interest.

"You know each other?"

"We had a discussion about a certain garden a long time ago," I replied.

"Lidia was right about one thing," Stefan added.

I raised my eyebrows.

"Only one?"

"I'm still considering the rest."

Helena laughed and invited us to sit down.

For the first half hour, everything went according to my expectations. I presented the concept for an exhibition provisionally titled The City Written Twice. The first map would reconstruct the official history of the complex: construction dates, changes of ownership, and the functions

of individual rooms. The second would emerge from the stories of the people who had worked, lived, and grown up there.

I wanted visitors to move through the space while listening to residents' voices, discovering how many different meanings a single address could hold.

Stefan listened attentively. He didn't interrupt, but occasionally marked something in pencil on his plan. I noticed that his map focused primarily on the courtyard, the passageways, and a small garden hidden between the buildings.

When I finished, Helena asked him for his comments.

"Lidia's project has a very strong foundation," he said. "But the proposed route passes through a section of the courtyard that shouldn't be opened to visitors at the moment."

I turned towards him.

"Why?"

He slid the plan across the table.

"The old retention tank was filled in, but the ground still needs to be assessed. There are also three mature trees there, and their root systems run directly beneath the proposed pedestrian route."

"I'm not suggesting we build a motorway. We're talking about a temporary pedestrian walkway."

"For several hundred people a week."

"If the exhibition is successful."

"I assume that's the intention."

His tone remained calm, which only increased my irritation.

"And if we direct people along a different route, we lose the most important part of the story. That's exactly where the workers used to gather during their breaks. I already have three accounts describing that place as the centre of their daily lives."

Stefan leaned over the map.

"I'm not questioning the importance of the place. I'm questioning how we give people access to it."

"In practice, that distinction leads to the same result."

"Not necessarily."

Helena watched us for a moment, then closed her notebook.

"I can see you'll have plenty to discuss."

I couldn't tell whether she was pleased or concerned.

After the meeting, I asked Stefan to stay behind. The other participants left, and the room filled with a silence broken only by the distant hum of the air conditioning.

"You could have told me earlier," I began.

"About what?"

"The problem with the courtyard."

"Last night?"

"For example."

He studied me calmly.

"Last night we were riding a tram. I didn't know exactly how you were planning the route."

"But you knew the site had restrictions."

"Yes. And I assumed we'd discuss them during the meeting we'd both been hired to attend."

I couldn't fault his logic. Even so, something about his answer bothered me.

"I have six weeks, Stefan. In four, the exhibition needs to be ready for a trial walkthrough. I can't spend half my residency negotiating every metre."

He rested his hands on the edge of the table.

"And I can't sign off on a route whose safety I can't confirm. I wouldn't do that even for you."

His last words sounded different from everything that had come before. I looked up.

"Even for me?"

"Precisely because I take your work seriously."

For a moment, I didn't know what to say. I'd been prepared for an argument with an expert who considered his own discipline more important than art. I hadn't been prepared for a conversation with a man who could refuse me something without the slightest attempt to diminish my competence.

"So what do you expect?" I asked.

"For us to go there together. See what can actually be done. Without making decisions based entirely on two maps."

"I've scheduled a site visit for tomorrow."

"I know. I'm on the schedule."

I gave him a suspicious look.

"You know my calendar?"

"I know the project schedule, Lidia. Not your private life."

A familiar smile appeared on his lips.

"Although I admit that, for a moment yesterday, I was more interested in that than in work."

I closed my folder a little more loudly than I'd intended.

"How convenient that you can separate the two."

"I never said I could."

The air between us seemed to grow heavier. One sentence was enough to remind me of seven years of silence, that hotel terrace in Kraków, and his hand resting on the railing just inches from mine.

"Stefan, I want us to work well together."

"So do I."

"And that means we won't let the past complicate this project."

He accepted my words without protest. For a moment, he turned a pencil between his fingers, then set it down on the plan.

"Agreed. But I have one condition."

"I'm listening."

"When we're discussing the project, don't assume I'm opposing you simply because I disagree with your proposal."

I felt a small stab of embarrassment. That was exactly what I'd just done.

"And my condition is that you won't hide behind safety concerns if there are solutions that would preserve the meaning of the exhibition."

"Fair enough."

He offered me his hand. I shook it, slightly amused by the formality of the gesture. His palm was warm and rough, but he didn't hold on a second longer than our agreement required.

"And one more thing," I added.

"I'm beginning to worry that I'm negotiating a very unfavourable contract."

"Our conversation on the tram last night doesn't mean you can treat me differently from the rest of your colleagues."

His expression grew serious.

"I never intended to."

There was no wounded pride in his voice. Only a firmness I found surprisingly easy to accept.

That afternoon, I met Inês Ribeiro, the residency coordinator. She was in her mid-thirties, spoke quickly, and carried more keys in her bag than I'd ever seen one person possess. She showed me the foundation's archive and introduced me to two older women who had agreed to share their memories of the former industrial complex.

One of them, Teresa, had worked there for twenty-seven years.

"Everyone asks me about the machines," she said when we sat down at a small table. "Nobody asks about the bench."

"What bench?"

"The one under the tree. That's where the most important decisions were made. Who was changing jobs, who was getting married, who needed help. The managers had their offices, and we had our bench."

I wrote down her words almost verbatim. Suddenly, I understood why the courtyard mattered so much to me. It wasn't simply a passage between exhibition rooms. It was the place where the residents' private histories acquired meaning.

I showed Teresa an old photograph.

"Was it here?"

She pulled the picture closer to her eyes.

"Yes. But the bench stood a little farther to the left. Under the biggest tree."

I marked the spot on a copy of the plan. It was exactly where Stefan had drawn the red area requiring protection.

For several minutes, we talked about the people who used to sit beneath the tree. Teresa told me that it was there her future husband had waited for her after their first shift together. He hadn't said anything particularly remarkable. He'd brought two oranges because he knew she'd forgotten her lunch.

"We got married two years later," she added. "But not because he brought me fruit. Because the next time, he remembered too."

I returned to my apartment with her words still in my mind.

Before entering the building, I stopped at a small stationery shop. I bought a new sketchbook and several pencils. I liked beginning work with clean pages, although I knew some of the best ideas emerged precisely where someone else had already left a mark.

My phone vibrated.

A message from Stefan.

I've checked the earlier measurements. Tomorrow I'll show you two possible routes to the courtyard. One might allow us to preserve the view of the old tree.

I read the message twice. He could have ended his day at his desk, deciding that the problem was mine to solve. Instead, he was looking for a solution.

I replied:

I spoke to a former employee. The tree is more important than I realised. I'll show you her account tomorrow.

His response arrived almost immediately.

Then we both have a reason to reconsider our original assumptions.

I smiled. A moment later, another message appeared.

One more thing. I know a place in Lisbon that serves coffee strong enough to survive a conversation with you. The invitation still stands, but strictly outside working hours.

I stared at the screen, trying to work out when exactly he'd managed to invite me the first time.

I typed:

Show me those two routes first. Then I'll decide whether you've earned that coffee.

I set my phone on the kitchen counter.

A few minutes later, standing by the open window, I realised I still hadn't checked Helena's reply concerning next week's meeting about the position.

That was entirely unlike me.

I switched on my laptop and confirmed the appointment. Then I opened my calendar to add a visit to the archive. Two

names were already listed beside tomorrow's site inspection.

Lidia Ostrowska.

Stefan Wilga.

For seven years, they had belonged to two separate stories. Now they appeared side by side in a single entry, on the map of a city that was supposed to mean something different to each of us.

I didn't want to draw any conclusions from that.

But when I closed my computer, I knew I would be looking forward to the following morning for reasons that couldn't be entered into a schedule.

Chapter 2 - Boundaries Drawn in Pencil

Stefan was waiting at the entrance to the former industrial complex with two cups of coffee and a rolled-up map tucked beneath his arm.

It was nine fifteen. The air was still cool, and the broad street leading towards the river was only beginning to fill with cars. Above the complex's low wall rose the crowns of trees I hadn't seen in any contemporary photographs.

"I didn't know how you take your coffee," he said, handing me one of the cups. "So I got you black. If you don't like it, I'll take it back."

"Black is perfect."

"Good. First crisis averted."

I accepted the coffee, trying not to smile too broadly. He was wearing light-coloured trousers and a shirt in a muted shade of green. He looked more relaxed than he had the previous day, though no less professional.

"I've got something for you," I said.

I took a printed excerpt from my conversation with Teresa out of my bag. Stefan read it without rushing, his gaze lingering on the description of the bench beneath the tree.

"This changes how we should think about the place," he said.

"Exactly."

"You don't necessarily need to take visitors through the middle of the courtyard. You need them to understand why it mattered."

"The two aren't mutually exclusive."

"We'll see."

I didn't answer. I was beginning to understand that his stubbornness wasn't about defending his original idea. Stefan simply refused to make a decision before he'd seen the entire problem. It was a quality that was simultaneously irritating and difficult to challenge.

At the gate, we were greeted by Miguel, the site administrator. He opened one of the heavy metal gates and led us into the first building. Inside, the air smelled of dust, wood, and the dampness the old walls had absorbed over the years. Sunlight streamed through tall windows, illuminating the tiny particles floating in the air.

We crossed an empty hall where traces of former workstations remained visible on the floor. I imagined the workers' voices, the sounds of machinery, and the brief conversations exchanged during breaks. This was exactly what I was looking for: a way to restore a human presence to the space without pretending that time could be reversed.

Stefan stopped beside the door leading to the courtyard.

"This is where things get more complicated."

We stepped outside.

The courtyard was larger than the plans suggested. At its centre stood an old tree with a broad canopy, surrounded by sections of stone paving and the remains of low walls. In one place, the ground had visibly subsided.

Stefan pointed to the area marked in the documentation.

"The old tank is beneath this section. We still don't know whether it was filled in properly. That's why we can't establish a public walkway here without further investigation."

He crouched beside the edge of an old path and showed me the cracks.

"See? This line isn't accidental. The ground behaves differently on either side."

I knelt beside him to take a closer look. I caught the scent of warm earth and his cologne, barely detectable beneath the smell of coffee.

"What if we installed a lightweight platform?" I asked.

"Possibly. But first we need to know what we'd be supporting it on."

"Once again, you sound as though you want to bring the entire project to a halt."

He turned his head.

"Lidia, look at me."

I did, reluctantly.

"I'm not trying to take anything away from you. I want people to be able to come here ten years from now, too. If we damage the roots or ignore the condition of the ground, we'll lose something that can't be recreated."

He didn't raise his voice. He spoke with such conviction that, for a moment, I forgot the response I'd been preparing.

"And if we focus too much on preservation, nobody will ever learn the history of this place," I said more quietly.

"That's why we're both here."

He stood and offered me his hand. This time, I accepted it without hesitation. He helped me up from the uneven ground, then stepped aside, giving me room to examine the tree.