Laura Bellini



Written at the Same Address

A home can be sold. A future must be chosen

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ROMANS

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INTRO

The first thing I did when I entered the apartment was open every window. The second was slip an old key into my handbag, a key I'd carried on my key ring for seven years even though it had long since stopped fitting the lock.

Gdańsk smelled of rain, wet cobblestones, and the sea, which couldn't be seen from this part of Wrzeszcz. A thin layer of dust had settled on the windowsill. Beneath my fingertips, I felt an uneven patch in the wood, exactly where I'd once spilled red wine. I'd removed the stain the following morning, but the mark left by my overenthusiastic sanding remained.

I had no intention of dwelling on the past that day.

I'd come to sell the apartment.

I was thirty-six, owned my own real estate agency, had a loan on a small office space, and possessed enough professional experience to know that sentiment was the most expensive extra in any transaction. Over the past few months, I'd parted ways with my business partner, taken over his financial obligations, and canceled a holiday I'd been saving for over two years. Selling my share of the apartment was supposed to help me get my finances in order and, for the first time in ages, stop checking my bank balance before every significant transfer.

That was why I'd spread out my property preparation schedule across the table. Four weeks. That was how long I'd given myself to create a show apartment, arrange professional photographs, and begin discussions with prospective buyers.

Everything had been calculated.

Except for one man.

"Do you still arrange your mugs by height?"

The voice came from the hallway. I didn't need to turn around to know who was standing behind me.

Norbert Rogowski.

We'd shared this address for three years. At first, as two acquaintances brought together by chance and an outrageously high rent. Later, as co-owners, when the previous owner decided to sell the property and we committed the madness of buying it together.

We weren't a couple.

Back then, I'd repeated that sentence far more often than the circumstances required.

"Only when I know someone's going to try rearranging them," I replied without looking up from my paperwork.

I heard him laugh. Low, brief, and free of the artificial politeness I'd learned to expect from people after several years of dealing with clients.

"So nothing's changed."

I turned around.

Norbert was forty, with dark hair showing its first silver streaks at the temples and the same infuriating ability to look perfectly at ease even in situations where anyone else would have felt out of place. He wore a navy-blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up. I noticed a pale mark from a recent cut on his forearm.

In one hand, he carried a paper bag from the bakery. In the other, a small toolbox.

"Plenty has changed," I said.

His gaze moved from my face to the neatly arranged documents.

"I can see that."

He didn't ask whether he could come in. He had exactly as much right to be in this apartment as I did. Even so, he stopped at the living room threshold as though waiting for an invitation.

That small gesture irritated me more than an unceremonious entrance would have.

"We're supposed to discuss the preparations today," I reminded him.

"I know. That's why I'm here."

He placed the bag on the kitchen counter and took out two croissants.

"I haven't had breakfast," I said automatically, before realizing he hadn't actually asked.

"I remember."

He put one on a small plate. He left the other untouched.

For a moment, I watched his hands. They had always been a little rough, even when he wore an elegant jacket. As a furniture restorer, he could spend hours working on a single detail that probably nobody but him would ever notice. I used to tell him he was wasting his time. He would reply that not everything valuable could be priced by the square meter.

And that was precisely what I intended to do now.

"I've prepared a schedule," I announced, pointing to the documents. "The painters are coming on Monday. On

Tuesday, the photographer will take the preliminary pictures. Then we'll replace the lighting, freshen up the floor, and bring in some neutral furniture."

Norbert walked over to the window.

"Neutral?"

"Furniture that doesn't impose someone else's story on potential buyers."

"So, beige."

"So, appropriate."

He glanced at me over his shoulder.

"Paulina, this apartment has a character of its own."

"Character doesn't pay the mortgage."

The words came out sharper than I'd intended. Norbert didn't answer immediately. He ran his fingers along the wooden window frame, then looked at the empty space against the wall where a long chest of drawers used to stand.

"Did you take it?" he asked.

"I sold it after I moved out."

"That's a shame."

"I needed the space."

He nodded. He didn't try to convince me I'd made the wrong decision. Norbert had his faults, but he knew how to respect the things I didn't want to discuss.

He took a folded sheet of paper from his pocket.

"I've prepared a plan too."

Of course he had.

I accepted the paper and unfolded it on the table. I found a hand-drawn sketch of the living room, complete with wall measurements and furniture placement. Beside the window, he'd drawn a high-backed armchair, with a lamp and a small table next to it. Against the opposite wall, he'd marked a bookcase. Everything looked surprisingly good.

"Where are you going to get all this?" I asked.

"I already have most of it."

"At your workshop?"

"Some of it."

I noticed a brief hesitation.

"Norbert?"

"I brought a few pieces here earlier. They're in the back room."

I looked toward the closed door.

At that moment, I remembered the message he'd sent me three weeks earlier. He'd asked me not to arrange for the entire apartment to be cleared out because he needed to sort out a few things involving the furniture first. I'd assumed he meant collecting the belongings we'd left behind when we moved out.

"How many pieces?"

"Come on. I'll show you."

He opened the door.

The room I'd planned to turn into a bright show bedroom resembled a small workshop. Wooden chairs stood along the walls, along with a partially restored display cabinet and two small tables. A wooden worktop rested on trestles, with tins of wood oil arranged beside it. Everything was orderly, but it

was hardly suitable for photographing or showing to potential buyers.

Near the door, I spotted an old sign bearing the name of his workshop.

ROGOWSKI. FURNITURE RESTORATION.

"This room was supposed to be empty," I said quietly.

"I know."

"When were you planning to tell me?"

"Today. Before we started moving anything around."

I stood beside the display cabinet. A small envelope containing documents lay on its glass shelf, and a rolled-up measuring tape protruded from beneath one of the chairs. Norbert had clearly been using this room for quite some time.

"You were supposed to remove your equipment before the preparations began."

"I never said I'd take everything away before today's meeting."

"But you knew I was planning to sell."

"Yes."

His calm reply left me with nowhere to take my next accusation.

I studied him for a moment. Up close, I could see the exhaustion concealed beneath his usual composure. I remembered the days when he could come home from work after midnight and still spend another hour telling me about a chair he'd discovered at a market, as though he'd unearthed a priceless treasure.

I used to enjoy listening to him.

Perhaps a little too much.

"I need a clear answer," I said. "Do you agree to prepare the entire apartment for sale?"

Norbert looked at the sketch I was still holding.

"I agree to get it ready for viewings over the next four weeks. I just want us to use my furniture instead of renting random pieces. And before anything leaves this apartment, we need to agree on the dates."

"Dates for what?"

"For everything that belongs to me."

Silence settled between us.

I didn't like the fact that I was suddenly beginning to see the sense in his proposal. The furniture was beautiful. Carefully restored, distinctive, and perfectly suited to an apartment with high ceilings and old parquet flooring. It might help me secure a better price.

But Norbert hadn't come here simply to help with the interior styling.

"We can discuss the dates," I replied. "But I won't agree to make the sale dependent on your workshop."

For a moment, he watched me without speaking.

"I understand."

It didn't sound like agreement. More like an acknowledgment of a boundary he had no intention of crossing just yet.

I set the sketch down on the windowsill. As I reached for my phone, Norbert moved the toolbox aside to make room for me. We found ourselves close together, for the first time

since his arrival without the comfortable distance of the table between us.

He smelled of a freshly laundered shirt, wood, and something familiar I couldn't quite name.

"Paulina," he said more softly. "I'm genuinely glad you've come back."

I looked up.

There was no provocation in his expression. No smile he could use to turn those words into a joke.

An answer sprang immediately to mind. I could have told him I'd come back solely because of the apartment. That I had four weeks of work ahead of me, after which we'd sign the documents and each go our separate ways.

Instead, I asked:

"And what if I don't want to stay this time?"

Norbert didn't move away, nor did he try to stop me.

"Then I'll have to learn to respect that," he replied.

I looked at him, my phone motionless in my hand.

And for the first time that day, I wasn't thinking about how much I stood to gain from selling the apartment, but about why that particular answer was the one I'd been most afraid to hear.

Chapter 1 - Four Weeks

The following morning, I arrived at the apartment at eight fifteen, armed with my laptop, a paint colour chart, and a firm determination not to let Norbert Rogowski take control of the property sale. The determination seemed perfectly reasonable until I looked through the half-open door and discovered that he'd already moved every piece of furniture in the living room against one wall.

He stood in the middle of the room wearing a grey T-shirt and dark work trousers. He held a spirit level in one hand. Sheets of paper that had previously protected a restored side table were spread across the floor.

"We agreed on nine," I said.

"It's eight fifteen."

"That's exactly my point."

Norbert glanced at his watch.

"I came early so you wouldn't have to see the worst of the mess."

"I appreciate the thought. Next time, though, I'd like to know what you're planning to move."

He put the spirit level down. He didn't look offended, which deprived me of the satisfaction of a small victory.

"You're right. I should have sent you a message."

I hadn't anticipated that.

I took out my laptop and sat down at the kitchen table. During the seven years we'd spent apart, I'd managed to forget how difficult it was to argue with him when he suddenly stopped arguing back. Norbert didn't need to have

the last word. He only needed to be certain that his position had been properly understood.

"I'd like us to establish some ground rules today," I announced. "Four weeks of preparation and viewings. No changes made independently, no unexpected expenses, and no treating the apartment like a storage facility."

"And I'd like you not to treat it like an empty box that needs to be handed over to the next owner as quickly as possible."

I looked at him over my screen.

"That's exactly what selling an apartment involves."

"Selling it, yes. Not pretending nobody ever lived here."

"Buyers don't pay for our memories."

"I'm not saying they should."

He walked over to the window and pointed to a section of wall where the afternoon sun usually cast a broad golden stripe.

"Do you remember why we chose this particular apartment?"

I remembered perfectly. We'd viewed it on a November afternoon while wet snow fell outside. The estate agent had praised the transport connections and the high ceilings. Norbert had stood beside the window, reached towards the light, and said the place would be beautiful once someone allowed it to breathe.

Meanwhile, I'd been checking the condition of the electrical installation.

"Because it was cheaper than similar properties in the area," I replied.

He smiled.

"Of course."

"And it had investment potential."

"Naturally."

"Stop it."

"I haven't even started."

Despite myself, I felt amused. I quickly hid it behind my laptop screen.

Norbert spread the drawing he'd prepared earlier across the table. Using his furniture really could improve the presentation of the property. The restored armchair, display cabinet, and small table formed a harmonious arrangement. They looked nothing like the catalogue furniture found in hundreds of similar listings.

Something else worried me, however.

"How long do you need to remove everything from the back room?"

For a moment, he smoothed the edge of the paper.

"I'd like to leave some of the furniture there until the four-week period is over."

"Why?"

"I don't have enough space in the workshop at the moment."

"You could rent storage."

"I could. But that costs money, and the furniture might be useful here anyway."

"All of it?"

"Not all of it."

I pushed my laptop aside.

"Norbert, I'm not going to conduct viewings in an apartment where one room looks like a carpenter's workshop."

"Neither am I."

"Then what are you suggesting?"

"Give me three days. I'll tidy the room, choose the pieces we can use for staging, and remove the remaining tools. I just want to decide for myself what needs protecting before transport."

It was a reasonable proposal. The problem was that three days meant postponing parts of my schedule.

"The painters are coming on Monday."

"Today's Thursday. I'll finish before they arrive."

"And if you don't?"

"Then I'll cover the cost of additional transport and storage rental."

I studied him more closely.

"We'll put that in writing."

"I expected you to say that."

I opened a document and began drafting the conditions. It wasn't that I distrusted Norbert as a person. I knew he kept his promises when it came to work. What I seriously doubted was his ability to remain objective about things he'd grown attached to.

I had similar doubts about myself, although I had no intention of voicing them.

An hour later, we were standing in the living room, moving cardboard rectangles around to represent the furniture

arrangement. Norbert suggested placing the armchair beside the window, angled slightly towards the bookcase. I preferred it closer to the door because that made the room appear larger in photographs.

"It blocks the passage from there," I explained.

"By twenty centimetres."

"In interior photography, twenty centimetres can determine how an entire room is perceived."

"And in ordinary life, people don't sit in armchairs to make rooms look bigger."

"We're selling an apartment, not an armchair."

"But we're showing people what it might be like to live here."

For a moment, we held each other's gaze.

Finally, I took out my phone and took two test photographs. In the first, the armchair stood where I'd suggested. In the second, it was positioned according to Norbert's idea.

We examined the photographs.

His arrangement looked better.

"Don't say a word," I warned him.

"I wasn't going to."

"You look as though you've just won a court case that's been going on for years."

"I simply like furniture to stand where it belongs."

He moved the armchair into the marked position while I opened the window wider. A cool breeze swept inside, stirring the papers on the table. One sheet fell to the floor.

We both bent to pick it up, and our hands ended up inches apart.

Norbert was the first to withdraw his hand.

"Go ahead," he said.

I picked up the paper, more conscious of his presence than the situation warranted. Years ago, we could spend entire evenings in the same room without paying attention to the distance between us. Now, every accidental moment of closeness reminded me that we were no longer the same people.

Before noon, my photographer friend Marta arrived to assess the light and plan the photo shoot. She was forty-two, spoke quickly, and never wrapped her opinions in unnecessary politeness.

She walked around the living room, looked into the kitchen, and then stopped in front of the armchair.

"Don't move that," she announced.

Norbert raised his eyebrows.

"Did you hear that?" he whispered.

"I heard that we've hired an excellent photographer," I replied.

Marta glanced at us with amusement.

"Do you two always talk to each other like this?"

"Only when we're being polite," Norbert said.

"Then I feel sorry for you both on the other days."

For the next half hour, we discussed wall colours and photographic angles. Marta suggested a warm white instead of the cooler shade I'd chosen. Norbert supported her

opinion, but only after she'd explained how the light would affect the photographs.

When she left, I was faced with two decisions I hadn't planned to make and a growing conviction that my schedule was developing a life of its own.

My phone rang while I was examining the paint samples.

It was Beata, my accountant.

I stepped into the kitchen. The conversation lasted several minutes and concerned an overdue payment from one of my clients. The money should have arrived two weeks earlier. Now it turned out that the transfer would be delayed by another month.

"I'll manage," I assured her.

After ending the call, I rested my hands on the counter.

I disliked financial uncertainty. Ever since I'd taken sole responsibility for running the agency, every delayed payment meant having to rearrange other obligations. I could use my reserves, but they were shrinking faster than I wanted to admit.

"Everything all right?"

Norbert was standing in the kitchen doorway.

"Work matters."

"I wasn't asking for details."

"Good."

He nodded as though my answer was sufficient. He didn't try to comfort me. He didn't offer money or propose a solution to a problem he knew nothing about.

Instead, he pointed to the croissant he'd brought from the nearby bakery that morning.

"Eat something before you start making any more decisions about my furniture."

"Is this nutritional blackmail?"

"More an attempt to prevent strategic errors."

I took the plate and sat down at the table. Norbert returned to the living room, leaving me alone.

That small gesture affected me unexpectedly. Over the past few months, I'd grown accustomed to people taking an interest in my well-being only when it had some bearing on their own affairs. He'd noticed that I hadn't eaten and expected no gratitude in return.

In the afternoon, we returned to settling the details. I agreed to use his furniture, provided that every item remained his property and could be removed before the apartment was handed over to its buyer. Norbert accepted without objection.

Then he presented his own condition.

"I want to take part in decisions about how we present the apartment. Not just as the furniture man."

"You're a co-owner. Of course you have that right."

"I mean genuine involvement, Paulina. Not simply signing off on decisions you've already made."

I closed my laptop.

"Selling property is what I do professionally."

"I know. And that's precisely why I want you to manage the whole process. But this is my property too."

I couldn't deny that he had a point.

"All right. We'll make decisions about the price, the listing, and the terms of sale together. I'll be responsible for

marketing preparations. You'll handle the furniture and consult on any changes to the apartment."

"And if we disagree?"

"We'll talk."

He smiled faintly.

"That's a bold declaration."

"Don't use it against me."

I printed out our agreement on the small printer I'd brought from the office. Norbert read the document carefully, added a note about liability for damage to his furniture, and signed beneath the final provision.

His surname appeared directly below mine.

For a moment, I stared at the two signatures. Once, they'd appeared side by side on a mortgage agreement and a notarial deed. Back then, I'd considered it nothing more than a practical arrangement.

Now I wasn't so sure our joint decisions had ever been entirely free of emotion.

"Four weeks," Norbert said, putting down the pen.

"Four weeks."

"After that, we'll each do whatever we think is right."

"That's the plan."

He stood and began gathering his tools. But he stopped at the door.

"Paulina?"

"Yes?"

"I'm not going to make your life difficult."

I looked at him.

"I hope not."

"But I won't promise to agree with you about everything."

I stepped closer.

"I've never expected that from you."

For a moment, we stood facing each other. There was something familiar and yet new in his gaze. As though he were trying to discover whether the woman he'd known years ago was still hidden beneath my carefully styled hair, elegant jacket, and professional composure.

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

This time, I didn't hide behind a joke.

"It's good to see you too."

He answered with a smile, then disappeared into the back room.

I remained alone at the table, with a document bearing both our signatures and the realization that I'd just agreed to four weeks far more complicated than I'd originally anticipated.

Because Norbert was no longer just a memory.

He was becoming part of my everyday life again.

And I was beginning to suspect that this wasn't only about the apartment.

Chapter 2 - The Boundaries We Cannot See

On Friday morning, I received a message from Norbert containing a photograph of an empty section of the back room. Beneath the picture, he'd written, "First square metre reclaimed. Please update the schedule accordingly."

I didn't reply until I'd finished a meeting with a client.

"Approximately eleven to go."

My phone rang almost immediately.

"Did you actually calculate that?" he asked.

"I'm an estate agent. Square metres are my speciality."

"And here I thought your speciality was giving orders."

"That's an additional service."

He laughed, then got down to business. He wanted to know whether he could bring a restored lamp and a small table to the apartment. I agreed after seeing the photographs, but reminded him that every item would have to be removed before the property was eventually handed over.

"I remember our agreement," he said.

"I prefer to be certain."

"I know."

After the call ended, I stared at my phone screen for a long moment. I wondered why an ordinary exchange of words could improve my mood more than receiving news that another contract had been signed.

Marta was already waiting at my office, this time not as a photographer but as the friend who'd believed for years that my personal life resembled a badly designed evacuation plan.

"Tell me you're not starting something with Norbert again," she announced without so much as a greeting.

I looked up from my paperwork.

"I'm not starting anything."

"Of course not. You're just furnishing an apartment together."

"An apartment we're selling."

"Where you used to live together."

"That's not an argument."

Marta sat opposite me.

"Paulina, I remember what you looked like when you moved out."

I didn't answer immediately.

That period was one of the few parts of my life I couldn't discuss without feeling ashamed. Not because anything dramatic had happened. Quite the opposite.

Nothing had happened.

For three years, we'd lived together, cooked together, argued over bills, and learned each other's habits. I could recognize his footsteps on the staircase. I knew when he needed silence and when he wanted conversation. Sometimes we'd fallen asleep on the sofa while watching films.

And not once had we asked whether there might be something more between us.