

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace, looking down at a document on a table. The man is wearing a dark suit, and the woman is wearing a light-colored sweater. In the background, there are snow-capped mountains and a cozy interior with warm lighting. A pen lies on the document on the table.

Laura Bellini

A Contract for Someone Else's Heart

They Were Supposed to Pretend to Be a Couple
Only Until the Deal Was Signed.

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ROMANS

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INTRO

The first time I saw Aleksander Radecki was in a photograph attached to the contract I was supposed to save.

It was not a good photograph. Someone had taken it during a conference, at the exact moment he was turning his head away from the camera, one hand resting on the edge of the lectern and the expression of a man who had just been asked a question beneath the limits of his patience. Dark jacket, white shirt without a tie, a few unruly strands of hair falling across his forehead. Beneath the picture were his name, his position, and the value of the project.

Aleksander Radecki. CEO of Radecki Hotels.

One hundred and eighty-four million zlotys.

I spent considerably longer looking at that last number than I did at him.

"Lena?"

I looked up from the documents. Karolina was standing in the doorway to my office with two coffees and that particular expression that meant she was bringing news that required either caffeine or a lawyer. Since we both worked at a law firm, caffeine was the only option left.

"If you came to tell me the investor from Vienna pulled the financing, put the coffee down and leave."

"He didn't."

"Then I may still have a good day."

She handed me the cup, but instead of sitting down, she leaned one hip against my desk.

"Radecki wants you in the meeting."

I looked at her over the lid.

"Radecki doesn't know me."

"He knows your name."

That was a different sentence.

I set the coffee down.

For six years, I had been negotiating transactions involving people with too much money, too little patience, and an unshakable belief that reading the first page of a document entitled them to argue with the people who had written the remaining hundred and forty. I liked the work precisely because numbers did not take offense, clauses did not raise their voices, and terms could be changed if you knew where to apply pressure.

A surname was worse.

A surname came with history.

"How?"

Karolina hesitated for barely a second.

"He said he worked with your father once."

The office became too quiet.

My father had been dead for four years. During the last two years of his life, he had managed to close his company, distance himself from most of his former business partners, and teach me that the question what actually happened? could be ignored for long enough that people eventually stopped asking.

I never had.

I had simply stopped asking out loud.

I turned over the page lying in front of me.

"When?"

"Forty minutes."

"Of course."

Karolina gave me a brief smile.

"Conference room four. He arrived early."

"Men with his kind of money don't arrive early."

"This one did."

I did not like that either.

Forty minutes later, I had the transaction structure in my head, six disputed points, and three ways to drag the negotiations out of deadlock.

I still had no answer to how Aleksander Radecki had known my father.

When I walked into the conference room, he was standing by the window.

The photograph had failed to convey the scale of the man. It was not even about his height, though he was tall. It was more the way he occupied space without doing anything to demand attention. He was not checking his phone. He was not pacing. He was looking through the glass at rain-soaked Warsaw as though he were perfectly capable of making the world wait.

He turned when I closed the door.

"Counselor Wójcik."

"Mr. Radecki."

He crossed the room and held out his hand.

His handshake was brief and certain, without any performative show of strength.

I noticed that despite myself.

"Lena is fine," I said. "If we're going to save your deal, there's no point wasting time on titles."

The corner of his mouth moved.

"Aleksander."

"That's still longer."

"Alek, then, if you intend to fight for every second."

"I intend to fight for considerably more expensive things."

This time he actually smiled.

We sat opposite each other. I placed the documents on the table.

"Your problem isn't the financing. It isn't the price either. The Austrians are ready to sign if they get a seven-year brand-maintenance guarantee and restrictions on the sale of shares."

"I know."

"So why am I here?"

Instead of answering, he slid a thin folder across the table.

It was not part of the documentation I had been given earlier.

The cover bore the Radecki Hotels logo and a handwritten note:

IMAGE PACKAGE - CONFIDENTIAL.

"If you're about to tell me that one hundred and eighty-four million depends on a new photograph of the CEO, I'm leaving."

"I wish it were that simple."

I opened the folder.

The first two pages contained a risk analysis prompted by an old article about his previous relationship. The third was a copy of an email from the investor.

I read it once.

Then again.

"This is a joke."

"Unfortunately not."

"They want you to maintain the image of a stable private life for the duration of the negotiations?"

"They didn't include it in the legal conditions. Officially, it's about reputational risk ahead of the brand's expansion into three new markets."

"Unofficially?"

"The man making the final decision considers me a walking crisis in an expensive suit."

I looked at him.

"Are you?"

"The suit really was expensive."

A laugh escaped me before I could stop it.

He looked rather more pleased by that than he should have.

I turned the page.

And then I saw a name I had never expected to find in a professional document again.

Tomasz Wójcik.

My father.

Beneath it was a date from eleven years earlier and the name of the project:

Hotel Aurelia.

My fingers went still against the paper.

Alek noticed.

Of course he noticed.

"Why is my father's name in your confidential analysis?"

For a moment, he said nothing.

For the first time since I had walked into the room, he looked like a man who did not have an answer prepared.

"Because what happened back then is connected to the current transaction."

"How?"

"It's complicated."

I closed the folder.

"I don't bill for answers like 'it's complicated.'"

"I know."

"You know a great deal for a man who supposedly needs my help."

His gaze settled on my face.

"That's exactly why I need your help."

I should have gone back to the question about my father. I should have done what I had failed to do four years earlier: refuse to let someone change the subject.

But Alek took out another sheet of paper.

He placed it in front of me.

My name was at the top.

Lena Wójcik.

His beneath it.

Aleksander Radecki.

And below our names were two words:

NON-DISCLOSURE AGREEMENT.

"What is this?"

"The beginning of a proposal."

"What kind of proposal?"

He rested his forearms on the table.

The smile disappeared.

"We have our final meeting with the investor in nineteen days. Until then, I need someone they'll believe."

"As a lawyer?"

"No."

The silence lasted one second too long.

"As what?"

He looked at me calmly, and for the first time that day I had the sense that every negotiation scenario I had prepared had just become completely irrelevant.

"As my partner."

For several seconds, the only thing I could hear was the rain striking the windows.

Then I looked at Aleksander Radecki's photograph protruding from the first folder, my father's name in the second, and the blank line waiting for my signature.

"Absolutely not."

Alek nodded, as though that was precisely the answer he had expected.

"Then we can start negotiating."