
LAURA
BELLINI
A Dangerously
Quiet Evening
At the table, everything divides them.
After dark, less and less.

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ROMANS

ISBN: 9788384900369

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CONTENTS

INTRO 4
Chapter 1 - The Condition That Wasn't in the Plan.....12
Chapter 2 - Where Contracts End 22
Chapter 3 - Everything the Schedule Failed to Account For 34
Chapter 4 - Things You Don't Say at the Table..... 45
Chapter 5 - The Right to Say No..... 55
Chapter 6 - The Kiss That Couldn't Be Taken Back 65
Chapter 7 - What Cannot Be Left Unsaid 76
Chapter 8 - On the Other Side of His World..... 86
Chapter 9 - The Price of Shared Risk..... 96
Chapter 10 - An Evening Without a Safe Distance 108
Chapter 11 - Room for Two 119
Chapter 12 - A Promise Written in His Own Words 130
Chapter 13 - The Limits of Loyalty.....140
Chapter 14 - The Price of Truth.....149
Chapter 15 - The Weight of a Single Signature 159
Chapter 16 - The Distance That Wasn't on Any Map 171
Chapter 17 - Decisions Made Separately 181
Chapter 18 - The First Cost of Truth.....190
Chapter 19 - Everything That Can Be Repaired.....200
Chapter 20 - The Evening We Chose..... 211

INTRO

The first thing I noticed when I arrived at the vineyard was the absence of hurry. The second was the man standing beside the open window, who apparently had no intention of greeting me.

September was drawing to a close in Lower Silesia. The air smelled of damp earth, grapes, and wood warmed by the last heat of the day. Beyond the tall windows of the tasting room, rows of vines descended gently toward a darkening hillside. Inside, candles burned, wineglasses stood on a long table, and someone had left an open bottle of red wine. Everything looked as though it had been prepared for a romantic dinner rather than a meeting that could determine the future of two family businesses.

I was thirty-six, with more than a dozen years of experience negotiating contracts, and I had one rule I followed without exception: I never allowed beautiful surroundings to change my opinion of the numbers.

That evening, I intended to get both parties to agree on the ground rules for further negotiations. Not to sign a settlement. Not yet. First, I needed their consent to an independent review of the documents, a thirty-day suspension of further claims and enforcement action, and a clear understanding of who had the authority to make binding decisions. I had prepared a timetable, two possible settlement frameworks, and a list of questions no one had been willing to answer.

The only thing I had failed to account for was Bruno Wolski.

“Hanna Domańska?” the man by the window asked before I had a chance to put down my briefcase.

He turned slowly. He was tall, with dark hair showing its first threads of silver at the temples, and wore a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up. He looked every one of his forty years, and his face suggested little concern about the impression he might make. He didn't smile, but he regarded me with an attentiveness far more unsettling than ordinary politeness.

“That's right. Mr. Wolski?”

“Bruno. If we're going to spend several difficult weeks together, surnames might only get in the way.”

“Sometimes surnames help people remember which side of the table they're sitting on.”

One corner of his mouth lifted slightly.

“Now I understand why they hired you.”

I approached the table. On one side lay neatly arranged materials concerning the Wolski vineyard; on the other were documents belonging to the Krawiec family's wine distribution business. For seven years, the companies had worked together with hardly any disputes. Now they were fighting over undelivered wine, lost contracts, and obligations neither side could agree on without involving lawyers.

The Krawiecs were my clients. The Wolskis, however, had agreed to let me conduct the discussions aimed at an amicable resolution. That required particular care on my part. Every relevant piece of information obtained during the meetings had to reach the appropriate people, and no private conversation could take the place of formal agreements.

“Are the others running late?” I asked.

“Mrs. Krawiec called. She'll be here tomorrow morning. So will my legal counsel. Were you informed?”

I reached for my phone. My client's message had arrived eleven minutes earlier, while I was driving along the narrow road between the hills.

“I see. It's a pity that wasn't arranged sooner.”

“I won't pretend this is an ideal situation. We can discuss organizational matters. Nothing that binds either party.”

I looked at him more closely. I had expected a vineyard owner who would try to take advantage of the other participants' absence. Instead, I found a man who had drawn a sensible boundary himself.

“I appreciate your precision,” I said.

“That almost sounded like a compliment.”

“Don't get used to it.”

This time, he genuinely smiled. There was something unexpectedly warm about it, something that didn't fit the cool correspondence we had exchanged over the previous two weeks.

He pulled out a chair but waited until I had taken my seat before sitting down himself.

“Would you like some wine?”

“Not while I'm working.”

“Water?”

“Please.”

He poured water from a carafe for me, then poured himself the same. He made no comment, although for a moment I had the impression he had noticed my wariness.

Then he sat opposite me and opened his own copy of my proposed timetable. Handwritten notes filled the margins.

“You've read the proposal,” I observed.

“Three times. The second time, I was angry. By the third, I'd decided most of it was reasonable.”

“And the first?”

“I wondered who the woman was who could identify all my problems in five pages without ever having met me.”

“I wasn't analyzing you. I was analyzing the documents.”

“That may be harder to forgive.”

I didn't answer immediately. A cooler breeze drifted through the open window, disturbing the candle flames. Bruno rose and partly closed one of the windowpanes, leaving the other open. He didn't ask whether I was cold. He had simply noticed that I was holding down a loose sheet of paper and removed the cause.

The small gesture irritated me more than it should have.

I liked predictable people. People whose courtesy could be distinguished from their strategy. Bruno Wolski was far too calm for a man whose company stood to lose its most important business partner.

“Before we begin tomorrow,” I said, “I'd like to know whether you're genuinely prepared to acknowledge at least some of the Krawiecs' claims.”

He rested his hands on the table.

“I'm prepared to consider a fair reckoning. That isn't necessarily the same thing.”

“If they didn't receive deliveries they were guaranteed, a fair reckoning will require someone to take responsibility.”

“I agree.”

He answered too quickly.

“Then why has your company spent six months disputing the basis of their claims?”

Bruno looked down at the documents. For several seconds, he ran his thumb along the edge of a sheet, as though considering whether to say something.

“Because there's a difference between a company's contractual obligation and a promise made by one particular person.”

I committed that sentence to memory.

“Contracts involve particular people, too. Someone must have signed the amendment.”

“Yes.”

“Someone must have assured the Krawiecs that increasing the deliveries was possible.”

“Yes.”

“And someone must have known what the vineyard's actual production capacity was.”

He raised his eyes.

“Ms. Domańska, if I answered all those questions tonight, tomorrow's meeting would be pointless.”

“Or considerably shorter.”

“Do you really believe every important matter can be resolved more quickly?”

“I believe postponing the truth usually makes it more expensive.”

This time, he made no attempt to joke. He studied me for a long moment, then slowly closed his folder.

“That's difficult to argue with.”

There was something personal in his answer. I didn't yet know what, but for the first time I sensed that the problem described in those documents might look entirely different from the perspective of the man sitting across from me.

My phone vibrated on the table. A message from Magda, my friend, reminded me of our Saturday trip to the seaside, which we'd been planning for months. Four days without clients, contracts, or phone calls. Four days during which I intended to finally decide whether I still wanted to run my own negotiation practice at its current relentless pace, or whether I might dare to make a change.

I sent a brief reply confirming that our plans were still on.

Bruno noticed my smile.

“Good news?”

“Personal.”

“I understand.”

He didn't ask anything more. Despite myself, I counted that in his favor.

Outside, darkness was settling over the vineyard. Candlelight shimmered in the empty wineglasses, and somewhere below, between the agricultural buildings, I heard workers laughing as they finished their day. Bruno stood and picked up a sweater lying near the door.

“I'll show you to your guest room. We start at nine tomorrow. The documents you requested will be available to everyone authorized to examine them.”

“All of them?”

He stopped.

“The ones we have.”

One word changed the meaning of his entire assurance.

“And the ones you don't have?”

For a moment, he regarded me without smiling.

“That's precisely why we need these discussions, Hanna.”

It was the first time he had used my first name. Calmly, without presumption, as though testing whether I would allow him to shorten the distance I had so carefully maintained.

I should have returned to the documents. Asked about the missing attachments, noted the discrepancy, and ended the meeting. Instead, for one unreasonable moment, I wondered what his voice would sound like if he said my name without professional caution.

I stood and picked up my briefcase.

“Tomorrow, I'll expect specific answers, Bruno.”

“I know.”

He opened the door for me, leaving enough room for me to pass without accidentally touching him. And yet I lingered beside him a moment longer than courtesy required.

“Are you always this calm?” I asked.

He looked at me. In the candlelight, some of the severity left his face.

“No,” he answered quietly. “Only when something matters so much to me that I desperately don't want to ruin it.”

I didn't ask whether he meant the negotiations.

I was afraid that if I heard a different answer, I would have to decide whether I truly wanted to keep a safe distance between us.

Chapter 1 - The Condition That Wasn't in the Plan

At nine o'clock the following morning, Bruno Wolski stopped being the man whose voice I remembered from the previous evening and became a party to a commercial dispute. At least, that was what I decided before going downstairs to the tasting room.

I had prepared carefully. A navy-blue suit, my hair secured in a low knot at the nape of my neck, documents divided by colored tabs. I had consumed nothing but coffee for breakfast because I had spent much of the night examining one particular detail: the phrase "guaranteed availability" appeared repeatedly in the correspondence between the companies, although the signed amendment referred only to planned volumes. That discrepancy could determine whether the Krawiecs received enough compensation to save their distribution network.

Three people were already seated at the table. Teresa Krawiec, the sixty-year-old owner of the distribution company, looked like a woman who had learned patience only because anger could be expensive. Beside her sat her son, Michał, who managed sales. Across from them was Paweł Radecki, the vineyard's legal counsel. Bruno stood near the sideboard, talking on the phone.

When he saw me, he ended the call.

"Good morning, Hanna."

I noticed Teresa raise her eyebrows. In our formal correspondence, Bruno and I had addressed each other by our surnames.

"Good morning, everyone," I replied, taking a seat at the shorter end of the table. "I suggest we begin by establishing the ground rules."

Bruno sat to my right, leaving one empty chair between us.

"We have an hour before the first break," he said. "After that, I need to go down to production."

"All the more reason not to waste time."

I spread out the timetable. Teresa immediately leaned over the document, while Michał watched Bruno with undisguised hostility. I knew the two men had once been close enough to spend family holidays together. Now they hadn't even shaken hands.

"I'm proposing a thirty-day suspension of debt collection proceedings and contract terminations," I began. "During that period, an independent expert will examine production records, orders, deliveries, and correspondence concerning the increased volumes. Only then will we establish the amount of any compensation due."

"Any compensation?" Michał almost snorted. "We lost two customers because we didn't receive the wine we were promised. There's nothing open to interpretation about that."

"I'm not disputing your losses," I replied. "I want to establish which losses the other party is responsible for and how they can be remedied without destroying both businesses."

"Our business is already suffering."

Bruno raised his eyes.

"I know, Michał."

"No. If you knew, we wouldn't be sitting here."

The atmosphere tightened. Teresa touched her son's hand but made no attempt to silence him. Radecki wrote something in the margin of his papers, while Bruno regarded Michał for a moment. He didn't retaliate, although there were several easy opportunities for him to do so.

"Before we go any further," he said at last, "I have one condition."

I set down my pen.

"I'm listening."

"No settlement can result in the sale of the vineyard or the dismissal of employees. We can discuss compensation, future deliveries, and payment schedules. But I will not agree to secure the claims against shares in the company."

"That's a proposed security arrangement, not a takeover," Michał pointed out.

"I know the difference. I also know the consequences of insolvency."

I looked down at my timetable. I had included the possibility of securing part of the compensation because the Krawiecs had no reason to trust another set of promises. Excluding the company's shares before we even knew the true extent of its liability would deprive us of one of our most important negotiating tools.

"I can't accept that restriction at the outset," I said.

Bruno turned toward me.

"Why not?"

"Because we don't know the scale of the damage. If we rule out effective forms of security, we may produce an agreement no reasonable person would sign."

"I didn't say all forms. I said shares."

"And I didn't say I intended to force the sale of your company."

For a moment, we looked at each other across the documents spread between us. Up close, I could see the fatigue beneath his eyes, which I hadn't noticed the previous evening. That didn't change the fact that he was trying to influence the outcome before we had established the basic figures.

"Then we should find a solution that protects both sides," he replied.

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

"Provided you're genuinely prepared to look for one."

Michał shifted sharply in his chair, but I spoke before he could intervene.

"Mr. Wolski, I represent the Krawiecs' interests in these settlement discussions. I'm not a neutral arbitrator. You agreed to this arrangement because both parties recognized the need for a solution that wouldn't involve litigation. If you're questioning my professional integrity, we should address that now."

Bruno held my gaze.

"I'm not questioning your integrity. I want to know whether you regard protecting the people who work here as a legitimate interest or as an obstacle to the negotiations."

I hadn't expected the question. It was well aimed because it exposed a weakness in my own plan. My tables accounted for employment costs and liquidity risks, but I hadn't distinguished the effects different forms of security might

have on seasonal and permanent workers. There was no point pretending otherwise.

"I regard it as a legitimate interest," I answered. "That's why I propose including the effect on employment in our assessment of the settlement's consequences. But I won't allow concern for employees to become an argument for avoiding responsibility to the other company."

Teresa nodded.

"That seems reasonable."

Bruno leaned back in his chair.

"In that case, I can work within those rules."

I felt an irritating flicker of satisfaction. Not because he had given way, but because he had taken my counterargument seriously.

For the next forty minutes, we discussed deadlines and procedures for making documents available. Radecki suggested that every request should pass exclusively through the law firms. I objected. Under that arrangement, even correcting a mistake in a batch number could take several days.

"We need direct working access to the people responsible for production and orders," I said. "Technical conversations will be recorded in meeting notes, and the findings shared with all participants. Without that, we won't complete the review within a month."

"Thirty days isn't enough," Radecki declared.

"Then please identify a specific task that cannot be completed within that period."

He didn't identify one.

Bruno, meanwhile, picked up a sheet of paper and wrote down two names.

"Ewa Zięba, our head of production, and Tomasz Lis, our accountant. You should begin with them. I'll also make a room available where you can work."

"I don't need a permanent office here."

"You need somewhere people won't be looking over your shoulder at confidential documents."

"What I need most is access to the records."

"One doesn't exclude the other."

He gave the faintest smile. I realized he remembered our earlier conversations just as precisely as I did.

Near the end of the meeting, Teresa requested a short break. She went onto the terrace with her son, while Radecki stepped away to take a call. I remained at the table, arranging my notes. Bruno began collecting the empty cups.

"You don't have to do that," I said.

"I know."

"You have employees."

"I know that too."

I looked up from my documents.

"Are you always this economical with your answers?"

"Only when I'm trying not to say something that will annoy you."

"Then you'd have to remain silent through most of our meetings."

He laughed quietly. It wasn't the laugh of a man accustomed to winning people over effortlessly. It sounded

more like someone who hadn't had much opportunity to relax in a long time.

"I like that you don't try to go easy on me."

"I wasn't hired to go easy on you."

"I noticed."

He stopped on the opposite side of the table. An open contract lay between us, and one of his hands rested on the back of a chair. Suddenly, I became aware that if we'd met under different circumstances, I might have considered this conversation flirtation.

And I wasn't entirely sure he didn't already consider it that.

"Yesterday, you said something about a promise made by a particular person," I reminded him. "I'd like to return to that during the review."

His smile disappeared.

"We will."

"I hope I won't have to ask repeatedly."

"I don't like making promises I can't keep."

He spoke calmly, but his gaze rested on the papers a fraction too long. I also noticed that the copy of the amendment I'd received from the Krawiecs carried two dates: the date it had been signed and a later date when the delivery schedule had been approved. I didn't yet know whether the distinction mattered.

Before the others returned, I asked one more question.

"Is there complete documentation confirming the vineyard's actual production capacity at the time the amendment was signed?"

"Production records exist," he replied. "Ewa can explain their scope."

It wasn't an answer to my question. I wrote it down without comment. Pressing him now might only close off a conversation I would need to revisit.

After the break, we finally agreed on the procedures for the thirty-day review. Bruno consented to providing the original documents necessary for the analysis, while the Krawiecs agreed to suspend new debt collection action until the next meeting. Neither party relinquished its claims. We also left the question of security unresolved.

It was a modest achievement. In my profession, the most difficult agreements sometimes began with progress exactly like that.

As the participants were leaving, Teresa stopped beside me.

"Hanna, don't let him persuade you simply by the way he speaks."

I glanced toward the terrace, where Bruno was talking to Radecki.

"I don't intend to."

"Bruno has always been able to make people believe everything is under control. Even when it isn't."

"Are you referring to something specific?"

Teresa pressed her lips together.

"I want to save the company I've spent thirty years building. I'm not interested in his personal tragedy. I'm interested in what he promised my son."

With that, she left.

I remained at the table longer than I'd intended. The sun now illuminated the vines from an entirely different angle. I had a concrete assignment, a timetable, and permission to begin reviewing the records. I should have felt nothing but satisfaction.

Bruno returned for a notebook he'd forgotten.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

"That depends. Are you asking about the negotiations or about me?"

He stopped in the doorway.

"This time, about you."

There was something in that ordinary question that robbed me of my prepared response. For a moment, I saw not the vineyard owner but a man who knew how to listen, whose presence was becoming increasingly difficult to ignore.

"I'm tired," I admitted.

"Then I won't keep you."

He retrieved his notebook and stepped back, leaving the way clear. He didn't offer coffee, suggest a walk, or try to prolong our conversation. He made no attempt to take advantage of the moment.

And it was precisely that restraint that made me speak before he could leave.

"Bruno?"

He turned.

"Yes?"

"I appreciate your agreeing to the review without further objections."

"I didn't do it for you."

"I know."

"But I'm glad you'll be the one conducting it."

I didn't have time to answer. He nodded and left, while I remained with a feeling I couldn't fit into any of my carefully prepared categories.

Only when I closed my folder did I notice a handwritten addition on the timetable's final page. Bruno had proposed another item: interviews with the employees responsible for harvest planning the previous year. Beside it was a date that preceded the approval of the increased deliveries.

I circled it in red.

I wasn't going to ignore the facts merely because the man responsible for them had a voice I was beginning to listen for in the silence.

Chapter 2 - Where Contracts End

The vineyard looked entirely different in the afternoon than it had during the morning negotiations. Instead of formal discussions, I could hear employees talking, a transport trolley rattling along a stone path, and the wind stirring the leaves. I sat in the small office that had been made available to me for the review, trying to organize the first documents. Through the window, I could see part of the courtyard and an older man carefully repairing a wooden crate.

The door remained open. Deliberately. I didn't want anyone to think I was holding confidential conversations with one of the parties outside the agreed procedures.

Bruno appeared a few minutes after three, carrying an additional desk lamp.

"This room gets too dark in the evening," he explained.

"I'm not planning to work into the evening."

"I imagine you weren't planning to yesterday, either."

He placed the lamp on the windowsill and waited for me to indicate where I wanted it. I noticed he had already learned not to move my documents.

"Over here, please," I said. "Thank you."

He plugged in the lamp and checked that the light wasn't shining directly into my eyes.

"I've heard from Ewa. She can meet you tomorrow at eleven. The accountant is preparing the delivery report."

"Good. I'd also like to see the original harvest forecasts."

"I know. I added them to the timetable."

"I noticed."

He regarded me with cautious amusement.

"And you're probably wondering why I suggested providing documents that might work against my company."

"I'm mainly wondering whether I'll be able to verify them."

"Quite right."

His answer was so free of defensiveness that I didn't know what to say for a moment. Most people in his position would have tried to convince me that my question demonstrated a lack of trust. Bruno accepted it as an ordinary part of my work.

He sat in the chair opposite my desk only after I gestured toward it.

"There's one more thing we need to agree on," he said. "How are we going to exchange information?"

"Anything that may affect the outcome will be documented and shared with the legal representatives and the Krawiecs. We won't conduct informal negotiations without their knowledge."

"And if I want to explain why certain decisions were made here at the vineyard?"

"You may. I'll prepare a written note and ask you to confirm its accuracy."

"That doesn't sound particularly romantic."

I looked up.

"I wasn't aware romance was the purpose of our cooperation."

He didn't avert his eyes.