
Laura Bellini
Don't Give Back Our Mornings
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ROMANS

ISBN: 9788384900307

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INTRO

At 5:47 in the morning, Poznań still belonged to people who had no time for anyone else's expectations. Delivery drivers, bakers, night-bus drivers, and women like me, who could tell when butter had been creamed incorrectly just by the sound of the mixer. I stood at the stainless-steel counter in my pastry shop, flour dusting my forearm and my hair tied back so carelessly that a loose strand kept falling against my cheek. Outside, rain smoothed the cobblestones, while my freshly baked croissants cooled on a wire rack. Everything was exactly as it should have been.

Until the first metallic crash came from the other side of the wall.

I glanced at the clock.

"No. Not today."

For the past three weeks, I'd been preparing my application for the city's food festival, which was due to begin in six weeks. It wasn't simply about having a stall, attracting crowds, or winning the public's choice award. I wanted contracts that would stop my pastry shop from lurching from one difficult month to the next. Late the previous evening, I'd finished designing my signature menu: six desserts inspired by Poznań mornings, each paired with a particular coffee.

There was just one problem. I didn't have a coffee partner, and the deadline for confirming our joint stand was tomorrow.

A second crash made the cups on the shelf rattle.

I put down my piping bag and went to the window. Lights were on in the neighboring premises, which had stood empty for almost four months. Through the misted glass, I could make out a man bending over a wooden crate. His dark shirt sleeves were rolled up, and he moved with the confidence of someone who had always belonged there.

When he straightened and looked in my direction, I instinctively stepped back.

Not because he'd caught me watching.

Because he smiled.

As though he knew exactly how much his presence was annoying me.

Five minutes later, I opened my door onto the street. The air smelled of wet asphalt and freshly ground coffee. The second scent stopped me more effectively than the sight of the neighboring premises standing open.

It was rich and faintly chocolatey, with something fruity lingering beneath it. Nothing like the coffee I served my customers. Mine was perfectly acceptable, predictable, and supplied by a wholesaler whose representative always got my surname wrong.

The man was carrying another crate from his van.

"Are you aware of the time?" I asked.

He turned. Up close, he looked like someone who had long since stopped worrying about the impression he made. He had dark hair, several days' stubble, and a face whose calm confidence hadn't been erased by fatigue.

"Five fifty-three," he replied, checking his watch. "But if you're asking whether I'm aware of the noise, I'm afraid the answer is less favorable."

"For you or for me?"

"I suspect both."

He set the crate on the pavement rather than make me talk to a man busy lifting heavy things. That small courtesy irritated me almost as much as his smile. I couldn't even accuse him of being inconsiderate.

"I run the pastry shop next door," I explained. "I start preparing orders at six. I'd rather not have to wonder whether the next crash means renovation work or the building collapsing."

"We finished renovating yesterday. The equipment's arriving today."

"Is that supposed to be good news?"

"Depends how you feel about espresso."

I raised an eyebrow.

"I generally prefer drinking it to discussing it before six in the morning."

He laughed softly. His voice was low and slightly husky, and his laughter lacked the exaggerated warmth some business owners reserved for potential customers.

He held out his hand.

"Daniel Rawicz."

I looked at his hand, then his face.

"Klara Górska."

His handshake was brief and firm. His fingers were warm despite the morning chill. When he released me, I noticed a small burn scar on the back of his hand, clearly older than a few days. I didn't ask about it. I had my own collection of

scars from hot baking trays and knew that not every workplace story was meant for strangers.

"Do you make those croissants?" he asked.

"Which ones?"

He pointed toward my window, where the first batch sat on a wooden tray.

"The ones that have been making it difficult for me to concentrate for the past fifteen minutes."

I smiled despite myself.

"That's a remarkably impractical compliment from someone opening a competing business."

"Competing?"

"Coffee, breakfast, morning queues. Shall I continue?"

"I'm going to roast coffee and run a small café. I have no intention of baking croissants."

"And I have no intention of roasting coffee."

"Then perhaps we're not competitors."

He said it calmly, but I couldn't ignore the way he watched me. He wasn't assessing my face or my clothes. He seemed genuinely interested in what I would say next. That was more dangerous than ordinary flirting, especially at an hour when my common sense was demanding its first coffee.

"My rent doesn't share your optimism," I replied.

Daniel didn't try to convince me. He nodded, then reached into his pocket when his phone vibrated. I caught only the contact name on the screen: Wiktor.

He declined the call without checking for a message.

"I'm sorry about the noise," he said. "I'll make sure future deliveries arrive later."

The straightforward apology robbed me of the sarcastic remark I'd been saving.

"Thank you."

I was about to head inside when he noticed a white smudge on my cheek.

"You've got some flour here."

He indicated the spot on his own face, keeping his distance. I wiped my cheek with my sleeve.

"Better?"

"Now it's on the other side."

I gave him a suspicious look.

"Are you making fun of me?"

"A little. But the flour was real."

This time, I laughed first.

The oven alarm sounded from inside my shop. I swore under my breath and turned sharply.

"I have to go."

"Klara?"

I stopped, surprised by how naturally my name sounded in his voice.

"Yes?"

"What time do you open to customers?"

"Seven."

"Then I'll be there at seven."

"For a croissant?"

"I'd like to know whether they taste as good as they smell."

"And if they don't?"

"I'll have a reason to tell you the truth."

I couldn't yet decide whether this man was outrageously cheeky or simply unaccustomed to saying things he didn't mean. I left him on the pavement and returned to my kitchen, where pistachio cream was waiting to be piped into tartlet shells. I worked quickly, but for the next half hour, I kept catching myself listening for sounds through the wall.

At 6:38, Marta, my friend and accountant, called.

"I've got two pieces of news," she announced without saying hello. "One good, one requiring coffee."

"Start with the good."

"The festival organizers have shortlisted your menu for the final selection. All they need is confirmation of your coffee partner. If you don't provide it by tomorrow, your place goes to someone on the waiting list."

My fingers tightened around the phone.

"And the bad?"

"The building's owner is talking to some company about a long-term arrangement involving the food businesses. I don't know the details, but he mentioned changing the terms for tenants. Check your lease before you agree to anything."

I hung up, promising to call her later. For a moment, I stood motionless at the counter, staring at the freshly decorated pastries. My own business was the one thing I didn't have to share with other people's expectations. I chose the recipes, the working hours, and the risks. For five years, I'd paid for that freedom with money, sleep, and

lonely Sundays, but I'd never once decided it was worth surrendering.

At exactly seven, the bell above the door rang.

Daniel walked in carrying two paper cups. He placed one on the counter without pushing it toward me.

"Espresso as a neighborly peace offering," he said. "If you'll accept that kind of apology."

Through the window, I noticed the sign above his premises for the first time. Beneath the roastery's name were three Polish words: Kawa od świtu. Coffee from Dawn.

I picked up the cup. The espresso smelled exactly as wonderful as the morning promised to be, a morning I'd had no intention of sharing with anyone an hour earlier.

"And what if I told you I need something more than coffee?" I asked.

Daniel rested his hands on the edge of the counter.

"Then I'd like to hear what you need."

Standing before me was a man who could help save my plans or complicate everything I'd worked for. All I had to do was tell him about the festival. Instead, I removed the lid, took a sip, and, for a moment, couldn't think of a single sensible answer.

The coffee was extraordinary.

"To begin with," I finally said, "you can stop being so formal with me."

He smiled, but this time something more serious entered his expression.

"All right, Klara."

And that was when a thought crossed my mind for the first time, one I wasn't ready to admit even to myself.

If sending Daniel back next door was already this difficult on our very first morning, what would I do when I truly began waiting for him?

Chapter 1 - Terms of the Morning

Daniel Rawicz hadn't even finished his coffee before I placed a binder in front of him.

It wasn't a particularly romantic way to begin an acquaintance, but at seven fifteen in the morning, my professional life was exactly twenty-four hours away from a serious disaster. I needed a coffee partner for the city's food festival, and the man standing on the other side of my counter had just opened a roastery next door. Allowing him to leave with nothing but a croissant would have been an almost criminal waste of opportunity.

"What's this?" he asked, looking at the navy-blue cover.

"A business proposal."

"Do you always begin with an interrogation?"

"Only when the person I'm talking to brings excellent coffee and looks capable of meeting a deadline."

Daniel lifted his cup to his lips. He was still wearing the dark shirt whose sleeves he'd rolled up while unloading equipment, and his presence in my little pastry shop seemed surprisingly natural. He wasn't glancing around impatiently or checking his phone. He studied the binder with genuine curiosity.

"A compliment and a business offer in the same sentence. Should I be worried?"

"Not yet."

I opened the documents to the page showing my proposed festival menu. Carefully printed photographs displayed the six desserts I'd spent the past month

developing. Each had its own recipe, story, and planned presentation. They weren't simply pretty pastries. They represented my first serious step toward creating a workshop where I could develop signature collections for restaurants and hotels instead of wondering every day whether I'd have enough money to pay the next electricity bill.

"The Poznań Festival of Flavours," Daniel read. "I've heard of it."

"I submitted a proposal for a joint pastry-and-coffee stand. The menu's been approved for the next stage, and I have a deadline to confirm my partner. That's the only thing missing."

"Your partner pulled out at the last minute?"

"No. I haven't found anyone I'd be willing to entrust with half the project."

He looked up from the documents.

"That's not a small distinction."

"Because it isn't."

He ran a finger along the photograph of a dessert made with caramelized pear, hazelnuts, and delicate coffee cream. He was careful not to touch the photograph itself, as though he didn't want to leave fingerprints.

"Who chose the coffee?"

"I did, based on flavor profiles I'm familiar with. But I need someone who can actually reproduce them and maintain consistent quality throughout the festival."

"You've already admitted you don't roast coffee."

"But I know when acidity is elegant and when someone's trying to disguise a mistake by calling it that."

His smile broadened.

"That's actually a pretty good place to start."

He slipped one of the photographs out of its transparent sleeve. After studying it for a moment, he pointed to the description.

"Here, you're planning an espresso with a strongly chocolatey profile. I understand why, but with that cream, the whole dessert could become too heavy. I'd try a coffee with more pronounced fruit notes, without sharp acidity."

I had a response ready, but I didn't say it.

He'd surprised me.

Most potential partners immediately asked about logo placement, cost sharing, and expected visitor numbers. Daniel had started with flavor.

"You haven't tasted my cream," I pointed out.

"Which is precisely why I'm not claiming to be right. I'm suggesting we test it."

For several seconds, we looked at each other across the open binder. I liked that he wasn't trying to gain an advantage by pretending he was infallible. At the same time, I sensed the stubbornness of a man who wouldn't surrender a decision simply because someone else spoke with conviction.

"I have samples," I said.

"And I have beans."

"So?"

"So first, we establish the rules."

And that was when I remembered why running my own business was sometimes easier than working with other people.

We sat at the table beneath the window. Outside, Poznań was slowly waking, and the first tram crossed the rain-darkened intersection with a metallic rumble. My employee, Anka, arrived shortly before eight and took over serving customers. She gave me a questioning look, which I answered with a discreet shake of my head. The last thing I needed was a public interrogation about my handsome new neighbor.

Daniel took out a notebook. Not a tablet or laptop, but a small black notebook with bent corners.

"You have six weeks until the festival," he began. "You want a shared stand, six flavor pairings, and sales on-site?"

"And business contacts. That's the most important part for me."

"How many orders can you handle in a single day?"

I gave him the figures Anka and I had calculated earlier. He opened his notebook and began converting portions into hours of service, accounting for breaks, product reserves, and the time needed to prepare drinks.

"You're going to have a queue," he concluded.

"I certainly hope so."

"A queue isn't always a sign of success. If people have to wait twenty minutes, they'll leave before they taste anything."

"That's why I need someone who can run the coffee side efficiently."

"And I need the authority to make decisions about that side."

I leaned back in my chair.

"To what extent?"

"Bean selection, drink recipes, training whoever operates the espresso machine, and quality standards. I won't put my name on coffee I can't control."

"And I won't put my name on desserts someone else changes without my approval."

"I'm not asking for that."

"Not yet."

He tilted his head.

"Klara, if we're going to spend six weeks seeing which of us can say 'mine' more loudly, we might as well stop this conversation now."

That stung because there was some truth in it.

I'd spent five years working for myself. Every success belonged to me, but so did every mistake. I'd grown accustomed to making the final decisions alone. Daniel wasn't offering to be an ordinary coffee supplier. He was proposing shared responsibility, and that felt considerably more dangerous.

"I'm not giving up control of my brand," I said, more calmly.

"I don't want your brand."

"I need you to say that clearly."

He put down his pen.

"All right. I don't want your brand, your customers, or your premises. I want to make the best coffee I possibly can and

show people why my roastery is worth visiting. If we can create something worthwhile together, I'm interested. If not, I'll still be your neighbor."

It was a reasonable answer.

Perhaps too reasonable from a man who'd been teasing me about the flour on my face half an hour earlier.

"What about the money?"

"We each cover our own production costs. We divide shared expenses according to an agreed budget. Revenue from the tasting sets gets allocated based on costs and margins we've both approved."

"I don't want a single joint account that only you can access."

"Neither do I."

I hesitated.

"Really?"

"I'm thirty-nine. I've had time to learn that unclear arrangements cost far more than a few difficult conversations at the beginning."

Something in his voice made me stop treating those words as an ordinary business declaration. He didn't sound like a man reciting a principle he'd learned from a management book.

He sounded like someone who'd paid to learn it.

I didn't ask about his past, though. Not yet. I had no right to.

When Anka came over to tell me we were running low on tartlets in the display case, I excused myself and went into the kitchen. I needed a few minutes to transfer the cream

into a piping bag and finish the decorations. Normally, that kind of work calmed me immediately.

This time, I couldn't stop analyzing our conversation.

A moment later, I heard footsteps near the kitchen entrance.

"May I?" Daniel asked from the doorway.

"Depends. Are you planning to criticize my pastry techniques?"

"I don't know enough about them."

"That's the second sensible thing you've said today."

He didn't enter until I nodded.

"Anka said I should look for you in here if I wanted to avoid another fifteen minutes of negotiations at the table."

"Anka talks too much."

"She also said you're at your most stubborn when you've had a good idea."

I smiled to myself.

"That part's true."

Daniel watched me fill the tartlet shells. He didn't comment on my movements. When I'd finished the last one, I handed him a small dessert on a porcelain plate.

"Taste it."

He took a spoon, broke off a small piece, and remained silent for a moment. I noticed that he tasted carefully, taking his time before passing judgment.

"It's excellent," he finally said. "But I have a question."

"I knew it."

"Why do you leave so little room for bitterness?"

He surprised me again. No one had ever put it quite like that.

"Because people come to a pastry shop for pleasure."

"Pleasure doesn't have to be sweet from beginning to end."

I looked at his face. He held the spoon between his fingers and appeared perfectly aware of the double meaning in what he'd just said.

"Do you always talk about desserts like that?"

"Only when they're worth talking about."

This time, I was the first to look away.

That afternoon, we moved our meeting to his premises. The café wasn't ready to welcome customers yet, but it already looked different from every fashionable coffee shop I knew. Dark wood, matte walls, large windows, and simple shelving created a space free from unnecessary decoration. A small coffee roaster stood behind a glass partition. The air smelled of fresh wood, warm metal, and coffee beans.

"Nice," I admitted.

"You sound disappointed."

"I was hoping for a few disastrous interior design choices."

"You haven't seen the bathroom yet."

I laughed, and he gestured toward a table where he'd prepared several bean samples.

Over the next hour, we tasted different coffees with various desserts. Daniel didn't force ready-made answers on me. He asked what I could taste, suggested adjusting the proportions, sometimes agreed immediately, and sometimes

patiently explained why he thought we should try something differently.

I discovered that he could be firm without raising his voice.

When we disagreed about one pairing, he didn't try to win the argument.

He prepared another sample.

It was a new experience for me.

During the fourth coffee, his phone vibrated. Once again, I saw the name Wiktor on the screen. Daniel declined the call, but this time he placed the phone face down.

"Important?" I asked.

"Something connected with getting the place open."

"You can answer."

"I'll call back."

He didn't turn it into some grand declaration. He simply returned to our conversation. Even so, I noticed that for a moment, he seemed less at ease.

Once we'd agreed on the first three flavor pairings, I took out my phone and showed him the message from the organizers. The deadline for confirming my partner was four o'clock the following afternoon.

"I need a decision today," I said.

Daniel leaned against the counter.

"I need something in return."

I felt my earlier caution returning.

"What?"

"I don't want to be a supplier whose name appears in tiny print. If we're going to create something together, both brands need to be visible. And I want the right to say when a pairing doesn't work, even if you've already fallen in love with it."

"You won't make decisions for me."

"No. But I'm not going to pretend everything is perfect just to keep the atmosphere pleasant."

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

There was no aggression in his manner. Only a consistency that irritated me and earned my respect in equal measure.

"All right," I said. "Equal visibility for both brands. Joint decisions about the tasting sets. Each of us responsible for our own products."

"And no changes without discussing them."

"No changes."

He extended his hand across the table.

I shook it.

This time, I didn't let go immediately.

Perhaps our hands remained together a second longer than a business agreement required. Daniel glanced at them, then at me.

"Klara?"

"Yes?"

"If I ask whether you'd like another coffee now, will you consider it an attempt to renegotiate?"

"Depends whether it's as good as the last one."

"Better."

"An ambitious promise."

He smiled.

By the time I returned to my shop, it was nearly five. Anka was finishing cleaning the display case. She stopped when she saw me.

"Well?"

"We have a partner."

"Just a partner?"

I gave her a warning look.

"Anka."

"I'm asking professionally."

"Of course you are."

She laughed and went back to work.

That evening, I emailed Daniel the first written version of our agreement. He replied about fifteen minutes later with three specific amendments. Every one of them made sense.

He also added a sentence I couldn't quite classify as either professional or entirely personal.

"I enjoy arguing with you. Tomorrow, let's try finding common ground over something more difficult than a pear."

I read it twice.

Then I wrote back:

"I'm not promising agreement. I'm promising an excellent tartlet."

His response arrived almost immediately.

"We have to start somewhere."

I put down my phone and switched off the kitchen lights. Through the window, I could see Daniel was still working next door. His silhouette moved between the tables, warm lamplight falling across the empty counter.

For the first time in a long while, I didn't feel only relief at the end of the day.

I was also curious about the following morning.

And that wasn't part of any business plan.

Chapter 2 - Two Cups, Two Boundaries

At nine the following morning, I discovered that Daniel Rawicz could be every bit as organized as he was irritating.

An email was waiting in my inbox, its attachment titled "Festival - Partnership Terms." It contained a meeting schedule, a preliminary budget, a division of responsibilities, and a list of decisions neither of us should make independently. Everything was presented clearly, without the legal jargon some business owners used to conceal their intentions.

On the final page, however, I found a sentence highlighted in yellow.

"Final approval of joint products requires the consent of both parties."

I stared at it for a full minute.

Not because it was unreasonable.

Because it meant Daniel could say no to a dessert I'd spent weeks developing.

At ten, I called him.

"We need to discuss clause seven."

"Good morning, Klara."

"Good morning. Clause seven."

"I suspected that's where we'd start."

I could hear the distinctive sound of beans being poured in the background.

"If I think a pairing works and you disagree, what happens?"