Laura Bellini



One Night to Stay

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ROMANS

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INTRO

The first time that evening I felt I was truly losing control was when the sound of a single piano key drifted out of the concert hall.

There would have been nothing unusual about it if I hadn't spent the previous twenty minutes trying to establish who was allowed to touch an instrument that cost more than my first apartment.

I stood in the middle of the hotel foyer in Krynica-Zdrój, holding a phone to my ear, an organizer's badge between my fingers, and a paper cup of coffee I hadn't had time to drink. Wet snow fell beyond the panoramic windows. Inside, the air smelled of polished wood, fresh flowers, and the expensive perfume of guests who had come to spend a weekend enjoying music.

It was supposed to be the most prestigious concert of the season.

And I was supposed to make sure everything went exactly according to plan.

"Aleksandra? Can you hear me?" Marek, my business partner, sounded disturbingly calm.

"I can hear you. Say it again, but leave out the part where you try to reassure me."

"Helena has canceled. Her doctor has forbidden her to travel."

I looked at my watch.

Nineteen hours until the concert.

Helena Radecka's name appeared on the invitations, posters, and tickets sold to four hundred and eighty people. The sponsors had paid for the event primarily because of her. The program promised her recital, followed by a private reception for the most important guests.

And in my calendar, at precisely nine thirty the following morning, was a meeting with representatives of an investment fund that would decide whether to finance my agency for another year.

I'd spent three months preparing that presentation.

"Send me the medical certificate and an official statement from her management," I said. "We're not announcing anything until we have a solution."

"Ola, what if we just cancel?"

I closed my eyes.

Not because the idea was absurd. Because it was reasonable.

"If we cancel, we lose the main sponsor's advance, the hotel demands reimbursement, and my agency spends the next six months explaining why we couldn't save one evening."

"You can't take everything on yourself."

"I'm not taking on everything. I'm taking responsibility for what I signed a contract to deliver."

I ended the call before he could reply.

I was thirty-three and had spent six years producing events where other people's expectations always exceeded the budget. I'd learned that when people started to panic, someone had to speak in short sentences, check the figures,

and remember practical details like transporting musicians and making sure dressing rooms were available.

That evening, I needed my personal rule more than ever: solution first, emotions later.

I opened my laptop on a low table beside reception. I sent three messages to my team, checked the list of available performers, and called the hotel director.

Then I heard a second note from the piano.

This time, several notes formed a melody.

Someone was playing slowly, as though testing not only the instrument's sound but also his own patience.

The hall was supposed to be locked.

I abandoned my coffee, crossed to the heavy doors, and pressed down on the handle.

Inside, the room lay in semi-darkness. A single work light glowed above the stage, casting a warm circle over a black grand piano. Empty rows of seats stretched all the way to the back wall. The man at the instrument wore dark trousers and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up. His jacket hung over the back of a chair.

He didn't turn around when I entered.

"The hall is closed," I announced.

The music stopped, but the man kept his hands suspended above the keys for a moment.

"Good," he replied. "I don't particularly enjoy an audience while I'm rehearsing."

His voice was low, slightly husky, and entirely unapologetic.

"This isn't about an audience. It's about access to the instrument."

"It's in tune."

"I didn't ask."

"And yet you came to check."

He turned his head.

I recognized him immediately.

Tadeusz Korf.

Thirty-eight years old. More than a decade performing across Europe, sold-out recitals, and a reputation for being capable of refusing to perform five minutes before going onstage if he believed the conditions wouldn't allow him to play properly.

I'd seen his photographs countless times. In person, he looked different. His dark hair was touched with gray at the temples, and he had the kind of face that didn't need a smile to command attention. What surprised me most, though, was his gaze: calm, attentive, and a little tired.

"Mr. Korf," I said.

"Ms. Czajka."

He shouldn't have known my name.

"Have we been introduced?"

"No. But I saw you through the hall window while you were on the phone. Someone at reception told me that if I wanted anything arranged, I should find Aleksandra Czajka."

"And you decided to start by breaking the rules?"

"I decided to start with the piano."

I should have asked him to leave. Instead, I noticed a folder of sheet music beside the instrument. Across its cover, someone had written by hand: Krynica - shortened version.

"Are you preparing a performance?"

Something shifted almost imperceptibly in his expression.

"I haven't decided yet."

"Are you involved in tomorrow's concert?"

"I was supposed to be in the audience."

"Was supposed to be?"

"I still have my ticket. I just don't know whether I'll use it."

He walked over to the lamp beside the piano and switched off the light above the sheet music. Only then did I notice a small envelope lying on the instrument. A document bearing the letterhead of his representatives protruded from it.

On the first page, I caught sight of one word: suspension.

Korf slid the envelope beneath the music.

He didn't do it abruptly. It was that very care that caught my attention.

"Excuse me," I said, remembering the more urgent problem. "I'm dealing with a crisis, and I don't have much time."

"I noticed."

"Is it that obvious?"

"You've checked your phone four times since you came in. And you left your coffee in the corridor, even though you look like someone who desperately needs it."

I didn't like strange men forming judgments about me after a few minutes.

I liked it even less when they were right.

"And you look like someone who has no desire to talk to anybody."

"Usually, I don't."

"Then we're both wasting our time."

I headed for the door.

"Ms. Czajka?"

I stopped.

"Is Helena really not performing?"

I turned slowly.

"How do you know?"

"I just received a message from her accompanist. She's a friend of mine."

For a moment, we stared at each other without speaking.

I realized that the man who had been sitting at the piano moments earlier might be the only person in the building capable of saving the concert.

He must have realized it too, because he sighed and looked toward the closed keyboard.

"Don't even start," he said.

"I haven't suggested anything."

"That's why I'm warning you."

I moved closer to the stage.

"You don't know what I'm going to propose."

"I know organizers. First they talk about art. Then responsibility. And in the end, I'm supposed to feel grateful for the opportunity to perform."

"I usually start with the fee."

He looked at me with unmistakable interest.

"At least that's honest."

"I didn't say I intended to hire you."

"Of course not."

He smiled for the first time, briefly and without triumph. I felt an unexpected urge to smile back, even though the canceled concert still hung over me like a sentence.

My phone vibrated.

A message from Marek appeared on the screen.

Ola, they've confirmed the dates for Korf's tour. The contract is ready for his management to sign. We need to finalize it today.

I read it twice.

For weeks, I'd been negotiating the production of nine concerts for Tadeusz Korf. The contract was supposed to provide the financial stability my agency desperately needed. I'd expected the final documents to reach me after the weekend.

I looked up.

The pianist was watching me without smiling.

"Has something happened?" he asked.

The envelope, with its carelessly concealed document, still lay on the piano. Beside it rested the sheet music for a program he supposedly hadn't decided to perform.

I could have told him about the tour. I could have explained that I wasn't some random event organizer and that our professional lives were already connected.

Instead, I put my phone away.

"I need to save tomorrow evening," I replied. "And apparently I need someone who doesn't want to perform."

"And I need someone to finally respect my no."

He didn't say it harshly. That made it harder to dismiss his words as a mere whim.

"Then I won't try to persuade you now," I answered. "But I'd like to know whether there are circumstances under which you would actually want to play."

He studied me for a long time.

"That's an entirely different question, Aleksandra."

The way he said my name made me forget, for a moment, about the phone in my hand.

"And do you have an answer?"

He looked toward the empty auditorium.

"Perhaps. But first I'd have to believe you can listen even when you don't like what you're hearing."

I stood before the man on whom my professional plans suddenly depended, and for the first time that evening, I had no idea what to say next.

Because if I truly listened to him, would I still be able to ask him to stay?

Chapter 1 - Terms That Cannot Be Bought

For several seconds, the only thing between us was a silence that no concert organizer would ever have been able to fit into a schedule. Tadeusz stood beside the grand piano, one hand resting on its closed lid. He didn't look like a man waiting for an offer. He looked more like someone testing whether I could accept an answer before I'd even heard it.

"I can listen," I said at last. "But I can't promise I'll always agree."

"That's a reasonable beginning."

"Then tell me what you need."

He didn't answer immediately. Instead, he walked over to the front row of seats and sat at one end, leaving me free to sit beside him or remain onstage. I chose an armchair across the aisle. I was still holding my phone, although I hadn't used it for several minutes.

"If I were to perform tomorrow, I wouldn't want to be Helena's replacement," he said.

"From an organizational perspective, that's exactly what you'd be."

"Not from a musical perspective."

"Explain the difference."

"The audience bought tickets to hear a particular artist perform a particular repertoire. I'm not going to pretend they'll be getting the same thing. I can give them a different concert. My own concert. But I don't want to wake up tomorrow and find a poster with my name where hers used

to be, as though we're interchangeable parts of the same machine."

There was no resentment in his voice. He spoke calmly, almost matter-of-factly, yet every sentence sounded like a boundary drawn after years of experience. I knew he was right. I also knew our marketing department was already preparing an emergency graphic announcing An Exclusive Recital by Tadeusz Korf.

"I can guarantee honest communication," I replied. "We'll officially announce Helena's cancellation, offer refunds, and present your concert as a separate event. We won't suggest that it's equivalent to the original program."

"And the sponsors?"

"The sponsors will be unhappy."

"I like that answer."

"It wasn't intended to please you."

"All the more reason to like it."

I looked up from my phone. He was smiling faintly, but the attention in his gaze was something I couldn't attribute to ordinary politeness. Men in my industry often treated negotiations as competitions for dominance. Tadeusz wasn't trying to speak louder or occupy more space. He simply refused to yield on matters he considered important.

"Second condition," he said. "No meeting with donors after the concert."

"That's part of the sponsorship package."

"Not mine."

"I could suggest fifteen minutes."

"You could. And I could refuse."

I rested my head against the back of the chair.

"Do you always negotiate like this?"

"Only when I know the other person is accustomed to winning."

"It's not about winning. It's about honoring commitments."

"To whom?"

The question sounded simple, but it struck precisely the place I didn't want to expose. To the sponsors, the guests, the team, the hotel. To the employees I'd promised stability. To myself, because for six years I'd been proving that my company wasn't just some passing venture started by a woman with good connections.

"To the people who trusted me," I answered.

Tadeusz nodded.

"I understand. But please don't add me to that list before I've agreed to be on it."

Before I could think of a response, the auditorium doors flew open.

Marta, the event's technical director, came in wearing a work jacket, a radio clipped to her belt. She stopped when she saw Tadeusz, then looked at me with the expression of someone who had found the answer to a problem and was terrified of losing it.

"Ola, I need a decision. The technicians want to know whether we're dismantling the orchestra setup."

"Not yet. Give me ten minutes."

"We've also got a lighting problem. If we're changing the program, we need to rewrite the lighting cues before the operators finish their shift."

"Keep them here for now. We'll pay the overtime."

"With what?"

It was the one question I least wanted to hear in front of Tadeusz.

"The production contingency fund."

Marta studied me carefully but said nothing. She'd known me long enough to recognize the tone that meant the discussion was over. She left, allowing the door to remain slightly ajar.

Tadeusz rose from his seat.

"You don't have to pretend everything is under control."

"I'm not pretending."

"I just heard a conversation about money you probably don't have."

"The contingency fund exists."

"That doesn't necessarily mean it's enough."

I gave him a cool look.

"Does every pianist know about event financing?"

"No. But this particular pianist managed his own projects for several years and learned how to read a budget."

I walked toward the stage, feeling my exhaustion mounting. I didn't need another person evaluating my decisions. I needed an artist willing to perform before an audience tomorrow evening.

"Mr. Korf, I have an honest offer for you. Your full fee at your current rate, complete freedom to choose the repertoire, separate communication for the event, and no obligation to attend the sponsors' reception. In exchange, I need your confirmation by midnight."

"And the rehearsal?"

"We'll arrange it according to your needs."

"No. We'll arrange it according to what's possible. Before I decide, I want to know whether the instrument, acoustics, and technical crew will allow me to prepare a concert I'm willing to put my name to."

I checked my watch.

It was 10:18 p.m.

"We have less than two hours before your deadline."

"Then I suggest we don't waste them trying to persuade me that I need to hurry."

For a moment, I wanted to walk out. Call another agency, find a less demanding pianist, offer the audience a chamber program featuring local musicians. I had several alternatives, although none promised the same level of interest.

I could also simply accept the cancellation.

Except Korf was standing before me, offering something I couldn't quite name.

Not rescue.

The possibility of working together without being able to buy his obedience.

"All right," I said. "We'll check the conditions. Now."

Surprise crossed his face for a fraction of a second.

"Really?"

"I should warn you that if you decide afterward that we've wasted the evening, I have no intention of apologizing for trying."

"I wasn't expecting an apology."

"Excellent. I, on the other hand, expect specifics."

I took out my phone and called Marta.

We spent the next forty minutes onstage. Tadeusz examined the instrument, its position, and its sound from different parts of the auditorium. He didn't behave like a star demanding special treatment. He moved the piano bench himself, helped a technician position the microphones, and asked for one light to be dimmed because it reflected off the piano's polished surface.

Marta, initially skeptical, began answering his questions with growing interest after the first fifteen minutes. I watched them communicate in the language of practical details, something no contract could ever replace. Korf understood technical limitations and didn't take offense at them. He could explain the reason behind every request.

When he returned to the keyboard, I sat several rows away.

He played a short passage from a piece I didn't recognize. The music began unassumingly, with individual, cautious notes. Then a melody emerged, so delicate that I almost instinctively tried to breathe more quietly. I didn't understand piano performance as thoroughly as I understood concert production, but I could recognize the moment when a performer stopped thinking about the audience.

Tadeusz wasn't playing for me.

And that was precisely why I found it difficult to look away.

He stopped before completing the phrase.

"Can you hear the reverberation?"

"Yes."

"It's too long in the third row. Even worse at the front. But it sounds better farther back."

"We could change the position of the acoustic screens."

Marta immediately approached the stage.

"We could. But I'll need people."

"You'll have them," I replied.

Over the following hour, the auditorium transformed before our eyes. Some of the music stands prepared for the orchestra disappeared. The technicians repositioned the acoustic screens, the lighting operator simplified the cues, and Marta checked whether the crew could stay longer.

At one point, Tadeusz appeared beside me at the control desk.

"You should get some rest," he said quietly.

"That sentence ought to be banned from the events industry."

"Then I'll say something else. You're good at what you do."

I turned toward him.

I hadn't expected a compliment, particularly from him.

"I haven't saved the concert yet."

"I know. I've been watching you. When a technician told you something couldn't be done, you didn't start looking for someone to blame. You asked what he needed in order to try."

"That's my job."

"Not everyone sees it that way."

For a moment, I studied his face from a distance shorter than a professional conversation required. I noticed the fine lines around his eyes and the traces of exhaustion that weren't visible from the audience. He smelled of clean cotton and something faintly woody. He didn't step away, but neither did he attempt to close the distance between us.

"You're good at your job too," I said.

"That, I already know."

I laughed before I could stop myself.

"You're insufferable."

"And yet you're still talking to me."

"Professional necessity."

"Of course."

This time, I was the first to look away.

A few minutes after midnight, we returned to the empty foyer. The hotel had fallen quiet. Outside, the snow had turned to rain, and the lamps illuminating the driveway cast golden streaks across the wet cobblestones. The receptionist brought us water and left two clean glasses on the table.

Tadeusz remained standing.

"I'll play," he said.

Relief hit me so suddenly that I had to brace one hand against the edge of the table.

"Thank you."

"But on one additional condition."

I straightened.

"I'm listening."

"I don't want anyone presenting this concert as the beginning of something bigger. No announcements about future performances. No suggestions about my plans."

I remembered Marek's message about the tour.

Nine concerts. A contract ready for his management to sign. Everything I'd been working on for weeks suddenly appeared in an uncomfortable new light.

"Why would I do that?" I asked cautiously.

"Because people like building futures out of other people's decisions."

I didn't answer. I already knew the subject mattered to him more than he wanted to admit. But I had no right to treat his agreement to one performance as agreement to an entire tour.

"All right," I said. "Tomorrow will be about tomorrow, and nothing else. We'll put it in the contract."

He held out his hand.

I took it, expecting an ordinary handshake. His hand was warm, dry, and surprisingly gentle for someone who had just helped move heavy stage equipment. He didn't hold mine any longer than courtesy required, but for one brief moment, we looked at each other as though neither of us was entirely sure whether we'd agreed on nothing more than the terms of a concert.

"Good night, Aleksandra."

"I'm afraid morning is still a long way off."

He glanced at the phone in my hand.

"Then please remember that people sometimes make better decisions when they're allowed to stop working for a while."

He walked toward the elevators.

Only after he'd disappeared around the corner did I open Marek's message. Beneath it waited a document ready for signature. The preliminary terms of Korf's tour, nine dates, advance payments, commitments to partners.

I read again the sentence Tadeusz had spoken moments earlier.

No suggestions about my plans.

I pressed the call button.

"Marek?" I said when he answered. "Before you send anything out for signature, we need to talk about what Korf actually wants."

"Ola, his management has accepted all the terms. Don't complicate things."

I looked toward the empty elevator doors.

"I'm starting to worry that nobody's asked him what he wants in the first place."

Chapter 2 - Between Silence and Consent

At twenty past two in the morning, I discovered that the hotel restaurant was closed, the chef had finished his shift, and the snack machine on the third floor accepted coins only.

My wallet contained two payment cards, several receipts, and a single cloakroom token.

I was hungry enough to wonder whether the token looked sufficiently like a coin.

I was sitting at a table in a small office behind reception. In front of me lay three versions of the schedule, an open laptop, and a notebook filled with the names of people I needed to call before dawn. Marta had just sent the technicians home after their additional shift. The communications department was preparing a message for ticket holders, and Marek had promised to send me the revised concert agreement.

The tour was a more complicated matter.

After our late-night conversation, he hadn't agreed to put the entire procedure on hold, but he had acknowledged that it was worth checking the extent of Korf's agency's authority again. Too much depended on the future concerts for us to rely on assumptions.

I hadn't told him about the envelope on the piano.

I didn't know what it actually contained.

My phone vibrated.

Didn't you manage to find anything to eat?

I stared at the screen.

The message came from an unfamiliar number, but the signature removed any doubt.

Tadeusz.

I replied almost immediately.

Do you always check what event organizers are doing at two in the morning?

The answer appeared a moment later.

Only the ones who look as though they're about to eat their own schedules.

I had no idea how he'd obtained my number. Probably from reception or Marta, although I intended to clarify that later. For now, I was too exhausted to pretend to be outraged.

The schedule isn't very appetizing. Too many revisions.

Club room, second floor. Five minutes. I have sandwiches.

I checked the time.

A sensible Aleksandra Czajka would have stayed at her computer. A sensible Aleksandra Czajka had a morning ahead of her that could determine her company's financial future.

However, a sensible Aleksandra Czajka also needed food.

I closed my laptop.

The club room was at the end of a corridor, beyond glass doors leading into a small library. Two lamps were lit inside. Beyond the windows, the dark slopes surrounding Krynica were punctuated by the occasional lights of houses.

Tadeusz sat beside a low table. He had changed out of his white shirt and was now wearing a charcoal-gray sweater made of soft wool. He looked less formal, but no less interesting.

Two plates, a teapot, and a basket of bread stood on the table.

"Where did you get all this?" I asked.

"I asked the night porter for help."

"The kitchen is closed."

"I know. That's why I didn't ask the chef."

I smiled despite my exhaustion.

"So you can talk to people after all."

"Most of them. Provided they aren't trying to plan my life for me."

I sat opposite him.

"I take it that was a hint."

"More of a warning."

He handed me a plate of sandwiches without commenting on my appetite. I ate in silence for a while. They were ordinary sandwiches: cheese, tomato, fresh bread. After a whole day sustained by coffee and nerves, they tasted like the finest dinner imaginable.

"Thank you," I said.

"You're welcome."

"Not just for the food. For the concert."

He set down his cup.