
Laura Bellini
Our Place
at the Bar
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aren't on the menu

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ROMANS

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INTRO

The first thing I noticed was the empty space where a bottle of whisky used to stand.

On the highest shelf of the hotel bar in Sopot, a lighter rectangle remained, not yet covered by dust. Decanters stood neatly arranged on either side, while in the middle something was missing that had apparently been considered an essential part of the décor for years. I took it as a good sign. A place where one thing could be removed without the entire structure collapsing was a place capable of change.

I spread my paper samples, a draft of the new menu, and six small bottles of homemade syrups across the counter. Outside, October twilight was settling over the town. The sea was barely visible between the rooftops, but its presence was betrayed by the wind, which battered the windows with the persistence of someone demanding to be let inside. The bar smelled of leather upholstery, orange peel, and freshly ground coffee.

I was thirty-seven, ran my own business, and had enough experience to know that even the best ideas could die during their first encounter with someone holding a corporate credit card.

That was why, this time, I intended to set my terms before anyone had a chance to suggest a compromise.

"Ms. Wierzbicka?"

I turned. Behind the bar stood a young woman with dark hair pulled into a bun. Her name badge read Marta.

"Shall I get the glasses ready?"

"Six short tumblers, please. And some ice water, if possible."

Marta glanced at my notes.

"Everything really is going to be alcohol-free?"

"Everything."

"The guests will be surprised."

"That's exactly what I'm counting on."

She smiled, but I caught a hint of caution in her expression. I knew that look. People often treated alcohol-free cocktails as poor imitations of something that ought to contain gin, rum, or at least a little vodka. I wanted to prove that pleasure didn't need an excuse.

For the past two months, I had been working on a concept for evenings designed to attract not only tourists but also Sopot residents to this small hotel bar. No loud music or pretence of being a fashionable big-city nightclub. Just good flavours, conversation, and a menu in which every drink had a personality of its own.

The hotel was changing hands in a few weeks. For me, this was the last opportunity to persuade the current management to try the project.

And my first chance in a long time to create something I would be proud to put my name to without reservation.

"Is someone coming for the tasting?" Marta asked.

"Mr. Wilk. Apparently, he has the final say."

She reached for a cloth, although the counter was perfectly clean.

"Robert likes to know what he's paying for."

"That's something we have in common."

"And he isn't particularly fond of surprises."

"Then we'll start with a small one."

I picked up the first bottle. The syrup made from roasted pear, rosemary, and a touch of black pepper would form the base of a cocktail called Late Return. The name had come to me during an overnight train journey, after a particularly disastrous business meeting, when I'd promised myself I would never again let someone sell my work under somebody else's name.

I poured a measure into the shaker.

"Starting without me?"

A man's voice sounded just behind my back. Calm and low, with the faintest trace of amusement.

I turned, measuring jigger still in hand.

The man standing near the entrance wore a navy shirt with the sleeves rolled up and dark trousers. He didn't look like someone who had come to evaluate the cost of a business venture. He looked more like a man who knew this bar well enough to remember exactly which floorboard creaked beside the window.

His dark hair was short, with grey at the temples, and his forty-one years had left marks on his face that were intriguing rather than severe. But what caught my attention most was his gaze. It didn't settle on the bottles I'd prepared or the budget lying on the counter.

It settled on me.

"If you're Robert Wilk, you've just missed the ceremonial opening of the tasting."

He came closer.

"And if I'm not?"

"Then you can still leave without consequences."

A slow smile spread across his face.

"Robert Wilk. I'm afraid I'm staying."

He offered his hand. I shook it, expecting the usual business greeting, brief and meaningless. Instead, his hand was warm, his grip firm but unforced. He made no attempt to hold on for even a second longer than the greeting required.

"Aneta Wierzbicka."

"I know. I've read your proposal."

"All of it?"

"Even the footnotes."

"That's rather worrying."

"Why?"

"Because now I can't count on you having missed anything."

He laughed softly. Marta placed the glasses in front of us and discreetly returned to tidying the back of the bar.

Robert removed his watch and set it beside his phone.

"Show me why I should take half our bestselling alcoholic drinks off the menu."

"I'm not suggesting removing alcohol. I'm proposing three evenings a week when it won't be the most important part of the offering."

"That sounds like a risky distinction in wording."

"In hospitality, most things begin with a distinction in wording. Then someone checks the bill."

He studied me for a moment with unmistakable interest.

"Do you always speak to potential clients like this?"

"Only the ones who read the footnotes."

I prepared the first cocktail. The pear blended with lemon and the bitterness of a nonalcoholic aperitif. I placed a thin slice of dried apple on top. Then I slid the glass towards him, but instead of reaching for it immediately, Robert examined the drink's amber colour.

"Beautiful."

"I'd rather hear that it's good."

He tasted it. He didn't rush to give his opinion. I watched him lift the glass again and take a second sip, although he had no reason to. Only then did he put it down on the coaster.

"The pepper comes through at the end."

"That's intentional."

"Like an uninvited guest who turns out to be the most interesting person at the table."

I looked at him more closely.

"That's a surprisingly accurate description."

"I've been running restaurants for fifteen years. Occasionally, I notice things."

He glanced at the menu draft spread across the counter.

"But the names are too personal."

"What do you mean?"

"Late Return, One More Conversation, Stay a Little Longer. You're selling emotions."

"And you sell nothing but liquids at carefully calculated prices?"

He didn't answer immediately. Instead, he picked up the card containing my graphic design. On the reverse, visible when held to the light, was the version number I'd assigned to the draft intended solely for internal discussions.

"I think emotions are valuable," he said. "But they have to stand on their own two feet."

"That's why I've included a recipe, a cost per serving, and a projected margin for every drink."

"I know. I read the footnotes."

This time, I was the one who smiled.

For a moment, our conversation became dangerously enjoyable. I forgot about the cold lighting in the hotel reception, the approaching change of ownership, and my own rule against treating professional rapport as an invitation to something more. Robert listened differently from most people I'd negotiated with. He wasn't simply waiting for a pause so he could make his point. He seemed genuinely to consider what I was saying.

Then his phone lit up on the counter.

I hadn't meant to look, but the screen was between us. I caught part of the notification: Confirmation of format after ownership change. Beneath it was a surname I didn't recognise.

Robert turned the phone face down.

"There's something we should discuss," he said.

I put down the shaker.

"I'm listening."

He looked at the menu I'd prepared, then at the empty space where the whisky bottle had stood on the top shelf.

"What would you do if it turned out this bar couldn't remain exactly as you've imagined it?"

I could have given him a professional answer. Talked about flexibility, budgets, and ways to adapt the concept. I had entire sentences ready, the kind that reassured clients without committing me to anything.

But with him, I didn't want to begin with a rehearsed response.

"That depends on who wants to change it," I said. "And whether they have the courage to tell me why."

Robert held my gaze for a long moment. Outside, the wind stirred the branches of a tree, and Marta switched off one of the lamps above an empty table. In the dimmer light, his face suddenly seemed less certain than his calm voice suggested.

"And what if you don't like the answer?"

I slid a second glass towards him, containing the cocktail I'd named Stay a Little Longer.

"Then I'll decide for myself whether it's worth staying."

He didn't look away as he lifted the glass.

"That's fair, Aneta."

For the first time, he spoke my first name without the formality we'd maintained until then. I didn't correct him.

And when he took a seat on the other side of the bar instead of returning to his phone and its urgent messages, I realised that the hardest part of this evening wasn't going to be convincing him of my idea.

It was going to be finding out whether the man who listened to me so attentively was capable of telling me the truth with the same honesty.

Chapter 1 - Terms That Aren't on the Menu

The following morning, Sopot smelled of wet sand, coffee, and an autumn that hadn't yet decided whether it intended to be gentle. I walked towards the hotel with a folder tucked under my arm and a message from Robert Wilk that I'd already read four times.

He had sent it at 7:42 a.m.

I'd like to discuss the terms of our collaboration. Ten o'clock at the bar. The coffee will be better than yesterday.

He hadn't said whether he intended to accept my proposal. Nor had he mentioned the changes he'd hinted at during the tasting. What irritated me most, however, was that I remembered exactly how he'd said my name.

I had more than enough reasons to regard Robert strictly as a potential client. For the past six months, I'd been working towards establishing my own design studio, one that would do more than tidy up restaurant menus. I wanted to create concepts for entire venues: their character, their language, and the ways they invited people to stay a little longer.

The hotel bar seemed like the perfect beginning. A small space, a recognisable location, and an opportunity to test my idea before the change of ownership. I needed a project I could show future clients as an achievement entirely my own.

Not another piece of work bearing the name of someone whose only contribution had been approving the invoice.

I entered the hotel five minutes early. The bar was still empty, and the morning light exposed all the details that the previous evening's shadows had concealed. The navy upholstery on the armchairs was slightly worn, the brass trim along the counter needed polishing, and a plant in the corner was struggling in a pot far too small for it.

I also noticed that the whisky bottle was still missing from the top shelf.

I was beginning to like that empty rectangle.

Robert was sitting at a table beside the window. An open laptop, an espresso, and several sheets covered in handwritten notes lay in front of him. When he saw me, he closed the computer.

"Is punctuality your way of making a good impression?"

"I prefer to let my work do that."

"One doesn't rule out the other."

He indicated the chair opposite him. I had no intention of letting a pleasant atmosphere replace a discussion of specifics, so I immediately took out my documents. Robert noticed, but instead of reaching for my proposal, he handed me the coffee menu.

"I promised you better coffee."

"You also promised a discussion about working together."

"And I intend to keep both promises. Not necessarily in that order."

I ordered a cappuccino. Robert made no attempt to persuade me to choose something else, which I considered his first sensible decision of the day.

When Marta brought my coffee, I slid the schedule across the table.

Three trial evenings over two weeks. A limited menu of six alcohol-free cocktails. Staff training. An assessment based not only on sales but also on the number of returning guests.

"I want people to come here because of this place," I said. "Not simply because it's raining and they have nowhere else to sit."

Robert ran a finger down the schedule.

"And I want to be certain the place makes money when it stops raining."

"That's why I've prepared the costings."

"The costings are good. I have no objections to the figures."

That surprised me. I'd prepared myself for a lengthy discussion about ingredient prices, production waste, and margins. I'd even calculated how much I could concede without compromising the quality of my recipes.

"Then what's the problem?"

"Scale."

He leaned back in his chair. He didn't look like a man about to spring an unreasonable demand on me. Quite the opposite. He seemed to be choosing his words carefully because he understood their consequences.

"The hotel's changing hands soon. I want whatever we create here to have a chance of surviving that transition. Three evenings might be a useful test, but I need something that can be repeated afterwards without you being present."

"That will be possible once the staff have been trained."

"I also need flexibility with the names, the menu design, and the way we present the offering."

I put down my pen.

"How much flexibility?"

"Enough to adapt the project to the hotel's future branding."

"So you want me to create something that, in a month's time, nobody will recognise as my work?"

"That's not what I said."

"Not yet."

Robert was silent for a moment. I noticed that he didn't look away, although my words had come out sharper than I'd intended.

"Tell me what you won't accept."

"Removing my name from the project. Using my recipes beyond the agreed scope. Changing the concept without consulting me. And presenting it as the idea of someone who had nothing to do with creating it."

"You've had some unpleasant experiences."

"I've had experiences I've learned from."

"I understand."

"I'm not sure you do."

He regarded me without taking offence.

"All right. You don't have to take my word for it."

That answer deprived me of the retort I'd been preparing. I'd expected assurances about mutual trust, or perhaps a

suggestion that I was overreacting. Instead, Robert reached for my proposal and marked two paragraphs.

"Let's put the right to approve changes here. And add a separate clause covering authorship."

"Without a general provision allowing unrestricted use of the project?"

"Without one."

"And the names?"

"I'd like the option of suggesting alternatives."

"Suggesting them or imposing them?"

The corner of his mouth twitched.

"You really don't let anyone get away with leaving things unsaid, do you?"

"Ambiguity is expensive. Usually for the party who didn't draft the contract."

We spent the next few minutes working through the document.

Robert proved more demanding than I'd expected. He asked about preparation times, ingredient stocks, and how we would serve a larger number of guests. He didn't like every answer, but he never questioned my expertise. When I explained that I wouldn't shorten the preparation of one particular cocktail at the expense of its flavour, he asked me to show him where time could be saved without changing the recipe.

There was something pleasantly challenging about it. It had been a long time since anyone had treated my work with such seriousness and such directness at the same time.

We were interrupted by a man in a light-coloured coat who entered the bar with his phone pressed to his ear. Robert noticed him immediately. He apologised and went over to speak to him.

Their conversation was brief and took place near the entrance, too far away for me to hear the words. I did, however, see Robert gesture towards the documents on our table. The other man shook his head.

When Robert returned, his expression was composed again.

"Someone from the new owners?" I asked.

"He's involved in preparing the hotel for the handover."

"He didn't look delighted."

"He's having a difficult morning."

"That's a fairly common condition in hospitality."

Robert smiled, but didn't pursue the joke.

"There's one more condition I'd like to propose."

I closed my folder.

"I'm listening."

"During the trial evenings, we need to test two ways of presenting the drinks. Your original menu and a simplified version. The same cocktails, but a different layout and more straightforward descriptions."

"Why?"

"I want to know what actually attracts customers."

"Am I supposed to understand this as a test of my concept?"

"A test of how we present it."

I stood and walked over to the counter. I needed a moment to collect my thoughts.

I'd seen concessions begin this way before, only to turn an entire project into a collection of other people's decisions. First, someone changed a name. Then the menu layout. Then the recipes. Eventually, all that remained was an idea stripped of everything that had made it distinctive.

Robert came over, stopping on the other side of the bar.

"I don't want to destroy your concept, Aneta."

"And yet you want to find out whether it works better without one of its most important elements."

"I want to prove that it can work under different conditions."

"Prove it to whom?"

His hesitation was so brief I might have missed it.

"To the people who'll be deciding this place's future."

I thought about the notification on his phone and the man in the light-coloured coat. Robert was making reasonable arguments, but I had the uncomfortable impression that we were discussing conditions I hadn't been told about.

"I can prepare a second version," I said eventually. "Provided it doesn't pretend to be my original concept. And provided we assess both versions by the same criteria."

"Agreed."

"I want to take part in analysing the results."

"Of course."

"And if the guests prefer my menu, you won't try to convince me the figures mean the opposite."

Robert rested his hands on the counter.

"Do you really expect the worst of me?"

"I don't know you well enough to expect anything beyond what we've agreed."

He accepted the answer without comment. A moment later, he slid a sheet of paper covered in handwritten amendments towards me.

"That's a fair starting point."

I examined his handwriting. It was small, slightly slanted, and surprisingly neat. Beside the paragraph dealing with authorship, he'd written:

Aneta's name to appear alongside the concept, recipes, and promotional materials.

He hadn't needed to agree immediately. He could have postponed the decision until he'd consulted a lawyer.

"Why did you agree?" I asked.

"Because I know the difference between paying someone for their work and buying the right to everything they might ever come up with."

I looked at him.

He was close enough for me to notice a small scar near his chin, something the previous evening's lighting had hidden. I hadn't intended to study him quite so carefully. Yet for a moment, that tiny imperfection interested me more than any signature on the documents.

"That's good," I said more quietly.

"Why?"

"Because I was beginning to suspect you might be a very difficult client."

"And what's changed?"

"Nothing. But at least you'll be difficult in an interesting way."

He laughed, more freely this time.

A little later, Marta asked Robert to come into the storeroom. One of the suppliers had delivered the wrong goods, and preparations for an afternoon reception had come to a halt.

I watched Robert speak to the staff. He didn't raise his voice or look for someone to blame. He asked for a list of missing items, found suitable replacements, and helped carry several crates himself. Only after the problem had been resolved did he return to me.

"Sorry about that."

"I've just seen you in your natural habitat."

"Meaning?"

"Surrounded by people who have every right to disagree with your plans."

"It happens more often than you might think."

"And do you take it well?"

"Depends whether they're right."

I didn't tell him that I liked his answer. Or that the way he thanked Marta for her help had impressed me more than all his assurances about professionalism.

We returned to the table and agreed on a provisional date for the first trial evening.

We had ten days to prepare the team, materials, and communications. Robert undertook to provide detailed sales figures and written confirmation of the scope of our

collaboration. I would revise the concept and prepare the alternative menu.

As I gathered my documents, he stopped me with a question.

"Can you promise me you won't walk away after our first difficult meeting?"

I looked up.

"I don't make promises about things I can't entirely control."

"And what can you control?"

"Whether I do my work honestly. And whether I tell you when you've crossed a boundary."

Robert held out his hand.

"Then that will be enough for now."

I shook it.

This time, I was acutely aware of how much I liked the fact that he made no attempt to narrow the distance between us beyond what the situation allowed.

Before leaving, I glanced back at the bar.

Robert was standing behind the counter, talking to Marta and showing her one of my menu designs. When his eyes reached the name Stay a Little Longer, he smiled in a way I couldn't quite interpret.

Outside, cold wind greeted me along with a message from my friend Iza.

Well? Did you sign a contract, or did you have another argument with the owner?

I replied:

Those two things aren't mutually exclusive.

I put my phone away, only to take it out again a few steps later.

Robert had sent me a message.

Thank you for the conversation. And for reminding me that not everything that can be changed should be changed.

I stared at the screen longer than it took to read the sentence.

I waited until I reached the intersection before answering.

Hold on to that thought. You may find it useful later.

His reply came almost immediately.

With you? I'm certain I will.

I smiled to myself and continued walking.

I didn't yet know whether Robert Wilk would turn out to be someone with whom I could create something worthwhile. What I did know was that, for the first time in a long while, I hadn't wanted a conversation to end as soon as the terms had been settled.

And that was a complication I hadn't included in any schedule.

Chapter 2 - A Place for Two

On Friday, shortly before noon, I received a message from Robert containing the attachments he'd promised to send.

There were sales figures, a floor plan, an up-to-date supplier list, and a proposed agreement incorporating the amendments we'd discussed at our meeting. Everything was neatly organised, clearly named, and delivered on time.

I could have appreciated that kind of reliability without becoming emotionally involved.

The problem was that, alongside the documents, I found a short message.

If you can spare an hour, I'd like to show you somewhere outside the hotel. It has nothing to do with our negotiations.

I stared at the last sentence for several minutes.

I couldn't tell whether it was an invitation to a private meeting or simply an attempt to get to know the person he intended to work with. Professionally, I had no need to spend that hour with him.

Personally, I was more curious about Robert than I wanted to admit, even to myself.

I replied that I could meet at five, but that I'd like to settle the outstanding matters concerning the trial evenings first.

His answer arrived a moment later.

A sensible order of priorities. Four o'clock at the hotel, then I'll show you the place. No hidden conditions.

I prepared the final version of the schedule and travelled to Sopot.

On the train, I reviewed the agreement one more time. Robert had accepted the provision concerning my authorship, but one section was still too general. It concerned the use of my recipes after the trial period ended.

I wasn't about to let anyone copy my ideas across other establishments without separate compensation.

At the hotel, I found Robert at a desk in a small room beside reception. Old photographs of Sopot hung on the wall. One showed the pier in winter, almost completely deserted.

Robert looked up from his documents and stood.

"Good afternoon, Aneta."

"Good afternoon. I have three comments."

"Only three?"

"I'm saving the rest for later."

"I'm beginning to understand that your sense of humour is a form of warning."

I sat opposite him and opened my laptop.

This time, I didn't want to conduct our discussion at the bar. We needed to establish specific rules, and I wanted both of us to be able to refer back to them later without misunderstandings.

For half an hour, we discussed the scope of the licence, payment for staff training, and the procedures for making decisions.

Robert made no attempt to hurry. When I suggested that each stage should end with written approval, he agreed without objection. At the same time, he made it clear that

responsibility for the budget, service operations, and guest safety rested with him.

"I don't want every problem to turn into an argument about whose responsibility it is," he said.

"Neither do I. That's why I'm proposing a clear division. You handle the operation of the venue. I handle the concept and the standards for preparing the drinks. Decisions affecting both areas require agreement from both of us."

"And if we can't agree?"

"We put the change on hold until we've resolved the issue. Neither of us implements it behind the other's back."

He studied me carefully.

"That's particularly important to you."

"Yes."

He didn't ask why.

I appreciated that restraint all the more.

We signed the preliminary arrangements for the trial period, leaving the launch dependent on final approval of the hotel's budget. We scheduled the first evening for the following Friday.

I was to begin staff training on Monday, while Robert would take care of deliveries and promotion.

When I closed my laptop, I felt a familiar sense of relief.

The project was no longer merely an idea written in a notebook. It had deadlines, designated responsibilities, and a clear framework.

"Now, could you spare me an hour without checking contractual clauses?" Robert asked.

"That depends on where you're taking me."