

Laura Bellini

Before Dawn Betrays Us

By Morning, She Will Choose Between
His Trust and Loyalty to Her Family.



Before Dawn Betrays Us

By Morning, She Will Choose Between His
Trust and Loyalty to Her Family.

Laura Bellini

ROMANS

CONTENTS

INTRO	4
Chapter 1 - The Man with Conditions	11
Chapter 2 - What Isn't in the Paperwork	25
Chapter 3 - The Woman Who Remembered Too Much	47
Chapter 4 - The Boundary You Can't See	66
Chapter 5 - Key Number Seven	89
Chapter 6 - After Hours.....	111
Chapter 7 - What Remained in the Drawer	134
Chapter 8 - Before the Lights Go Out.....	154
Chapter 9 - The Second Key	177
Chapter 10 - The Price of Other People's Debts	197
Chapter 11 - The Price of Honesty	219
Chapter 12 - What Really Belongs to the Family.....	240
Chapter 13 - Twelve Percent.....	261
Chapter 14 - Not Everything We Inherit.....	281
Chapter 15 - Emergency Committee.....	314
Chapter 16 - On the Other Side	333
Chapter 17 - The Terms We Write Ourselves	375
Chapter 18 - The Full Version of the Truth	395
Chapter 19 - The Price of Closure	417
Chapter 20 - On This Side of Dawn.....	436

INTRO

At four thirty-seven in the morning, the hotel sounded as though it were breathing through clenched teeth.

The wind battered the old windows on the forest side, water shifted somewhere in the pipes, and the emergency lights in the corridor cast too little light for anything to look innocent. I stood barefoot in my father's office with my phone in one hand and a key in the other. It was small, brass, with a worn number seven stamped into it. An hour earlier, it had been in the pocket of Michał Zaremba's jacket.

Now I had it.

The last message from my brother glowed on the screen.

You have until dawn. Find out what's in there. If Zaremba has a copy, we need to know before the meeting.

I didn't reply. Not because I didn't know what to write.

I knew all too well.

I'm not doing it.

That sentence would have been enough to choose a side. The problem was that in all thirty-three years of my life, the word side had almost always meant the same thing as family.

The Sawickis were difficult, proud, loud, and exceptionally gifted at pretending a crisis was merely a more demanding version of dinner. But they were mine. The Hotel by Lake Ciche was ours too, although for months the bank, our creditors, and half the local gossip network had held opinions of their own on the matter.

And Michał?

Michał was the man I had promised, three hours earlier, that I wouldn't hide anything else from him.

I closed my eyes.

It was an exceptionally inconvenient memory.

We had been sitting in the empty hotel restaurant at a single table lit by a candle because the storm had knocked out the power across the entire building. He had cut his hand helping me secure a cracked window in the orangery. I was holding the bandage, and he was watching me with that infuriating calm of his that appeared exactly when I wanted him to lose it.

"Emilia," he'd said. "If I'm staying until morning, I need to know whether you're still playing fair with me at all."

"I'm not playing."

"Good. That's the worst possible answer."

I laughed then, even though I shouldn't have.

A moment later, his fingers tightened lightly around my wrist, not to stop me, only to see whether I would pull my hand away.

I didn't.

When he kissed me, he did it only after my quiet yes, and for a few minutes I became someone who didn't have a family business to save, documents to review, or a surname that had been opening some doors for generations and locking others twice over.

Now I was standing in front of one of those locks literally.

The brass key fit the narrow drawer in my father's desk.

I knew because earlier that evening I had seen Michał slide a navy folder into it while he thought I was talking to the receptionist by the stairs. He hadn't explained.

I hadn't asked.

At the time, I could still tell myself it was ordinary documentation for tomorrow's meeting with the bank.

Then Adam called.

My older brother didn't waste time on introductions.

"He found something," he said.

"Who?"

"Don't make me look like an idiot, Emi. Zaremba. Dad remembers that folder."

"Dad's been claiming for two days that he can't remember where he put his own phone."

"That doesn't mean he can't remember something from eighteen years ago."

That was the first moment I truly felt cold.

Eighteen years.

Exactly that long ago, the Zaremba family had sold the Sawickis the final share of the land beneath the hotel's northern wing. At home, the transaction had always been reduced to a single sentence:

Fair. Closed. Settled long ago.

Michał had arrived five days earlier as the representative of a fund considering taking over part of our debt. Only later did I learn that his mother had once been Anna Milewska-Zaremba, and that the signature on that old agreement belonged to her.

Coincidence.

That was what my father had said.

I hadn't believed him.

I hadn't told Michał that I didn't believe him.

And that was exactly how everything I had promised three hours earlier never to do again had begun.

I turned my phone face down.

Outside the window, the night had begun to pale. It wasn't dawn yet, but the black sky above the tree line had already taken on a dark blue cast.

I had maybe an hour.

Maybe less.

I slid the key into the lock.

I didn't turn it.

A floorboard creaked behind me.

I turned so quickly that my hip struck the edge of the desk.

Michał stood in the doorway.

He was wearing a dark sweater, the same one I had given him after the storm because his shirt had been soaked through by the rain. His hair was still slightly damp, and his bandaged hand rested against the doorframe.

He didn't look sleepy.

His gaze moved first to me.

Then to the key.

I didn't try to hide my hand.

It was probably the only honest thing I was capable of at that moment.

"Couldn't sleep?" I asked.

"I could. Then I noticed you were gone."

His voice was quiet.

It hurt more than anger would have.

"Michał..."

"That's my key."

"I know."

"How did you get it?"

I could have lied.

I had practice, if withholding half the truth and leaving someone with the version most convenient for the family counted as lying.

This time, though, every sentence that came to mind sounded like something I would never want to hear from him.

I held out my hand and placed the key on the desk.

"It fell out of your jacket in the restaurant," I said. "I found it later."

"And you brought it here."

"Yes."

"At four thirty-seven in the morning."

"Yes."

For a moment, the only thing we could hear was the wind.

Michał stepped into the office, but stopped on the far side of the desk.

He didn't come any closer.

Only a few hours earlier, I had known the warmth of his mouth and the way he asked with his eyes before touching me.

Now a meter of old oak lay between us, along with a brass key and everything we had failed to tell each other before.

"Did you open it?" he asked.

I looked at the drawer.

"No."

"Did you want to?"

That was worse.

"Yes."

He didn't flinch, but something in his gaze changed.

It didn't grow colder.

It grew more attentive.

"Why?"

My phone vibrated on the desk.

We both looked at the screen.

ADAM.

He didn't need to see the message.

The name was enough.

Michał looked back at me.

"Did your family send you here?"

Dawn still had no color, but it was already there in the windows, a thin line beyond the black forest.

I thought about my father sleeping one floor above us. About Adam waiting for an answer. About the hotel's debt. About the employees who didn't know whether they would still have jobs a month from now.

And then I thought about the man standing across from me, who had come here with reasons of his own, a history of his own, and a document my family was clearly afraid of.

He had a right to the truth.

They were my family.

My phone vibrated again.

Michał didn't push me.

He didn't demand an explanation.

He simply waited.

And that was what made me understand, for the first time, how much trust could cost when someone gave it to you at the exact moment it would be easiest to take advantage of it.

I looked at the key.

Then at him.

"They didn't send me," I said. "But they expect me to choose them."

"And you?"

Outside the window, the night began to give way.

I knew that before it was fully light, I would have to answer.

Chapter 1 - The Man with Conditions

Five days earlier.

By nine seventeen on Monday morning, I already knew three things about Michał Zaremba.

First, he was exactly seventeen minutes late and made no attempt to blame traffic, the weather, or his navigation system. Second, when he walked into the lobby, he noticed the crack in the marble floor before he noticed the sign beside reception advertising our autumn wellness package. Third, he was far too calm for a man who had come to decide whether my family's hotel would get the money it needed to survive the winter.

I didn't like people who stayed calm in a crisis.

It usually meant the crisis wasn't theirs.

I was standing at the high table beside reception, finishing a call with our bread supplier, when the revolving door stalled for a moment under the force of the wind. Michał stepped inside with a dark bag slung over one shoulder and a thin coat that looked far too elegant for November in Warmia.

He wasn't the kind of man you described as handsome in the first sentence.

That word was too simple.

He had the kind of face you wanted to watch during a conversation just to see when it would finally betray an emotion.

I ended the call and checked my watch.

"Mr. Zaremba?"