

Laura Bellini

The Price of Your Closeness

She Came to Shut Down His Factory. She
Never Expected Who She Would Trust.



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ROMANS

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INTRO

The first thing I noticed when I walked into the plant was that nobody stopped working.

I had expected silence. People standing against the walls with their arms folded across their chests, maybe a few angry looks, maybe one person bold enough to ask whether I slept well at night, making a living out of other people losing their jobs. I knew the routine. Eight years in restructuring had taught me not to take it personally.

But here, the machines kept running.

The metallic pounding of the presses blended with the steady hum of the ventilation system. Somewhere to my left, a pallet truck squealed, and from the open doors of the assembly hall came the short hiss of compressed air. Dozens of people carried on with their work as though they had no idea that the black folder tucked beneath my arm contained the timetable for winding down the plant.

Or maybe they knew and had simply decided not to give me the satisfaction.

I took off my glasses, which had immediately acquired a thin film of moisture. Outside, the March rain had turned the parking lot into a gray mirror. Inside, it was warm and smelled of machine oil, metal, and something faintly like freshly cut wood, even though the documents said this place had produced nothing but components for industrial equipment for the past thirty-seven years.

"Ms. Natalia Radecka?"

I turned.

The man standing a few yards away did not look like someone who was about to lose his company.

He wasn't wearing a suit. The sleeves of his dark shirt were rolled up to his elbows, and I could see a thin scratch on his forearm and a streak of black grease. He was tall, but that wasn't what caught my attention. He looked at me without haste, with the irritating calm of a man who had already decided exactly what kind of person I was and saw no reason to offer me the chance to appeal.

"Yes."

He came closer and held out his hand.

"Tomasz Wierzbicki."

I knew.

I had read his name at least a hundred times over the past three weeks. President of the company, majority shareholder, thirty-eight years old. Automation engineer. Nine years ago, he had returned from Germany, taken over his uncle's debt-ridden plant, and increased revenue for the next six years. Then came two weaker contracts, rising energy costs, the loss of their biggest customer, and an investment loan the bank was no longer willing to renegotiate.

According to my employer's report, the company no longer had an economic reason to exist.

According to Tomasz Wierzbicki's hand, which I was shaking now, the report was not yet a verdict.

"I thought you were coming tomorrow," he said.

"My schedule says today."

"The schedule I received says tomorrow."

He let go of my hand. A fraction later than politeness required, but too soon for me to make anything more of it.

Which was exactly why I remembered the moment.

I opened my folder.

"The updated schedule was emailed on Monday."

"I didn't receive an update."

"I can resend it."

"Please do."

He did not try to prove that I was lying. That would have been easier. Instead, he stepped aside and gestured toward the doors leading onto the production floor.

"Since you're already here, I'll show you the plant."

"I'd like to discuss the financial documents first."

"I know."

"Then?"

He looked past me at the rows of machines and the people working at their stations.

"If you're going to decide how much of this place gets sold for scrap, you should at least see what it is you're shutting down."

There was no theatrics in the way he said it. No accusation.

Just a fact.

It irritated me more than it should have.

"The decision to close the plant was made before I arrived."

For the first time, something changed in his face. Not much. His jaw tightened.

"By people who have never been here."

"By the holder of the majority of the company's debt."

"That isn't an answer."

"It's the answer that matters legally."

For a moment, we stood looking at each other over the noise of the machines.

I was used to men trying to undermine my competence. They had different methods. They asked my age, addressed the junior analyst instead of me, explained their own balance sheets to me, or offered me coffee in a tone that suggested I ought to be the one bringing it.

Tomasz Wierzbicki did none of those things.

It was inconvenient.

"All right," he said at last. "Then I'll show you something that matters financially."

He headed toward the production hall. I hesitated for only a second before following him.

At the first production line, he stopped beside a woman in a navy work coat. She looked to be around fifty and was checking small metal components with a caliper.

"Mrs. Ewa has worked here for twenty-six years," Tomasz said.

The woman looked up.

"Twenty-seven in June."

"If we make it that far," he replied.

She didn't smile.

Neither did I.

"You don't have to do this," I said more quietly once we had walked away.

"Do what?"

"Introduce me to every employee so I'll remember their faces later."

He stopped so abruptly that I almost walked into him.

"Ms. Radecka, if you can genuinely lay off one hundred and fourteen people and forget every one of their faces the next day, there's nothing I can do to make this harder for you."

I should have answered immediately.

I didn't.

One hundred and fourteen.

The report said one hundred and seven.

"How many employees do you have?" I asked.

"One hundred and fourteen."

"The documentation says one hundred and seven."

This time, his gaze sharpened.

"Documentation from when?"

I took out my phone and opened the latest operational report. It was dated nine days earlier.

"According to this, one hundred and seven full-time positions."

Tomasz stared at the screen for several seconds without touching it.

"That isn't our report."

"The data was provided by management."

"I am management."

The noise of the production floor suddenly began to bother me.

I scrolled down. Employee headcount was only one of dozens of fields. Inventory. Liabilities. Work in progress. Unused capacity. Tables that had formed the basis of the recommendation to shut the plant down.

"Who else has access to this data?" I asked.

Tomasz did not answer right away.

He walked over to a metal cabinet against the wall, unlocked it, and took out a slim binder. He placed it on the inspection table between us.

"Find the month when your report says we lost our biggest customer."

I turned several pages.

Found it.

Then read it again.

The contract that, according to the documentation, had been terminated in November had an amendment signed in December. The customer had not only continued the relationship but extended it for another eighteen months.

Despite the heat of the hall, I felt cold.

"Is this the original?"

"Yes."

"Why isn't it in the documentation?"

"I've been trying to find that out for three weeks."

I looked at him.

For the first time, I no longer saw the owner of the company I had come here to shut down.

I saw a man standing on the other side of a problem I might not understand at all yet.

"Ms. Radecka," he said calmly. "Before you start selling my machines and handing out termination notices, answer one question for yourself."

"What question?"

He pushed the binder toward me.

"Who wants you to believe so badly that there is nothing left here worth saving?"

Chapter 1 - Numbers That Don't Add Up

The binder lay between us on the metal table, and for several seconds I stared at the signed amendment as though I could force the paper to admit which version of reality was true. The first page carried the name of the customer whose loss had supposedly been one of the main arguments for shutting the plant down. On the last were signatures, stamps, and a date more than a month after the cooperation had allegedly ended. It was not a letter of intent, a purchase order, or a promise.

It was a binding contract.

"I need a copy," I said.

"You'll have one."

Tomasz did not look like a man who had just won the first round. There was no satisfaction in him. He stood on the other side of the table with both hands resting against its edge, watching me so closely that it was beginning to irritate me.

"And the complete documentation for this customer. Invoices, orders, correspondence, delivery confirmations."

"You'll have those too."

"And an up-to-date employee list."

"Of course."

I closed the binder.

"Is there anything else?"

"A lot more."

"I'm asking whether you have another document that contradicts the material supplied to my firm this clearly."