Laura Bellini



Our Private Season

Not Every Real Connection Needs an Audience

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ROMANS

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ALL-IN Rafał Płonkowski



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INTRO

On the first day of rehearsals, I decided that for the next eight weeks, I wouldn't let any man complicate my life. It was a sensible, mature decision, and an exceptionally easy one to stick to, right up until Dorian Kłos walked into the dressing room with my dress draped over his arm.

"I believe this belongs to you," he said, stopping in the doorway.

I looked up from my sewing machine. He was wearing dark trousers, a white T-shirt, and an unbuttoned linen shirt. He looked less impressive than he did on the posters that had been hanging along the seaside promenade for the past week. He was, however, considerably more real. The crease between his eyebrows, the stubble along his jaw, and the care with which he held the delicate fabric didn't fit the meticulously manufactured image of a star.

"That depends on where you found it."

"In the corridor. It was lying on a trunk marked 'Props.'"

"In that case, someone has just taken several years off my life."

I set down my scissors and walked over to him. The silk crepe dress I was preparing for the leading actress cost more than a month's rent on my apartment. Fortunately, the fabric was undamaged.

Dorian didn't hand it over immediately.

"Would you like me to put it somewhere safe?"

"Preferably in my hands."

He smiled faintly and passed me the hanger.

"Gabriela Bąk?"

"That's right."

"Dorian Kłos."

"I noticed."

"Hopefully not because of the dress."

"No. Your face is on six billboards between the railway station and the theatre."

He laughed, and I regretted noticing his voice. It was deeper than in his interviews, slightly husky, without the rehearsed confidence I knew from the screen. I didn't have time to find out whether he sounded the same when he said something genuinely personal.

I had come to Sopot with a specific plan. I was going to design the costumes for an intimate theatre production called The Last Summer, see it through to opening night, collect my fee, and return to Warsaw with a portfolio that would allow me to open my own studio. I had been saving for it for two years. I had already found a place in Mokotów, and the landlord had agreed to wait until September before signing the lease.

There was no room for romance in that plan. Especially not with a man whose name accounted for half the production's promotional budget.

"I heard you refused to replace the costumes with the sponsor's designs," Dorian said.

"Because I don't design advertisements disguised as theatre."

"A bold position, considering who's paying the bills."

"They're paying for my work, not my silence."

He studied me for a moment. Not the way men at industry parties did when they were trying to decide whether a woman was worth inviting for a drink. He looked more as though he were checking whether I meant what I said.

"Good," he replied at last. "In that case, perhaps this production still has a chance."

Before I could ask what he meant, a woman's voice came from the corridor.

"Dorian! They're looking for you for the photos!"

He turned his head. That was when I saw how quickly the ease disappeared from his face.

"I'm coming, Magda."

"Not on your own. Lena arrived early. They want the two of you together in front of the poster."

A brief, awkward silence settled between us.

Dorian looked at me again.

"See you at the fitting, Ms. Bąk."

"Provided you don't walk off with another costume."

He left with a smile, but his shoulders remained tense.

I didn't dwell on the change for long. People in theatre had their problems, secrets, and arrangements, and I had learned not to get caught between other people's ambitions. I returned to my sewing machine, adjusted the seam, and tried to concentrate on my work.

I failed.

Twenty minutes later, Magda, the publicity specialist, came into the dressing room with a phone pressed to her ear and a tablet tucked under her arm.

"Gabrysia, we need Dorian in that navy suit. By four. Promotional photos."

"The navy suit is a stage costume. It isn't finished yet."

"It's only a few shots."

"Yesterday, 'a few shots' ended with coffee on a cuff."

Magda covered the microphone with her hand.

"We have to sell this production. People are coming for Dorian and Lena, not because someone stitched a lining beautifully."

For a moment, I stared at her without saying anything. Not because she'd offended me. More because she'd said aloud something I'd been hearing between the lines for a long time.

"Which is exactly why that lining needs to survive eight weeks of performances," I replied. "The suit will be ready for tomorrow morning's rehearsal."

Magda sighed and left, returning to her phone conversation.

I rested my palms on the worktable. The scent of the sea and sun-warmed wood drifted through the open window. Somewhere below, stage technicians were moving pieces of scenery, while seagulls shrieked so loudly that they might have been demanding speaking parts of their own.

I had worked in theatre for eleven years. I knew I wasn't the most important person in the building. I didn't need to be. I simply wanted my work to matter even after the camera flashes had stopped.

My phone vibrated beside the sewing machine.

A message from my friend Marta contained a photograph of a small commercial space with an enormous window.

The landlord wants an answer before the end of August. Gabryś, this place was made for you.

I enlarged the photograph. I imagined my own cutting table, shelves filled with fabrics, and a sign bearing my name hanging on the door. For years, I had sewn other people's dreams, allowing them to shine beneath the stage lights. At last, I wanted to create something that belonged entirely to me.

I wrote back that I hadn't changed my mind.

At that exact moment, someone knocked on the open door.

Dorian stood on the threshold, this time without the dress, but with a phone in his hand.

"May I come in?"

"As long as you're not bringing another request from the publicity department."

"I'm bringing a request from an actor who needs to breathe onstage tomorrow."

He pointed to the jacket hanging nearby.

"I tried it on this morning. It's a little tight."

"That's possible. The costume was made according to measurements sent three weeks ago."

"Are you suggesting I've put on weight?"

"I'm suggesting that breathing requires space."

This time, he laughed more freely.

"So I can count on your help after all."

I went over to the rack, took down the jacket, and handed it to him. Dorian slipped it over his shoulders, and I stood behind him to check how the fabric sat. Our eyes met in the mirror.

"Please raise your arms."

He obeyed.

"And now?"

"Now lower them. I have no intention of designing wings for you."

"That's a shame. They might come in handy."

My fingers paused on the seam beneath his shoulder blade. I wasn't touching his skin, and yet I suddenly became painfully aware of the small distance between us. He smelled of freshly washed clothes and something woody, subtle and free of overpowering sweetness.

I drew my hands away.

"I only need to let it out by two centimetres. It'll be more comfortable tomorrow."

He turned towards me.

"Thank you, Gabriela."

For the first time, he had said my first name without my surname. It sounded natural, as though we'd known each other for longer than a few dozen minutes. I didn't like how easily that small detail had distracted me from my work.

Voices drifted in from the corridor. Someone mentioned Lena, a joint interview, and a romantic surprise for the media.

Dorian glanced towards the door.

"Is it always this peaceful in here?"

"Only when nobody knows I'm here."

"I can see why you make sure it stays that way."

He removed the jacket and handed it back to me carefully.

For a moment, he looked as though he intended to say something else. Instead, he stepped away, leaving exactly enough space between us for me to feel sensible again.

"Until tomorrow, Gabriela."

"Until tomorrow, Dorian."

After he left, I closed the dressing room door, even though it had remained open all day.

A new notification was waiting on my phone. The theatre's official account had posted a photograph of Dorian with his arm around Lena in front of the poster. Beneath it was the caption:

The hottest duo of the summer. Could the love they share onstage become something real?

I looked at their smiles, then at the navy jacket resting on the table.

I was thirty-two years old, had plans of my own, and possessed enough experience to know that public stories rarely revealed the whole truth.

And yet I could still hear his voice when he said my name.

So why, standing alone in a dressing room overlooking the sea, was I beginning to wish that tomorrow the door would close behind us again?

Chapter 1 - The Boundaries of Light

The following morning, I discovered that the hardest part of working in theatre wasn't dealing with temperamental actors, delayed deliveries, or costumes that needed adjusting five minutes before rehearsal. The hardest part was maintaining professional indifference towards a man whose voice I remembered more clearly than my own dreams.

Dorian Kłos appeared onstage at exactly nine o'clock. I was standing beside the front row of seats with a notebook and a collection of fabric samples when he entered from the wings. He was talking to the director, Piotr Malec, and seemed completely absorbed in their discussion. It was only after a moment that he noticed me in the dim auditorium.

He didn't smile immediately.

First, his gaze settled on my face, as though he were making sure I was really there. Then he nodded, discreetly, almost imperceptibly. I returned the gesture, although it would have been more sensible to concentrate on the alterations to his jacket.

"Gabriela, I need you onstage," Piotr called.

I climbed the steps at the side. The set represented the living room of an old house by the sea. Wooden shutters, a faded rug, two armchairs, and an enormous window beyond which light imitating a sunset would move during the performance. Everything looked intimate, almost private. The audience was meant to feel as though they were secretly observing the lives of people who had no idea anyone was watching.

The irony of that concept wasn't lost on me when I saw Magda standing beside the stage with a camera.

"We want a few photographs from rehearsal," she announced. "Natural ones. Dorian and Lena together, a little closeness, a few meaningful looks."

"Natural or staged?" I asked.

Magda gave me an indulgent look.

"It's publicity, Gabrysia. Everything is staged to some extent."

Dorian turned his head.

"Could we rehearse first?" he suggested calmly.

"The photographs will take five minutes."

"That's what they were supposed to take yesterday."

There was no irritation in his voice. That was precisely why he sounded so firm.

Piotr raised a hand.

"Costumes first. Publicity afterwards. I'm not going to put on a production that nobody has time to prepare."

I felt grateful, although I knew the director was primarily defending his own schedule.

Dorian approached me.

"The jacket?"

"Ready. Two centimetres of extra room, as requested."

"Sounds like something I've been needing rather badly lately."

I studied him more closely.

"Room around the shoulders?"

"Among other things."

I didn't answer. I led him to the dressing room, where the remaining elements of his costume were waiting. As he put on the jacket, I turned towards the mirror, pretending to check my list of alterations. Dorian noticed, but he didn't comment.

"That's better," he said, moving his shoulders.

"Please sit down."

He dropped into a chair.

"And now?"

"Now try standing up without adjusting your clothes."

He followed my instructions. The jacket sat exactly as it should.

"Perfect," I declared.

"That's the first time I've heard you use that word."

"Don't get used to it."

For a moment, we looked at each other in the mirror. I noticed a few strands of grey at his temples. They weren't visible on the posters. Neither was the tiredness that appeared around his eyes whenever he stopped smiling.

"May I ask you something?" he said.

"Depends what it is."

"Why did you take this job?"

He surprised me. Most actors asked about their costumes, deadlines, or the possibility of making minor changes. Very few were interested in why a costume designer had ended up working at a particular theatre.

"Because I like good literature, challenging projects, and payments that arrive on time."

"In that order?"

"Depends on the month."

He smiled.

"And seriously?"

I hesitated.

"I want to open my own studio. This production is an important part of that plan."

"So Sopot is just a stop along the way."

"For you too, isn't it?"

He didn't answer immediately.

"I'd like it to be something more."

For a moment, I had the impression that his answer wasn't only about the theatre. But then someone called him back to the stage, and he turned towards the door.

"See you later, Gabriela."

After he left, I remained alone with the strange feeling that our conversation had ended several sentences too soon.

At eleven, we began rehearsing the scene in which Dorian's character returned to his family home after years away. Lena, who played his former love, was supposed to welcome him as one welcomes someone whose return one has longed for over an entire decade without ever having the courage to admit it.

I watched from the auditorium as Dorian changed with the first lines of dialogue.

His smile disappeared, along with his relaxed posture. What remained was a man standing on the threshold of a house he was afraid to enter. He did nothing dramatic. He

didn't raise his voice. It was enough that, for several seconds, he couldn't bring himself to look Lena in the eyes.

"You came back," she said.

"I didn't know if I still could."

I felt something I hadn't expected from such an ordinary exchange.

It wasn't simply good acting. Dorian possessed an extraordinary ability to make room for another person. He didn't dominate the scene, although he could easily have done so. He listened to his fellow actress so attentively that every word she spoke seemed to change something inside him.

When Piotr interrupted the rehearsal, Magda immediately hurried towards the actors.

"Wonderful! Those are exactly the emotions we need. I want to use this in the campaign."

Dorian rubbed a hand over his face.

"That was a rehearsal."

"Even better. Real emotions sell best."

Lena laughed and adjusted her hair.

"Magda, at least let us have some water."

"Of course. But afterwards I need you both together on the terrace."

Dorian glanced in my direction. I didn't know whether he was looking for help or whether our eyes had simply met by accident. Either way, I was the first to look away.

I had no intention of becoming part of a game whose rules I didn't understand.

That afternoon, Magda found me in the workshop. She was carrying a tablet displaying drafts of the promotional materials.

"I need your approval to use the costumes for an additional photo shoot."

I examined the schedule. Alongside photographs from the production, there was a romantic beach shoot featuring Dorian and Lena, interviews about their chemistry, and a series of short videos suggesting that something more than professional cooperation existed between them.

"These materials aren't about the play," I said.

"Of course they are."

"No. This is a campaign built around their private lives."

Magda shrugged.

"Audiences love stories like that."

"Audiences love good theatre too. Or so I've heard."

"Gabriela, don't start."

I slid the tablet across the table.

"I won't agree to the stage costumes being used for a photo shoot that has nothing to do with the production. You can commission separate outfits."

"That's an additional expense."

"Then include it in the budget."

Magda stared at me for several seconds.

"You do realise Dorian doesn't have a problem with it?"

"That's his decision."

"Exactly. You should respect other people's decisions."

"I do. That's why I expect the same in return."

After she left, I sat motionless for a while. I disliked conflict, but I disliked it even more when someone tried to present another person's boundaries as a personal insult.

I didn't notice Dorian standing in the doorway.

"I heard the end of that," he said.

I looked up.

"Then you know I'm an exceptionally difficult person to work with."

"I know you don't like people making decisions for you."

"That's a fairly common trait among adults."

He stepped inside but remained near the door.

"Magda claims you're having problems because of me."

"Magda has a problem with her budget. I have a problem with people using my work without asking."

"I understand."

"Do you really?"

"Yes."

He said it so simply that, for a moment, I ran out of arguments.

"In that case, there's nothing for us to discuss."

"That's exactly why I wanted to talk."

I put down my tailor's chalk.

"I'm listening."

Dorian leaned against the doorframe.

"I'm not going to try to persuade you to change your mind. I just want you to know that the campaign is part of a larger commitment. Not all the materials are under my control."

"That sounds like a very elegant way of saying someone else makes the rules."

"Sometimes that's exactly what my job looks like."

"And sometimes people agree to rules they later regret."

He didn't deny it.

Silence settled between us. The sound of heels clicking along the corridor mingled with distant piano music. Dorian looked at the sketches spread out in front of me, as though searching among them for something less complicated than our conversation.

"I don't want you getting into trouble because of me," he said.

"You don't have that kind of power over my life."

The faintest suggestion of a smile appeared on his face.

"Good."

"Why?"

"Because I get the feeling very few people have said anything like that to me lately."

I felt a little sorry for him. Not enough to change my mind, but enough to recognise the man concealed beneath the famous name.

"Dorian, if you want to know what I think, just ask me. You don't need to send Magda."

"I didn't send her."

"Even better."

He nodded.

"And what if I wanted to ask you something that had nothing to do with costumes?"

I went still.

"That depends on whether the answer could stay between us."

He studied me carefully.

"That's exactly what I wanted to ask."

I didn't have time to respond because Piotr's voice came from the corridor, asking Dorian to return to the stage.

The actor stepped away from the doorway.

"We'll come back to this."

"I haven't promised anything."

"I know."

He left, bringing with him the scent of sea air and leaving behind the unsettling feeling that we had just begun a conversation that should never have strayed beyond professional matters.

That evening, I stayed at the theatre longer than usual. I needed to make alterations to Lena's dress and check that every costume piece had been labelled correctly. By the time I finished, the building was almost deserted. A single work light illuminated the stage, and the sound of the sea drifted through the partly open terrace door.

I stepped outside with a mug of tea.

Dorian was sitting on the steps leading down to the garden.

"I'm beginning to suspect you live here," he said.

"Only until opening night."

"And afterwards?"

"Afterwards, I go back to my own life."

"Sounds like a plan."

"It is."

He looked up at me.

"Do you like knowing what's going to happen next?"

"I like having some control over what happens next."

"Those aren't always the same thing."

I sat at the other end of the step, keeping a safe distance between us.

"You seem to enjoy making simple things complicated."

"And you seem to enjoy pretending complicated things are simple."

I turned towards him.

"We only met yesterday."

"Long enough to notice a few things."

"Such as?"

He regarded me thoughtfully.

"That when you're nervous, you start fixing things that don't need fixing. That you always check whether everyone else is comfortable before thinking about yourself. And that you don't like it when somebody notices."

I hadn't expected that answer.

"And you pay far too much attention to people."

"Occupational hazard."

"Then please don't turn me into another character to play."

His smile disappeared.

"I have no intention of doing that."

We remained silent for a long while, listening to the waves. I was thirty-two years old and had enough experience to know that attraction wasn't yet a reason to change my plans.

Dorian was the first to stand.

"Goodnight, Gabriela."

"Goodnight."

He paused.

"And one more thing. I don't want our conversations to become part of the publicity campaign."

I looked at him.

"In that case, there's at least one thing we agree on."

He walked back towards the theatre.

I sat there for several more minutes, watching the sea darken. For the first time since arriving in Sopot, I wasn't thinking exclusively about deadlines, expenses, and my future studio.

I was thinking about a man who knew how to listen.

And about how dangerously easy it was to start wishing he would listen to me in particular.

Chapter 2 - An Agreement Without Witnesses

The following morning, I found a note on my desk, written in distinctive, slightly slanting handwriting.

The jacket is perfect. Thank you. D.

There was nothing unusual about it. Actors occasionally left thank-you notes, especially when their costumes stopped pinching in the most inconvenient places. Nevertheless, I read the message twice before slipping it beneath my notebook.

Not because I intended to keep it.

I simply didn't want Magda to see it during her morning rounds.

At nine thirty, Piotr called a team meeting. I sat at the long table in the rehearsal room, beside Lena and the technical director. Dorian took a seat opposite me. For most of the meeting, he concentrated on the script, marking passages with a pencil.

"We have a problem with the second half of the production," Piotr announced. "The transition between scenes is taking too long, and Dorian's costume change requires more time than we anticipated."

"I can simplify the construction of the coat," I said.

"I don't want it to look worse."

"It won't look worse. It'll be designed differently."

Dorian looked up.

"What if we tried changing the entrance instead? Rather than leaving the stage, I could stay in partial darkness."

Piotr frowned.

"A costume change in front of the audience?"

"Not exactly. Behind a movable partition."

I began analysing the position of the scenery. The idea made sense, but it would need careful planning. The audience couldn't simply see an actor changing his clothes by accident. The transition had to become part of the story.

"I could prepare a layered costume," I suggested. "An outer coat, with a waistcoat and shirt beneath. The change would involve removing just one layer. We wouldn't need an interval."

Piotr looked at both of us.

"Work it out together. You've got two days."

Magda immediately raised her hand.

"Excellent! We could film some behind-the-scenes footage. Dorian and Gabriela working on the costume, a little conversation, a natural atmosphere."

I felt a familiar surge of irritation.

"I don't consent to my work being filmed without prior agreement," I said.

"Gabriela, it's publicity for the production."

"Which is precisely why it should be planned."

Dorian put down his pencil.

"Let's solve the staging problem first. Then we can decide what we're comfortable showing."

Magda gave him a displeased look.

"Dorian, you really don't have to complicate every little thing."

"I'm not complicating anything. I'm establishing the order of priorities."

Piotr ended the discussion by distributing the revised schedule. As people began to leave, Dorian stopped beside my chair.

"We have two days," he reminded me.

"I know."

"Where do we start?"

"With you stopping calling everything a problem we have to solve together."

He raised his eyebrows.

"And what is it, then?"

"My design and your costume."

"So, cooperation after all."

I smiled reluctantly.

"Under certain conditions."

"I'm listening."

I stood, closed my notebook, and looked him straight in the eyes.

"First, we work without cameras. Second, we don't discuss our conversations with the publicity department. Third, you don't use your name to pressure me into making decisions faster."

Dorian considered this for a moment.

"Agreed. But I have a condition too."

"What is it?"