Laura Bellini



Just Don't Say Goodnight

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ROMANS

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CONTENTS

INTRO 4
Chapter 1 - Nine Days Until Opening Night 13
Chapter 2 - The Terms of Closeness 25
Chapter 3 - The Light That Remains..... 38
Chapter 4 - What the Stage Doesn't Show 49
Chapter 5 - The Boundary You Won't Cross..... 62
Chapter 6 - Stay a Little Longer 74
Chapter 7 - Between One Glance and the Next 85
Chapter 8 - On the Other Side of the Lake..... 95
Chapter 9 - The Last Rehearsal Before Darkness..... 107
Chapter 10 - The Night We Stayed..... 119
Chapter 11 - What Remains After the Night 131
Chapter 12 - After Opening Night..... 143
Chapter 13 - The Price of One Decision 154
Chapter 14 - The Truth Between Us..... 165
Chapter 15 - Everything You Didn't Tell Me 176
Chapter 16 - When the Last Spotlight Goes Out..... 189
Chapter 17 - The Place I Choose 201
Chapter 18 - Instead of Another Promise 212
Chapter 19 - What Truly Remains..... 226
Chapter 20 - Just Don't Say Goodnight 240

INTRO

I switched on the first spotlight at 10:17 p.m., when the lake beyond the stage had already turned black and a mist so delicate it looked like part of the scenery was drifting above the water. The beam cut across the empty auditorium, swept over the wooden benches, and settled in the center of the stage. Exactly where the leading actress was supposed to stand in nine days' time, delivering the line on which the entire production depended.

At least, that was how I had imagined it.

In reality, the spotlight flickered, made a soft cracking sound, and went out.

"Wonderful," I told the darkness. "Very artistic. Just not what I had in mind."

I came down from the lighting booth with a flashlight between my teeth and a tablet tucked under my arm. The Summer Theater by the Lake supposedly had an atmosphere unlike anywhere else. In the promotional brochure, it looked like the kind of place where people fell in love during performances, then returned every year to remember their first kiss.

The brochure said nothing about electrical wiring from the previous century, moisture in the distribution cabinets, or the fact that half the spotlights were older than I was.

I was twenty-seven, ran my own business, and had enough experience to know that a romantic view could cost more than professional equipment.

And yet I had accepted the job.

Not because of the lake.

In three weeks, I was due to present my proposal for an original lighting installation in Warsaw. If the committee approved the concept, I would receive funding for my first project created entirely on my own terms. No submitting to someone else's vision. No being told that lighting should merely enhance whatever was supposedly more important.

I had treated the theater job as my final commitment before that meeting. Nine days of preparation, the premiere, a few adjustments, and then I would leave. My schedule was planned almost down to the hour.

The only thing I hadn't anticipated was someone deciding to change the stage.

I noticed it when I stepped onto the platform.

A tall structure made of dark wood stood on the left. It hadn't been there that morning. Three irregular walls formed something halfway between a fragment of a house and a maze. They obscured the lake, robbed the stage of its depth, and interrupted the paths of light I had carefully planned.

I moved closer, touched one of the boards, and noticed fresh assembly markings.

"You have got to be kidding me."

"Usually not until the second meeting."

The voice came from the darkened auditorium.

I spun around.

A man sat in the third row, his legs stretched out in front of him. He wore a light-colored shirt with the sleeves rolled up, dark trousers, and dust-covered shoes. A sketchbook and a tape measure lay on the bench beside him.

I hadn't noticed him before.

"The theater is closed," I said.

"I know."

"Then?"

"I have keys."

He raised a small bunch, as though that explained everything.

"Congratulations. I have permission to work on the lighting installation. Who are you?"

He stood, collected his sketchbook, and came down toward the stage. He moved without hurrying, with the infuriating confidence of someone who had never needed to prove he had a right to be somewhere.

Only when he stepped beneath the emergency light could I see his face. He looked a little over thirty, with dark hair, several days' stubble, and a small scar cutting through one eyebrow. He didn't seem particularly interested in making a good first impression.

Which, to my irritation, didn't mean he hadn't made one.

"Wiktor Małecki. Set design."

I looked at the wooden structure.

"Is this yours?"

"Depends. Are you about to compliment it?"

"I'm about to ask why you've blocked half the lake."

"Because the play takes place inside a house the heroine can't escape."

"And I was supposed to show that the house is nothing but a shadow. That the space beyond it has been open all along."

Wiktor studied me more closely.

"You're Pola Rej."

"Unfortunately for your structure."

He smiled. Barely, just one corner of his mouth, but it was enough to tell me he had no intention of backing down simply because I'd raised my voice.

"I've seen your design," he said. "It's good."

"How kind. Pity you apparently decided to ignore it."

"I didn't ignore it. I wanted to test something the visualizations didn't show."

"You could have called."

"I could have."

The answer was so outrageously calm that, for a moment, I had nothing to say.

Wiktor stepped onto the stage and stood beside the structure. He smelled of wood, dust, and something fresh, perhaps soap. Up close, I noticed a small scratch on his hand and graphite smudges on his fingers.

"Show me your lighting," he said.

"I don't perform on command for random men who turn up in the middle of the night."

"Quite right. But I am the set designer for this production, so perhaps you could make an exception."

"You're remarkably sure of yourself."

"And you're remarkably quick to pass judgment."

For a moment, we stared at each other in silence.

I didn't like the way he spoke. Or the fact that, rather than taking offense at my remarks, he seemed genuinely

interested in the conversation. What I liked even less was that he stood close enough for me to have to make a conscious decision about stepping away.

I didn't step away.

"Ten minutes," I said finally. "Then we'll decide which pieces need dismantling."

"Ten minutes sounds fair."

I returned to the control desk and activated the backup setup. Light appeared across the floor first, then climbed the wooden walls. In my original design, it was meant to reveal the lake gradually, as though the heroine were discovering the possibility of escape.

Now, however, the structure cast its shadow across the auditorium.

It wasn't an effect I had planned.

But I had to admit it looked interesting.

Wiktor walked between the walls, stopped in the narrow passage, and lifted his head. A strip of light touched his cheek, leaving the other half of his face in shadow.

"What if the stage actually opened up at the end?" he asked.

"How?"

"The middle section can slide."

I looked at the structure again.

"Then the light could reach straight out onto the water."

"Exactly."

For a moment, I could see it so clearly that it felt as though the performance were already happening. A woman

leaving a closed house. Light breaking through darkness. The lake ceasing to be a backdrop and becoming a promise.

I was surprised by how much I liked the possibility.

"I'd have to reprogram the finale," I said.

"And I'd have to rebuild the mechanism."

"A lot of work."

"I do occasionally work."

"I don't doubt it. Especially when it involves making other people's lives difficult."

He laughed softly.

And then came the crack.

It wasn't as loud as an explosion. More like an enormous plank snapping in two. The floor shifted beneath Wiktor's feet, and one side of the stage sank several centimeters.

"Don't move!" I shouted.

He froze immediately.

I shut down the stage equipment and hurried down the stairs. Wiktor had already switched on his phone's flashlight. He directed its beam toward a gap running along the edge of the platform.

Only then did I see the cracked supporting beam.

"That's not part of your structure?" I asked.

"No. It's the permanent platform."

He crouched without touching the damaged section.

"We need to close the stage. Now."

There was no amusement left in his voice.

I took out my phone, photographed the damage, and called the technical manager. Wiktor found some safety tape

and cordoned off the entrances. For several minutes, we worked side by side without a single sarcastic remark, as though our earlier argument had belonged to two completely different people.

When I finished the call, I sat down on the front bench.

The premiere was nine days away. The stage was damaged. My lighting design could no longer be tested safely. And there was a meeting in Warsaw I had absolutely no intention of canceling.

Wiktor sat two seats away, leaving an empty space between us.

"The structural engineer will be here in the morning," I said. "Until then, nobody goes onto the platform."

"Good."

I glanced at him sideways.

"I expected you to argue."

"Against what? Common sense?"

"Against someone else making the decision."

He rested his elbows on his knees.

"I don't have to make every decision, Pola."

It was the first time he'd said my name without professional distance. Quietly, as though he were discovering how it sounded.

I didn't answer immediately.

Beyond the stage, the wind stirred the reeds. Lights flickered in the windows of distant houses, and a solitary night bird called over the water. The theater seemed larger now, and strangely empty.

"We'll need to work out a new plan in the morning," he said.

"I already have a plan."

"Then we'll have to find out whether it survived tonight."

I should have taken that as another provocation. Instead, I noticed that Wiktor wasn't looking at me but at the damaged stage. He didn't look like a man intending to leave the problem for somebody else.

"And you?" I asked. "Do you have a plan?"

"Several. None involved the floor collapsing."

"I mean afterward. After the premiere."

He turned his head. For a moment, he looked as though he were deciding how much to tell someone he'd met less than an hour earlier.

"I'm leaving after the premiere," he replied.

"Far away?"

"Far enough."

I didn't press him. I had neither the right nor any sensible reason to.

And yet his answer stayed between us as we stood and headed toward the exit. At the gate, Wiktor stopped to let me pass first. He didn't touch me, although the narrow opening almost forced us close together.

"Goodnight, Pola."

I looked at the lake, then at him.

"Not yet," I replied. "I need to check whether we secured the rear entrance."

His smile softened.

"Then let's go."

And it was at that moment, walking beside the man I'd wanted to throw out of my project only minutes earlier, that I asked myself a question I couldn't answer.

Why did the thought of Wiktor Małecki actually leaving after the premiere trouble me more than the prospect of spending the next nine days working with him?

Chapter 1 - Nine Days Until Opening Night

At eight in the morning, the theater smelled of damp wood, freshly brewed coffee, and a disaster nobody was quite ready to call by its proper name.

I stood at the entrance to the stage, watching a man in an orange safety vest. For the past fifteen minutes, he had been running his hand along the damaged beam, checking the joints, and taking photographs. I made no attempt to hurry him. In a profession where an improperly secured spotlight could fall on someone's head, I had learned to distinguish impatience from courage.

The problem was that every passing minute was taking something away from me that I could neither buy nor recover.

Time.

My schedule was open on my tablet. Nine days until opening night. Seven until the dress rehearsal. Four until the first complete technical run-through. Under normal circumstances, that would have meant a demanding but manageable workload.

Under the present circumstances, it felt like planning a dinner party in a house that had just caught fire.

"Good morning, Pola."

I didn't have to turn around to recognize Wiktor Małecki's voice.

"That remains to be seen."

He came to stand beside me, holding two paper cups of coffee. He wore a dark T-shirt and beige work trousers, and looked like a man who had enjoyed an excellent night's sleep, even though we hadn't parted until shortly before midnight, after securing the rear entrance.

I had slept for four hours.

I'd spent the rest of the night trying to convince myself that a man with disturbingly calm eyes wasn't another complication I needed to watch out for.

"Black, no sugar," he said, offering me a cup.

I gave him a suspicious look.

"How do you know?"

"I saw an empty cup beside your workstation yesterday. Someone had written 'black' on the lid."

"It might have belonged to someone else."

"It might. In that case, I'll have to apologize for choosing the wrong coffee."

I accepted the cup. It was hot, and for a moment the aroma of freshly ground beans managed to distract me from the damaged platform.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

He said nothing more. That was almost as irritating as his answers the previous evening. He wasn't trying to use a small gesture to make me like him. He had simply brought me coffee and turned his attention to the stage.

At that moment, the structural engineer straightened up and removed his glasses.

"I have a preliminary assessment," he announced. "The damage affects the main beam and two cross connections. Until we've inspected the entire structure, nobody can use the platform."

The bitter taste of coffee lingered on my tongue.

"How long will the repairs take?" I asked.

"If the materials are available, three or four days. But I won't commit to a date until I've checked the remaining supports."

"Four days?" someone repeated behind me.

The theater director, Helena Rudzka, appeared with Marta, the technical manager. Helena wore a linen dress and the expression of a woman who had just discovered that the world had no intention of honoring the contracts she'd signed.

"The tickets have been sold," she said. "Our patrons are arriving next Friday. We can't postpone the premiere."

"We can avoid an accident, though," the engineer replied.

Silence fell.

Wiktor set his coffee on a bench.

"We need a contingency plan," he said. "If the main platform is out of action, we could build an independent performance area in front of it."

I turned to him.

"In front of the stage?"

"At the level of the first row. We'll move the audience back."

"And my lighting?"

"We'll adjust it."

One word was enough to bring the familiar tension back between my shoulder blades.

"No," I said.

Helena looked at me in surprise.

"Pola..."

"I'm not saying I refuse to prepare an alternative. I'm saying I won't agree to changing the entire performance space without examining the consequences. I have a completed design, agreed lighting angles, programmed transitions, and equipment on order. Moving the actors several meters means some of the spotlights will shine directly into the audience's eyes."

Wiktor turned toward me.

"I know."

"Then why are you talking about it as if we're moving a coffee table?"

"Because somebody has to start with a solution instead of a list of reasons why it's going to be difficult."

The remark struck exactly where it shouldn't have.

I tightened my fingers around the cup.

"Aren't you confusing planning with doing nothing?"

"No. But I have the impression you're confusing a change of plan with a loss of control."

Marta cleared her throat.

"Perhaps we should discuss the details in the office?"

I didn't answer. I turned and walked there first.

Helena's office occupied a small building behind the auditorium. Posters from previous productions covered the

walls, and a fan stood beneath the window, making considerably more noise than the relief it provided. I laid out my tablet, opened the technical drawings, and connected it to the monitor.

Wiktor sat opposite me.

Too close.

Not physically. It was simply that every time I raised my eyes, I found him looking at me.

"Let's do this properly," I said. "Safety first, then the geometry of the space, and only after that the artistic decisions."

"Agreed," he replied.

I raised my eyebrows.

"Just like that?"

"I'm not going to argue with something sensible simply because you said it."

Helena sighed with relief.

Over the next forty minutes, we examined possible solutions. Marta explained what equipment the theater had available. Wiktor sketched two versions of an independent platform. I calculated which lighting fixtures could be moved without additional power supplies and how to change the lighting without dazzling the actors.

I rejected the first option almost immediately. The second would have required too many changes to the audience seating. I spent longer considering the third.

"If we move the first two rows back and position the platform at a slight angle, I can use side lighting from the existing rigging positions," I said.

Wiktor leaned over the sketch.

"But then the audience will lose its view of the lake."

"Not entirely."

"In the finale, they will."

"We can change the finale."

He looked up from the drawing.

"Yesterday you were prepared to fight for every single lighting position."

"Yesterday the stage was intact."

He gave a brief smile.

"I think this is the first moment we've genuinely understood each other."

I didn't want those words to please me.

But they did.

After the meeting, I went out onto the dock to call Agata, the producer of my Warsaw installation. I needed confirmation that the presentation date hadn't changed. I also needed to hear that a world still existed beyond this theater, one in which my plans weren't collapsing with an almighty crack.

"Pola, everything's arranged," Agata said. "The committee has your portfolio. Your presentation is on Thursday in three weeks, at eleven. Come the day before so we can test the projection."

"I'll be there."

"Are you sure? You sound as though you're trying to put out a fire."

I looked across the calm surface of the lake.

"Something like that."

"Remember, this is your opportunity. Don't give it up because somebody else can't plan their project properly."

I closed my eyes.

"I won't."

When the call ended, I remained on the dock for a moment. Sunlight glinted off the water, and a small sailboat moved along the opposite shore. The place was beautiful. So beautiful that it was difficult to reconcile it with the argument we'd had that morning.

"Bad news?"

Wiktor stood several paces behind me.

"Private conversation."

"Understood."

He didn't come closer. Instead, he leaned against the railing at the entrance to the dock, leaving me my space.

"I only wanted to tell you I've found a contractor for the platform."

"Congratulations."

"He'll be here at three. He needs approved dimensions."

I put my phone away.

"So we have four hours to make a decision."

"More or less."

"Then we should get back."

I started toward the shore, but stopped when I heard him call my name.

"Pola."

I turned.

"I'm not trying to take your project away from you."

He looked serious, without any of his earlier amusement.

"I wasn't suggesting..."

"You've been suggesting it all morning. And I understand why. But I'm not trying to take control of the lighting. I want the actors to have somewhere to stand and the audience to get the performance they've paid for."

For a moment, I didn't know what to say.

"Then please stop making decisions that affect my work before you've spoken to me."

He nodded.

"Fair enough."

"And no structural alterations after hours without updating the documentation."

"Equally fair."

I studied him more closely.

"Do you always give in this easily?"

"I'm not giving in. I'm establishing the rules."

The distinction felt more important than I wanted to admit.

By three o'clock, we had three sketches, two cost estimates, and one compromise that neither of us considered ideal.

The platform contractor, a stocky man named Robert, examined the drawings and shook his head.

"It'll be stable, but I can't build it in two days."

"How long do you need?" Marta asked.

"Three. And that's assuming I get the materials tomorrow morning."

Helena turned pale.

Wiktor slid his drawing across the table.

"What if we use the modules from last year's production?"

Robert studied the sketch.

"If they're in good condition, we could shorten the installation time."

"They're in storage in Olsztyn," Wiktor replied. "I'll check whether they're available."

"And I'll check whether they meet the load requirements," I added. "Until the structural engineer confirms it, we can't assume they're safe for performances."

Wiktor nodded, this time without comment.

When Robert left, Helena closed the door and sank into her chair.

"Tell me we're going to pull this off."

Neither of us answered immediately.

Finally, Wiktor spoke.

"We can prepare a safe alternative. But we need to make one decision."

I looked at him.

"What decision?"

"We can't build two different productions. From this moment on, the scenery and the lighting have to be developed together."

I understood where he was heading.

"Meaning?"

"We approve every change jointly. No unilateral adjustments, even when one of us is convinced we're right."

Helena looked at me hopefully.

I wanted to object. Not because the proposal was unreasonable, but because it meant surrendering some of my freedom to a man I'd met only the previous evening.

And yet I knew we wouldn't save the premiere without working together.

"On one condition," I said.

Wiktor straightened.

"I'm listening."

"My commitment in Warsaw is nonnegotiable. I'm leaving according to plan. If the work overruns, I'm not staying here at the expense of my own project."

Helena opened her mouth, but Wiktor spoke first.

"Agreed."

I looked at him in surprise.

"You're not even going to ask where I'm going?"

"I don't need to know where you're going to respect your deadline."

For one brief moment, I felt something considerably more dangerous than ordinary attraction.

Relief.

That evening, after most of the crew had gone home, I stayed in the lighting booth to reprogram the settings. Through the window, I could see Wiktor on the empty auditorium benches. He was talking on the phone, pacing between the rows. Every now and then, he stopped and looked out at the lake.

I couldn't hear the conversation.

All I knew was that when it ended, he stood motionless for a long time.

Then he raised his head and noticed me behind the glass.

He lifted a hand.

I returned the gesture before I had time to consider whether I wanted to.

A few minutes later, he knocked on the open booth door.

"Robert has confirmed the transport. The modules will arrive tomorrow afternoon."

"Good."

"The safety barriers stay in place until the inspection is complete."

"Very good."

He fell silent for a moment, studying my computer screen.

"Is that the new finale?"

"A preliminary version."

"Can I see it?"

I moved aside to make room.

He stood beside me, close enough for me to feel the warmth of his shoulder, though he didn't touch me. A sequence of visualizations played across the monitor. Light drew fragments of the stage out of darkness, leaving everything else in deep shadow.

Wiktor watched carefully.

"I'd leave more darkness in the final scene," he said.

"Why?"

"Because if everything is revealed, the heroine won't have anything left to discover."

I considered that.

"Or perhaps that's the point? That she finally sees everything?"

He turned his head.

"Sometimes the hardest part isn't seeing something. It's deciding what to do with what you've seen."

I didn't answer.

I paused the final image on the screen. A bright strip cut through the empty space, leading toward the lake.

Wiktor stepped back.

"Goodnight, Pola."

This time, I didn't invent another safety check as an excuse to keep him there.

"Goodnight, Wiktor."

After he left, I remained alone with my design and the strange conviction that I had just agreed to something far more difficult than saving a production together.

I had agreed to let him into a space I'd always considered mine alone.

Chapter 2 - The Terms of Closeness

At 7:45 the following morning, I received a message from Wiktor.

"The warehouse has confirmed the modules. Transport at two. Structural engineer on-site at three thirty. I'm not changing anything without you."

I read it twice.

Not because the technical information was particularly fascinating.

It was the final sentence.

I'm not changing anything without you.

Simple. Specific. No joke, no attempt to impress me.

I replied:

"Good. I've prepared a new lighting plan. I'll show you after nine."

For a moment, I stared at the screen. I realized that, for the first time, I had written to him without using the formal form of address we'd maintained since meeting.

I didn't change the message.

Before noon, we met in the rehearsal room, where props and folding chairs were usually stored. I spread drawings, printouts, and a list of the theater's available equipment across the table. Wiktor brought models of the proposed structure made from thin cardboard.

For the first half hour, we worked almost without speaking.

It wasn't an awkward silence. It was more like the concentration I had experienced during my best projects. We each worked on our own part, but we remained aware of what the other person was doing.

When I moved one of the models, Wiktor automatically held the board steady.

When he indicated the position of a new support, I immediately checked whether it would interfere with the planned light beam.

I was surprised by how quickly we'd begun to understand each other's gestures.

"Here," I said, marking a point on the drawing. "If we move the spotlight onto the side truss, I'll get the right angle."

"And will the actress be visible to people in the back rows?"

"Yes, provided the wall isn't higher than two meters forty."

Wiktor reached for his pencil.

"Two thirty will be enough."

I looked at him.

"You're not going to negotiate?"

"Should I?"

"I'm starting to suspect you were deliberately trying to annoy me yesterday."

"Yesterday I was convinced my version was the best."

"And today?"

"Today I know yours is just as good in the places I overlooked."