Laura Bellini



When We Stop Pretending

The hardest part begins when the pretending ends

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ROMANS

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INTRO

I told my first lie before dessert.

"No, Aunt Regina, I'm not alone. I came with someone."

Aunt Regina froze, her teaspoon suspended above her cheesecake. Conversations hummed around us, someone was rearranging chairs on the veranda, and the scent of sun-warmed grass drifted through the open windows of the old house beside a lake in Warmia. It was Saturday afternoon, the first in months that I'd intended to spend without answering questions about my love life. I'd even worked out a strategy. Two days at the family reunion, polite smiles, a few conversations about work, and a drive back to Warsaw before noon on Sunday. No heartfelt confessions. No explaining why, at twenty-nine, I still had no plans to get married.

And, above all, no mention of the man who, three months earlier, had decided that my work was an adorable hobby, provided it didn't interfere with his plans.

"With whom?" Regina put down her teaspoon. "Diana, you didn't say anything!"

That was the problem with my family. One innocent sentence could turn into news that twenty people knew about within fifteen minutes.

"Because it never came up."

"Is it someone serious?"

I glanced toward the door leading into the garden. Beyond it stretched a lawn where my cousins were arranging tables for the evening bonfire. I thought I could still salvage the situation. Tell her I'd meant a female friend. A client. Anyone

who wouldn't give Regina a reason to start planning another wedding.

Instead, I heard myself say, "Mikołaj."

My aunt blinked.

"That Mikołaj?"

"How many Mikołajs do you know?"

"Sokołowski? Your librarian?"

"He's not mine."

Regina smiled so broadly that I immediately regretted those last three sentences.

"I knew it!"

Of course she had. For eleven years, my family had known that Mikołaj Sokołowski was my destiny. They weren't particularly bothered by the fact that neither of us had received the same information.

We'd met during my first year at university, when I'd taken shelter from a thunderstorm in the library with a soaked sketchbook. Mikołaj was working at the circulation desk back then. Instead of commenting on my sorry state, he'd brought me paper towels and asked whether I was more worried about my drawings or my phone. Since that day, he'd seen me in situations no sensible woman would ever want an attractive man to witness. He knew how ugly my crying could get when I was furious. He knew my worst decisions, and he could identify the exact moment I was pretending not to care about something.

He was thirty-three, had the patience to deal with people who returned books six months overdue, and possessed the infuriating habit of asking one perfectly aimed question instead of offering ten pieces of good advice.

He was my closest friend.

And I'd just turned him into my boyfriend.

"Where is he?" Regina asked.

That was when I spotted him through the window.

He stood beside the wooden garden gate in a light-colored shirt with the sleeves rolled up, holding a paper bag from the bakery. He was talking to my father, who was showing him something beside the car. Mikołaj listened with the attention of someone who genuinely wanted to understand another person's story, even when that story concerned the extraordinary features of a new roof box.

He'd come because I'd invited him. Not as a partner, but as an ally. I'd promised him two days by the lake, homemade food, and the chance to read on the jetty. In return, he was supposed to help me avoid relatives convinced that a single woman required immediate intervention.

What I hadn't told him was that I intended to change the terms of our agreement.

"He'll be here in a minute," I replied.

Regina was already getting up from the table.

"I have to tell your mother!"

"Auntie, please don't make a big deal out of this."

"Darling, after all these years? It is a big deal!"

She disappeared into the kitchen before I could stop her.

I stood, picked up my glass of lemonade, and went out onto the back steps. The sun was sinking toward the trees, and the lake beyond the garden had turned a muted silver. Children's sandals lay scattered across the terrace.

Someone had forgotten to close a box of crayons. I sat on the top step and took out my phone.

Mikołaj, we need to talk.

I typed the message but didn't send it.

I didn't want to do this over the phone. Mainly because he was exceptionally good at reading between the lines of my messages. Three words and the absence of an emoji were enough for him to know I'd done something wrong.

"Is it that bad?"

I looked up.

He was standing a few steps below me, the paper bag resting against his hip. His dark hair was slightly tousled, and he wore that familiar, faintly amused expression that usually meant he was about to say something unbearably sensible.

"How do you know it's bad?"

"You're sitting on the steps with your phone in your hand, looking as though you're trying to come up with an alibi."

"Maybe I'm just admiring the view."

He looked toward the lake.

"With your back to it?"

I sighed.

Mikołaj sat down beside me. Not too close. He never took up more space in someone else's life than they offered him. It was the quality I liked most about him. With him, I didn't have to be funnier, more interesting, or less complicated than I really was.

"I brought your favorite sweet buns," he said. "Although I'm starting to suspect I should have bought something stronger."

"Regina thinks we're together."

For a moment, he looked at me without speaking.

"I see."

"It wasn't planned."

"Of course."

"Mikołaj."

"Diana."

He said my name calmly, but without the familiar warmth that usually softened his irony.

"How, exactly, did she reach that conclusion?"

I ran a finger over the condensation on my glass.

"I told her I'd come with someone."

"Which is true."

"Then she asked if it was someone serious."

"And?"

"I gave her your name."

He tipped his head back and looked at the sky. A smile appeared on his face, but quickly vanished.

"So I've been promoted without an interview."

"If you want to say no, I'll understand."

"Really?"

That single word sounded different from everything he'd said before. I turned toward him. Mikołaj was still looking straight ahead, his fingers gripping the edge of the paper bag.

"Of course, really."

"Because sometimes I get the feeling you take my presence for granted before you've even had a chance to ask me."

It hurt more than it should have.

I wanted to respond with a joke, but something in his voice made me stay quiet. I thought back over the past few months. The late-night phone calls when I needed someone to talk to. The dinner he'd canceled to help me move my studio. And that Friday when he'd suggested going to the cinema and I'd turned him down because I'd assumed I could see him whenever I wanted.

I'd never asked whether he felt the same way.

"I'm sorry," I said at last. "I shouldn't have told her that without asking you first."

He turned to face me. Our shoulders were almost touching, and I suddenly became aware of how close we were sitting. Mikołaj smelled of clean cotton, coffee, and something warm and familiar. A scent I'd associated with safety for years.

This time, however, I couldn't focus entirely on that association.

"I'm not angry," he said. "I just want to know what you're expecting from me."

My mother's laughter drifted out from inside the house. A moment later, someone called for us to come and join the family photograph.

Mikołaj didn't get up. He waited for my answer.

I'd prepared at least a dozen arguments for why pretending to be a couple would be harmless. I could have told him about Regina, about my ex-boyfriend, about how

desperately I needed a weekend without being interrogated by my relatives.

But sitting beside Mikołaj, I considered for the first time that the price of my peace of mind might be something I'd never even thought about before.

"I wanted you to pretend to be my boyfriend for two days," I admitted. "But if that's asking too much, I'll tell them the truth."

He studied me carefully.

"And if I say yes, Diana? What are we going to do when the performance is over?"

I didn't answer.

Because for the first time in eleven years, I wasn't sure either of us wanted to go back to our old roles.

Chapter 1 - The Terms of the Performance

Mikołaj was still sitting beside me on the steps when another call for the family photograph came from inside the house. Normally, in a situation like this, he would have given me a knowing look, invented an excuse, and helped me escape our collective family obligation. This time, he did nothing. He held the paper bag on his lap and waited for me to answer the question he'd just asked.

"I don't know what we'll do afterward," I admitted. "I thought we'd simply go back to Warsaw and everything would be the way it was before."

"Everything?"

"Mikołaj, we're talking about a weekend, not a wedding."

"That's precisely why I'm asking now. If it were a wedding, we'd be leaving it rather late to agree on the terms."

I tried to smile, but he didn't return it. He didn't look offended. He seemed focused, the way he did when someone was telling him about a book whose ending didn't match its beginning. That attentiveness of his, once so comforting, had suddenly become uncomfortable. I realized he'd come to the lake to relax, and I'd already managed to turn his free weekend into an obligation he hadn't even been given the chance to accept.

"I'll take it back," I offered. "I'll go inside and tell them Regina misunderstood."

"Did she?"

"No. I deliberately misled her."

Mikołaj nodded.

"In that case, at least we know where we're starting."

My younger cousin Zosia came out of the house. She had a phone in her hand and the expression of someone entrusted with a mission of historic importance.

"Diana! Grandma says we're not starting without you two. And Aunt Regina told me to tell you that you have to stand together."

Mikołaj looked at me, then at Zosia.

"Tell them we'll be there in a minute."

"Okay. Just hurry up, because Uncle Andrzej is setting up the tripod for the second time already."

When she disappeared, I moved my glass against the wall and stood up.

"You don't have to do this. Really."

"I know."

He got up too, but instead of following me, he stopped me with a calm question.

"Why is it so important to you that they believe you're with someone?"

I could have said Regina was unbearable. That my mother worried about me for no reason, and that one more question about children would send me fleeing into the lake, where I'd remain until Monday. All of it would have been true. But Mikołaj knew me well enough to recognize an answer that avoided the real question.

"Because I don't want them looking at me like a woman whose life hasn't worked out," I said. "In Warsaw, I have a

studio, clients, and an apartment I pay for myself. But here, all it takes is for me not to have a partner, and suddenly none of the rest matters."

"Your parents are proud of your work."

"I know. But my mother can praise my illustrations and ask whether it wouldn't be easier to work less if I found the right man, all in the same sentence."

Understanding flickered across his face. He rested one hand on the wooden railing, revealing the small scar near his wrist. I remembered the day he'd acquired it while helping me carry a cracked pane of glass out of my old studio. He'd always been there for disasters like that. And that was precisely what was beginning to trouble me: how much of his willingness to help I'd come to take for granted.

"You don't need a boyfriend for your life to have value," he said.

"I know that."

"I just want to make sure you know it too."

I looked at him with irritation that quickly gave way to gratitude.

"If you weren't so sensible, you'd be much easier to take advantage of."

"I suspect that's exactly why you've spent eleven years perfecting your technique."

This time he smiled. Briefly, but enough for me to breathe easily again.

"I'll agree to it," he said.

He caught me off guard.

"Really?"

"On one condition. Actually, several, but one matters more than the others."

I waited.

"You don't get to make decisions for both of us. Not in front of your family, and not when we're alone."

My first instinct was to assure him I'd never done anything of the sort. Then I remembered that barely fifteen minutes earlier, I'd introduced him as my partner without asking. I closed my mouth.

"You're right."

"This isn't a competition, Diana. You don't have to award me a point."

"I'm giving you something much rarer. I'm admitting I was wrong."

He laughed softly.

"I'll treasure this moment."

We went down the steps and headed toward the garden. On the way, however, I stopped beside the door to fix my hair in the glass. Mikołaj stood next to me. In the reflection, I saw us together: me in a dark green dress, my hair loosely tied at the nape of my neck; him in a light shirt and navy trousers. We looked like two people who'd arrived at a family reunion and had known for a long time exactly where they belonged.

There was something disturbingly pleasant about that thought.

"We don't look convincing," I muttered.

"What's wrong?"

"You're too calm."

"Would you prefer me to break out in a nervous sweat?"

"You could at least try to look like you're in love."

Mikołaj turned his head. For a moment, he studied me so intently that I forgot my own provocation.

"Be careful what you wish for," he said gently.

Then he opened the door and let me go through first.

More than thirty people were waiting on the lawn. Grandma Halina sat in a chair in the front row, surrounded by grandchildren and great-grandchildren. My father was trying to persuade the youngest cousins to stop jumping around, while my mother was talking to Regina, who spotted us immediately.

"There they are! Our new couple!"

I felt Mikołaj slow down. He didn't touch me. He merely gave me a questioning look, and, remembering what he'd said earlier, I slipped my hand through his arm myself.

"Shall we?" I asked quietly.

"Let's."

There was nothing especially intimate about the gesture. We'd walked arm in arm before, on icy pavements, at my cousin's wedding, and one New Year's Eve when I'd twisted my ankle. This time, however, I knew the people around us would interpret it differently. Worse still, I was beginning to notice things I'd previously overlooked: the warmth of his forearm, the way he subtly adjusted his pace to mine, and the fact that he made no attempt to take control.

Regina immediately pointed us toward a place beside Grandma.

"Come on, you two, closer together. You're not going to bite each other!"

Mikołaj leaned toward my ear.

"I never promised that."

A burst of laughter escaped me just as Uncle Andrzej activated the camera's self-timer. In the photograph, I probably looked like a genuinely happy woman.

The problem was that, for those few seconds, I genuinely was.

After the photograph, the family surrounded us. My mother hugged me and whispered that she was delighted, although I could have told her sooner. My father shook Mikołaj's hand with a solemnity he didn't display even when signing contracts. Grandma surprised me most of all. She beckoned us over and, instead of asking questions, studied us from beneath her gray eyebrows.

"You look good together," she announced.

"Grandma..." I began.

"Don't explain anything to me. I'm old, not deaf. The whole house is buzzing."

Mikołaj crouched beside her chair.

"I hope we haven't caused any trouble."

"Trouble was when my Marian brought an orchestra to our engagement even though he couldn't afford wedding rings. At least you two turned up on time."

Grandma patted his hand, and I watched his expression soften. She'd liked him from the first time they'd met. Not because she considered him a suitable candidate for me, but because he always found a moment to talk to her during

family gatherings. He knew she loved old atlases and stories about prewar Olsztyn. He even remembered that she'd been struggling to read small print for the past two years, and he brought her books with larger type.

Regina, however, wasn't about to let us rest.

"So, how long have you been together?"

I felt Mikołaj glance in my direction. All I had to do was give any date, and he'd probably be able to match it with a suitable story without making a single mistake. Instead, I remembered our agreement.

"We don't want to talk about the details just yet," I replied.

My aunt pursed her lips.

"But we're family."

"Which is exactly why I'm hoping you'll respect that."

Mikołaj said nothing. Only when Regina found another subject did he gently squeeze my hand. One brief gesture of approval. I realized it had pleased me more than all the family's congratulations combined.

That evening, while dinner preparations were underway, we found ourselves together at the kitchen counter. Mikołaj was slicing lemons for a jug of water, and I was arranging bread on a wooden board. Through the open door came the voices of relatives and the crackling of branches catching fire. It was that particular kind of commotion I remembered from childhood, when Grandma's house had seemed like the biggest, safest place in the world.

"You handled Regina well," he said.

"I surprised myself."

"I noticed."

"I thought you'd say something for me."

"I could have. But I didn't need to."

I stopped arranging the slices of bread. What he'd said was perfectly ordinary, yet it struck exactly the place I'd rather not have touched. Over the past few months, Mikołaj had rescued me from difficult conversations many times. He hadn't asked for gratitude, but I'd increasingly stopped wondering whether helping me cost him anything.

"Once, you asked whether I treated you like an emergency hotline," I recalled.

"I remember."

"I was offended."

"I remember that too."

"I think I'm starting to understand what you meant."

He put down the knife.

"I didn't want you to feel guilty. I just wanted to be someone you called sometimes when everything was going well, too."

For a while, I listened to the voices coming from the garden. Shame was quiet and unpleasant, because this time I had nothing to defend myself against.

"I want to change that," I said.

Mikołaj regarded me with cautious kindness.

"That's good."

He didn't say everything was fine now. He didn't promise that one conversation would be enough. He finished slicing the lemons, and I felt an unexpected relief at not having to win back his full approval immediately.

At dinner, we sat beside each other. We didn't exchange affectionate words or pretend to be consumed by sudden passion. We talked about books, childhood memories, and my work on illustrations for a new edition of fairy tales. When my aunt asked whether I intended to abandon freelance work someday in favor of something more stable, Mikołaj didn't answer for me. He waited while I explained that I'd been earning my living from my work for six years and was currently negotiating the biggest contract of my career.

Only later, when the conversation had moved on, did he lean toward me.

"I'm proud of you."

I looked at him in surprise.

"What for?"

"For not apologizing to anyone for having ambitions of your own."

There was nothing patronizing in his voice. He said it as though he'd noticed something important, and suddenly I wanted him to notice more.

After dinner, Regina approached with her phone in her hand.

"Have you taken any pictures together? I'd love to show your Aunt Irena, since she couldn't come."

I opened my mouth, but Mikołaj spoke first.

"We'd prefer to keep this between the people who are here for now."

Regina looked at me, clearly disappointed.

"It's not as though I'm going to announce it in the newspapers."

"We know," I replied. "We just don't want photographs or messages going out to the extended family yet."

My aunt sighed and walked away. Mikołaj watched her go.

"Sorry I answered first. I could have waited."

"It's all right. I was going to say the same thing."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. And thank you for asking."

For a moment, we stood facing each other, while the conversations around us seemed to drift somewhere farther away. Mikołaj slipped his hands into his pockets, as though consciously resisting the impulse to make some gesture.

"Looks like we can negotiate," he said.

"As long as neither party changes the agreement without warning."

"That's a particularly important clause."

I smiled, but a moment later I grew serious.

"I'll stick to it."

For the first time since arriving, I felt that my lie had stopped being merely a private way of avoiding uncomfortable questions. Mikołaj had his own place in it, his own boundaries, and his own expectations. If I wanted to preserve his friendship, I had to learn to recognize them as clearly as my own.

And when, later, beside the bonfire, he pushed an extra blanket toward me before I could say I was cold, I understood something else.

Until now, I'd considered his attentiveness a natural part of our friendship.

Now I was beginning to wonder what life would look like with a man who knew how to love in precisely that way.

Chapter 2 - Without Witnesses

I woke to a knock on the door and my mother's voice announcing that breakfast would be ready in half an hour. For several seconds, I couldn't remember where I was. Then I saw the familiar wallpaper patterned with tiny flowers, the old desk beneath the window, and my suitcase standing beside the wardrobe. As a child, I'd remembered this room as a refuge from family noise. Now it turned out to be the only place where no one expected me to behave like a woman in love.

I reached for my phone. A message from Mikołaj, sent at 8:17, was waiting on the screen.

I've gone to the shop for coffee. Do you want your usual, or does your new identity mean you now drink exclusively beverages for happy couples?

I smiled despite myself.

The usual. And a sweet bun if they still have any.

His reply arrived almost immediately.

This time I'm only buying for people who know how to say please.

Please, Mr. Sokołowski.

Now that sounds suspiciously interesting.

I put my phone down and stared at the ceiling for a long moment. Mikołaj was flirting with me over text. Or perhaps he was simply joking the way he had for eleven years? I couldn't decide which was worse: the possibility that he was doing it deliberately, or the fact that I suddenly wanted him to be.