Laura Bellini

On the Other Side of Summer

Summer has to end. Their story doesn't



On the Other Side of Summer

Summer has to end. Their story doesn't

Laura Bellini

ROMANS

ISBN: 9788384900420

ALL-IN Rafał Płonkowski



CONTENTS

INTRO 4
Chapter 1 - Conditions I Hadn't Anticipated 11
Chapter 2 - Outside Working Hours 23
Chapter 3 - When the Wind Changes Direction 36
Chapter 4 - Things You Don't Put in Your Calendar..... 48
Chapter 5 - The Right to Say No..... 62
Chapter 6 - The Distance of a Single Kiss..... 74
Chapter 7 - What We Didn't Put in the Calendar 87
Chapter 8 - On This Side of the Lake 99
Chapter 9 - One More Evening Under the Stars..... 112
Chapter 10 - Where Caution Ends 124
Chapter 11 - Ordinary Things, Extraordinary Meaning.....134
Chapter 12 - Dates That Cannot Be Moved 145
Chapter 13 - The Price of Good Decisions 158
Chapter 14 - The Truth Spoken in a Whisper 170
Chapter 15 - Everything We Left Unsaid 180
Chapter 16 - Silence Between Two Cities 193
Chapter 17 - Everything I Can Choose..... 203
Chapter 18 - The First Step Beyond Summer 213
Chapter 19 - Room for Two 223
Chapter 20 - On the Other Side of Summer 234

INTRO

The final screening was supposed to be the most beautiful evening of the summer. I had planned it down to fifteen-minute intervals, even accounting for the moment when the sun would disappear behind the line of pines and the lake would stop reflecting its orange light. The one thing I hadn't anticipated was the man responsible for safety at the swimming area refusing to let me use the pier five days before the event.

I was standing on the wooden boards with my phone pressed to my ear when I heard a voice behind me.

"If I were you, I wouldn't put the projector there."

I turned slowly. A man in a navy-blue lifeguard shirt was pointing at the spot that had been marked as the technical station on my plans for the past three weeks. He had closely cropped dark hair, several days' worth of stubble, and the kind of calm expression that was particularly irritating on someone who was certain he was right.

"If you were me?" I repeated, ending my call. "Have you ever been in my position?"

"No. That's why I'm not trying to organize a film screening."

"Wonderful. Because I'm not trying to rescue anyone."

For a moment, he looked at me without speaking. Then one corner of his mouth lifted, as though I'd said something he intended to remember.

"Grzegorz Woś. Head lifeguard at this swimming area."

"Milena Okoń. Organizer of the event you're currently trying to ruin."

"We've only just met, and I've already accomplished that much?"

I didn't answer. I walked past him, spread my equipment layout across a bench, and pinned down the corners with my phone and keys. A breeze coming off the lake immediately caught one of the sheets. Grzegorz snatched it before it slipped between the boards.

"Thank you," I said, taking it back.

"You're welcome. Now, can we discuss the cable you intend to run across the emergency access route?"

I looked at the drawing. The cable did cross the red line marking the access route, but it was supposed to be protected by a specially designed cable cover. I explained this, showing him the technical specifications. He listened carefully without interrupting, then crouched beside one of the pier's metal fittings and pressed his hand against a plank.

"And this?"

The wood shifted noticeably beneath his palm.

My stomach tightened. The previous day, an employee of the resort had assured me that the pier had passed its inspection. I even had the message to prove it. Still, I had no intention of admitting to Grzegorz that he'd spotted a problem I hadn't personally checked.

"I'll report the damage to the site administrator."

"I already did. Yesterday. This section stays closed until it's repaired."

"The screening is on Saturday."

"I know."

"Almost two hundred people are coming."

"I gathered as much."

"Do you always answer women like this when they're trying to have a conversation with you?"

He straightened. Only then did I notice how much taller he was than me. He didn't use his height to move closer or assert himself, though. Instead, he leaned against the railing, leaving a comfortable distance between us.

"Only the ones trying to convince me that a larger audience will somehow repair damaged planks."

I didn't want to laugh. I genuinely didn't. Unfortunately, he was right, and his voice was so composed that my own irritation was beginning to seem a little excessive.

I'd arrived in Brzeziny nad Jeziorem at the end of June, intending to organize a series of four summer film screenings and leave without complications. For the local cultural center, the project was an experiment. For me, it was my final freelance assignment before starting a permanent position at an events agency in Poznań.

I'd already signed the contract. On October first, a desk, a team of my own, and the life I'd spent the past three years working toward would be waiting for me.

There was no room for improvisation in that life.

Especially not improvisation that was thirty-four years old, had attentive eyes, and looked perfectly capable of ruining my afternoon without breaking a sweat.

"I need a solution," I said, folding up the plan. "Not another prohibition."

Grzegorz looked toward the lawn stretching behind me.

"We could move the screen beneath the alders. The shoreline is more stable there, and the audience wouldn't block access to the marina."

"There isn't enough space."

"Have you been over there today?"

"Last week."

"They mowed the grass all the way to the fence yesterday."

I hesitated. There genuinely might be room for more chairs beneath the alders than I'd estimated. But moving the screen would mean changing its position, rerouting the power supply, and redesigning the sound setup. Just thinking about all the phone calls I'd have to make gave me a headache.

"Will you show me?"

"Now?"

"Unless lifeguards aren't allowed to walk on grass."

He gave a quiet laugh.

"After you, Ms. Okoń."

We left the pier and headed toward a small bay. The path wound between reeds, and the air smelled of sun-warmed pine bark and water. Across the lake, someone started a boat engine. The sound bounced off the forest and faded.

The town was gradually settling into that peculiar late-August mood, when holidaymakers hadn't quite left but the locals were already beginning to talk about September.

Grzegorz walked beside me, matching my pace. He pointed out the places where the ground became soft after rain and the narrow access lane used by maintenance

vehicles. He wasn't trying to impress me with his knowledge of the area. He simply knew what he was talking about.

When we reached the alders, he stepped aside and let me assess the space for myself.

I took out my phone, opened a measuring app, and walked several yards, checking the width of the clearing.

"We could put the screen here," I admitted reluctantly.

"That almost sounded like a compliment."

"Don't get used to it."

"I'll try to contain myself."

For the next few minutes, our conversation changed completely. We exchanged observations about chair placement, wind direction, and the possibility of using a nearby electrical distribution point. Grzegorz refused to approve anything he considered unsafe, but instead of simply telling me no, he suggested alternatives.

I realized I'd stopped thinking of him as an obstacle.

As I bent over my phone to record another measurement, the screen lit up with a message from my future manager.

Milena, please confirm your attendance at the onboarding session on September 21. We can't reschedule it.

I sent a brief confirmation. When I looked up, Grzegorz was gazing across the lake, giving me a moment of privacy.

"Are you leaving?" he asked after I put my phone away.

"After the season. For Poznań."

"For long?"

"Permanently."

He nodded. He made no comment, but for a moment the easy expression on his face disappeared.

"What about you?" I asked. "Does your job end with the summer too?"

"At the swimming area, yes. After that, I go back to my other responsibilities."

"So terrifying event organizers isn't your only occupation?"

"No. I have a few less glamorous specialties as well."

I wanted to ask what they were, but his work radio crackled before I could. He listened to a short message, confirmed that he'd return to his station shortly, and checked his watch.

"I have to go. Tomorrow morning, I can show you the electrical distribution panel and help work out a safe equipment layout."

"What time?"

"Seven."

I grimaced.

"That's definitely not an hour intended for people who work in cinema."

"Eight, then."

"Eight thirty."

He studied me with amusement.

"You enjoy negotiating."

"I enjoy winning."

"This could be an interesting working relationship."

He offered his hand. I shook it, expecting an ordinary, formal gesture. His palm was warm and roughened by work, his grip firm but gentle. He didn't hold on for even a second longer than politeness required.

Even so, when he stepped away, I found myself thinking not about the projector but about how natural the word relationship had sounded in his voice, even with working in front of it.

"See you tomorrow, Milena."

It was the first time he'd used my name without Ms. in front of it.

I noticed.

I suspected he did too.

I watched him walk back along the path toward the lifeguard tower. Then I turned to the lake, which looked almost motionless in the afternoon light. The layout for the final screening was still open on my phone. I should have called the technicians immediately.

Instead, I stood there for several seconds without moving.

In five days, my summer in Brzeziny would be over. In a few weeks, I would begin the new life I'd wanted and worked so hard to achieve. Everything was settled, signed, and secure.

So why, as I watched Grzegorz walking away, did I find myself wishing for the first time that at least one of my plans might turn out to be a little less certain?

Chapter 1 - Conditions I Hadn't Anticipated

At eight twenty-seven the following morning, I stood outside the locked gate leading to the swimming area's service facilities, wondering whether Grzegorz Woś was the kind of man who regarded lateness as a personal insult.

I'd arrived early, even though I'd spent half the night revising the layout for the final screening. I was carrying two takeaway coffees, a roll of technical drawings, and a list of arguments I intended to use to regain control of my project.

I hadn't even managed to take out my phone when the gate opened from the inside.

"Three minutes early," Grzegorz observed. "I'm impressed."

He was wearing a navy-blue shirt and light-colored trousers. His hair was still damp, as though he'd managed to go for a swim before starting work. His gaze dropped to the two paper cups in my hands, and he raised an eyebrow.

"Is that a bribe?"

"An attempt to establish civilized working conditions."

"With milk?"

"One black, one with milk. I'll leave you the freedom to choose."

He took the black coffee.

"A sensible strategy. Do you always allow your opponent a little sense of control?"

"Only when the outcome matters a great deal to me."

He smiled without answering, opened the gate wider, and let me through.

The air smelled of freshly brewed coffee, damp wood, and the lake, which had an entirely different character at this hour than it did in the afternoon. The water was smooth, almost silver. A thin veil of mist hovered over the opposite shore, and a woman was walking her dog along the deserted beach.

The electrical distribution panel was housed in a low utility building beside the rescue equipment storeroom. Grzegorz showed me the available connections but refused to let anything be switched on without an electrician present. I took photographs, recorded the circuit breaker numbers, and marked the proposed cable routes on my plan.

For the first twenty minutes, we worked together with surprising efficiency.

The problem arose only when we returned to the alders.

"This section needs to stay clear," he said, indicating a strip of grass running along the shoreline.

I looked up from my drawing.

"That's the best place for the last two rows of chairs."

"And the only convenient access route for emergency vehicles."

"Then we'll move the chairs closer to the screen."

"That won't be enough."

"Why not?"

"Because besides the access route, I need a clear area between the audience and the water. People lose their bearings after dark. Children wander between chairs,

someone goes to take a photograph, someone else looks for the toilets. I'm not going to wait for an accident before doing something about it."

I spread the plan across a picnic table.

It felt as though every new requirement Grzegorz raised was taking another few yards of space away from me, along with my ability to keep the promises I'd made to the cultural center.

Two hundred spectators wasn't a number I'd chosen at random. It was the capacity I'd declared in the proposal on which the project's funding had been based. Reducing the audience might mean having to return part of the money.

"With this arrangement, we'll fit a hundred and fifty people at most," I said.

"Probably."

"That's fifty too few."

"Milena, I'm not judging your project. I'm assessing the place where you want to hold it."

Hearing him use my first name surprised me, although he'd already crossed that particular boundary the day before. There was nothing patronizing in his voice. He sounded calm but firm, like someone who could refuse a request without needing to win an argument.

"And I'm responsible for the people who bought tickets," I replied. "And for the money someone entrusted to this project."

"Which is exactly why we need to find a solution."

"I've been telling you that's what I'm trying to do."

"You're trying to preserve your original plan. That's not quite the same thing."

I closed my notebook a little harder than I'd intended.

"Do you always have to have the last word?"

"No. But when it comes to safety, I have to be able to say no."

For a moment, we held each other's gaze.

I didn't like that I couldn't unsettle him or make him lose his temper. What I liked even less was that I understood his position.

I was used to people making my work difficult through laziness, incompetence, or a desire to demonstrate their authority. Grzegorz didn't belong to any of those categories.

"Fine," I said at last. "Show me a solution you would approve."

He set down his coffee.

"First, you need to understand my condition."

"I'm listening."

"Before the event, we'll run a full rehearsal with all the equipment in place. Not just the screen, not just the chairs. Everything. We'll check the lighting, the walkways, and how people will leave the site after the screening. If anything is unsafe, you'll fix it before admitting the audience."

"That means an extra day's work for the technical crew."

"I know."

"And additional costs."

"I gathered as much."

I sighed, recognizing his familiar way of answering.

This time, though, I didn't feel like arguing. I took out my calculator and began estimating the cost of the rehearsal. Grzegorz stood beside me, waiting patiently until I'd finished.

"We can do it on Thursday afternoon," I said. "Provided I get a written list of your requirements beforehand. I don't want any more surprises on Friday."

"You'll have it today."

"And I need someone to help me establish whether the grounds can actually accommodate two hundred people."

"I know the site manager. We can inspect the additional area beyond the fence together."

He raised his hand and pointed toward a place that was barely visible from where we stood.

Behind the alders was a small clearing separated from the main grounds by a low wooden fence. I'd never considered using it because it was marked as a service area on the original site plan.

"Can we get in there?"

"With the administrator's permission. It's sometimes used for children's activities during the summer."

"Why didn't you tell me about it straightaway?"

"Because I wanted to see whether you'd agree to the safety rehearsal first."

I stared at him for several seconds.

"So you were negotiating."

"I'm learning from the best."

I couldn't suppress a smile.

He returned it with one of his own, brief but completely open this time. And that was when I noticed something I'd missed the previous day: a small scar near his left eyebrow and fine lines appearing at the corners of his eyes when he smiled.

He had the face of someone who spent a great deal of time in the sun, but his gaze remained remarkably attentive.

I was the first to look away.

By eleven o'clock, we were sitting in the site manager's office.

Mr. Władysław was a short, gray-haired man whose glasses seemed perpetually determined to slide down his nose. He studied our drawings with the expression of someone who'd just discovered that a stranger intended to relocate his entire building.

"That clearing is rarely used," he admitted. "But I don't know whether we can allow the public in there."

"We don't need to," I replied. "We only need to put the technical equipment there. That would free up space for the audience."

Grzegorz looked at me appreciatively.

"That could work."

Mr. Władysław adjusted his glasses.

"Provided you don't ruin the grass."

"We'll put protective mats beneath the heavy equipment," I assured him.

"And you'll clean everything up the following day?"

"I'll personally make sure it's done."

He considered this for a moment before reaching for a pen.

"All right. But I want to see the final plan before Thursday."

When we left his office, I felt like dancing in the middle of the path.

Instead, I raised both arms in triumph.

"Two hundred seats. No reduction in the audience."

"We haven't counted them precisely yet," Grzegorz reminded me.

"Are you genuinely incapable of enjoying a success for one minute?"

"I am capable."

"Then try."

He stopped walking.

"All right. Congratulations, Milena. You've just found a solution that's better than the original plan."

There was no irony in his voice.

For a moment, I didn't know what to say. I'd grown accustomed to professional success being treated as an expected duty, while mistakes were considered evidence of poor preparation.

Sincere recognition, especially from someone I'd been arguing fiercely with less than an hour earlier, unsettled me more than criticism ever could.

"Thank you," I said quietly.

We headed toward the beach.

The sun was already high, and the first swimmers were gathering near the shore. Grzegorz glanced at his watch and quickened his pace.

"My shift by the water starts in ten minutes."

"I won't keep you."

"I'll send you the requirements this afternoon."

"And I'll send you the revised plan."

"And the technician's phone number. I want to speak to him directly."

"On one condition."

He looked at me questioningly.

"You won't give my team instructions about event organization. If something concerns safety, you discuss it with me, and we'll agree on the changes together."

He considered it.

"Agreed. But if I see an immediate danger, I'll act straightaway."

"Of course."

I took out my phone to save his number.

He dictated it, and when I called him, he pulled his own phone from his pocket.

"Got you," he said, saving my contact.

"That sounds threatening."

"Depends how you look at it."

Our eyes met for a second longer than an ordinary conversation required.

He made no attempt to close the distance between us. It was precisely that restraint that suddenly made me so aware of his presence.

Someone called his name from the lifeguard tower.

"I have to go," he said.

"I know."

He took two steps, then stopped and turned around.

"Milena?"

"Yes?"

"Not every change of plan means you've failed."

I didn't answer immediately.

There was something about that sentence that went far beyond projectors and chair arrangements. Grzegorz seemed to realize it too, because he didn't try to explain.

I watched him return to his station, then sat down on a bench and opened my calendar.

At the beginning of September, I was supposed to leave Brzeziny, spend a few days sorting out my affairs, and move to Poznań.

Everything was logical and sensible.

My phone vibrated.

Grzegorz Woś: I forgot to ask. Is tomorrow's coffee part of the negotiations too?

I read the message twice before replying.

Milena: Depends on the quality of your list of requirements.

His answer came almost immediately.

Grzegorz: In that case, I'll make an extra effort.

For a moment, I stared at the screen, smiling at something I couldn't yet put into words.

That was when my friend Natalia called.

"How are preparations going?" she asked without a greeting.

"We've got a problem with the pier, but we found another location."

"We?"

I knew that tone.

"Me and the head lifeguard."

"Ah."

"Don't start."

"I'm not starting anything. It's just the first time in a month I've heard you mention a man without using the words 'incompetent' or 'unavailable.'"

"It's strictly professional."

"Of course."

"Natalia."

"All right, all right. Is he handsome, at least?"

I glanced toward the lifeguard tower.

Grzegorz was standing on its platform, talking to a younger lifeguard. When the other man pointed toward something in the water, Grzegorz immediately turned, focused and serious.

"I haven't noticed," I lied.

Natalia burst out laughing.

"Milena, I've known you since high school. If you haven't noticed, that means he's extremely handsome."

I ended the call a few minutes later, convinced my friend was drawing conclusions that went far beyond the available evidence.

Then I got up, put my phone away, and headed for the parking lot.

Halfway there, however, I stopped at the information board.

A lifeguard duty roster hung beside an announcement for an autumn first-aid course. Beneath the September dates, Grzegorz's name appeared as the instructor.

I studied the notice with an entirely disproportionate amount of interest.

He would still be here in the autumn.

I wouldn't.

I pushed the thought aside before it could take any definite shape. There was no reason to think about September in connection with a man I'd only met the day before.

Nevertheless, when I opened the list of requirements he'd sent me that evening, I read it carefully twice.

Not because it was particularly complicated.

It was clear, practical, and even included a sketch showing an alternative equipment layout.

At the very end, he'd added a single sentence:

If I've overlooked anything, correct me. I really want this screening to be a success.

I leaned back on the sofa in my rented apartment.

Beyond the open window, the air smelled of evening rain, and music drifted faintly from a restaurant by the lake.

For the first time in weeks, I didn't feel like immediately closing my laptop once my work was finished.

I replied:

Good list. Coffee tomorrow at eight thirty. This time, I get to decide whether you drink it black.

I sent the message before I could edit it.

Then I spent several minutes staring at my phone, waiting for an answer, even though I had absolutely no professional reason to do so.

Chapter 2 - Outside Working Hours

The following morning, coffee was no longer necessary for negotiations, but I bought two cups anyway.

Grzegorz was waiting beneath the alders with a measuring tape stretched across the grass and several wooden markers laid out nearby. When he saw me approaching along the path, he looked first at the coffee, then at his watch.

"Punctual and prepared," he said. "I'm beginning to get used to it."

"I wouldn't recommend that. After Saturday, I'm going back to my normal life."

I said it lightly, without thinking.

Only when I handed him his coffee did I notice his expression turn serious for a moment.

"I understand," he replied.

I wanted to ask what, exactly, he understood, but he'd already knelt beside the first marker and extended the tape. Instead, I took out my plan, knelt on the opposite side, and we began measuring the area.

The work demanded concentration.

We needed to establish the actual seating capacity, allowing for walkways, the screen, and the sound technician's station. Every few yards, Grzegorz marked the boundaries of the safety zone while I transferred the measurements into my app.

We disagreed about several details, but this time our exchanges were shorter and more practical.

After an hour, we had a completed layout for a hundred and ninety-six people.

"Four seats fewer," I said, studying the screen. "I'll survive."

"That sounds like tremendous progress."

"Don't exaggerate. I could still change my mind."

I stood up and brushed the grass from my trousers.

Grzegorz rolled up the tape measure, then handed me a sheet containing his own sketch. The care he'd taken surprised me. This wasn't a casual arrangement of a few lines, but a precise plan showing dimensions, landmarks, and marked access routes.

"Do you do this sort of thing often?" I asked.

"Safety plans? Yes."

"I thought you mostly watched people swimming."

"That's the most visible part of the job."

He explained that outside the summer season, he trained lifeguards, taught first-aid classes, and worked with the resort on safety arrangements for events held near the water.

He spoke without boasting, as though all these responsibilities were simply a natural part of his everyday life.

"So you basically never get time off?" I asked.

"I do. Just not always when everyone else does."

"That sounds familiar."

He studied me more closely.

"Do you have trouble relaxing too?"

"I can relax. Once everything's finished."

"And when is everything finished?"

I opened my mouth but couldn't find a convincing answer.

For the past several years, my life really had been a succession of projects, deadlines, and promises that after the next event, I'd finally have time for myself.

"Don't ask uncomfortable questions before ten in the morning," I said.

"I'll add that to our working agreement."

I smiled.

There was something disarming about him. He could recognize when I was avoiding a question without feeling the need to challenge me over it. Instead, he moved on to the next measurement, leaving me room to think.

Around noon, Ms. Elżbieta, the manager of the cultural center, arrived to inspect the new location and confirm that our arrangements were still valid.

I showed her the plan, explained why we'd moved the screening, and outlined the cost of the additional technical rehearsal.

"The budget is tight," she said, adjusting the strap of her handbag. "We don't have any contingency funds left."

"I know. I've reallocated some of the money from decorations and advertising. We won't exceed the approved amount."

"And if the weather changes?"

"We've reserved the cultural center's hall as a backup. We'll make the decision by Saturday morning at the latest."

She nodded, but her gaze moved toward Grzegorz.