Laura Bellini



The Last Ferry to Us

Leaving the island is easier than leaving the longing

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INTRO

The last ferry was due to leave at 7:40 p.m., and I was trying to convince thirty kilograms of research equipment that it had absolutely no right to break down before I had even managed to switch it on.

I stood at the end of a rain-soaked jetty, my phone wedged between my shoulder and ear, an adjustable wrench in my hand. The wind kept tugging at my hood, rain found its way beneath the collar of my jacket, and on the other end of the call, my supervisor was explaining why signing a five-year contract to run a research station ought to be cause for celebration.

"Ewa, do you understand what this means?" Professor Majewski asked. "Your own team. Funding. Independence. You've spent three years working toward this."

"I understand. It's just that my salinity sensor is currently getting flooded."

"Can you stop working for five minutes?"

I looked out at the gray sea. Several dozen meters away, gulls circled a fishing boat returning with its catch. Behind me stood the little research station, its walls whitened by salt and battered by the wind, its windows facing the bay. This was where I was going to spend the next several years. Where I intended to prove that I didn't need anyone's permission to do something that truly mattered.

"Not really," I admitted. "But thank you for the news. I mean that."

The professor chuckled.

"You're the only person I know who can treat success like a technical malfunction."

I ended the call with a smile no one was there to see.

I was thirty-four years old, had one suitcase of unpacked clothes, and had signed a contract that, for the first time in years, didn't require me to arrange my life around somebody else's plans. I had arrived on the island six weeks earlier to prepare the station for a long-term program monitoring coastal ecosystems. I worked from dawn, ate at irregular hours, and fell asleep with my laptop still open. I was exhausted, but happy in a way I didn't have to explain to anyone.

Or so I thought.

"That cable's about to come loose."

The voice came from my left. Low and steady, with a slight rasp that suggested its owner spent more time talking over the wind than into a telephone.

I turned my head.

A man stood near the edge of the jetty, wearing a dark waterproof jacket, his hands tucked into its pockets. His hair was short and slightly disheveled, his jaw covered in several days' stubble. The cold had left a faint flush across his face. He looked a little older than me. He wasn't smiling, but there was something attentive about his gaze that made me instinctively adjust my slipping hood.

"Excuse me?"

He pointed to the cable running from the sensor to the measuring unit.

"The fastening's given way. One stronger gust and you'll be fishing your equipment out of the water."

I followed his gesture.

He was right.

I disliked strange men being right about my work. Particularly when it meant I had overlooked something myself.

"I can see that," I said, setting down the wrench.

"Now you can."

I looked up. The faintest hint of a smile crossed his face.

"Do you always comment on other people's work?"

"Only when the wind looks likely to win."

Before I could answer, he approached my toolbox and stopped beside it.

"May I?"

That one brief question surprised me more than his cheeky remark. He didn't reach for a tool or begin fixing anything without permission.

He waited.

I handed him a spare clamp.

"Hold the cable steady, please. I'll do the rest myself."

He crouched beside me without protest. The sleeve of his jacket brushed mine as we leaned over the fastening. He smelled of rain, cold air, and something warm, perhaps coffee. His hands were large, with a small scar crossing one knuckle, yet he held the delicate cable with surprising care.

"What are you measuring?" he asked.

"Temperature, salinity, and dissolved oxygen. Among other things."

"What for?"

There was no condescension in his voice, only genuine curiosity. Instead of giving him a one-sentence answer, I explained how changes in water conditions affected the life inhabiting shallow bays, and why isolated measurements couldn't tell us what was happening to an entire ecosystem.

He listened without interrupting. When I finished, he gazed at the dark water for a moment.

"So you'll have to stay here a while."

"Five years."

He turned toward me.

"Five?"

"At least."

He didn't answer immediately. His fingers tightened slightly around the cable before relaxing again.

"That's a long time on one island."

"Depends on whether you're trying to escape it."

This time, his smile disappeared.

"Sometimes you just want to see somewhere else."

There was something far too personal in the way he said it for a conversation between two strangers. For a moment, I wanted to ask what exactly he meant. Instead, I tightened the final screw.

"Done."

He released the cable and straightened, offering me his hand. I accepted, although I was perfectly capable of standing on my own. His palm was warm despite the cold, his grip firm without any unnecessary display of strength. I noticed that he held on only until I had regained my balance.

"Thank you," I said.

"You're welcome."

A long ferry horn sounded in the distance.

The man checked his watch.

"I have to go."

"To catch the last ferry?"

"You could say that."

He headed toward the harbor before I had a chance to ask his name.

I watched him for longer than I probably should have. Not because he was handsome, although he certainly was. What intrigued me more was his answer about leaving the island. It sounded like something he'd been keeping to himself for years.

I returned to the station as the sky began to darken. Inside, the air smelled of freshly brewed tea, paper, and the paint a local maintenance worker had been using to restore the window frames. I took off my wet jacket, switched on my computer, and opened the delivery schedule. Another shipment of equipment was due the following morning, with two members of my future team scheduled to arrive three days later.

At 7:53 p.m., my phone rang.

The screen displayed the name of the harbor manager, Mr. Wysocki.

"Ms. Kulesza, we have a problem."

I leaned against the desk.

"What kind of problem?"

"Ferry services are being temporarily suspended. Starting tomorrow morning. For at least three weeks, possibly longer."

For a moment, I couldn't make sense of his words.

"All of them?"

"All regular services, yes. The decision was made today. An inspection revealed damage to the quay infrastructure. Until the necessary safety work is completed, there'll be no normal passenger traffic or deliveries."

I looked at my schedule. At the equipment due to arrive the next day. At the sample collection dates already agreed upon with the laboratory in Gdynia.

"I'm running a research station that's about to begin a multiyear project. I need to move samples, equipment, and people. I can't put everything on hold for three weeks."

"I know. That's why I'm calling. We may be able to arrange limited technical crossings, but you'll have to agree on the details with the captain."

"Which captain?"

"Maks Żur. He's been handling the final crossings, and he'll be responsible for any special transport arrangements."

The name meant nothing to me.

Wysocki hesitated before adding, "I should warn you, though, Maks isn't particularly happy about what's happening here. He has plans of his own."

After the call ended, I sat motionless for a long while.

Another ferry horn sounded in the distance, shorter this time.

I went to the window.

Lights burned along the harbor. The ferry was pulling away from the quay, cutting a bright ribbon of foam through the dark water. I could make out a man in a navy jacket on the bridge. From that distance, I couldn't distinguish his features, but when he turned his head toward the research station, something compelled me to move closer to the glass.

I picked up my phone and opened the message from the harbor manager. He had sent me the captain's number, together with a short note:

"Maks Żur, 36. Knows the island and the conditions better than anyone."

Beneath the name was a photograph.

The same stubble. The same attentive eyes. The same man who, only a short while earlier, had held my measuring cable steady and spoken about wanting to see somewhere else.

I looked again at the departing ferry.

I had five years of plans that were suddenly beginning to unravel, and the telephone number of a man who apparently dreamed of leaving this place at precisely the moment I had decided to stay.

My thumb moved across the screen, but I didn't press the call button.

Could a man who wanted so badly to leave the island ever want to help me make it my home?

Chapter 1 - Terms of the Crossing

By six thirty in the morning, I had already prepared a list of arguments, three alternative transport schedules, and a strong cup of coffee I hadn't found time to drink. I waited until after seven to call Maks Żur. Not because I was afraid of the conversation, but because I wanted to speak to a captain who had had a chance to finish his night shift. On the island, I had quickly learned that respecting someone else's time could be more effective than the most persuasive letter from a university.

He answered on the fourth ring.

"Żur."

"Good morning. Ewa Kulesza, from the research station."

For a moment, all I could hear was the wind.

"The woman with the cable."

"And you're the man with the unsolicited commentary."

He gave a short laugh.

"So you do remember me."

"The harbor manager gave me your number. I need to discuss transport arrangements while the ferry services are suspended."

"I thought you might. I'll be at the harbor office at eight."

"I can come earlier."

"I can't."

He ended the call before I could reply.

For several seconds, I stared at my phone in disbelief. I wasn't accustomed to people who ended conversations the

moment they considered them finished. In my line of work, even the simplest arrangements could turn into discussions lasting hours. Maks Żur apparently saw no reason to prolong any of them.

At eight o'clock, I stood outside the small harbor administration building. The rain had stopped, but the wind still carried fine droplets of seawater inland. Several men in orange safety vests were working along the quay. Barriers had been erected around the damaged mooring berth, and part of the concrete surface had been cordoned off with tape. I stopped beside the ferry timetable. Someone had attached a white notice announcing that regular services were suspended until further notice.

The office door opened behind me.

"Punctual," Maks remarked.

He wore a navy sweater and dark trousers, and his hair was still damp. Without his hood and raincoat, he looked different from the previous evening. I noticed the fine lines around his eyes and the tiredness he made no attempt to conceal.

"So are you."

"It's my job."

"Mine requires punctuality too."

"Then we've already found one thing we have in common."

He opened the door wider and let me enter first.

The office consisted of two rooms. The first contained metal filing cabinets, desks, and an old coffee machine. The second was a small meeting room with charts of the surrounding waters. Photographs of ferries from different

decades hung on the walls. I noticed a picture of a younger Maks standing beside an older man wearing a captain's hat. Both had the same distinctive habit of narrowing their eyes.

Maks indicated a chair at the table.

"Show me what you need."

I spread out the schedule I had prepared.

"The first shipment should take place tomorrow. I need to collect two crates of measuring equipment and laboratory supplies from the mainland port. Two members of my team are due to arrive three days later. After that, I'll need regular transport for samples, preferably twice a week."

Maks drew the sheet toward him.

"How much do the crates weigh?"

"Approximately ninety kilograms each."

"Dimensions?"

I gave him the measurements.

"What's inside?"

"Hydrochemical measuring equipment, data loggers, and components for the sampling system."

"Any hazardous materials?"

"Not in those crates."

He looked up.

"That's an important distinction."

"I know. I have the transport documentation."

He spent several minutes studying my schedule. He said nothing, merely marking certain entries with a pencil. Eventually, he set the paper down.

"This won't work as you've planned it."

I felt the familiar prick of irritation.

"Why not?"

"Because you've scheduled these crossings as though we still had a regular ferry service. We don't. Small vessels can use the technical berth, but restrictions apply. And we don't yet know the full extent of the repairs."

"The harbor manager said special transport could be arranged."

"It can. Once the conditions have been agreed upon, not simply because someone has entered a departure time in a spreadsheet."

I moved my chair closer to the table.

"Then tell me what I need to change."

Something in his expression might have been approval.

"First, I need to know which shipments are genuinely urgent."

"All of them."

"That's not an answer."

"They are to me."

"I believe you. But if I have to choose between transporting your equipment and delivering medication to the island clinic, the equipment will have to wait."

I fell silent.

Not because I lacked an argument. His example simply reminded me that the island consisted of more than my research station, the harbor, and the sea. People lived here, and they needed reliable connections to the mainland just as much as I did.

"I have no intention of taking essential transport away from anyone," I said more calmly.

"Then we can start talking."

He took a clean sheet of paper and divided it into three columns.

"People, equipment, samples. Set your priorities within each category. I'll check which vessels are available and their permitted loads. But I have one condition."

"What condition?"

"You don't change a sailing plan without discussing it with me. If I decide we're not going out, we don't go out. If I end a crossing, we turn back. No arguments on board."

I placed my hands flat on the table.

"I understand a captain's responsibility. But I won't agree to a situation in which my research depends entirely on your personal discretion."

"And I won't agree to safety decisions being dictated by a deadline in your calendar."

We regarded each other for a moment. His voice remained calm, but there was no room for negotiation in it. His firmness irritated me precisely because it reminded me of my own.

"Let's divide the responsibilities," I suggested. "I'll determine the scientific priorities and prepare the cargo. You'll be responsible for the vessel, the route, and safety. If conditions prevent a crossing, we'll agree on the earliest feasible alternative together."

Maks turned his pencil between his fingers.

"That sounds reasonable."

"I have my moments."

He smiled.

"I noticed yesterday, when you were rescuing that sensor."

"Which is still working, thanks to my repair."

"Of course."

That brief exchange eased the atmosphere more than I cared to admit. Maks slid the paper toward me and asked me to identify the shipments that needed to be kept at specific temperatures. When I began explaining the storage requirements for the samples, he didn't pretend to know everything. He asked precise questions, made notes, and immediately pointed out the practical limitations.

After an hour, we had the first draft of a plan.

It wasn't perfect. It didn't cover all my requirements, and it meant changing my team's schedule. But it was achievable, which represented considerably more progress than I had initially expected.

Maks closed his notebook.

"I still need to confirm the availability of the technical boat. If everything checks out, we can arrange the first shipment in two days."

"Tomorrow would be better."

"I know."

"I really need that equipment."

"And I really can't conjure up another mooring berth."

I sighed and gathered my documents into their folder.

"You're not fond of compromise."

"Quite the opposite. We've just agreed on one. I simply don't call something a compromise when it's a promise I can't keep."

His words stayed with me. Over the years, I had heard plenty of promises delivered with polite smiles, only for them to dissolve into revised deadlines and elaborate explanations. Maks was an uncomfortable man to negotiate with, but at least I knew where I stood.

As we got up, I noticed an envelope lying at the far end of the table. It bore the logo of a shipping company based in Gdynia. Maks quickly slid it beneath his notebook. He made no obvious attempt to disguise the movement, yet something about it caught my attention.

"Do you have other commitments?" I asked.

"Everyone does."

"I'm asking in relation to our working arrangements."

"If anything affects the agreed shipments, I'll tell you."

It was a perfectly correct answer, but it told me very little.

At the door, he stopped me with another question.

"Why this particular island?"

I turned.

"Sorry?"

"You could conduct research at a larger facility. Somewhere with better infrastructure, closer to the university. Instead, you chose a place where the ferries have just stopped running."

For a moment, I searched for an answer that wouldn't sound like a paragraph lifted from a grant application.

"Because here I can run a project from beginning to end without having every decision approved by five other teams. And because this stretch of coastline hasn't been studied nearly enough. If we organize the research properly, the results could make a genuine contribution."

"So it's about independence."

"Among other things."

I studied him more closely.

"Isn't independence important to you?"

His gaze shifted briefly toward the window. Through it, I could see a small ferry moored at the technical quay.

"More than I used to realize."

He offered no further explanation.

Outside, the air was cold, but the clouds were beginning to clear. The smell of wet wood and diesel drifted across the harbor. I was heading back toward the station when Maks caught up with me at the steps leading down to the waterfront.

"Ms. Kulesza."

I stopped.

"Yes?"

"One more thing."

He stood in front of me, maintaining a little distance. Only then did I notice that he was more than a head taller than I was. He didn't use his height to impose his presence. He spoke quietly, looking straight into my eyes.

"I won't promise that everything will happen according to your schedule. But if I agree to take a shipment, I'll make sure it's done properly."

"That's exactly what I expect."

"Then perhaps we'll manage to get along."

"Despite my personality?"

The corner of his mouth twitched.

"Perhaps it's precisely because of your personality that things won't get boring."

For once, I couldn't think of an immediate reply.

Maks nodded and returned to the building, while I set off toward the station with my folder pressed against my chest.

On the way, I called Marta, one of the two people due to join my team. I explained the situation and asked her to postpone her journey until we had a confirmed transport date.

"You sound as though you've just fought a battle," she observed.

"Negotiations."

"With whom?"

"The ferry captain."

"Handsome?"

"Marta."

"So that's a yes."

I rolled my eyes, although she couldn't see me.

"He's stubborn, more than anything."

"That doesn't rule out handsome."

I ended the call before she could pursue the subject.

Another problem was waiting for me at the station. One of the data loggers had stopped transmitting readings to the central computer. I spent almost two hours checking the

connections before discovering that a faulty power supply was responsible. Under normal circumstances, I would have ordered a replacement and collected it the next day. Now even a minor malfunction meant adding another item to the transport list.

Around noon, a message arrived from Maks.

"Technical boat available the day after tomorrow from 9:00 a.m. Maximum cargo load 250 kg, subject to weather and documentation approval. Please send the final list by 4:00 p.m."

I replied almost immediately.

"Confirmed. Thank you. May I add one power supply?"

His answer arrived a moment later.

"As long as it doesn't weigh 160 kg."

I smiled at the screen.

"It doesn't. But it can be just as troublesome."

"Then it'll fit right in with the rest."

For a moment, I considered replying. In the end, I put the phone aside. I didn't want to become the kind of woman who looked for excuses to prolong work correspondence with a man she barely knew.

Especially since, before coming to the island, I had made myself a very specific promise: for the next few years, I would not allow my life to begin revolving around somebody else's decisions again.

That afternoon, I prepared a detailed cargo list. I postponed some of the research, changed my team's arrival date, and sent the university an update about the transport

difficulties. Professor Majewski replied with three words: "You'll manage."

Once, I would have taken that as a sign of confidence. Now I was increasingly aware of how much lonely responsibility could be concealed in three apparently encouraging words.

I sent Maks the documentation before four.

A few minutes later, he called.

"Everything looks good," he said. "Except for one thing."

My fingers tightened around the phone.

"What?"

"You haven't put yourself on the passenger manifest."

"Because I'm not planning to travel. Someone from the port can collect the equipment."

"They can. But someone needs to verify its condition before loading. If anything is damaged, I don't want to be left guessing when it happened."

I fell silent while I considered his point.

"You're right."

"Could you repeat that? The connection's terrible."

"Don't get used to hearing it."

He laughed. Properly this time, openly and without restraint. The sound seemed entirely at odds with the man who had spent the morning drawing up my schedule with such gravity.

"Eight thirty, by the boat, the day after tomorrow," he said. "And bring a warmer jacket."

"I have a suitable one."

"The one you wore yesterday leaks at the shoulders."

It surprised me that he had noticed.

"How do you know?"

"I saw."

For a second, I had no idea what to say.

"See you then, Captain."

"See you, marine biologist."

I put down the phone and looked out toward the harbor. Maks was standing on the quay, talking to one of the workers, a bundle of documents in his hand. At one point, he raised his head as though he had sensed someone watching him. I couldn't know whether he could see me through the window, but for a moment he looked toward the station.

Then he returned to his conversation.

And instead of immediately turning to my next task, I stayed at the window for several more seconds.

I didn't like the fact that a man I had met only the previous evening could distract me from work so easily.

What I liked even less was that I wasn't entirely sure I wanted him to stop.

Chapter 2 - Off Schedule

The following morning, the island looked as though someone had caught it halfway through a breath and held it there. Several people with travel bags stood outside the closed ferry terminal, apparently having missed the announcement that services had been suspended. The grocery shop opened later than usual, and a longer queue than I had seen in previous weeks formed outside the bakery. People spoke more quietly, glancing toward the harbor as though looking at it often enough might somehow restore the regular crossings.

I arrived at the station before seven. I needed to prepare a set of samples for transport, arrange a revised analysis schedule with the mainland laboratory, and conduct a remote briefing with Marta and the other member of the team, Paweł. Both accepted the delay with a calmness I envied. Marta offered to take over some of the work remotely, while Paweł promised to check the availability of spare equipment in Gdynia.

It was only during that conversation that I realized how accustomed I had become to taking everything upon myself. Not because I didn't trust other people. Rather, after years of experience, I had learned that if I personally checked every detail, nobody could accuse me of neglecting anything.

After the briefing, I opened a message from Maks.

"Please come to the harbor at 11:00. We need to approve the cargo restraints and contingency plan."

There was no greeting and no signature.

I replied:

"I'll be there. Will coffee be provided, or should I expect nothing but further restrictions?"

His answer came a few minutes later.

"Coffee depends on the participants' behavior."

I laughed to myself. I had no idea when our exchanges had begun to resemble flirting, considering that we were discussing such serious matters. Perhaps it had started with his comment about my cable. Or perhaps with the moment when, instead of taking over the repair, he had simply asked whether he could help.

At eleven, Maks was waiting beside a small technical boat moored on the safe side of the quay. He wore a work jacket and held a metal mug.

"Coffee?" he asked by way of greeting.

"That depends. Is it part of the negotiations?"

"More of an attempt to maintain good relations."

He handed me the mug. The coffee was strong, bitter, and surprisingly good.

"I must admit, your methods are becoming increasingly effective."

"I'm only getting started."

I looked at him over the rim of the mug. He said it calmly, without an exaggerated smile, but there was the same glint in his eyes that I'd noticed during our first meeting.

I didn't answer.

This time, deliberately.

For the next hour, we examined the arrangements for securing the crates. Maks showed me where the cargo could be fastened with transport straps and explained the

limited space available on deck. He pointed out that some components would have to travel separately to avoid putting pressure on delicate instrument housings.

He made no pretense of being an expert in research equipment. When he didn't understand the significance of a particular parameter, he asked. When I didn't understand a technical restriction, he explained it patiently, without the slightest trace of condescension.

At one point, I placed an empty transport crate on the deck.

"This would be the safest position."

Maks shook his head.

"No. Too close to the side."

"It's stable."

"While we're moored."

He moved the crate several dozen centimeters.

"If we take a wave from the side, the pressure will fall on this fastening. Look."

He demonstrated how the securing straps would behave. Only then did I see the problem.

"All right," I conceded. "We'll leave it here."

He gave me a look of exaggerated astonishment.

"Twice in two days."

"What?"

"You've admitted I was right."

"Careful. I might stop."

He laughed and handed me another strap.