The Same Summer Twice

The same place. Different people. One more chance



Laura Bellini

The Same Summer Twice

The same place. Different people. One more chance

Laura Bellini

ROMANS

ISBN: 9788384903315

ALL-IN Rafał Płonkowski



TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRO 4
Chapter 1 - Everything We Never Said 11
Chapter 2 - The Boundaries We Draw Ourselves 21
Chapter 3 - Between Light and Shadow..... 33
Chapter 4 - What Remains After Sunset 45
Chapter 5 - The Right to Say No..... 60
Chapter 6 - The First Kiss After All These Years..... 70
Chapter 7 - Dangerous Closeness 83
Chapter 8 - Where the Film Ends 94
Chapter 9 - Everything We Could Lose 105
Chapter 10 - There's Nothing Accidental About Us Anymore 115
Chapter 11 - The Right to Be Close 126
Chapter 12 - The Departure Date 137
Chapter 13 - The Price of Other People's Expectations 147
Chapter 14 - The Truth We Don't Yet Know 157
Chapter 15 - The Last Morning of That Summer 166
Chapter 16 - The Distance We Choose 177
Chapter 17 - Everything That's Up to Me 187
Chapter 18 - The First Step Without Guarantees..... 198
Chapter 19 - What We Truly Choose 209
Chapter 20 - The Summer That Stayed With Us 221

INTRO

The first thing I saw when I arrived was the sea. The second was the man I had spent eleven years trying not to think about.

He was standing on the stone terrace of Villa Serena, his hands resting on the balustrade. He wore a light linen shirt with the sleeves rolled up and dark trousers. The wind stirred his hair, which was a little shorter than I remembered. I couldn't see his face, but I recognised the way he tilted his head when he was thinking something over. Memory preserved certain details with astonishing precision, even when you did everything you could to erase them.

I stopped the car in front of the wrought-iron gate and switched off the engine. Through the open window came the scent of sun-warmed pines, salt and rosemary growing beside the driveway. It was late June. The Adriatic was that outrageously beautiful shade of turquoise that looked like the result of excessive editing in photographs.

I had come here to work. To help a friend. To take a break from Kraków and from a professional calendar in which every day was divided into hours, and every hour belonged to someone else.

I hadn't come looking for memories.

My phone vibrated on the passenger seat.

"Syl, are you here yet?" Lena asked before I had a chance to speak.

"I'm outside the gate. Just tell me one thing."

"If it's about the air conditioning, they fixed it yesterday."

"Is Maks Sęk staying with you?"

There was silence. Brief, but long enough.

"I was going to tell you."

I closed my eyes.

"Lena."

"I know."

"You knew I was arriving today."

"Yes."

"And you knew he'd be here too."

"He's been here for three days."

I looked towards the terrace again. The man turned to pick something up from a table. Only then did I notice the portable projector and the rolled-up screen leaning against the wall.

"Why?"

"Because I need both of you."

Lena said it as though the answer were obvious. We'd known each other since university. She knew how difficult I found it to say no to people I loved, and until now she had never taken advantage of that knowledge.

Two weeks earlier, she'd asked me to help launch a summer cultural programme at the villa she'd inherited from her aunt. I was supposed to prepare translations, handle communication with international guests and help refine the literary events. She needed someone she could trust, because the renovation had swallowed her savings and the first season would determine the future of the property.

I'd agreed to six weeks. For a fee we'd negotiated fairly, with a room of my own and the freedom to continue working on my freelance assignments. In mid-August, I was due to

return to Kraków, where a collaboration with a publishing house I'd spent years working towards was waiting for me.

It was a sensible plan. My plan.

It hadn't included Maks.

"He's running the outdoor cinema," Lena explained. "I need his equipment and experience. Without the evening screenings, I can't make the programme work."

"You could have warned me."

"I was afraid you wouldn't come."

That hurt more than the surprise itself.

"You should have let me decide."

"You're right," she said quietly. "I'm sorry. I'm in the kitchen. Please come inside. We'll talk."

I ended the call but remained motionless for another moment. On the terrace, Maks moved a small table, opening up a section of the view across the bay. That simple movement brought back a memory I didn't want to revisit: our hands intertwined on a similar balustrade, eleven years earlier, when I was twenty-three and convinced that courage meant pretending not to care.

Back then, I hadn't told him I wanted to stay longer.

He hadn't asked me to.

And on that final morning, we'd both behaved as though our summer together had been nothing more than a pleasant interlude.

I got out of the car.

I remembered the stone steps leading to the entrance from my previous visit. Generations of guests had worn their edges smooth, and tiny white flowers grew in the cracks.

Back then, Lena and I had stayed in rooms upstairs, and her aunt had allowed us to use the terrace after the restaurant closed.

Now a new sign bearing the villa's name hung beside the door. Beneath the fresh paint on the walls, the old cracks were still visible.

I went to the boot and took out my suitcase. One of its wheels caught on the uneven paving stones. I tugged the handle once, then again, growing increasingly irritated by my own clumsiness.

"It'll be easier on the left."

The voice came from behind me.

I didn't need to turn around to know who it belonged to.

"I can manage."

"I don't doubt it."

Maks came no closer. When I turned my head, he was standing a few steps away. He was thirty-nine now, although I could still see something of the twenty-eight-year-old I'd known. The same strong eyebrows, slightly crooked smile and calm, attentive gaze. A few strands of grey had appeared at his temples.

Eleven years hadn't made him any less handsome. They'd made him harder to ignore.

"Hello, Sylwana," he said.

He didn't use the old nickname. I was grateful for that.

"Maks."

He glanced at my suitcase, then towards the steps.

"Lena's waiting inside. There's currently a major drama unfolding in the kitchen involving the coffee machine."

"Is she still trying to fix it by hitting the casing?"

"She's started using verbal persuasion as well."

I smiled despite myself. I immediately regretted it, because Maks noticed.

"It's good to see you," he said more softly.

There was something dangerously ordinary about those words. They carried no accusation, no declaration, no attempt to explain the past. And yet, for a moment, I forgot why I'd been so determined to keep my distance.

"I didn't know you'd be here."

The smile disappeared from his face.

"I guessed that much a moment ago. Did Lena tell you?"

"Only just."

"She told me you were coming last night."

My fingers tightened around the suitcase handle.

"And you decided to stay."

"I have work here, Sylwana. Just like you."

It didn't sound like an excuse. More like a boundary being drawn, one I needed just as much as he did.

I nodded.

Maks gestured towards a narrower path beside the steps, sloping gently down towards a side entrance.

"There's a ramp over there. If you like, I can show you the way."

"I know where it is."

"In that case, I'll see you around."

He headed back towards the terrace, allowing me to walk away without asking anything else. I watched him for a moment, surprised by how much his lack of insistence hurt.

In the kitchen, Lena threw her arms around my neck before I could even put down my suitcase. She smelled of lemon soap and coffee, which she'd apparently finally managed to coax out of the machine.

"I'm a terrible friend," she announced.

"Today you've certainly got some compelling evidence to support that claim."

She pulled back to look me in the eyes.

"I wasn't trying to set you two up. I swear."

"I'd rather you didn't even use that expression."

"I need him for the cinema. I need you for the literary programme and dealing with the guests. That's genuinely all there is to it."

I looked through the window towards the sunlit terrace. Maks was speaking on the phone while checking the screen's mounting at the same time. He made no attempt to look towards the kitchen.

Lena handed me a glass of cold water.

"Will you stay?"

I took a sip. I'd come here with plans of my own, and I had no intention of abandoning them simply because the past had decided to put on a linen shirt.

"I'll stay," I answered. "But from now on, no more surprises."

Lena nodded, visibly relieved.

Maks's quiet laughter drifted in through the window. It was so familiar that, for a second, I was twenty-three again, with wet hair after a midnight swim and his shirt draped around my shoulders.

I set the glass down on the counter.

I could work with him. I could pass him on the stairs, discuss the programme and treat him like any other colleague. After all, I was a different woman from the one I'd been that summer.

But could I bear to look at him every day, knowing that once, I'd let him walk away without a single honest word?

Chapter 1 - Everything We Never Said

The first organisational meeting began forty minutes after Lena had promised she wouldn't hide anything else from me. I was sitting at the large table in the former dining room, with my laptop, notebook and a glass of water no one had thought to chill. The scent of sun-warmed cypress trees drifted through the open windows. Beyond the wall, someone was moving furniture, while the sounds of tools carried in from the terrace. Villa Serena was preparing for its first season after years of neglect. I was preparing for six weeks that were going to be very different from what I'd planned.

Lena spread a printed schedule across the table.

"I need your help because I can't manage all this on my own," she began. "And before either of you asks, no, I don't have any extra money to hire a professional agency."

I pulled the sheet towards me. The programme included three film nights a week, two literary gatherings and weekend events for the villa's guests. Every item had been described with the enthusiasm of someone who could picture the finished result but hadn't necessarily remembered every stage of the preparations.

"When do you want to open bookings?" I asked.

"Friday."

I looked at her over the top of my glasses.

"In four days?"

"That's right."

"We don't have finished descriptions, confirmed guests or final times yet."

"That's why you're here."

"I can't translate events that exist only in your imagination."

Lena opened her mouth, but before she could answer, Maks entered the dining room. He was carrying a metal toolbox and a folder of documents. The top buttons of his shirt were undone now, and I noticed a small scratch on his forearm. He set the toolbox beside the door, apologised for being late and sat down opposite me.

He made no attempt to refer to our encounter outside the house. In fact, he behaved so naturally that I felt an irrational flicker of irritation. As though eleven years apart had been nothing more than an unusually long pause between two conversations.

"I've managed to check the wiring on the terrace," he told Lena. "I'm not connecting any equipment out there until an electrician replaces two sockets and inspects the distribution board."

"What if we used extension leads?"

"Then we'd have more cables connected to the same faulty electrical system."

He spoke calmly, without making the slightest attempt to embarrass my friend. I noticed that. The Maks I'd known could be impatient when people didn't understand his ideas. This one had clearly learned to distinguish between a lack of knowledge and a lack of goodwill.

"I have an electrician's number," I offered. "He helped some friends renovate a guesthouse near Split. I can call him."

Maks looked at me more closely.

"You speak Croatian?"

"Well enough to explain a technical problem. And if I'm missing a word, I have a dictionary and I'm not ashamed to use it."

"That much I remember."

I didn't ask what else he remembered.

Lena exhaled and began talking about the invited guests. Two Polish women writers, a Croatian essayist and an Italian translator were due to lead discussions about travel literature. I knew some of their books. I listened with growing interest, marking matters that still needed confirmation in my notebook. When the conversation turned to the film evenings, Maks opened his folder.

"We need to change the screening times," he announced.

Lena frowned.

"Why?"

"It's still too light at nine. With this screen, I need at least another half an hour, and ideally the projection should start after nine forty-five."

"Then they'll overlap with the author events," I said.

"Which is why we need to change the programme."

"We can't move every event simply because the projector needs darkness."

"The projector doesn't negotiate with the sunset."

I looked up. Maks had his forearms resting on the table and was watching me without a trace of amusement.

"And our invited guests aren't pieces of equipment we can move around whenever it suits us," I replied. "Some of them have fixed arrival and departure times. We need a solution that takes everyone into account."

"I agree. But if you want to screen a film in daylight, I'm not putting my name to it."

There was a firmness in his voice I hadn't heard before. It wasn't aggressive. That was precisely why it was harder to dismiss.

Lena looked from one of us to the other.

"Perhaps we could..."

"First, I need to know what's already been promised to the guests," I interrupted gently. "I'm not changing confirmed arrangements without their agreement."

"And I need the authority to stop a screening if the technical conditions are unsafe or the appropriate licence isn't in place," Maks added. "My company is responsible for the equipment and the legality of the screenings."

I realised this wasn't simply a difference in temperament. He owned an outdoor cinema business, with his own reputation, commitments and bills to pay. My responsibility was to protect the coherence of the programme and the people who had placed their trust in Lena. Neither of us could simply give way and pretend the problem had disappeared.

"In that case, let's divide the decisions," I suggested. "You establish the technical requirements for the screenings and the list of films we have the rights to show. I'll arrange

the programme around the commitments we've already confirmed with our guests. Lena approves any final changes."

Maks studied me for a moment.

"Provided we don't announce a screening until I've confirmed it."

"And no author event gets moved without consulting me."

"Agreed."

He extended his hand across the table.

I looked at it a fraction too long. It was larger than I remembered, with a small patch of roughened skin near his thumb. When I shook it, his grip was brief and businesslike. He made no attempt to hold on to my fingers.

I was almost disappointed.

After the meeting, I stayed in the dining room to organise my notes. Lena hurried away to receive a delivery of bed linen, and Maks returned to the terrace. For several minutes, all I could hear was the clicking of my keyboard and the cicadas beyond the window. I'd managed to send two emails when a message from the editor at the Kraków publishing house appeared on my screen.

She confirmed receiving my translation sample and informed me that the discussion about a long-term collaboration would take place in mid-August. It wasn't a contract offer yet, but it was the first concrete sign of progress I'd had in months. I dreamed of that work. After years of translating manuals, contracts and advertising materials, I wanted to return to literature. Not because I looked down on the work I'd been doing. I was simply tired of postponing my most important ambitions.

I replied immediately, confirming my availability.

"Good news?"

I lifted my head. Maks was standing in the open doorway leading onto the terrace. I hadn't noticed him come back. He was holding a coiled cable, and a darker patch of perspiration had appeared on his shirt.

"Work-related."

"So, good news."

"Not every work-related message is good news."

"But you smiled at this one."

I closed my laptop.

"Have you been watching me?"

"I came in for the installation plan. It's hard not to notice someone who's spent the last two hours looking at a schedule as though it were a personal enemy."

"I like knowing what I'm doing."

"I remember."

He pulled out the chair on which he'd left his folder and took a diagram of the terrace from it. He was in no hurry, although I knew perfectly well that his presence affected me.

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

"About organisational matters?"

"No."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Depends on the question."

For a moment, he looked as though he were considering several possible ways of asking it.

"Is it really my being here that bothers you, or just the way you found out?"

I would have preferred him to ask about almost anything else. The tax implications of services provided abroad, for example. Or the grammatical forms of Croatian place names.

"Both," I answered.

He accepted that without protest.

"I understand."

"Do you?"

"I have no right to expect you to be delighted by a surprise after eleven years."

I studied him carefully.

"You don't seem surprised."

"I am. I just don't see why we have to turn it into a performance."

Those words struck me harder than they should have. Over the years, I'd imagined different versions of our reunion. In those imaginary encounters, I was either cool or brilliantly witty. Sometimes I delivered a speech that would finally make him understand what he'd lost. Reality, meanwhile, had given me an ordinary dining room, an unfinished schedule and a man who knew how to accept an uncomfortable answer.

"I'm not planning to make a performance of it," I said.

"Good."

"But let's not pretend we're old acquaintances who simply never found the time to call."

Maks put down the cable.

"I'm not going to."

His expression remained calm, but I noticed his fingers tighten around the back of the chair.

"In that case, we can work together," I declared.

"We can."

He didn't leave immediately, though.

"Sylwana?"

I looked at him.

"What?"

"I'm glad you didn't try to pretend to be someone else back then."

I frowned.

"When?"

"Eleven years ago. You were very sure of what you wanted."

For a moment, I couldn't find an answer. I remembered our conversation on the beach on the final evening of our summer. I'd told him I wasn't going to change my plans for a holiday romance. I'd spoken with a conviction I hadn't felt at all.

"Sometimes confidence is just a very convincing performance," I replied.

Something passed across his face.

"I know."

Before I could ask what he meant, Lena called from the courtyard, and Maks turned towards the door.

"I need to check the delivery. I'll have the list of films and technical restrictions ready for you tomorrow."

"I'll send you my proposed schedule."

He nodded and left.

That evening, the villa gradually grew quiet. Lena was dealing with the accounts in her office, while I settled onto the balcony of my upstairs room. From where my chair stood, I could see part of the terrace and the sea. In the distance, the lights of boats returning to the harbour moved slowly across the water.

I opened the document containing my work plan for the next six weeks. I allocated time for assignments from regular clients, preparing my literary translation sample and my responsibilities at the villa. I even left Sunday afternoons free. I had no intention of repeating the mistake I'd made years earlier, when I was capable of arranging an entire day around waiting for one person.

My phone vibrated.

A message from an unknown number contained a photograph of a hand-drawn plan of the terrace.

"Maks. Lena gave me your number so we can coordinate the programme. If you'd prefer email, let me know. I've marked in red the places where we can't run cables."

I enlarged the photograph. The drawing was precise, complete with measurements and short explanations. In the bottom corner was a little sketch of a folding chair, accompanied by a note: "Don't put one here, even if it looks romantic."

I smiled.

I replied: "Email for formal matters. Messages for urgent arrangements. And romantic chairs aren't my speciality."

His answer came a moment later.

"Pity. You used to be rather good at them."

I read those words twice. Not because I didn't understand what they meant. Precisely because I understood them far too well.

For a moment, I considered writing something light, perhaps a little sharp. In the end, I put my phone down without replying.

A few minutes later, I heard music. A quiet instrumental melody floated up from the terrace. I leaned over the balcony railing. Maks was sitting alone on the stone steps leading into the garden. A small speaker stood in front of him, with a notebook lying beside it.

In the last rays of sunlight, his silhouette looked familiar, almost painfully so.

Eleven years earlier, I'd promised myself that if I ever saw him again, I wouldn't let memories make my decisions for me.

Now, for the first time, I realised how little I knew about what had truly remained unfinished between us.

I closed the balcony doors, but the music still reached me through a narrow gap.

The following day, we were supposed to begin working together properly. I needed clear rules, deadlines and a little cool-headed common sense.

What troubled me most, however, was that throughout the entire afternoon, Maks hadn't once tried to win me over.

And yet it was becoming increasingly difficult to stop thinking about him.

Chapter 2 - The Boundaries We Draw Ourselves

The following morning, I was woken by the bells of a nearby church. It was six forty-five, far too early for a summer stay on the Adriatic, but my body had long since stopped distinguishing working days from holidays. I got up, opened the shutters and spent a moment looking out across the bay. The sea was almost perfectly still, and small boats left silver trails across its surface. There was still a pleasant coolness in the air, the kind that vanished almost immediately once the sun rose.

Before breakfast, I checked my messages. The electrician had replied to my enquiry and suggested coming the following afternoon. The editor at the publishing house had sent additional materials for our forthcoming interview. Lena had left three questions about the event descriptions on our messaging app, and Maks had sent a list of films together with information about their licences.

I read his message twice, this time for entirely professional reasons. The document was carefully prepared. Every title had its own breakdown of costs, technical requirements and restrictions on public screenings. There were no unnecessary promises or hidden costs. I liked working with people who understood that professionalism also meant being able to say what couldn't be done.

At eight, I went downstairs to the kitchen. Lena was sitting at the table with a mug of coffee and her phone pressed to her ear. She was speaking Croatian, quickly and with obvious tension. I found yoghurt, fruit and a loaf of bread someone had left in a paper bag. As I began making

breakfast, my friend ended the call and rested her head in her hands.

"Tell me you've got good news," she pleaded.

"The electrician is coming tomorrow."

"I love you."

"I know. But we need to talk about the schedule."

Lena sighed.

"You and Maks really are alike."

I stopped with the knife poised above a peach.

"We are not."

"You both begin sentences with 'we need to talk', and then explain why my ideas are impossible."

"The difference is that I suggest solutions."

"So does he."

She smiled innocently, and I decided not to pursue the discussion.

After breakfast, we spread the documents across the table. I showed her my proposed division of events into two blocks: literary afternoons and later film screenings. The problem remained with two author events whose guests couldn't arrive until the evening. I didn't want to move their appearances without speaking to them first. So I suggested one day without a screening and another with a shorter film.

"Maks won't be happy," Lena observed.

"Why?"

"He wants three regular screenings a week. It's important to him because he was planning to promote his European cinema series here."

I put down my pen. I knew he ran his own business, but I hadn't realised how much the regularity of the events mattered to him.

"In that case, the three of us will talk."

"You don't need me there for every little detail," Lena pointed out. "You can work out a proposal between yourselves."

"That's precisely why I'd prefer you to be present."

My friend studied me with gentle amusement.

"Syl, you're both in your thirties. Surely you can sit at the same table without supervision."

"It's not about supervision."

"I know."

She said nothing more, and I felt a familiar prickle of irritation. Lena knew me well enough to recognise when I didn't want to admit my own fears.

Maks appeared in the dining room shortly after nine. He was carrying two mugs of coffee and a small bag from the bakery.

"Lena said you'd been working since early this morning," he announced. "I thought you might need something stronger than water."

He set one of the mugs beside my laptop.

"You don't know how I take my coffee."

"Black, no sugar."

I looked at him.

"That was eleven years ago."

"If you've changed your mind, I'll drink it myself."

He didn't look like a man trying to impress me with his memory. He said it casually, as though it were the sort of detail a person remembered without making any effort.

I picked up the mug.

"I still drink it black."

"Good to know."

He sat down on the other side of the table and opened his laptop. For the next half hour, we worked on the schedule, checking sunset times, guest availability and the technical possibilities of the terrace. Maks didn't interrupt when I explained the restrictions surrounding the literary events. I listened while he explained the differences between commercial screenings and events organised as part of a cultural programme.

I was slowly beginning to understand why Lena needed his help so badly. Maks knew not only the equipment but also the people and procedures involved. He could anticipate problems that wouldn't even have occurred to me.

"If we move Tuesday's screening to Wednesday, we can keep all three projections," I suggested. "But I need confirmation that the rights to that film allow us to change the date."

He checked the document.

"They do. I just need to notify them of the new date."

"In that case, we have a solution."

"Almost."

I looked up.

"What else?"