
Laura Bellini
While You Still Smell of Rain
They remember every hurt.
And every reason to stay

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ROMANS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRO 4
Chapter 1 - The Terms of Returning 11
Chapter 2 - The Boundaries of Trust..... 22
Chapter 3 - The Road That Wasn't on the Map..... 35
Chapter 4 - Everything We Never Said 46
Chapter 5 - The Right to Say No..... 60
Chapter 6 - The Scent of Rain 71
Chapter 7 - What Remains Between the Words 82
Chapter 8 - The Place You Return To 92
Chapter 9 - The Price of a Shared Decision.....102
Chapter 10 - No Turning Back 112
Chapter 11 - Between Us and the World.....122
Chapter 12 - Words That Cannot Be Taken Back.....132
Chapter 13 - What Money Cannot Buy 143
Chapter 14 - The Truth We Cannot Yet Bear.....153
Chapter 15 - Everything I Had No Right to Say.....164
Chapter 16 - The Distance That Matters.....174
Chapter 17 - What Remains When We Leave 183
Chapter 18 - Without the Promise of Forgiveness..... 191
Chapter 19 - The Right to Your Own Story 200
Chapter 20 - A Reason to Stay.....210

INTRO

The rain began at precisely the moment I decided that, for the first time in a long while, everything was going according to plan.

I stood at a fork in the hiking trails, a map spread across my knee and a travel mug in my other hand. Ahead of me, between dark spruce trees, a narrow path leading to the Pod Sokolą Skałą mountain refuge disappeared into milky fog. According to my schedule, I was supposed to arrive before five, speak with the owner, examine some old photographs, and return to my guesthouse in Szklarska Poręba that same evening. The following day, I had two more places to visit, places whose stories I wanted to preserve before someone turned them into fashionable apartments with mountain views.

I was forty-one, with two published works of literary journalism behind me and enough experience to know that reality rarely paid much attention to schedules. Nevertheless, I had prepared this one with the meticulousness my friend Natalia always found amusing. Times, names, alternative routes, even places where I might get a mobile signal. After months spent editing other people's writing, I needed a project that belonged entirely to me. No editor looking over my shoulder. No compromises I agreed to simply because I was too tired to argue.

Above all, no people telling me how I should tell their stories.

I folded the map, slipped it into my jacket pocket, and started uphill.

Twenty minutes later, I knew the shortcut marked on my printout had been suggested by someone who had never walked this way in October. Wet stones shifted beneath my boots, and the stream crossing the path carried considerably more water than the map suggested. I stopped beside a little wooden bridge. One plank had split lengthwise, while another tilted alarmingly over the rushing water.

"That wasn't part of the plan," I muttered.

"Bridges don't usually consult hikers before deciding they need repairs."

The voice came from behind me.

I turned more sharply than I intended.

A man stood several metres away, his hood pushed back and raindrops running through his dark hair. He wore a green hiking jacket, carried an old backpack, and had the kind of quiet, composed stance I remembered far too well. One hand held the strap of his backpack. The other rested in his pocket.

For a moment, I saw the man from seven years earlier, standing by our kitchen window with a cup of coffee. Then I noticed the grey at his temples and several new lines on his face. He looked older, more severe. No less familiar.

"Marcin."

I said his name so quietly it was almost as though I were testing whether I could still say it.

"Ula."

He didn't smile. He had never liked my full first name, although after our separation I had begun using it professionally with a determination that might have been better spent elsewhere. Urszula Lis sounded like a woman

who had her life under control. Ula reminded me of someone who had once fallen asleep with her head on Marcin's shoulder and believed that not everything needed an expiration date.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

He glanced at his backpack, then at the trail.

"Working. You?"

"Same."

"With a camera, a notebook, and the expression of someone determined to defeat the weather?"

I tightened my fingers around the strap of my bag. He remembered that I had never been good at accepting defeat when my plans went wrong. He also remembered that when I was nervous, I answered questions with questions. What irritated me most, however, was that after only three sentences, I could once again hear the difference between amusement and malice in his voice.

"I didn't know you guided people on this side of the mountains too."

"For a few years now. Where are you heading?"

I told him the name of the refuge.

His gaze settled on my face.

"To see Mrs. Zofia?"

"You know her?"

"Yes."

He offered nothing more. Marcin had always possessed the ability to remain silent in a way that compelled other people to ask further questions. I had once considered it a

sign of patience. Later, I began to understand that sometimes it was also a form of defence.

"I've arranged an interview with her," I said. "I'm working on a book about small mountain refuges in the Sudetes."

Something changed in his expression. Not anger, not yet. More the wariness of a man who had spotted a familiar warning sign.

"About the stories of the people or the buildings?"

"It's difficult to separate one from the other."

"Exactly."

That single word seemed to hang between us, heavier than the sound of the stream.

Seven years earlier, I had published a piece of reportage containing several sentences Marcin had spoken one winter night. We hadn't been talking with a recorder running. We had been at home, alone, after a day neither of us ever wanted to remember. I had assured myself that the quotation was essential because it said something important about responsibility. Marcin believed I had betrayed his trust.

I hadn't been able to convince him of my version of events. Eventually, he had stopped wanting to hear it.

"I didn't come here looking for you," I said.

I regretted the words immediately.

"It never occurred to me that you had."

I recognised the lie in the almost imperceptible movement of his lips. Marcin realised I had recognised it. For one brief moment, we came dangerously close to our old way of speaking, when every unspoken thought had a history of its own.

A branch creaked above us. The wind brought colder rain, and I pushed my notebook deeper into my bag. Marcin approached the bridge, inspected the damaged planks, and pointed towards a path branching off to the left, almost invisible beneath the fallen leaves.

"There's a safe crossing that way. It'll take ten minutes longer."

"It's not on the map."

"Neither is the damage to that bridge."

He was right, which gave me another reason not to thank him too quickly.

I started along the path he had indicated. After a few steps, I heard his boots behind me.

"You don't have to escort me," I said.

"I'm not escorting you. I'm going to the same refuge."

I stopped.

"Why?"

"Zofia asked me to help with a project. She wants to organise the refuge's archives before handing them over to her successors. There are things in there you can't simply spread out on a table and photograph."

Rain ran down his cheek. He didn't wipe it away. I noticed that he still wore the thin leather cord around his neck, the one we had bought on our first trip together. It disappeared beneath his collar before I managed to look away.

"She didn't mention she was working with anyone," I said.

"She didn't mention a journalist to me."

For a moment, we listened to the rain. Then Marcin gestured towards the path opening between the spruce trees.

"You can turn back and choose another subject. Or we can go to Zofia and work out what happens next."

He made no attempt to stop me or persuade me. That freedom hurt more than it should have. Once, he had fought for us with a persistence I had taken for granted. Now he stood before me, prepared to accept whatever I decided.

"I'm not giving up the book," I said.

"I didn't ask you to."

He walked past me and set off first, leaving enough room for me to walk beside him or stay behind.

I caught up with him after a dozen or so steps.

The forest smelled of wet wood and earth. Marcin shortened his stride when the path became steep, but he didn't offer me his hand. He knew I could manage slippery rocks on my own. He remembered that. Just as I remembered the smell of rain on his jacket when he came home from a long hike and wrapped his arms around me before he had even taken off his wet clothes.

Ahead of us, the trees began to thin. In the distance, I saw the refuge's roof and a thin trail of smoke rising from its chimney.

Marcin stopped at the edge of the clearing.

"Ula, before we go inside, there's something you need to know."

I looked at him.

"I won't agree to anyone's story being published without their informed consent. Even if that makes it less compelling."

I could have responded with a professional argument. I could have told him that reportage wasn't a text its subjects had the right to approve, that the truth could be uncomfortable, that not every sentence required permission. I knew those arguments perfectly well.

But Marcin wasn't talking about the principles of journalism.

"I understand," I replied.

He studied me for a long moment, as though trying to establish whether there was anything behind those words beyond politeness.

"Do you really?"

Behind him, the first lights were coming on in the refuge's windows. Before me stood the subject I had been waiting months to explore and the man I had been unable to forget for seven years.

And yet what frightened me most wasn't the possibility that he might reject me again.

I was afraid that this time, I would have to truly understand why he had left.

"I don't know yet," I answered. "But I want to."

Marcin remained silent for a moment. Then he nodded and opened the little gate leading to the refuge.

I stayed on the path for one second longer, rain on my face and a question I didn't dare speak aloud: if we still remembered every hurt, could we find even one reason to stay?

Chapter 1 - The Terms of Returning

The refuge smelled of burning beechwood, wet wool, and mushroom soup. I stepped inside behind Marcin, trying to shake the rain from my shoulders while simultaneously refusing to think about how dangerously familiar it felt to enter a warm room with him. Once, evenings like this had ended at the same table, with his hand resting on my knee and conversations stretching late into the night. This time, several steps separated us, along with seven years of silence and a sentence spoken on the trail whose meaning neither of us intended to pretend we hadn't understood.

Behind the wooden counter stood a petite woman with grey hair tied back in a red scarf. She looked up from her accounts and smiled when she saw us.

"Well, finally. I was beginning to think the mountain had decided to keep you."

"The footbridge is damaged," Marcin said, taking off his backpack. "We need to close that crossing before someone tries to use it after dark."

"I'll put up a notice tomorrow."

"Today. I've got some tape in the car. I just need to go back down."

"Eat first. You're always saving everyone else, and only afterwards do you remember you have a stomach."

I took note of the way they spoke to each other. Without ceremony, without any need to explain what they meant to one another. Marcin knew this refuge as well as he had once known all my habits. I didn't ask how long he had been coming here.

"Mrs. Zofia?" I said.

The woman came out from behind the counter, wiped her hands on her apron, and studied me with obvious interest.

"Ms. Urszula. I thought you'd be taller."

"And I thought the refuge would be smaller."

She laughed warmly.

"Well, that's one disappointment each. Come along, I'll show you the room."

I stopped at the word "you," which she had clearly meant in the plural.

"I'm sorry, I think there's been a misunderstanding. I came to conduct an interview and look through the materials. I've already booked accommodation in Szklarska Poręba."

"In weather like this?" Zofia glanced at the windows, beyond which darkness was falling. "My dear, even if I have to keep you here by force..."

"Zosia," Marcin interrupted.

"All right, no force. Let's call it a request."

I couldn't help smiling back. There was a directness about this woman that might have irritated me under other circumstances, but here it suited the heavy tables, old maps, and dog sleeping beside the fireplace. Zofia led us into a small room behind the dining area. In the centre stood a table covered with cardboard boxes, metal tins, and framed photographs. Above it hung a black-and-white panorama of the mountains taken several decades earlier.

"And this is only the beginning," she said proudly. "The rest is in the attic. My husband collected everything other people wanted to throw away. Postcards, letters, old guest

registers. Marcin says some of it should go to an archive and some can be displayed for visitors."

I picked up a photograph showing several hikers standing in front of a wooden building. Someone had written a date and several names on the back. The ink had faded, but the inscription was still legible.

"This is wonderful material," I said. "Photographs like these help show how life in these places has changed. I could start with your family's history and then move on to the other refuges."

"That's exactly what we wanted to talk about," Zofia replied.

I looked at her more carefully.

"We?"

Marcin pulled out a chair but didn't sit down.

"Zofia wants to create an archive of stories about several small mountain refuges. Not just a book. Recordings, photographs, memories of former employees. Something that will remain here and be accessible even when the owners change."

"An excellent idea," I replied. "But I don't create archives. I write reportage."

"I know what you do."

His voice remained calm. That was precisely why I felt a stab of anger.

"Then you also know that you don't gather material for a book according to someone else's checklist."

"And you know that people's memories don't exist solely to become material."

Zofia looked from one of us to the other.

"Children, perhaps some tea?"

I didn't correct her. Marcin was forty-five and I was forty-one, but for a moment we really were behaving like two teenagers arguing over who got to sit by the window.

"I'd love some," I said.

Zofia left us alone.

Marcin approached the table and moved a box to make room for my bag. That simple gesture irritated me more than his earlier remark. He remembered that I disliked putting my equipment on the floor. He remembered the little things, although apparently he wanted to forget everything else.

"You didn't know I was coming here?" I asked.

"No."

"Zofia didn't tell you my name?"

"She said she'd found a journalist whose book about old guesthouses she'd really enjoyed. I didn't ask for the name."

"Should you have?"

He looked up.

"Now I think I should."

There was nothing offensive about his answer. Nevertheless, for a moment I felt my confidence slipping. In my plan, everything had been straightforward: interviews, documentation, a few weeks of work, and the book I had wanted to write for so long. Marcin's presence didn't diminish the value of the subject. It did, however, change the price I might have to pay to pursue it.

"I've already arranged appointments at four locations," I said. "I've collected preliminary materials, signed a contract

to prepare the publication, and I have no intention of starting from scratch."

"No one's asking you to."

"I've just been told that I'm supposed to work according to rules nobody discussed with me."

"You've been told that people should have a say in what happens to their private memories."

"That's not the same as controlling the text."

Marcin watched me silently for a moment.

"Perhaps not to you."

That was when I understood we weren't arguing exclusively about the future book. We had returned to a conversation we hadn't managed to finish seven years earlier. Except that this time, we both knew where it might lead.

"I'm not going to defend every sentence I've ever written," I said more quietly.

"I didn't ask you to."

"But you're judging me because of one of them."

His jaw tightened almost imperceptibly.

"Not because of one sentence, Ula. Because of a decision."

Zofia returned with a tray before I could answer. She placed three mugs of tea and a plate of bread and cheese on the table. Then she sat down with the expression of a woman who knew perfectly well she had walked into the middle of an argument but had no intention of letting that interfere with her own business.

"Listen, you two. I haven't got the strength to manage all of this on my own anymore. My niece will take over the refuge in the spring. Some of the keepsakes will stay here, but the rest needs organising. There are people who want to talk about the old days, only they don't know who to approach. Ms. Urszula knows how to write. Marcin knows the refuges, the trails, and all those stubborn owners. It seems to me you could do something genuinely worthwhile together."

"We could," I said cautiously. "If we establish some ground rules."

"That's exactly what I mean."

Marcin reached for his mug.

"I need to know that nobody will be presented with a fait accompli. No private letters or recordings will appear in the publication without their owners' permission. And if someone tells a story exclusively for the archive, that's where it stays."

"I can separate archival documentation from material intended for reportage," I replied. "But I won't agree to having every interviewee approve the entire book."

"I'm not asking for that."

"Then who decides what's private?"

"The person entrusting you with it. Before they give you their story."

Zofia set down her tea.

"That sounds reasonable."

I stared at her in disbelief.

"Mrs. Zofia, reportage sometimes includes facts its subjects would rather forget. I can't promise that every story will be comfortable."

"And I don't want you to. My husband could be absolutely impossible. Write that if you need to. Just don't go pulling his letters to me out of a drawer because they'd make a lovely ending to a chapter."

I fell silent.

There was something in that request I couldn't reduce to a professional debate. Zofia wasn't trying to control history. She wanted to preserve her right to keep part of her own life to herself.

"I understand," I replied.

Marcin looked at me, but this time he made no comment.

For the next half hour, we discussed practical possibilities. I suggested creating two separate collections: an archival collection that would remain under the care of the refuge owners, and a journalistic collection I could use on the basis of agreed permissions. Zofia would identify the first people to interview, while Marcin would help contact those who didn't use email and rarely travelled down to larger towns.

When I spread out my schedule, Marcin leaned over the table.

"You won't manage all this in one day."

"Why not?"

He pointed to three places.

"This road closes after heavy rain. This owner only sees visitors until two in the afternoon. And here, Mrs. Helena,

who lives on the property, doesn't speak to anyone on Mondays because that's when she visits her daughter."

"I could have found that out over the phone."

"Of course."

"You don't have to sound so pleased with yourself."

"I'm not pleased. I'm wondering how to tell you about the fourth mistake without having you throw your pen at me."

I looked at the pen in my hand. Only then did I notice how tightly I was gripping it.

Marcin smiled for the first time that evening.

It was a brief, unguarded smile. The sort that used to appear on his face when he'd managed to provoke me and then convince me that I ought to laugh about it. For one unbearably long moment, I didn't see the man who didn't trust me. I saw the man I had once loved.

I looked back at the schedule.

"Tell me about the fourth."

This time there was no joke. He explained that the owner of one of the refuges was planning to close the building for three weeks to renovate its installations. I hadn't heard anything about it, even though I'd spoken to her son the previous day. I noted the change and felt a moment of reluctant gratitude. Marcin didn't simply know these places. He paid attention to the people, their habits, and their needs, things no form could ever fully capture.

When we finished, Zofia brought us a meal, although it was long past the hour at which I usually ate. Outside, the rain had eased, but it was so dark that even the edge of the clearing had disappeared from view. I checked my phone. It had last connected to the network almost an hour earlier.

"Could I use your phone?" I asked. "I need to let the guesthouse know I won't be returning tonight."

"Of course. And I'll get your room ready. I won't even pretend I'm going to give you a choice between a warm bed and a walk through the wet forest."

Marcin raised his head.

"If you'd like, I can walk you down to the car park in the morning."

"I can manage."

"I know."

He answered without the slightest trace of offence. That was what unsettled me. He wasn't trying to prove that I still needed him. And yet I remembered the years when he'd been the first person I called after every good day and every bad one.

Later, when Zofia went to prepare the bedding, we were briefly alone at the table. Marcin was gathering the photographs into a box while I arranged my notes. I noticed he'd left one print on top. It showed a young woman standing on the refuge steps with an armful of firewood. On the back was an inscription: "Maria, winter 1984. The first year without a road."

"Do you know her story?" I asked.

"Some of it."

"I'd like to hear it."

"Ask Zofia first. Maria's her sister."

I didn't like having to accept yet another condition from him. At the same time, something about the photograph made it impossible to put aside without wanting to know

more. The young woman looked exhausted, but she was smiling broadly, as though she'd just accomplished something of which she was immensely proud.

"All right," I said. "I'll ask."

Marcin closed the box.

"We can discuss the rest tomorrow at nine."

"Eight."

"Zofia will have finished dealing with the delivery by nine. At eight, she needs some peace."

"Nine it is, then."

I reached for my bag, but his voice stopped me.

"Ula."

I turned around.

He stood beside the table, the lamplight falling across his face. I noticed a weariness he'd previously concealed beneath his composure. For a moment, I thought he was going to say something personal. Perhaps ask how I'd lived over the past few years, or mention our old apartment, where he'd once left a book about hiking trails in the Tatras.

"I'm not here to make your work difficult," he said.

"And I'm not here to hurt you again."

The words escaped me more quickly than I'd intended.

He didn't answer immediately.

"It would be good if we could both keep those promises."

He picked up his jacket and went into the dining room.

I remained alone with my open notebook and a feeling I couldn't name. It wasn't simply regret or anger. Throughout the evening, Marcin had treated me as someone whose

professional abilities he respected but whose intentions he didn't trust. And when he'd smiled over my schedule, for a second I'd forgotten there had ever been anything different between us.

I ran my finger over the names of the refuges written in my notes. My project had just become more difficult than I'd anticipated. But I had no intention of abandoning it. I also knew that if Marcin remained part of it, I would have to learn to talk to him without hiding behind professional arguments.

I had no idea whether he would want to do the same.

When I switched off the lamp above the table, I caught sight of him through the half-open door, sitting beside the fireplace. He was talking to Zofia, listening patiently to her story while she straightened his collar as though he were still a boy who needed looking after before going out into the cold.

It was then that I realised, for the first time, that over those seven years I hadn't merely lost Marcin.

I'd also lost the opportunity to get to know the man he'd become.

And I wasn't sure whether I wanted more to reclaim that opportunity or run away from it.

Chapter 2 - The Boundaries of Trust

I woke to the creaking of floorboards and the smell of freshly baked bread. For several seconds, I couldn't remember where I was. The wooden ceiling was lower than the one in my apartment, wisps of fog drifted past the window, and the jacket I hadn't managed to dry properly hung over a chair. Only when I heard dishes clattering in the dining room did I remember the previous evening. The refuge. Zofia. Marcin. Our conversation about boundaries that, apparently, both of us found far easier to establish than to respect.

My phone showed seven twenty. I had several messages from Natalia, one from the editor who had worked on my previous books, and an automatic reminder about the deadline for submitting the preliminary outline of my new publication. I ignored everything except Natalia.

"Did you get there? You're not replying. Should I call Mountain Rescue, or is it enough if I just start worrying?"

I wrote back that I'd arrived, spent the night at the refuge, and run into Marcin.

The three typing dots appeared almost immediately.

"THAT Marcin?"

"Do you know another one?"

My phone rang before I had time to put it on the bedside table.

"You can't just send me something like that and pretend it's a normal morning," Natalia announced without bothering to say hello.

I ran a hand through my hair.

"It hasn't been a particularly normal morning for me either."

"What's he look like?"

"Natalia."

"I'm asking as the person who spent two years listening to you insist you were completely over him."

"He looks good."

"So, disastrous."

I sat on the edge of the bed and looked out of the window. A blackbird was perched on the low stone wall outside the refuge, pecking at something among the wet leaves.

"We're going to be working together," I said.

Silence fell at the other end.

"Ula, are you sure that's wise?"

"Not yet."

"Then perhaps, for the first time in your life, you could think about it before committing yourself to anything."

I smiled despite myself. Natalia was one of the few people who had never treated my stubbornness as a virtue in its own right.

"We started setting out the rules yesterday."

"Rules for working together, or rules for avoiding any conversation about what happened seven years ago?"

"Mostly work."

"I see. So you'll discuss everything else when one of you loses patience."