Laura Bellini

# Lose Me for a Moment

*They won't hold each other back.*
*They can choose the same path*



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ROMANS

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# INTRO

The first time I saw Łukasz Modry, I was trying to prove that I didn't need anyone's help.

I stood knee-deep in the cold waters of the Krutynia River, holding a backpack containing my surveying equipment above my head and cursing whoever had marked this inlet as easily accessible on the map. The water was the color of strong tea, the riverbed gave way beneath my feet, and for the past five minutes my left Wellington boot had been attempting to start a life of its own in the mud. It was late April, and the air smelled of wet wood and last year's leaves. Somewhere among the reeds, a bird called out, one whose name I didn't know. I did, however, know the exact coordinates of the place where I was stuck, and that knowledge had proved completely useless.

"If you took one more step to the left, you'd at least have an interesting story to tell," I heard behind me.

I turned my head. A man stood beside a small wooden landing, wearing a dark green jacket with the sleeves rolled up and a rope slung over his shoulder. He looked to be in his mid-thirties, with light brown hair cropped short at the sides and the face of someone who spent more time outdoors than in front of a mirror. He wasn't grinning. He watched me with an interest I found irritatingly calm.

"I already have an interesting story," I replied. "It involves a badly marked landing place and someone who prefers making comments to offering help."

"This isn't a landing place."

"It is on the map."

"Which is exactly why I'm standing here."

I studied him more carefully. He didn't look like someone out for a casual walk. A long red kayak rested beside the landing, with rolled-up buoyancy aids lying in its bow. The man set down his rope, crouched, and extended his hand toward me. He didn't step onto the unstable bank, as though he knew precisely where the firm ground ended.

"I can pull you out. Or we can spend a little longer discussing cartography."

"I'm a cartographer."

This time, he smiled.

"That explains a lot."

I should have been offended. Instead, I gave him my free hand. His fingers closed firmly around mine, but he waited until I shifted my weight myself. He showed me where to put my foot and, with one smooth movement, helped me onto a firmer stretch of the bank. The moment I regained my balance, he released me. Only then did I realize that throughout the entire absurd operation, he hadn't taken his eyes off my face.

"Oliwia Kuna," I introduced myself, adjusting the strap of my backpack. "I'm working on a new map of quiet stopping places along the kayaking route."

"Łukasz Modry. I run kayaking trips."

I recognized the name. It had appeared in correspondence about the project, always attached to objections concerning proposed stopping places. I hadn't yet had the opportunity to meet the author of those comments, but I'd already decided he was the sort of man who disagreed with documentation on principle.

"So you're the one who kept sending back my proposals with the comment 'unsafe at higher water levels'?"

"If your proposal concerns this spot, I stand by that comment."

I took out my phone and showed him the screen. A green dot marked the inlet that local promotional materials had described for years as a convenient stopping place for kayakers. Our project was supposed to organize this information, identify less crowded locations, and create a map accessible even to people who didn't want to fight for a patch of riverbank in the middle of the season. For me, that meant six weeks of fieldwork, accurate data, and completing the contract on schedule. For Łukasz, apparently, it meant an opportunity to challenge everything I considered obvious.

"The water undermined this bank during the autumn floods," he said, pointing toward the reeds. "In July, it'll look beautiful. Then a family with a child will arrive, someone will climb out first, and they'll sink knee-deep into the mud. Just like you."

"I didn't sink knee-deep."

He looked at my wet trousers.

"Of course not."

I laughed before I could stop myself. There was something unsettling about that. For months, I'd made sure that no person or situation distracted me more than my schedule allowed. Yet within a few minutes, this man had made me laugh when I hadn't intended to.

My phone vibrated in my hand. A notification appeared from Aneta, the coordinator at the company I was due to join after finishing the project.

"Oliwia, please confirm the date you'll take possession of the apartment. Gdańsk is waiting for you from June. I'll send the documents on Friday."

I swiped the notification away before Łukasz could accidentally read it. The move was settled. I'd signed the contract, agreed on my working conditions, and saved enough money for the first few months. For the past two years, this was exactly what I'd been working toward: a position where I could design my own solutions instead of merely correcting other people's mistakes. The Krutynia was supposed to be my final assignment before a fresh start. I hadn't allowed for any sentimental complications.

"Something urgent?" he asked.

"Work."

He nodded without trying to look over my shoulder. I appreciated that more than I wanted to admit.

We walked toward the wooden landing. The boards were damp, marked here and there by dark traces left by the winter water. Łukasz walked beside me, a little more slowly than before, as though he'd adjusted his pace to accommodate my boot, which made a pathetic squelching sound with every step. The river reflected the dull sky, and on the opposite bank the pines stood motionless, still cool from the morning. For a moment, I forgot about my wet socks and my phone. There was something here I couldn't mark on a map: a stretch of space that demanded no decisions from me.

"Why quiet stopping places?" he asked.

"Because everyone describes the route in terms of kilometers and attractions. I'm interested in places where people can stop rushing."

I said it with more honesty than I'd intended. Łukasz leaned against one of the landing posts and gazed at the river for a moment.

"Interesting. And do you know how to stop rushing yourself?"

"Professionally or personally?"

"Is there really that much difference?"

"An enormous difference."

He tilted his head. The amusement had disappeared from his expression, replaced by an attentiveness that wasn't easy to brush aside with a joke. I felt an unexpected urge to tell him something true. That for a long time I'd been organizing my life around one deadline after another, because anything I didn't put in my calendar seemed uncertain. That I wanted to leave, yet was simultaneously afraid that somewhere else I'd still be the same woman who always found another reason not to rest.

Instead, I put my phone away.

"I still need to check three more locations before dark."

Łukasz pushed himself away from the post.

"One of them probably exists only on paper, too."

"Are you planning to comment on my entire project like this?"

"If I have to. And if you'll let me, I'll also show you places that aren't on any map yet."

It was a sensible, professional offer, entirely consistent with the needs of my assignment. I should have treated it as nothing more. But when he pulled a spare dry jacket from the kayak and handed it to me without unnecessary

questions, I saw something more in him than the man who kept criticizing my documentation. Someone who could notice another person's discomfort and offer help without taking away their independence.

"I'll return it this afternoon," I said.

"I'm in no hurry."

I put the jacket on. It smelled of cool air, wood, and the faintest trace of soap. It was too big for me, and I had to roll the sleeves up twice. Łukasz watched me struggling with the fabric, then turned his gaze toward the water, leaving me that small moment without his attention.

I stood on the wooden landing with someone else's jacket around my shoulders and my future contained inside my phone. I had everything planned, right down to the day I would leave. So why, as I looked at the man who knew this river better than any map, did I find myself wanting, for the first time, to get lost, even if only for a moment?

# Chapter 1 - Places That Aren't on the Map

At eight the following morning, I was sitting at the largest table in a small kayaking base in Ukta, surrounded by maps, printouts, and a cup of coffee that had already gone cold. Outside the window, the sun was cutting through the mist above the river, its first rays catching on the wet boards of the landing. I had six weeks of work ahead of me, fourteen potential stopping places, and a spreadsheet in which every hour had been assigned a purpose. Everything suggested I would finish before the season began.

Provided Łukasz Modry stopped crossing locations off my list.

His notes lay on the table. Seven points had a brief "no" beside them, three were marked "to be checked," and next to one he had written by hand: "Who approved this, and have they ever actually seen the river?"

I glanced at my watch. We had agreed on eight o'clock.

The door opened at seven minutes past eight.

"You're late," I said without greeting him.

Łukasz stopped in the doorway. He was wearing dark trousers, a light-colored shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and the same green jacket he'd lent me by the river the previous day. He held a paper bag in one hand and two cups in the other.

"Good morning, Oliwia. Lovely to see you again."

"Eight-oh-seven."

"I know. The clock by the door works."

He set the bag on the table. The smell of freshly baked bread immediately reminded me that I'd had nothing but coffee that morning.

"There was a queue at the bakery. I decided seven minutes was a reasonable price to pay for breakfast."

"I didn't ask for breakfast."

"That's why I bought some for myself, too."

He took out two sweet buns and slid one toward me. He didn't wait for me to accept it. He sat opposite me, spread out his notes, and looked at the map.

I had no intention of letting a sweet bun disarm me.

"Let's start with the basics," I said. "This project has a fixed deadline, budget, and scope. I need your local knowledge, but I can't work on the principle that we cross out everything you don't like."

Łukasz took a pencil from his bag.

"And I can't put my name to a map that sends people to places where they shouldn't be getting out of their kayaks."

"No one's asking you to put your name to my map."

"Actually, they are."

I frowned.

He produced a printed email from the project coordinator. According to the message, a local guide was to verify the safety and practical accessibility of the proposed locations. Only after we had both approved the points could the map be submitted for publication.

I read the email twice.

"I didn't receive this update."

"Then we've already identified our first organizational problem."

"We?"

"If we're going to work together, I'd rather use the plural."

I didn't answer immediately. The word "together" sounded strangely natural coming from him. It wasn't an invitation to intimacy, more a calm statement of fact, but that was precisely what irritated me. For a long time, I'd organized my assignments so that I wouldn't have to depend on anyone else's decisions. Now it turned out that I couldn't complete this contract without the man sitting opposite me.

"All right," I said. "In that case, we'll establish a procedure."

Łukasz leaned back in his chair.

"Sounds ominous."

"We'll assess each location according to the same criteria. Accessibility of the bank, safety, suitability for resting, environmental impact, and distance from other stopping places. Every rejection must be justified."

"Agreed."

I looked at him in surprise.

"Just like that?"

"Did you think I enjoy arguing?"

"I have some evidence."

"I like it when people listen to me. That's a little different."

He said it without smiling. There was a firmness in his voice I hadn't heard before. I realized that beneath his easygoing manner was a man accustomed to making decisions for which he was genuinely responsible.

I spread the map across the entire width of the table.

"Good. Let's start with the first location."

For the next forty minutes, we compared satellite photographs, my measurements, and his observations. Łukasz didn't use technical cartographic language, but he could point out details that no terrain model revealed. He knew where water collected after rain, where the wind pushed kayaks into the reeds, and which banks were damaged by people stopping wherever they pleased during the summer.

I showed him why we couldn't simply mark any attractive spot on the map. I explained scale, data availability, and the importance of precise descriptions. At first, he interrupted me with questions. Later, he began listening with an attentiveness that made me speak more and more freely.

At the fifth location, he leaned over the map. His shoulder was right beside mine. I caught the scent of clean cotton and the cool outdoor air he'd brought in with him.

"Here," he said, pointing to a small widening of the river. "You've marked a clearing. But there's no way to reach it from the water."

"It looks different in the photograph."

"Because the photograph was taken when the water level was lower."

I enlarged the image on my tablet.

"We can verify that."

"We can. But we'll have to paddle a little farther."

"How far?"

"About four kilometers."

I looked at my schedule.

"I've planned measurements at three other locations today."

"I know. I've seen your itinerary."

"And?"

"And I think it's a very pretty plan."

I sighed.

"Łukasz."

"It just doesn't account for the fact that the river has opinions of its own."

I wanted to come back with something equally sarcastic, but I noticed that he wasn't mocking my work. He was studying the schedule with genuine curiosity. After a moment, he reached for a sheet of paper and sketched an alternative route. He didn't reject my assumptions. He connected them to places he knew.

"If we start here, we can check two points along the way. We can take a break at the third. Then we'll be back before five."

I examined the sketch.

"That makes sense."

"I know."

"Don't get used to compliments."

"Too late."

He smiled, and I returned to my tablet, pretending I was more interested in its battery level than in the small crease that appeared beside his left eye.

We were on the water before ten. Łukasz had prepared two single kayaks, although he'd also offered one we could share. I chose my own without hesitation. I needed freedom of movement and space for my equipment. Above all, I didn't want to spend several hours knowing that every movement I made would be felt by someone sitting behind me.

He didn't comment on my decision.

We paddled at an unhurried pace. The river carried us between trees whose branches bent low over the water. In places sheltered from the wind, the surface looked like dark glass. Every so often, I stopped to take a photograph or record coordinates.

At the first planned stopping place, Łukasz paddled closer.

"See those roots?"

"Yes."

"In summer, they're almost invisible. A kayak can get caught on them, and someone climbing out on the wrong side could fall between the branches."

I took a photograph.

"We could mark it as an observation point only. No landing."

"Exactly."

I looked at him.

"Did you just agree with one of my suggestions?"

"Write down the date. A historic occasion."

For a while, we paddled side by side in silence. Łukasz used his paddle economically, almost effortlessly. He wasn't trying to impress me with his speed or demonstrate how

much better he knew the river. He adjusted his pace without turning it into a protective gesture. That simple, unremarkable consideration was surprisingly pleasant.

"Why did you choose cartography?" he asked.

"Because I don't like ambiguity."

He laughed.

"That might be the most honest answer I've ever heard."

"At least maps try to show you where things are."

"And if something changes?"

"You update the map."

"Sounds simple."

"A lot of things sound simple in theory."

He studied me but didn't press further. I was grateful for that. Some questions needed more time than a few kilometers of peaceful river.

At noon, we pulled up beside a small clearing that wasn't on my list. The bank sloped gently, and between the trees there was a natural place to rest. Łukasz climbed out first and pointed out a stable patch of ground.

"I sometimes bring groups here when someone needs a moment of quiet," he said. "There's no shop, no toilet, nothing to see. That's why hardly anyone finds it."

I looked around. In the distance, I could hear only the water and the soft rustling of branches. Dry pine needles covered the ground, and the air smelled of resin.

"This is exactly the kind of place I'm looking for."

"I know."

I turned toward him.

"How?"

"Yesterday, you said you were interested in places where people could stop rushing."

He remembered.

Not merely the information, but the way I'd said it. For a moment, I didn't know how to respond. So I knelt beside the bank and began photographing the slope of the ground.

Łukasz stood a few steps away.

"There's just one condition," he said.

I looked up.

"What condition?"

"We don't put this place on a public map until we've worked out how to limit the number of visitors. If twenty kayaks start pulling up here every day, it won't be a peaceful stopping place a year from now."

I straightened.

"The project is supposed to serve people, not hide places from them."

"And this place is supposed to survive longer than one season."

There was a hard edge to his voice.

"You can't decide for everyone who has the right to come here."

"I'm not trying to. I want us to anticipate the consequences."

For a moment, we looked at each other without speaking. I understood his argument, but I had no intention of handing him control over the map's contents. I'd spent years working to ensure that my professional decisions were taken

seriously. I wasn't about to let someone treat local experience as sufficient grounds for dismissing an entire methodology.

"We'll conduct an assessment of visitor pressure," I said at last. "We can mark it as having limited access and propose rules for stopping here. But I won't remove a location simply because it's beautiful."

Łukasz looked toward the clearing.

"All right. That's a proposal I can consider."

"Consider?"

"I never promised I'd always be easy to work with."

"That much I've noticed."

He watched me for a moment, then extended his hand.

"Deal?"

I looked at his hand. I didn't need another gesture of someone rescuing me from trouble. This time, however, he was offering it as an equal partner, proposing shared responsibility.

I shook it.

"Deal. But we make decisions based on data and observations. Not intuition."

"Intuition is a kind of observation, too. Sometimes it's just poorly documented."

He didn't release my hand immediately, but waited for me to move. When I withdrew my fingers, he stepped back without the slightest hesitation. It left me with the strange impression that we'd just agreed on something beyond the map.

We returned to the kayaking base before five. I had a complete set of measurements, new photographs, and three locations requiring further analysis. Łukasz helped me carry my equipment into the building, then began washing the kayaks. The sun was sinking toward the trees, its light drawing copper tones from the water.

I sat at the outdoor table and opened my laptop. A few minutes later, he appeared beside me with two glasses of water.

"What now?" he asked.

"I update the data. Then I send the report."

"And after that?"

"Dinner, shower, sleep."

"Fascinating plan."

"Effective."

He leaned against the railing. For a while, he said nothing, watching the river.

"Do you know what's strangest about running kayaking trips?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"People pay to spend a few hours without having to be anywhere on time. Then they spend the first hour asking when we'll arrive."

I closed my laptop.

"Maybe they need time to adjust."

"Maybe. Or maybe they don't believe they can simply keep paddling."

I looked at him. There was no lecture in his voice, but the words touched something I preferred not to examine.

My phone lit up on the table with a message from Aneta. I didn't open it. The screen went dark before Łukasz noticed anything.

"We'll start at eight tomorrow," I said.

"I'll be on time."

"Really?"

"I might even manage seven fifty-nine."

He stood and headed toward the building. I watched him until he disappeared through the door. I had the feeling we'd just completed the first day of a working relationship far more complicated than my schedule had anticipated.

And yet, when I updated the plan for the following week that evening, I didn't add any warnings beside his name.

Instead, I allowed an extra half hour for conversation.

# Chapter 2 - On the Other Side of the Plan

Łukasz arrived the following morning at seven fifty-eight, with his watch conspicuously displayed beneath his sleeve.

"There you are," he said, standing in the doorway. "I'm early. Do I get official confirmation?"

I didn't look up from my laptop.

"I'll enter it in the minutes."

"With a signature?"

"If you behave yourself."

Only then did I look at him. He was smiling, but I noticed something in his eyes I hadn't seen the previous day: exhaustion. He didn't look as though he'd simply had a late night. His shoulders were slightly tense, and he had the focused expression of someone who'd already had to solve several other people's problems before starting work.

He placed a thermos and a small paper bag on the table.

"No queue today."

"Are you planning to bribe me with food every morning?"

"Only until you stop looking at me like an administrative obstacle."

I moved my laptop aside.

"That could take a while."

"I'm patient."

He took two small croissants from the bag. This time, I accepted one without protesting. The previous evening, I'd eaten a sandwich over a spreadsheet, so a fresh breakfast was an offer I found difficult to refuse.

"We're not going out on the water straightaway today," I said. "First, we need to agree on how we're going to document your comments."

Łukasz sat down and opened his notebook.

"I'm listening."

"Each location will receive a score based on five criteria. If our opinions differ, we'll record both positions. I'll prepare the final recommendation, but without your approval, we won't mark a location as safe."

He studied the table for a moment.

"And if I decide something is dangerous, but you want to include it on the map?"

"We can mark the point as unsuitable for landing or requiring additional verification. We won't pretend the problem doesn't exist."

"Good."

"And one more thing. You can't change the day's itinerary without discussing it with me."

He looked up.

"Yesterday, I suggested an alternative. You agreed."

"I know. I'm talking about the principle."

"Then my principle is that if conditions on the water require us to change the route, the decision belongs to the person responsible for safety."

"Meaning you."

"Yes."

We were silent for a moment. I didn't like surrendering control, but I couldn't deny that he had more experience guiding people along the river. I was responsible for the

accuracy of the data; he was responsible for the practical conditions of our fieldwork. Neither of us should pretend to possess the other's expertise.

"Agreed," I said. "Provided you explain every change."

Łukasz nodded.

"And you won't treat every warning as an attack on your project."

I looked at him.

"I don't do that."

He raised his eyebrows.

"Oliwia."

I couldn't suppress a smile.

"All right. I'll try."

I reached for a pen and wrote down our agreements. I wanted them to be clear because I already knew we'd be spending a great deal of time together. I didn't want our daily cooperation to turn into endless negotiations over every decision.

Łukasz watched me for a moment.

"Do you always write everything down?"

"Almost."

"Even the things you do for pleasure?"

I hesitated.

"Not everything."

"That's good."

"Why?"

"Because I was beginning to wonder whether there's room for spontaneity in your calendar."