

Laura Bellini

Leave the Light On for Me

Their Shared Past Is About to Take the Stage.



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ROMANS

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INTRO

I switched on the first light at 7:43 p.m., even though according to the schedule I should have been in a car on my way to the hotel twelve minutes earlier.

The empty auditorium of the Nadbrzeże Theatre smelled of dust, freshly painted wood, and coffee someone had abandoned in a plastic cup at the edge of the stage. After six weeks of renovations, the building looked the way theatres liked to look just before reopening - beautiful enough for the audience and unfinished enough for every member of the technical crew to still have at least three reasons to swear.

I stood at the lighting console, trying to find a fourth.

"Twenty-seven again," I said into the intercom. "And please, nobody touch the fixture on bridge number two. Seriously. Even if someone decides it looks lonely."

Marek, head of the technical crew, answered through my headset.

"Wasn't us. That lonely fixture moved by itself."

"Great. We have a ghost. Put it on the payroll if it's willing to work overtime."

I heard him laugh, followed by the distinctive clatter of a ladder against the metal structure. The sidelight onstage went out, then returned a second later, this time exactly where I wanted it - along the edge of the wooden platform that was supposed to pass for an old railway platform in the opening-night production.

This was my last job in Poland before leaving for Copenhagen.

At least, that was what I kept telling myself.

Two weeks of work, the season-opening premiere, invoice, plane. No getting attached to places, people, or projects that required me to stay longer than the contract said. Over the past eight years, I had built a fairly comfortable life out of that principle. Theatres in Berlin, Prague, Vienna, sometimes Warsaw or Gdańsk. I arrived, set the lighting, rescued three crises nobody had anticipated, and disappeared before anyone had time to ask where I actually lived.

Technically, I lived in Wrocław.

In practice, I owned an apartment there where my plants spent more time than I did.

"Lena?" Marek's voice came through the headset. "Are we doing thirty-one?"

I checked the time.

I should have said no.

"We are."

I entered the cue number. Warm, dimmed light spilled onto the stage, carving a solitary chair out of the darkness in the middle of the set.

The chair hadn't been there an hour ago.

I frowned.

"Marek?"

"Not mine."

"Does anyone in this theatre ever admit to anything?"

"Rarely. That's how we survived the renovation."

I was about to ask him to have the prop removed when a shadow moved at the back of the stage.

At first I thought it was another technician. Then I saw a woman. Young, maybe twenty-five, wearing black trousers, her hair tied high at the back of her head. She stepped out from the wings with a stack of pages in one hand, sat on the chair, and looked out toward the empty auditorium.

"Sorry," she said. "They told me to check my entrance before rehearsal tomorrow morning. Is that okay?"

I didn't like actors wandering in while I was setting lights, but there was so much caution in her voice that instead of sending her away, I sighed.

"One scene. Don't move the chair."

"Sure."

I lowered my hand to the dimmer fader.

The woman opened the script.

"You leave the light on for those who come back," she began.

My fingers froze.

At first, I didn't understand why.

It was only a sentence. Ordinary words, a handful of syllables spoken by a stranger on an empty stage.

Then she read the next line.

"For those who leave, darkness is enough."

I felt the back of the chair press hard against my spine.

Onstage, the actress continued.

"And what if I don't know which one I am?"

Now I knew.

I stood so quickly that the headset cable caught on the edge of the desk.

"Stop."

The girl looked up.

"Something wrong with the lighting?"

"I said stop."

Marek spoke through the intercom, but I pulled off the headset before I understood what he was saying.

I walked down the steps between the rows of seats. I wasn't hurrying.

At least, I tried not to.

With every step, words from thirteen years ago settled back into their old places inside me.

You leave the light on for those who come back.

I had written that on the back of a receipt from an all-night café near the main railway station.

It was 2:17 in the morning.

I was twenty-one.

Michał had been sitting across from me, insisting the opening line was pretentious.

Five minutes later, he had written the second one.

For those who leave, darkness is enough.

We had never staged it.

We had never even finished the play.

"Where did you get that script?" I asked.

The actress looked down at the pages as if she had only just realized they might contain an answer.

"From the artistic office."

"Who gave it to you?"

"Ms. Dorota. It's the new production."

I held out my hand.

The girl hesitated.

"I'm not really supposed to give anyone my copy."

"I only want to see the first page."

I must have sounded reasonable enough, because she handed me the pages.

The paper was still warm from the printer. The theatre logo was at the top. Underneath were the date of the first rehearsal, the director's name, and the title.

Leave the Light On for Me.

For a moment, all I could hear was the ventilation system running beneath the stage.

My eyes moved lower.

Author: Aleksander Wolski.

I might have laughed if Aleksander Wolski hadn't been dead for three years.

He had been one of the most respected playwrights of his generation. A man whose work had been staged in Warsaw, Kraków, Berlin, and Paris.

A man I had never met.

And a man who had apparently written a sentence I had created at 2:17 in the morning when I was twenty-one and in love with a boy I believed I would one day build a theatre with.

I turned the page.

Scene two.

Ours.

Scene three.

Ours too.

Not identical. The names had been changed. The stage directions had been shortened. Someone had polished the dialogue, moved a few lines around, added scenes I didn't remember.

But I knew this text.

I knew it the way you know a scar beneath your clothes - you don't have to see it to know exactly where it is.

"When was this found?" I asked.

"Apparently in Wolski's archives. The management got the manuscript from his heirs. It's supposed to be a surprise for the opening of the season. His first unpublished work since his death."

I gave the pages back to her.

"Who's directing?"

This time, the answer came from the darkness behind me.

"I am."

I didn't need to turn around.

Thirteen years had been enough for me to forget the exact shade of his eyes, the way he smiled, and whether he really had a small scar beside his left eyebrow or whether my memory had added it over time.

It had not been enough for me to forget his voice.

He stood in the aisle between the first row and the stage.

Michał Borowski.

Older. Leaner. One hand tucked into the pocket of a dark coat, wearing the same calm expression that used to drive

me insane because I could never tell whether he genuinely feared nothing or had simply become very good at hiding it.

He looked at the script in the actress's hands, then at me.

"Hi, Lena."

I didn't answer.

Because suddenly I no longer cared who had found our play.

I wanted to know why the man who had written half those words with me had been standing here from the beginning and didn't look surprised.

Chapter 1 - What We Didn't Burn

For several seconds, neither of us moved. The actress standing between Michał and me looked from him to me and back again, increasingly convinced she had wandered into a scene that wasn't in her copy of the script. Finally, she closed the pages, pressed them against her chest, and took a step toward the wings.

"Should I come back tomorrow at nine?" she asked.

Michał looked at her first.

"Yes. Thanks, Maja. And don't worry about what's happening right now."

"I don't know what's happening."

"Even better."

When she disappeared behind the black curtain, I was left alone with him onstage and with my own memory from thirteen years ago, printed on paper bearing the theatre's logo. Voices drifted down from the technical galleries above, but no one came down. Marek had enough experience to recognize the moment when someone else's crisis stopped being interesting and started requiring discretion.

Michał looked different from the way I remembered him, but not enough for me to pretend I was looking at a stranger. His hair was cut shorter, there were a few pale strands at his temples, and a line between his brows that hadn't been there before. What had disappeared was the boyish ease that, at twenty-two, had once allowed him to walk uninvited into a third-year graduation rehearsal and convince everyone he belonged in the cast. Now he stood calmly, like someone