Too Real to Forget

They knew each other's words. Now they must learn the truth



Laura Bellini

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ROMANS

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CONTENTS

INTRO 4
Chapter 1 - The Voice on the Other Side 12
Chapter 2 - Without Anonymity 25
Chapter 3 - Everything You Cannot Hear 40
Chapter 4 - Not Everything Can Be Written Down 50
Chapter 5 - The Right to Say No 63
Chapter 6 - Where Words End 75
Chapter 7 - On the Other Side of the Kiss 87
Chapter 8 - Light Beyond the Studio 100
Chapter 9 - The Price of a Single Voice 112
Chapter 10 - Truth Spoken in a Whisper 124
Chapter 11 - What I Really Need 136
Chapter 12 - The Date I Couldn't Forget 149
Chapter 13 - Terms I Refuse to Accept 160
Chapter 14 - Between What I Feel and What I Know 170
Chapter 15 - Everything You Knew 181
Chapter 16 - The Silence I Chose 194
Chapter 17 - In My Own Voice 204
Chapter 18 - Without the Right to an Answer 214
Chapter 19 - On Both Sides of the Truth 224
Chapter 20 - Too Real to Forget 234

INTRO

For the first time in three years, I was about to do something entirely for myself. Without consulting anyone, without explaining why the risk was worth taking, and without leaving myself a convenient escape route. On a Friday afternoon, I stood outside the glass doors of a radio studio in Bydgoszcz, clutching my laptop and a folder containing a project that could change my professional life. In my coat pocket was a phone with a message from a man I had never met.

Or at least that was what I believed at the time.

Behind the glass, someone was adjusting a microphone. The red light above the control room entrance was off, but a fragment of a recording drifted through the corridor speakers: a woman's voice describing her return to a home that no longer existed. I stopped, recognizing the slight distortion at the end of the sentence. In my twenty-eight years, I had learned to ignore many things, but an improperly adjusted compressor was not one of them.

"Are you here for the workshops?" the receptionist asked.

"Sandra Wrona. Sound editing."

The woman found my name on the list and handed me a badge.

"Group two. The room at the end of the corridor. The instructor has asked everyone to upload their materials to the shared drive before we begin."

"What if I'd rather present mine in person?"

The receptionist smiled with professional patience.

"Then you'll have to convince the instructor."

That was precisely what I intended to do.

I had come to the six-week audio drama production workshop with a documentary project of my own. Its working title was Between the Lines, and it brought together the voices of people who had maintained close relationships for years without ever seeing the people they were communicating with. I wasn't interested in internet scams or sensational stories. I wanted to understand what happened to a person when someone else's voice or written words became more important than their physical presence.

The subject wasn't a coincidence.

For almost two years, I had been exchanging messages with someone who used the screen name Północ, meaning North, online. We had met on a small forum dedicated to audio dramas, during a discussion about the ending of a particular production. I believed the heroine should have left. He argued that sometimes courage meant staying. We debated for three evenings before he admitted that my arguments were stronger.

We had talked almost every day since.

We didn't know each other's surnames, professions, or exact addresses. He knew I lived in Bydgoszcz and worked with sound. I knew he was involved in writing and traveled frequently. We had never exchanged photographs. At first, it had seemed like a game. Later, it became a rule neither of us wanted to break.

With him, I could admit that I was afraid of being ordinary. That sometimes I rejected other people's help before they even had a chance to offer it, because I never wanted to hear again that I couldn't accomplish much without someone else's support.

Północ never responded with empty reassurance. He asked questions I would rather have avoided.

The previous evening, he had written:

If you really want to make this project, stop waiting for someone else to decide you're ready.

I hadn't replied until the following morning.

I'm going to fight for my own audio drama today. Don't ask where. I don't want to jinx it.

I won't ask. But when you get back, I want to hear that you didn't let anyone else take control of your story.

Now, standing in the radio station corridor, I read his message once more. Despite my nerves, I smiled. Północ had an infuriating talent for constructing sentences that stayed with me far longer than they should have.

I put my phone away and entered the room.

About a dozen people were seated around a long table. A screen on the wall displayed the workshop schedule, and a listening station had been set up beside it. I recognized two sound engineers from local radio stations and a producer I had worked with once before. I greeted them briefly and chose a seat near the exit.

"Sandra?" a familiar voice called.

I turned. Magda, the workshop coordinator, was standing by the door.

"I thought you'd dropped out."

"Why?"

"You haven't sent in the release form for your materials."

"Because I'm not signing it in its current form."

Magda sighed.

"I knew you were going to be difficult."

"We could call it protecting my copyright."

"We could. But Emil still has to approve your project."

I frowned.

"Emil?"

"Jarosz. The audio drama writer. He's leading the dramatic writing section and selecting the projects for the final presentation."

I knew his name. I had listened to several of his productions, including one whose ending I considered brilliant, although I would never have admitted that publicly. He was known for his spare dialogue and the way he could turn an ordinary silence into the most important moment of a scene.

"And what if I refuse to agree to a shared license?" I asked.

"Talk to him. We're starting in ten minutes."

Magda walked away, leaving me with the unpleasant feeling that my carefully prepared plan already needed defending before it had even begun.

I opened my laptop. The screen displayed an editing session containing dozens of tracks: recordings of breathing, footsteps, and voices. I moved the cursor to the final scene. In it, an elderly woman spoke about a man with whom she had corresponded for forty years. They had never met. When he died, she inherited a box of letters from him.

That recording was meant to be the heart of my audio drama.

"Interesting place for a silence."

The man standing beside my chair pointed to a section of the track where I had left almost seven seconds without any sound.

I looked up.

He was in his mid-thirties, with dark hair, the sleeves of his charcoal-gray shirt rolled up, and the face of someone who rarely spoke merely to fill a pause. He held a cup of coffee in one hand, while the other rested casually on the back of the neighboring chair.

"It's not an empty space," I replied. "That's where the protagonist makes her decision."

"Without saying anything?"

"Not every decision needs to be spoken aloud."

He studied me with an interest that felt more attentive than polite.

"And how is the listener supposed to know the recording hasn't ended?"

"If I've told the previous five minutes properly, they'll know."

A barely perceptible smile appeared on his lips.

"That's a bold assumption."

"I prefer bold assumptions to explaining everything three times."

For a moment, we looked at each other. He didn't look away, but neither did he try to occupy more space than I had allowed him. I noticed a small scar near his eyebrow and the way he listened to my answer, as though he were genuinely considering what I meant.

"Emil Jarosz," he introduced himself.

I stood.

"Sandra Wrona."

He shook my hand. His palm was warm, his grip firm but free of any exaggerated display of confidence.

"I saw your project's title on the list. I'd be interested in hearing the whole thing."

"On the condition that you don't try to change my ending."

He laughed softly.

"I can't promise that."

Someone called his name from the control room. He turned his head, answered with a brief "Just a moment," and remained beside my workstation for another few seconds.

"One question, Ms. Wrona. Why people who have never met?"

I hesitated. I could have given him my prepared answer about intimacy in digital communication, but something in his expression made those words feel false before I even spoke them.

"Because sometimes it's easier to tell the truth to someone who doesn't know what we look like."

Emil's expression grew serious.

"And once they do?"

I couldn't find an answer immediately.

"That's when the harder part begins," I finally said.

He nodded, as though he had heard something important, and headed toward the control room.

Through the glass doors, I watched him talking to the sound engineer. He took off his watch, placed it beside the mixing console, and leaned over the screen. He looked like a man entirely absorbed in what he was doing. There was a confidence in his movements that affected me more than I was willing to admit.

My phone vibrated.

Północ: So? Did you make it there without running away at the last minute?

I stared at the message, surprised by how accurately he had guessed my state of mind.

Sandra: I made it. I've just met a man who's probably going to try to ruin my ending.

His reply arrived a few seconds later.

Północ: Maybe he just wants to find out whether you really know why you chose that particular ending.

I raised my eyes.

Behind the glass, Emil Jarosz placed his phone facedown on the desk. Then he glanced toward the workshop room. Our eyes met through two layers of glass and several meters of corridor.

I had no reason to connect those two events. People checked their messages and put their phones down all day long. And yet, for a moment, I couldn't tear my gaze away from him.

Another sentence appeared on my phone.

Północ: Just don't let him decide for you.

This time, I didn't reply.

I watched the man behind the glass as he turned back toward the mixing console, wondering why the voice of someone I had met only minutes earlier had sounded strangely familiar.

And why, for the first time in a very long while, I found myself wishing that someone who knew my truest words would dare to get to know me, too.

Chapter 1 - The Voice on the Other Side

The workshops began with something I hated even more than badly edited dialogue: introducing myself to a room full of people pretending they would remember each other's names. Everyone was supposed to explain what they did and why they had come to Bydgoszcz. I sat near the end of the table, turning my name badge between my fingers, listening to stories about professional ambitions, creativity, and the need to explore new forms of expression. Everyone sounded as though they had rehearsed their speeches in front of a mirror. I had prepared three sentences myself, but after my conversation with Emil Jarosz, I no longer felt like reciting anything.

The instructor stood beside the screen and switched off the presentation. Without it, he looked less formal, which somehow made him even more interesting. He was thirty-four, according to the professional biography I had read earlier, and possessed the kind of ease people usually acquired only after they stopped trying to prove their worth to everyone around them. He made no effort to impress. When one participant spent several minutes describing his achievements, Emil listened patiently before asking what story the man truly wanted to tell.

Silence fell over the room.

"That's exactly why we're here," Emil said. "I'm not interested in how well you can talk about your projects. I'm interested in whether you can make someone want to listen to them."

When my turn came, I stood without my notes.

"Sandra Wrona. I'm a sound editor. I mainly work on radio features and short documentaries. I've brought a project about relationships that exist entirely through words. I want to produce it without inventing emotions my subjects never expressed."

Emil leaned against the table.

"And what if the emotions matter more than the words being spoken?"

"Then you need to learn how to listen to silence."

Several people turned toward me. Emil smiled faintly.

"I'm beginning to suspect we'll work well together."

"That depends on how you define working well together."

"We'll come back to that."

I sat down, feeling an unsettling sense of satisfaction. Not because I had managed to attract his attention, but because he hadn't dismissed my answer. Over the past few years, I had met too many people who regarded a sound editor as someone who removed background noise rather than someone who helped create the story. Emil seemed to understand the difference.

After the organizational introduction, Magda handed out the schedule. The workshops involved six weeks of teamwork, dramatic writing consultations, and a final presentation before representatives of several radio stations and independent producers. Three selected audio dramas would receive the opportunity for further development through a partnership program. Broadcast wasn't guaranteed, but for me, this was a chance to finally step out of the shadow of other people's names.

The problem arose when we began discussing the rules.

"Materials used in the presentation must be made available to the organizer to the extent necessary for screenings and project evaluation," Magda explained. "We'll sign the detailed consent forms before production work begins."

I raised my hand.

"What if the author has individual agreements with the people recorded and isn't authorized to transfer those rights?"

"We consider those situations individually."

"I didn't see that option in the form."

Emil looked at me over his printed schedule.

"We can discuss it after class."

"I'd rather discuss it now, so everyone knows the rules."

For a moment, he studied me without speaking. He didn't look offended.

"All right. The organizer needs limited permission to present the work, not the right to control the entire piece. The form is indeed worded too broadly. I'll ask for a revised version."

I hadn't expected him to concede so quickly. In fact, I had already prepared several arguments, and now I had nowhere to use them.

"Thank you," I said.

"Don't thank me for something that should be obvious."

There was no irony in his voice. I remembered that sentence more clearly than the entire presentation that had preceded it.

Before the break, participants were asked to play excerpts from their projects. Mine was chosen third. When the elderly woman's voice emerged from the speakers, I stopped watching the room. I knew every hesitation in her speech and every creak of her chair. I had spent so many hours working on that recording that I could replay it in my memory without headphones.

The woman spoke about the last letter she had received from the man she had loved from a distance. She said she knew the way he placed his commas but had never discovered what he looked like when he laughed.

Then came the silence.

Seven seconds.

Nobody moved.

When the recording ended, Emil didn't immediately turn on the lights.

"Is that silence authentic?" he asked.

"Yes. I didn't shorten it."

"Good."

That was all. And yet, in that single word, I heard the recognition I had needed for a long time.

After a moment, he switched on the lights.

"I have one concern about the structure. For most of the story, the listener gets to know only one side of the relationship. I don't know who the absent man was. And I don't know whether the author really wants me to know him."

"Because this story belongs to the woman who was left behind," I replied.

"Of course. But if you're telling a story about two people, you can't pretend the second person exists only in the first person's imagination."

It was a reasonable observation.

Which was precisely why it irritated me so much.

"I'm not going to invent a voice for him."

"I'm not asking you to invent anything. I'm asking you to consider whether the absence of his voice is an artistic decision or a convenient way of avoiding a difficult question."

I looked at him carefully.

"Do you always talk to people like this?"

"Like what?"

"As though you already know the answer but want them to figure it out for themselves."

For a brief moment, an unreadable expression crossed his face.

"I don't always know the answer, Ms. Wrona."

We didn't continue the conversation. Magda announced the break, and I went out into the corridor feeling as though someone had just touched the weakest point of my project.

Beside the coffee machine, I took out my phone. A message from Północ was waiting on the screen.

How did the first confrontation go?

Sandra: I've encountered a man who thinks he knows my story better than I do.

Północ: Maybe he saw something in it that you're not ready to see yet.

I pressed my lips together.

Sandra: Do you always have to defend the other side?

Północ: Only when the first side is being exceptionally stubborn.

I shook my head. He knew me far too well. He knew that when I used the word "always," I was usually beginning to run out of arguments.

"The machine swallows coins," someone said behind me.

Emil stood a few steps away, holding his own cup.

"Maybe it's trying to reduce caffeine consumption," I replied.

"In that case, it's more responsible than most people in this building."

He approached the machine and pressed a button I hadn't noticed earlier. The machine made a protesting noise before starting normally.

"Not everything has to be fixed by force," he said.

"I'll remember that. It might come in handy during our consultations."

He laughed. Up close, I noticed lighter strands among his dark hair and a small crease that appeared beside his left eye. He smelled of coffee and something fresh, perhaps cedarwood. I registered these details with irritating precision.

"May I suggest something regarding your project?" he asked.

"You can try."

"Let's put the structure aside for a moment. I'd like you to play the first five minutes without music or atmospheric sound. Just the voice."

"Why?"

"Because I want to hear what's already there before we start adding anything."

This time, I couldn't find a reason to object.

When we returned to the room, my phone vibrated again.

Północ: And remember, sometimes the most honest answer is admitting that there's something you don't know yet.

I read the sentence twice.

Emil stopped by the door.

"Everything all right?"

"Yes. Someone's giving me unsolicited advice."

"Good advice?"

"Unfortunately."

He smiled, but his expression soon grew serious.

"Be careful around people who always know what you should do."

"Why?"

"Because even when they're right sometimes, it's easy to mistake their certainty for your own."

It sounded so familiar that, for a moment, I couldn't find anything to say.

The real confrontation came an hour later, when Emil invited me into a small control room for an individual consultation. There were two armchairs, a mixing console,

and an enormous window overlooking the recording studio. We sat beside each other, maintaining a respectable distance, but the room suddenly seemed smaller anyway.

Emil opened my project file.

"I'd like to suggest a change in how the story unfolds."

"And I'd like to retain control of my material."

"The two aren't mutually exclusive."

"That depends on what you're suggesting."

He moved the cursor to the section where the protagonist recalled the first message she had received.

"I'd like the listener to hear a few authentic letters before the ending. Not as reconstructed dialogue, but as a separate layer of the narrative. We could use archival recordings of the letters being read aloud, if any exist, or arrange a reading that clearly identifies the performance as an interpretation."

"I don't have permission to publish private correspondence."

"I know. That's why I'm discussing a possibility, not presenting a finished solution."

"And what if the woman refuses?"

"Then we'll find another way. But we have to ask her."

I turned toward him.

"I'm not going to pressure her just because the final selection committee needs a stronger ending."

Emil turned as well. Little more than the width of our armrests separated us.

"I don't want a stronger ending for the committee. I want a more honest story. There's a difference."

"More honest for whom?"

"For the listener. And for your protagonist."

For the first time that day, he addressed me informally. I noticed immediately.

I didn't correct him.

"If I'm going to make that decision, I need to be certain nobody will use my material without my permission."

"You have my word."

"Your word isn't enough."

He fell silent. He didn't take offense or try to persuade me with another argument. He simply closed the file and moved his hands away from the keyboard.

"Then let's put the rules in writing."

Only then did I truly begin to listen to him.

During our conversation, a notification appeared on his monitor from a communication platform I had used for years. Its icon was distinctive: a small white microphone against a navy-blue background. Emil quickly dismissed the notification. I had no reason to take an interest in his private messages, but I recognized the application.

"You use Głos Po Godzinach too?" I asked.

He went still for a fraction of a second.

"Occasionally."

"I thought all the professionals had moved somewhere else years ago."

"Some people like familiar places."

"So do I."

I smiled, remembering my first argument with Północ.

"I once had an argument with someone there about the ending of an audio drama. He thought the heroine should stay."

Emil didn't answer immediately.

"And you?"

"That she should leave."

"Who won?"

"I did. Obviously."

He tilted his head back slightly, as though trying not to laugh.

"Naturally."

There was something so familiar about his tone that I fell silent.

"What screen name do you use?" I asked.

He glanced at the screen.

"Why do you ask?"

"Curiosity."

"And yours?"

For two years, I had protected this one part of my life from strangers. I hadn't planned to reveal it to a man I had known for only a few hours. Yet suddenly, I wanted to test my suspicion.

"Latarnia."

Emil slowly raised his eyes.

A silence fell between us, different from any we had analyzed together that day.

"Latarnia," he repeated.

"Do you know it?"

Instead of answering, he took out his phone. For a moment, he looked at the screen. Then he placed the device between us so I could see the open conversation.

At the top was my screen name.

Latarnia.

Beneath it was the last message I had sent to Północ.

Do you always have to defend the other side?

It felt as though someone had suddenly muted the entire room.

"No," I said.

Emil didn't move.

"Sandra..."

"No. That's impossible."

For two years, I had imagined the man on the other side of the screen in dozens of different ways. Never, however, had I imagined him in a well-cut charcoal-gray shirt, sitting beside me at a radio mixing console.

"Północ?" I asked, almost in a whisper.

He nodded.

He watched me carefully, as though waiting for a reaction he couldn't predict.

"It's really you?"

"Yes."

I gave a short laugh, more out of disbelief than amusement.

"We've talked almost every day for two years, and you've spent half the day criticizing my project?"

"I didn't know you'd see it that way."

"How else was I supposed to see it?"

"As a conversation between two people who don't always agree."

That was exactly the kind of thing Północ would say.

Suddenly, I remembered all our late-night conversations. Messages sent at two in the morning. Confessions I had never spoken aloud. Moments when I wrote to him about loneliness, and he didn't immediately try to fix it.

Now that man was sitting beside me. I could see his hands, hear him breathe, notice the tension along his jaw.

"When did you figure it out?" I asked.

Emil hesitated.

"What you said about listening to silence... Then you mentioned the forum."

"So today?"

"Sandra, this is a lot for both of us to take in."

He hadn't answered directly. At the time, I assumed he was also trying to organize his thoughts.

"Why didn't you say anything sooner?"

"I wanted to be sure it really was you."

It didn't sound entirely convincing, but the situation was too extraordinary for me to start interrogating him.

For a moment, neither of us spoke.

"Do you know what the worst part is?" I finally asked.

"What?"

"For two years, I've been imagining your voice. And now I'm going to have to revise everything."

He smiled slowly.

"Is it very different from what you imagined?"

I looked at him. The warm, slightly husky voice I had been listening to since the workshops began suddenly acquired an entirely new meaning.

"I don't know yet," I admitted.

Emil moved his phone aside.

"We can still talk the way we used to."

"No, we can't."

His smile disappeared.

"Why not?"

"Because before, you didn't know what I looked like when you were hiding something from me. Now I'll be able to see it."

I said it half jokingly.

I didn't yet know how terribly true those words would turn out to be.

Chapter 2 - Without Anonymity

On Monday morning, I found an email from Emil Jarosz in my inbox.

Not from Północ.

From a man whose surname appeared in his professional email signature, alongside a telephone number and the name of his studio.

The subject line read: Between the Lines — Proposed Terms of Collaboration.

I opened the attachment before I had even taken off my coat. The document was four pages long. Emil had outlined the scope of consultations, the schedule, the method of sharing recordings, and the procedure for approving changes. The most important sentence appeared near the beginning: the rights to the source materials and the final authorial version would remain mine. The organizer would receive only limited permission to use selected excerpts during the workshops and final presentation.

I read it twice.

On Friday, after discovering our online connection, we had parted in such an awkward atmosphere that I couldn't decide until late that evening whether I was amused, embarrassed, or angry. Over the weekend, we had exchanged only a handful of messages. Neither of us knew how to write to the other now that the anonymity that had allowed us to say almost anything had suddenly disappeared.

Now Emil had sent me a document proving that he had taken my concerns seriously.