Laura Bellini

Your Name After Midnight

Two voices. One night they can't leave unspoken



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INTRO

At eleven forty-seven that night, I found myself alone in a radio studio with a man whose voice I had listened to for the past three years, although I had never had the slightest desire to meet him in person.

I hadn't planned the encounter. In fact, I'd spent the entire day doing everything I could to avoid it.

On the screen in front of me, the sound design for a new late-night program flickered into shape. Twelve tracks, four versions of the opening sequence, dozens of hours of recordings, and one idea that might finally lift me out of my role as the woman who moved the faders.

For six weeks, I'd been developing a format in which listeners didn't merely tell their stories. They helped turn them into audio portraits. Each night would belong to one person. Their voice, their city, the things they left unsaid.

I'd come up with the name during a sleepless morning.

Po północy.

After Midnight.

I'd already sent a preliminary outline to Marta, our programming director. The following morning, I was supposed to present the finished demo before we began the final season of the existing late-night show.

If the project was approved, I intended to negotiate a permanent production team of my own and official recognition as the format's creator.

Not another contract for technical support.

Not another thank-you buried in credits nobody read.

At thirty-one, I was tired of proving that I could do more than rescue other people's ideas.

I was adjusting the final transition when the light above the control-room door came on.

Someone had entered the studio.

I couldn't hear his footsteps through my headphones. I only saw his reflection in the glass separating the control room from the microphones. Tall, wearing a dark shirt with the sleeves rolled up, he set a paper coffee cup on the desk and looked directly at my reflection.

Leon Brzeski.

Thirty-five years old, the most popular late-night voice at our station, and a man routinely forgiven for things that earned everyone else a reprimand.

Late entrances. Scripts changed without consultation. Conversations with callers that ran far beyond their allotted time.

There was something about him that made people keep listening even when he wasn't saying anything particularly remarkable.

I turned back to the mixing console.

"The studio's occupied," I said over the intercom.

Leon pressed the talkback button.

"I noticed. That's why I haven't switched on the microphone."

His voice sounded different without the station's compression. Lower, slightly rough around the edges. As though it retained things the broadcast equipment usually smoothed away.

"I've booked the studio until midnight."

"And my show starts at midnight."

"Then you've got thirteen minutes to get ready."

Through the glass, I saw him smile. Not broadly. It was more an expression of interest, one that seemed unnecessarily personal.

"You're Sara Wójcik."

"Congratulations on finding the staff schedule."

"I've heard your work."

My cursor stopped moving.

"Everyone who turns on the radio hears my work."

"I'm not talking about your engineering. I'm talking about the recording of the woman taking a night tram back to an empty apartment."

I looked at him more carefully.

That was the demo for my project. Unreleased. Marta wasn't even supposed to receive it until the following morning.

"How did you get it?"

Leon straightened, as though he'd only just realized the conversation was no longer harmless.

"Marta played me a section after this afternoon's meeting. She wanted my opinion."

I felt a familiar stab of irritation. Not because someone had evaluated my work, but because, once again, they'd done it without involving me.

"Interesting. She didn't ask whether I wanted your opinion."

"I didn't say I gave her one."

"Did you?"

He didn't answer immediately. Instead, he stepped closer to the glass.

"I told her that for the first thirty seconds, I could hear rain, even though it wasn't raining in the recording."

I went still.

In the original material, the woman described the night she'd left her husband. Behind her voice were the sounds of a tram, traffic signals at an intersection, and car tires rolling over wet asphalt.

There really hadn't been any rain.

I'd created the impression of it by carefully layering those sounds because the woman had said the whole city seemed wet to her that night.

"And?" I asked, more cautiously now.

"Nothing. That's exactly why it was good."

I hated compliments that sounded as though someone had looked beneath my skin.

I turned back to the monitor and muted the track.

"I need a few more minutes."

"I won't disturb you."

I should have accepted that promise. Instead, I glanced over my shoulder.

"You already are."

This time, he genuinely smiled.

"Understood. I'll keep quiet."

He sat down on the other side of the glass, took a notebook from his bag, and opened it on his lap.

For a while, he really did remain silent.

Unfortunately, I couldn't return to my work.

I was used to people entering a studio and immediately occupying every inch of available space. Leon was doing something considerably more irritating.

He was letting me decide whether I wanted to pay attention to him.

At eleven fifty-six, Marta called.

I answered without removing my headphones.

"Sara, a small change of plans. Tomorrow at ten, the three of us are meeting. You, me, and Leon. I want to see whether we can use your idea in the final season of his show."

"My idea is supposed to be a separate format."

"I know. We'll discuss it."

"Marta, I made it perfectly clear in the document—"

"I've read it. I'm not making any decisions yet. But I need something that will keep our late-night audience before the schedule changes. Leon has the listeners. You have the concept. Let's give this a chance."

The call ended.

For several seconds, I stared at my phone's dark screen.

I knew how these experiments usually ended. One person presented a concept, someone else became its public face, and the name of the person who had created the entire thing disappeared beneath the words production support.

I removed my headphones.

Leon looked up when I entered the studio.

"Did you know about tomorrow's meeting?"

He closed his notebook.

"I knew Marta wanted to discuss the new season. I didn't know she was planning to bring your project into it."

I had no reason to call him a liar.

I had no reason to trust him, either.

"I don't want you becoming the face of something I created."

He stood.

Only now, from this close, did I notice the fine lines at the corners of his eyes and the pale scar cutting through one eyebrow. He smelled of cold air, coffee, and something subtly woody.

He stood close enough for me to notice, but made no attempt to narrow the distance.

"Then don't let anyone take it away from you," he said.

"Not even you?"

"Especially me."

His answer knocked the argument I'd prepared right out of my head.

He glanced at the clock above the door.

"One minute until midnight. I have to start."

He passed me, then stopped at the threshold.

"Sara?"

I turned.

"What did you call your project?"

For a moment, I considered whether to tell him. The name wasn't registered, the proposal hadn't been approved, and I already had more than enough reasons to be careful.

"Po północy. After Midnight."

Leon repeated the two Polish words slowly, as though testing how they sounded without music.

Then he nodded.

"It suits you."

"You don't know me."

"That's true."

He said nothing more.

When I returned to the control room, the red ON AIR light came on.

Leon put on his headphones, drew the microphone closer to his mouth, and waited for the final notes of music to fade.

"Good evening, Wrocław," he said calmly. "It's a few minutes past midnight. If someone made you an important promise today and then couldn't find the courage to keep it, you can call me. Tonight, we're going to talk about the price of silence."

He looked through the glass, straight at me.

I didn't know whether the introduction was a coincidence or a deliberate provocation.

I only knew that the man sitting before me could give silence meaning with a single sentence. And that tomorrow, I would have to sit across from him and defend the most important project of my life.

I rested my fingers on the fader controlling his microphone.

For the first time in years, I wasn't sure which possibility frightened me more: that Leon Brzeski might take my voice away from me, or that one day I might want to give it to him myself.

Chapter 1 - The Voice That Couldn't Be Silenced

By nine fifty-eight the following morning, I knew three things. Marta had no intention of apologizing for sharing my recording without permission. Leon Brzeski was not a man who could easily be ignored. And the coffee from the vending machine on the second floor tasted even worse after three hours of sleep.

I stood outside the conference room with my laptop tucked under my arm, reviewing my presentation for the fourth time. Not because anything was missing. I needed to keep my hands occupied so I wouldn't do something unreasonable, such as walk into the programming director's office and ask when creative ownership had become a matter of professional courtesy at our station.

Through the glass doors, I could see Marta talking on the phone. She wore a navy suit and the same expression she usually had when informing people that their budget had just run out.

Three printed copies of my proposal lay on the table.

Three.

So this wasn't going to be an innocent discussion of an idea.

"You look as though you're preparing a lawsuit."

The voice came from behind me.

I didn't need to turn around.

"I was leaning more toward murder, but a lawsuit sounds sensible."

Leon stopped beside me. He looked surprisingly awake for someone who had finished broadcasting only a few hours earlier. His dark hair was slightly disheveled, a scarf hung around his neck, and a leather briefcase rested beneath one arm.

He wasn't carrying coffee. I noticed this with an absurd flicker of disappointment, as though being a late-night presenter obliged him to have a paper cup permanently attached to his hand.

"Should I be worried?" he asked.

"Depends how attached you are to your own opinions."

"Less attached to some of them than people think."

"Excellent. Start with the ones about my project."

He studied me for a moment. There was no amused superiority in his expression, no attempt to soften me up with a compliment.

"I didn't come here to take your format away from you, Sara."

It was the first time I'd heard him say my name in ordinary daylight. In the studio at night, his voice had sounded different, as though the surrounding silence made room for it. Here, in a corridor smelling of cleaning products and overheated plastic, it remained just as dangerously attentive.

"In that case, we might actually finish this meeting before eleven."

Marta opened the door before he could answer.

"Good. You're both here. Come in."

I sat on one side of the table. Leon chose the seat opposite me rather than the one beside Marta. I couldn't tell

whether it was deliberate, and I preferred not to attach meaning to his every movement.

Marta brought up the proposed schedule.

"The situation is straightforward. In eight weeks, we're changing the format of our overnight programming. Head office wants more digital content, shorter excerpts, and material that can be published independently of the broadcast. Leon's current show will end with this season. But I don't want us to say goodbye to our listeners with eight weeks of nostalgic retrospectives."

She looked at me.

"Sara has developed a concept that could give that final season a completely different character."

She pushed a printed copy toward me.

"Tell us about it."

I opened my laptop. The title Po północy appeared on the first slide, with my name beneath it. I'd deliberately made the lettering large.

"I want to create eight nighttime audio portraits, each built around one person's story. I'm not interested in confessions for the sake of confessions. The subject tells us about a moment when something in their life changed, and the sounds of their everyday world become part of the narrative."

I spoke calmly, although I was still angry about the previous evening. I showed them the episode structure, the proposed recording process, and a sample sequence based on the woman's journey home by tram.

"The presenter shouldn't tell listeners what they're supposed to feel. His job is to listen, ask questions, and leave room for the person speaking."

"So I should talk less," Leon said.

"Considerably less."

Marta burst out laughing.

Leon nodded as though I'd just given him a useful piece of professional advice.

"That might be the hardest thing I've ever done in radio."

I didn't smile.

Although I wanted to.

I moved on to the budget. I needed an editor, someone responsible for coordinating with interview subjects, additional studio time, and a guarantee that the original recordings wouldn't be chopped into arbitrary little videos.

Marta listened, pressing her lips together more tightly with every item.

"It's a good project," she said eventually. "But it's expensive."

"Less expensive than spending eight weeks promoting a new schedule without having anything worthwhile to offer."

"Sara..."

"I've done the calculations. The digital version will allow us to use the material after the broadcasts are finished."

Leon leaned over the proposal.

"I have one question."

I braced myself for a suggestion that we simplify the whole thing into a series of telephone interviews.

"Go ahead."

"What happens if the person we're interviewing doesn't want to answer the most important question?"

"Then they don't answer."

"Even if the story falls apart without it?"

"Then we find another story. Or we tell this one honestly, including the silence."

"And what if that silence turns out to be the most important part?"

We looked at each other across the table.

It was a good question. Not a production question, not something asked to demonstrate his experience. It went straight to the heart of my idea.

"Then we won't pretend we know the answer," I said. "We'll let the listener hear where the boundary is."

Leon leaned back.

"I can work with that."

Marta folded her hands.

"Excellent. Then we're in agreement."

"Not yet," we said simultaneously.

I shot him an irritated look.

He raised his eyebrows.

Marta sighed.

"Sara first."

"I want written confirmation that I created the concept and that I'm responsible for its sound design. I also need a production team that won't be changed every week depending on staffing shortages."

"I can't guarantee you a permanent team for the future today."

"I'm not asking you to guarantee the future of the entire station. I'm asking for the conditions necessary to deliver this project and a clear decision about what happens to the format afterward."

Marta began taking notes.

"Leon?"

He put down his pen.

"I have a different condition. I don't want to read prepared questions or perform scripted empathy. If we're asking people to share genuine stories, I need freedom within the conversation. Otherwise the voice will be mine, but the program will be lifeless."

"Freedom doesn't mean improvising at the expense of someone's trust," I said.

"I didn't say it did."

"Last night you kept a caller on air for twenty-six minutes when the slot was scheduled for twelve."

"Because after twelve minutes, he finally said something he'd never been able to say before."

"And after twenty-six minutes, the engineer had to cut two prepared segments."

"I know."

He said it so matter-of-factly that I lost my rhythm.

"You know?"

"I checked the report this morning. It was my decision and my scheduling mistake. I don't regret the conversation, but I

should have warned the engineer that I intended to let it run longer."

I hadn't expected him to concede the point.

Especially not without qualifications.

Marta glanced at her watch.

"I need something I can take to the board. Not a philosophical dispute about the nature of radio."

"Then we need time for a trial run," Leon said.

"What kind of trial?" I asked.

"One complete interview. Not for broadcast. You decide how it sounds. I decide how I conduct the conversation. Then we see whether those two things can become something worth sharing with an audience."

I studied him more closely.

There was something tempting about his suggestion. Instead of promises, we'd have evidence. At the same time, it meant allowing Leon into material over which I'd previously had complete control.

"Under my rules for access to the recordings," I said.

"And without editing my words to make me sound cleverer than I actually was."

"That could be difficult."

He laughed softly.

Marta raised a hand.

"Enough. I'm giving you forty-eight hours to prepare a sample. If it's good, we'll launch the season. Sara will prepare the division of responsibilities and the budget. Leon will take responsibility for the presenting. We'll negotiate the rights to the format separately."

I didn't like that last sentence.

"Before production is formally approved," I insisted.

"Before production is formally approved," Marta repeated.

The meeting ended, but instead of relief, I felt a new weight settling over me.

I had the opportunity I'd been working toward for months. Its success now depended partly on a man whose professional reputation rested on doing things his own way.

Back in the control room, I found a message from Iga, the editor I'd worked with on most of my more demanding projects.

Apparently Brzeski's got your format. Should I give you a hug or fetch a shovel?

I replied that both might come in handy.

Then I opened the document containing my proposed working arrangements.

Fifteen minutes later, someone knocked.

Leon stood in the doorway holding two bottles of water.

"I don't know whether you accept bribes."

"Depends how generous they are."

"Mineral water is all I can afford at the moment."

He placed one bottle on the table and remained near the entrance.

"Can we talk?"

"We're talking now."

"Without Marta. And without an audience."

I indicated an empty chair.

He sat, but didn't speak immediately. For a while, he studied the board above my console, where I pinned deadlines and brief notes.

In the center, written in red marker, was a sentence:

Don't fix emotions with music.

"Is that yours?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because people often add sentimental music when they're afraid to let an ordinary human voice speak for itself."

Leon looked at me.

"And you're not afraid?"

"I am. That's why I know how easy it is to deceive people with sound."

He was silent for a moment.

"That's exactly why I want you directing the creative side of this project."

"This morning, I thought you wanted to take it over."

"I want a say in the interviews. There's a difference."

"A rather convenient difference for someone in your position."

He accepted the criticism without protesting.

"Probably. But I don't expect you to take my word for it."

I got up to close the window. Noise from construction work in the courtyard was making it difficult to concentrate, and cold air had begun filling the room.

When I returned to the table, Leon was still waiting. He hadn't attempted to look at the document open on my screen.

"I want to know why this matters so much to you," I said. "Your show has a loyal audience. You could comfortably host the final eight weeks and leave with your reputation intact."

At the word leave, his hand moved slightly.

"Because I don't want to spend eight weeks pretending nothing is coming to an end."

For the first time since we'd met, his voice lost its characteristic lightness.

"And what do you want to do afterward?"

He looked at the cap of his water bottle.

"I don't know exactly yet."

I said nothing.

He didn't owe me a career plan. Still, something about the way he'd answered suggested that uncertainty wasn't the whole story.

"That's a problem," I said eventually. "Because I know what I want afterward. I need people who can build something with me for longer than one season."

"I understand."

"Do you?"

"I understand that you don't want to invest all that work in someone who might disappear after the final broadcast."

He'd expressed my concern more precisely than I'd intended to.

"Exactly."

Leon rose from his chair.

"Then let's begin with something we can honestly promise each other. For these eight weeks, I'll do my share of the work. And if my plans change, I'll tell you before it affects the project."

I watched him for several seconds.

"That's not a guarantee."

"No. I'm not going to pretend it is."

I disliked uncertainty.

But I disliked people who made impossible promises merely to end an uncomfortable conversation even more.

I pointed to his notebook.

"What's in there?"

"Ideas for questions."

"Already?"

"I started last night."

He took it out and handed it to me, open at the first page.

At the top was a single sentence.

Whose name do you say only when no one is listening?

I read it twice.

It wasn't theatrical. It didn't try to force a confession. And yet I could imagine the silence that might follow such a question.

"That could be too intimate," I said.

"Maybe. We don't have to ask it."

"But you want to."

"I want to know whether the person sitting across from me will choose to answer."

I handed back the notebook.

"Then we have to learn to distinguish curiosity from the right to an answer."

Leon closed it slowly.

"I have a feeling you'll remind me of that often."

"If necessary."

He paused at the door.

"Sara?"

"Yes?"

"Yesterday you said I was disturbing you."

"I stand by that."

"Good."

I frowned.

"Good?"

"Because I get the impression that if you were completely indifferent to me, we'd have finished this conversation a long time ago."

Before I could find a response, he left.

I remained at the console, staring at the closed door. It irritated me that he'd allowed himself a personal remark in a place that was supposed to remain strictly professional.

What irritated me even more was that I couldn't honestly dismiss it as entirely inaccurate.

I reopened the document containing our working arrangements and added the first sentence.

No creative decisions without the other person's knowledge and consent.

I studied the words for a moment.

I didn't yet know how badly I would need them.

Chapter 2 - The Terms of Closeness

Over the following twenty-four hours, I discovered that working with Leon Brzeski required two things: patience and the ability to distinguish between the moments when his silence meant agreement and those when he was preparing a counterargument.

At ten that morning, I sent him the document outlining the rules for our trial production. At ten-oh-seven, I received a reply containing three comments.

The first concerned his freedom to ask additional questions. The second addressed an interview subject's right to withdraw part of a recording before publication.

The third was unexpected.

I'd like you to be present during the interview, not just the editing.

I read the sentence several times.

Not because the suggestion was especially personal. Having a sound engineer present during a radio interview was hardly unusual. But Leon hadn't written that he needed someone to operate the equipment.

He'd written that he wanted me there.

I replied that I would be directing the production and had no intention of handing responsibility for the material to anyone else.

His answer arrived almost immediately.

That's exactly what I meant.

I smiled at the monitor before I could stop myself.

Iga, sitting beside me while she edited an advertisement for a local car dealership, gave me a suspicious look.

"If you tell me Brzeski's charming, I'm going to lose all respect for you."

"I haven't said anything of the sort."

"You're smiling."

"Because I've found a mistake in the schedule."

"Since when do scheduling mistakes cheer you up?"

I moved her cup of tea away before she spilled it over her keyboard.

"Since certain people became incapable of minding their own business."

Iga laughed, but her expression soon grew serious.

"Be careful with this project, Sara. Marta loves the idea, but if the season succeeds, everyone's going to remember Leon's voice."

"That's why I'm documenting every decision."

"I'm not just talking about paperwork."

I looked at her.

"Then what?"

"You. You're putting more than work into this. I don't want you to end up dealing with the consequences alone again."

I knew what she meant.

Two years earlier, I'd helped create a series of radio documentaries about women running family businesses. I'd developed the concept, found the women who would feature in the episodes, and supervised the editing.

After the premiere, the presenter received an invitation to a festival, while I was asked to prepare the files for the archive.

It wasn't the recognition itself that hurt most.

It was that for months, nobody had even noticed the difference between carrying out instructions and creating something of my own.

"This time will be different," I said.

Iga nodded.

"I hope so."

At four that afternoon, Leon and I met in a small listening room lined with dark-gray acoustic foam.

He arrived on time, placed his notebook on the table, and took a printed copy of my document from his bag. Its margins were crowded with handwritten notes.

"I hope you won't take this as a declaration of war," he said.

"Depends how many changes you've made."

"Seven."

"So you've come prepared for battle."

He sat opposite me.

For the next hour, we discussed the sort of issues most productions postponed until the first serious disagreement.

Who had the authority to stop a recording. The interview subject's right to refuse a question. The boundary between shaping a compelling narrative and manipulating someone's emotions. Whether the presenter should be allowed to remove an awkward remark of his own when leaving it in would reveal something important about the conversation.