Laura Bellini



Say It Without a Joke

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ROMANS

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INTRO

For the first time in fifteen years, I had written a scene in which nobody said anything funny.

I was sitting alone in a radio studio in Wrocław, staring at two pages of a printed script. Beyond the control room window, green indicator lights glowed, and the air conditioning made a noise like someone who desperately wanted to sigh but couldn't because professional obligations wouldn't allow it. It was seven forty in the evening, most of the crew had gone home, and I had just committed the most serious crime of my career as a comedy writer: I had allowed a character to tell the truth.

"I love you," I read aloud.

The words sounded unfamiliar. Not because I had never said them myself. Quite the opposite. I knew them perfectly well, along with every possible way of immediately stripping them of their meaning.

My character, Marta, was supposed to follow that confession by explaining that she was, of course, talking about her love for the newly renovated kitchen. The audience was meant to laugh. Her partner would respond with a joke about their mortgage. Then came the music, the commercials, and the next episode.

That was the plan.

Except I had crossed out the punchline.

I had done it deliberately, with full awareness of what I was doing, and in defiance of three editorial notes I had received that afternoon.

A message from Iga appeared on my phone. She was my best friend and the only person who knew that, for the past several months, I had been preparing something more ambitious than another batch of radio romances with jokes woven into the background.

So? Did you tell them?

I replied that I hadn't. Not yet.

Business as usual, then. The great Aldona Mróz, who can make half of Poland laugh but can't ask for the one thing she actually wants.

I smiled reluctantly.

Iga had the irritating ability to get straight to the heart of things without bothering to build any dramatic tension first.

For six months, I had been working on an original audio drama that didn't need canned laughter inserted at precisely calculated moments. A story about two people who kept meeting too late, making the wrong choices, and learning how to talk to each other only when they finally ran out of excuses. I had a completed pilot script, some preliminary interest from a small independent production company, and enough savings to avoid taking whatever work came my way for several months.

The only thing I lacked was the courage to leave the programme that had made me a recognisable name.

An envelope containing my notice of termination lay on the desk.

I had signed the document the previous evening, after a glass of red wine and a long conversation with my reflection in the bathroom mirror.

I had decided to hand it in the following morning.

What I hadn't anticipated was that someone would decide to change my plans before the evening was over.

The control room door opened without warning.

"I had a feeling I'd find someone here who doesn't respect working hours."

I looked up.

A man stood in the doorway wearing a dark shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a coat draped over his forearm. His dark hair was cut short, with a few silver strands at his temples, and he had the face of someone who rarely hurried because other people were generally expected to adjust to his pace.

I had never met him in person, but I recognised him immediately.

Błażej Ryba.

Forty-two years old. Radio producer. The man responsible for several critically acclaimed programmes and one I absolutely detested. For the past month, rumours had been circulating that he was about to take over supervision of our broadcasting slot.

Apparently, those rumours hadn't mentioned his fondness for unannounced visits.

"If you're looking for someone who respects working hours, I'd recommend the accounting department," I replied. "They leave exactly on time and never laugh at anything I write."

Instead of returning the joke, he glanced at the printed pages lying in front of me.

"Ms Mróz?"

"Depends who's asking and whether they've brought a termination notice."

"Błażej Ryba."

"I know. You have a surname that's perfect for comedy radio. It would be a shame not to make use of it."

He acknowledged the remark with a slight lift of his eyebrows, but he didn't smile immediately. Only when he placed his coat over the back of a chair did I catch the briefest movement at the corner of his mouth.

It didn't look like a polite smile.

It looked more like a sign that he had just decided not to make things easy for me.

"May I?" he asked, indicating the script.

"That depends. Are you planning to read it or rewrite it?"

"Read it first."

I handed him the pages.

He stood beside the mixing console for a moment, his eyes moving steadily down the lines. His hands were calm, and he read without the nervous page-turning producers usually employed to demonstrate just how valuable their time was.

The silence stretched unbearably.

"There's no punchline," he said at last.

"I know."

"On purpose?"

"I do occasionally make conscious decisions."

He looked at me over the top of the page.

"Why did you remove it?"

I could have answered with a joke. I had at least four ready to go, each one waiting for its moment. One involved inflation, another the quality of modern marriages, the third our sponsor, and the fourth was so indecent that even Iga would have told me to think twice.

I used none of them.

"Because she really does love him," I said.

Błażej lowered the pages.

"I know."

That single word surprised me more than his entire unexpected visit.

"How?"

"Because I read the earlier scenes. In every one of them, she's trying to tell him something important, and he changes the subject. When she finally finds the courage to say it, you make her crack a joke about the kitchen. It would be a shame to waste that moment."

For several seconds, I studied him without speaking.

Most producers talked about pacing, the appeal of the dialogue, and keeping listeners tuned in until the commercial break. This man had noticed something I hadn't even discussed with my editor.

"Our listeners expect comedy," I reminded him.

"Does that mean they can't hear a genuine declaration of love?"

"They can. But most of the time, someone immediately adds a joke."

"And you?"

I knew he was asking about the script.

Even so, the question felt as though it concerned something far more personal.

"I get paid to do exactly that."

This time, he smiled.

Slowly, without haste, as though he knew he shouldn't encourage me but couldn't quite help himself.

"In that case, we're paying you far too much to avoid answering questions."

I laughed before I had time to decide whether I wanted to concede the point.

My phone vibrated. Another message from Iga appeared on the screen.

Don't back out tomorrow. You promised yourself a new life.

I turned the phone face down on the desk.

Błażej noticed the movement but made no attempt to read the message. That small act of restraint impressed me more than I expected.

"I came to discuss a new project," he said. "A romantic comedy. I want you to write it."

I glanced at the envelope protruding from beneath my notebook.

"You might be too late with that offer."

"Perhaps. But you haven't heard it yet."

I walked over to the glass separating the control room from the empty studio.

In the reflection, I could see both of us: me, with my hair loosely tied at the nape of my neck, and him standing beside the table, my pages still in his hand.

I was thirty-eight years old, and for the first time in a long while, I knew exactly what I wanted.

All I had to do was say it aloud.

Instead, I found myself wondering why a man I had met only minutes earlier had so easily understood the meaning of a scene everyone else had overlooked.

"What if I don't want to write comedy anymore?" I asked.

Błażej didn't answer immediately.

He placed the script on the table and came to stand beside me, leaving enough space between us for me to move away comfortably if I wanted to.

"Then I'd like to know what you want to write instead."

One of the studio's automatically controlled lights went out.

In the darkened glass, our reflections became clearer.

I could still treat this conversation as a professional game.

Or I could tell the truth.

So why was it that, standing beside Błażej Ryba, a stranger with an unsettlingly attentive gaze, the second possibility seemed both so tempting and so dangerous?

Chapter 1 - The Price of a Good Punchline

The following morning, I arrived at the studio twenty minutes early to do something I had been working up the courage to do for six months. The envelope containing my resignation was in my handbag, tucked between my wallet and a crumpled packet of tissues. Throughout the tram journey, I kept checking that it was still there, as though I suspected the document might seize the first opportunity to escape. I was determined. At least until I had to explain my decision to another human being.

At the entrance to the control room, I found a note taped to the glass.

Concept meeting. Room B. 9:00 a.m. Aldona Mróz's attendance is mandatory.

Signed: Błażej Ryba.

"Of course," I muttered. "Some men bring flowers. Others organise meetings."

In Room B, I found coffee, two copies of a script, and the man who had asked me the previous evening what I really wanted to write. Błażej was wearing a light-coloured shirt, this time without a jacket. He sat at the table with his laptop open, and when I entered, he closed it so decisively that I felt an unpleasant flicker of satisfaction.

"Good morning, Ms Mróz."

"That remains to be seen."

"Coffee?"

"As long as it isn't part of some elaborate negotiating trap."

"Black, no sugar. That's how you drank it yesterday."

I stopped beside the chair.

He remembered.

There was nothing particularly remarkable about it, and yet I registered the detail with irritating precision.

"Do you observe all your employees so carefully?"

"Only the ones a project's success depends on."

"So I shouldn't feel special."

"I didn't say that."

I sat opposite him, carefully positioning my handbag beside the chair leg. Błażej slid a printed document towards me. It was titled Love on the Frequency. Beneath it was my name, accompanied by a note: Concept for joint development.

I didn't like that note.

What I liked even less was that someone had used my name before I'd agreed to anything.

"Where did you get this?"

"From the programme director. She introduced you as the best dialogue writer she'd ever worked with."

"That's nice. Usually she introduces me as someone who misses deadlines and questions her decisions."

"She mentioned that too."

I opened the document.

The characters were called Marta and Adam, but apart from their names, very little resembled the story I had been

developing over the past several months. Someone had added a misunderstanding involving an engagement ring, two arguments in a restaurant, and an ending in which the heroine forgave her partner for everything because he'd hired an orchestra.

"Who wrote this?"

"The creative team."

"Please tell the creative team that people don't stop being idiots just because violins are playing behind them."

Błażej leaned back in his chair.

"What would you suggest?"

"Starting with honesty. Marta doesn't want another grand gesture. She wants to know whether Adam is capable of staying beside her when there's no audience."

"It's a romantic comedy."

"Exactly. Which is why it ought to be about love, not hiring musicians."

He studied me for a moment.

He didn't look amused or offended.

That was the worst part. I knew how to persuade outraged people and disarm amused ones. Błażej gave the impression that he was genuinely considering my arguments.

"I want six pilot episodes," he announced. "Thirty minutes each. Two main characters, self-contained secondary storylines, and one clearly defined central conflict. After six episodes, we evaluate the results and decide whether to commission a full season."

"What do you expect from me?"

"I want you to write the series."

"And if I refuse?"

"I'll find someone else."

He said it without applying any pressure.

That calm answer deprived me of the speech I had prepared about creative independence. I was accustomed to producers who insisted that I ought to be grateful for the opportunity to work.

He was leaving the choice to me.

"Do you have someone who could replace me?"

"A few names."

"Then why are we having this conversation?"

Błażej leaned forward across the table.

"Because I read your script. The real one, not the version prepared by the team."

I felt cold, although the room was definitely too warm.

"Which script?"

"The material you left in the control room yesterday."

"Two pages."

"They were enough to make me understand that you don't want to write the way you used to."

I remained silent.

He hadn't said it accusingly, but I felt exposed. For years, I had carefully kept Aldona Mróz, the writer of witty dialogue, separate from the woman who sometimes couldn't sleep because she had spent too long thinking about a single sentence.

"I have a project of my own," I finally said.

"I know you're working on something. I don't know the details."

"And I don't intend to abandon it."

"I'm not asking you to."

"But you want my time, my name, and my ideas."

"Yes."

"At least you're shamelessly honest."

"I try to save my shamelessness for important occasions."

I caught myself smiling.

Then immediately became serious again.

Błażej opened his laptop and showed me the schedule. The first version of the pilot was due in three weeks. A trial recording with actors was planned for six weeks from now. The project had its own budget, a separate team, and the possibility of later distribution beyond the station's regular schedule.

"There's one condition," he said.

"Naturally. I was beginning to worry you'd remain reasonable all the way through."

"I don't want us to write another story about people who spend ten episodes avoiding a conversation when one honest sentence would solve everything."

I gave a short laugh.

"You've just described eighty percent of romantic comedies."

"I know. I'd like to make something better."

"At the expense of audience figures?"

"If necessary."

I studied him more carefully.

"That's easy to say when you're not the one paying for your ambition."

"I'm responsible for the budget. You're responsible for the story. We'll both pay if it fails."

There was no exaggerated confidence in his voice.

For the first time, I noticed the exhaustion hidden beneath his composure. I didn't yet know whether it came from work or something more personal.

I took the envelope from my handbag and placed it in front of me.

"I came here today with this."

Błażej glanced at the document.

"Your resignation?"

"Yes."

"I understand."

"Aren't you going to ask why?"

"I could. But I wouldn't want you to feel that you owe me an explanation."

For a moment, I had no idea what to say.

The man who had just offered me my biggest project in years wasn't trying to take advantage of my uncertainty.

That should have made my decision easier.

Instead, I found myself wanting to hear him say that he didn't want me to leave.

"You're irritating," I told him.

"That's the second time you've suggested that."

"Are you keeping statistics?"

"Only about interesting conversations."

I felt warmth rise into my cheeks and hated myself for reacting that way. At thirty-eight, I ought to have been capable of accepting a compliment without behaving like the heroine of a badly written romance.

I covered the envelope with my hand.

"If I were to accept your offer, I'd need complete control over the dialogue. No jokes added by people who think a woman over thirty is only funny when she's desperately searching for a husband."

"I agree with the direction. I can't promise there won't be editorial notes."

"I also want to choose my own script collaborator."

"We can discuss that."

"And no changes to the ending without my approval."

Błażej considered that for a moment.

"In that case, I have a condition of my own."

"I'm listening."

"We won't hide serious scenes behind jokes simply because we're afraid of their consequences."

I gave him a suspicious look.

"Are we talking about work?"

"About the script, Aldona."

I didn't answer.

Something about the way he said my name suddenly made me acutely aware of the clock ticking above the door.

"That's a difficult condition," I admitted.

"For you?"

"For anyone who's ever tried to tell another person something important."

Błażej stopped smiling.

For a brief moment, we looked at each other without the safe protection of professional arguments.

Then I pushed the envelope aside.

"I'm not promising I'll stay."

"I'm not expecting a promise."

"I need until tomorrow."

"All right."

"And don't think you've persuaded me with that calm voice of yours."

"The thought wouldn't dream of crossing my mind."

I stood, taking the script with me.

At the door, I stopped for one last moment.

"And you, Mr Ryba? Can you say something important without turning it into a joke?"

He didn't answer immediately.

"Professionally? Yes."

"And personally?"

His gaze settled on my face.

"I'm still working on that."

I left before I could respond with something I might later regret.

Before noon, I had a conversation with the programme director. I didn't hand in my resignation. Instead, I informed her that I needed two days to decide whether I wanted to continue working with the station. She was surprised but

agreed without much resistance. Apparently, the new project mattered a great deal to the station.

After the meeting, I shut myself inside a small editing room.

I took out my own script and read its final scene. In it, the heroine told a man that she loved him, even though he had never learned how to stay. There was no joke. No music. Only the silence following a sentence that could never be taken back.

That was when I understood that the silence was precisely what frightened me.

My phone rang a few minutes later.

"Well?" Iga asked.

"I didn't hand in my resignation."

"Aldona."

"I know."

"No, you don't. You promised yourself you wouldn't stay just because someone offered you a little more money and a new mug with the station's logo on it."

"Nobody offered me a mug."

"Outrageous. You should resign immediately."

I laughed, but this time laughter didn't solve the problem.

"I met a producer," I said.

Silence fell on the other end of the line.

"And?"

"He's intelligent. He listens. He doesn't treat me like a machine designed to produce punchlines."

"Sounds suspicious."

"Annoyingly handsome, too."

"Aha."

"Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"That meaningful 'aha'."

Iga sighed.

"I'm not worried that you've found someone attractive. I'm worried that you'll once again mistake someone's interest in you for a reason to give up your own plans."

Her words hurt because they touched something I had been trying to hide for a long time.

Several years earlier, I had stayed in a relationship much longer than I should have, convincing myself that love required patience. In reality, it had required me to occupy less and less space in my own life.

"I won't give up," I said quietly.

"Then make sure he understands that."

When the call ended, I returned to Room B.

Błażej was no longer there, but a sheet of paper lay on the table with a handwritten note.

If you decide to write the series, please begin with a scene in which the characters cannot tell the truth. I have a feeling you know something about that subject.

Beneath it was a telephone number.

I stared at the words for longer than was reasonable.

I didn't know whether Błażej Ryba had just presented me with a professional challenge or had read my life with dangerous accuracy.

All I knew was that, for the first time in months, I wanted to sit down and write not because I had to, but because someone had placed a question before me that I didn't know how to answer.

And that was considerably riskier than any contract.

Chapter 2 - The Rules of the Game

At nine o'clock the following morning, I sent Błażej a message.

I'll accept your offer if we meet outside the studio and talk like two adults who aren't trying to sell each other a vision of success.

He replied seven minutes later.

All right. A café on Włodkowica Street. Five thirty. No presentations or charts.

I added:

And no motivational speeches.

I'll try to survive without them.

For the rest of the day, I attempted to work on an overdue episode of the programme, but every sentence sounded artificial. Once again, the heroine was supposed to misunderstand something her fiancé said and start an argument that could have been resolved with a single question.

I wrote three versions of the scene.

All of them were technically correct.

Not one gave me any pleasure.

At four o'clock, I closed my laptop and looked at my reflection in the dark screen. I adjusted my hair, let it down, and then tied it back again. I was annoyed with myself for caring at all. After all, I was going to discuss work, not prepare for a date.

Eventually, I chose dark trousers, a simple blouse, and a coat.

No special effort.

At least, that was the version of events I intended to present to Iga if she asked.

The café was small, with wooden tables and windows overlooking a street wet from the rain. The air smelled of coffee, cinnamon, and freshly baked bread.

Błażej was sitting at a table near the back of the room. An espresso stood in front of him, with a notebook beside it.

When he saw me, he stood.

"Ms Mróz."

"If you're going to keep calling me 'Ms Mróz', I'll have to add it to my fee."

"Błażej."

"Aldona."

We shook hands.

His grip was firm without being demonstrative. He didn't hold my hand a second longer than politeness required.

For reasons I couldn't quite explain, I noticed that with disappointment.

We sat down.

I ordered tea with lemon, although I usually drank coffee. Błażej moved his notebook aside.

"Before we begin, I want to make something clear," he said.

"That sounds like the beginning of a conversation about budget cuts."

"I'm not going to ask you to give up your own project."

I looked at him more closely.

"You don't even know what it is."

"I don't need to. You told me it matters to you. That's enough for me to take it seriously."

I felt an uncomfortable tightness in my throat.

I had prepared myself to negotiate money, deadlines, and copyright. I hadn't expected the simple acknowledgement of my ambitions to provoke the strongest resistance in me.

"And what if the two projects start competing with each other?"

"Then we'll establish priorities. I don't want to build a programme on the assumption that someone should sacrifice their entire life for a single production."

"Are you saying that as a producer or as a person?"

For a moment, Błażej turned his cup between his fingers.

"Once, I would have said there was no difference."

"And now?"

"Now I know that's a very dangerous belief."

He didn't elaborate.

I noticed, however, that for the first time since we'd met, he didn't have an immediate answer. That small glimpse of uncertainty made him seem more human.

I took a notebook from my handbag, with my points already prepared.

"All right. These are my conditions."

"I'm listening."

"I work on the script three days a week. The other two are reserved for my own project. I won't sign an exclusivity agreement. I retain the right to refuse changes that