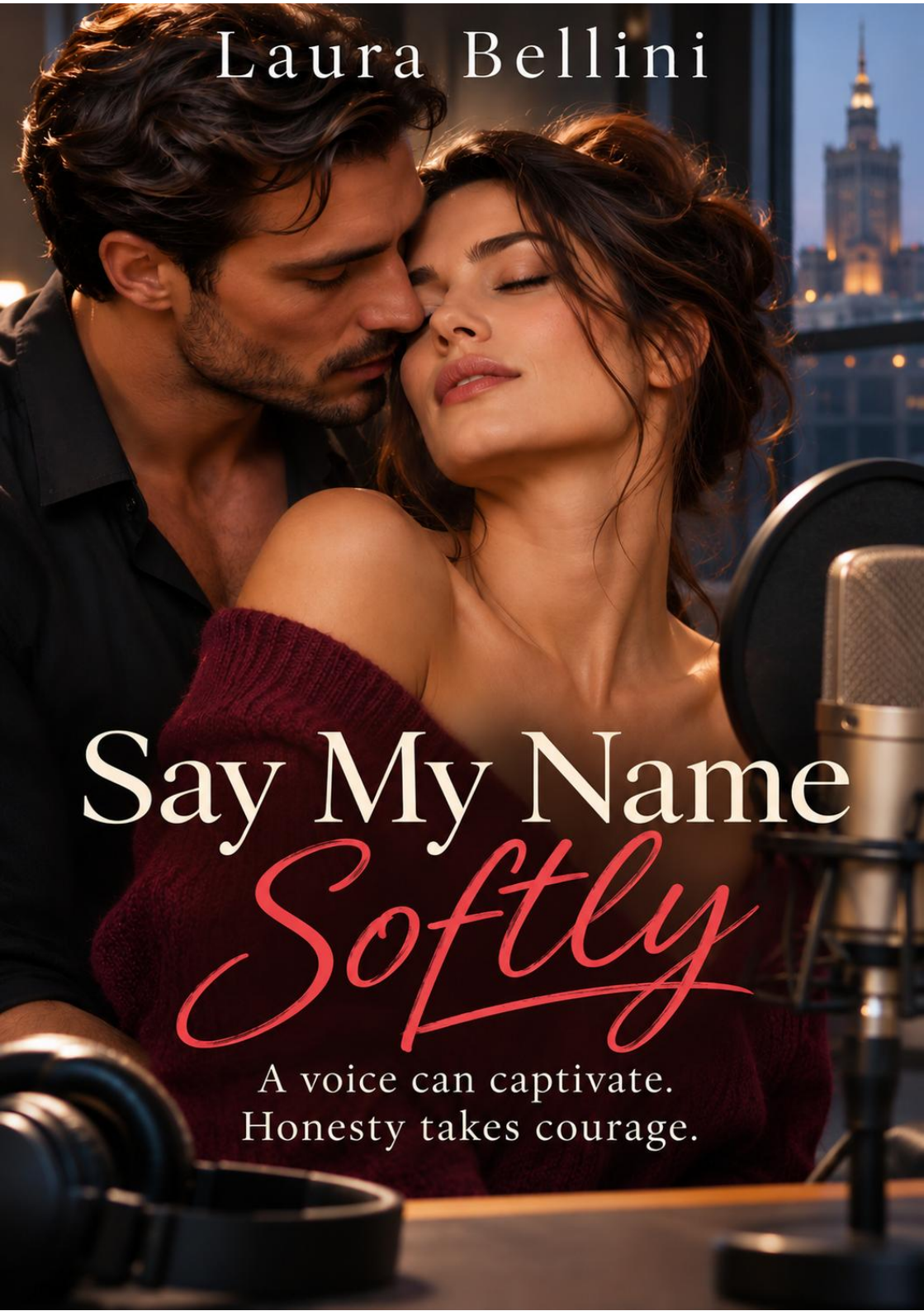

Laura Bellini
Say My Name
Softly
A voice can captivate.
Honesty takes courage.

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A voice can captivate. Honesty takes courage

Laura Bellini

ROMANS

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INTRO

I first heard his voice at eleven seventeen at night, when I had already decided that I wasn't going to let anyone ruin this recording.

The studio smelled of freshly ground coffee, warm electronics, and the rain I'd carried in on my coat from the streets of Warsaw. Beyond the control room window, a single lamp illuminated the script stand in the recording booth. The rest of the room lay in shadow. I liked this hour. The city finally stopped demanding attention, phones fell silent, and words acquired a weight they never seemed to carry in daylight.

On my computer screen, a file waited under the name "Scene 14 - Farewell." It was the final scene of the romantic audio drama I'd spent three months working on. I ran a finger around the rim of my coffee cup and read the dialogue once more.

"If you stay, I'll have to tell you the truth."

That line was supposed to be the heart of the entire ending. Not the kiss, not the dramatic music, not even the declaration of love. The truth. Spoken by a man who had spent most of the story capable of saying anything except what he truly felt.

The problem was that the actor cast in the leading role had withdrawn six hours earlier.

And I had exactly three weeks to deliver a finished audio drama to a producer who didn't understand the meaning of the word "delay."

My phone vibrated on the desk. A message from Marta, our sound engineer, who had gone out to get dinner half an hour earlier.

Found a replacement. He's coming now. Don't kill me before you've heard him.

I checked the time.

Now?

Her reply arrived immediately.

He's walking in.

The door opened before I could type that I didn't hold auditions just before midnight.

The man standing in the doorway was tall, with rain-dampened dark hair and a black coat hanging open over a charcoal sweater. He didn't look like someone who intended to apologize for arriving so late. Still, he stopped at the threshold rather than walking straight in, as though checking whether he was about to enter a space he hadn't yet been invited into.

"Sylwia Baran?" he asked.

I recognized the voice before I recognized the name.

Ignacy Kwiecień. Thirty-six years old, an actor known for audiobooks, advertising campaigns, and audio dramas I'd listened to professionally, analyzing other people's mistakes. His voice had a distinctive depth, but that wasn't what made his recordings memorable. He knew how to leave silence between words, silence that could hold more meaning than an entire exchange of dialogue.

"Depends who's asking," I replied.

A faint smile appeared on his face.

"The man Marta convinced that you urgently need a voice."

"I need an actor who's punctual, prepared, and won't start negotiating the interpretation of every comma."

"Then we already have two potential problems."

"Which are?"

"I wasn't expected, so punctuality is difficult to judge. And sometimes a comma determines whether a character is lying."

I didn't answer immediately. Not because I lacked a response. He had simply glanced at the script lying beside the microphone with such close attention that I had the distinct impression he genuinely cared about what was written on those pages.

"You have fifteen minutes," I said. "Then I'll make my decision."

He removed his coat, draped it over the back of a chair, and stepped into the booth. He moved without haste, but also without the showy confidence some actors mistook for charisma. He adjusted the microphone, put on the headphones, and waited for my signal.

I switched on the talkback.

"Scene fourteen. Starting with 'If you stay.' No music, no effects. I want to hear the intention."

He nodded.

For several seconds, there was silence. I watched his eyes move across the page. His lips didn't move. He made none of those little gestures actors often use to summon an emotion before they've even felt it.

Then he spoke.

"If you stay, I'll have to tell you the truth."

Just eleven words.

And yet I heard something in them that I hadn't managed to draw out of the previous actor during four weeks of rehearsals. Not a plea for her to stay. Not the threat of a separation. The fear of a man who longed for intimacy and knew, at the same time, that he might not be able to bear it.

I stopped the recording.

"Again."

Ignacy looked through the glass.

"What was wrong?"

"Nothing. I want to find out whether that was an accident."

Amusement entered his smile, and he made no attempt to conceal it.

"I see. We're doing it again to crush my hopes."

"We're doing it again to establish whether you can work with a director."

This time, he didn't answer with a joke. He read the line again, more quietly, with almost no emphasis. The words stopped sounding like a confession delivered across a distance. They became something intended for one person alone.

I realized I was leaning toward the speaker.

I pushed my chair back.

"Good," I said, trying to keep my voice neutral. "Now the final line. 'I don't know how to ask you to love me.'"

Ignacy didn't begin reading.

"May I suggest something?"

I sighed.

"I knew the commas were going to be trouble."

"It's not the commas. It's the meaning."

He lifted one side of his headphones.

"This man spends the entire drama hiding what he wants. And suddenly, here, he says exactly what he couldn't say before. It doesn't sound like a breakthrough. It sounds like a convenient ending written so the audience can go to bed feeling satisfied."

I felt a stab of irritation. Not because he'd insulted me, but because I'd been having doubts about that very line for two weeks.

"The script has been approved," I informed him.

"I'm not questioning the approval."

"You're questioning the ending."

"I'm asking whether you believe in it yourself."

The control room seemed strangely quiet. Outside, a tram passed, its metallic rumble briefly penetrating the soundproof walls.

I believed in the story. I believed in its characters. But I wasn't certain I believed in how easily we'd allowed them to reconcile.

"Read it as written," I instructed.

Ignacy held my gaze through the glass for another moment. Then he put his headphone back on and followed my direction. Without defiance, without any display of dissatisfaction.

Perfectly.

Which was, somehow, the most irritating thing of all.

When he finished, I opened the booth door. The air inside was warmer than in the control room, smelling of wood, paper, and something subtly spicy. Ignacy stood beside the microphone, the script in his hand. Up close, I noticed the fine lines beside his eyes and the faint trace of an old scar on his chin.

"Do you have experience revising scripts?" I asked.

"Reading them aloud. Sometimes that's when you hear things the writer didn't notice."

"That's not an answer."

For a moment, he looked as though he wanted to say more. His thumb moved over the folded corner of the page.

"I write things for myself sometimes," he finally replied. "Nothing you need to concern yourself with."

I didn't like that last remark. It didn't sound arrogant. More like a door being carefully shut.

"In my studio, anything that affects the recording concerns me."

"Then it's fortunate we haven't agreed to work together yet."

He handed me the script. Our fingers touched briefly, long enough for me to notice that he neither withdrew his hand nervously nor tried to prolong the contact.

"There's one thing I need if we're going to work together," he said.

"I'm listening."

"I want to know when you genuinely like something. Not just when you've run out of notes."

I studied him more closely.

Over the past several years, I'd built my professional life around precise decisions. I knew when to stop a recording, when to demand another take, and when to set my emotions aside so I wouldn't lose control of a project. I had no intention of handing that control to a man I'd met twenty minutes earlier.

And yet his request wasn't about power.

It was about honesty.

"The first version was excellent," I said. "The second was even better."

Ignacy grew serious. For a second, he looked at me as though my answer meant more than I could possibly understand.

"Thank you, Sylwia."

He said my name calmly, almost in a whisper. No theatrical inflection, no attempt to impress me. Yet it sounded different from the way it usually did, as though, for a moment, my name had stopped belonging to all the people who used it every day.

I looked away, toward the open control room door.

"Marta will send you the terms of the contract tomorrow morning."

"And you?"

"What about me?"

"Will you tell me whether I should come back?"

I looked at the script, then at the man who had heard the weakness in my ending within minutes and pointed it out without the slightest need to feel victorious.

"Yes," I answered. "Tomorrow at nine."

He smiled, this time making no effort to hide his pleasure.

After he left, I stood in the open booth doorway for a long time. On the script stand lay a page with a handwritten note I hadn't noticed before. Beside the final line, he'd written just two words:

Don't run.

I returned to the control room and played the first recording again.

"If you stay, I'll have to tell you the truth."

I closed my eyes.

Why did I have the feeling that if I let him say that line one more time, I would be the one forced to answer a question I'd been running from for far too long?

Chapter 1 - Terms of Silence

By eight forty-five the following evening, I already knew that hiring Ignacy Kwiecień would either be the best decision of my career or the beginning of a disaster I had absolutely no time for.

Marta sat at the second monitor, eating pretzel sticks while reviewing the files prepared for recording. A schedule hung on the wall, its deadlines marked in three different colors. Red indicated dates that could not be moved under any circumstances.

There was far too much red.

"Stop staring at the door," Marta said.

"I'm looking at the clock."

"The door is on the opposite wall."

"Do you want to keep your job?"

"I want to keep my sanity. Yours too, although it might already be too late for that."

I turned back to the monitor.

We had twenty-eight scenes to record, five evenings booked at the studio, and a producer who believed every delay could be solved by working harder. Then there was my own ambition. Between the Words was supposed to be the first audio drama on which I'd been given complete artistic freedom, without a supervising director correcting my decisions.

I'd worked toward that opportunity for years. I knew how easily it could be taken away if the production failed.

The previous evening, Ignacy had challenged the script's ending before we'd even signed a contract. Admitting that he was right about one line didn't mean I intended to hand him influence over the entire production.

At eight fifty-eight, the door opened quietly.

"Good evening," he said.

He wore a dark shirt with the sleeves rolled up and an ordinary pair of jeans. He carried a bag in one hand and a paper coffee cup in the other. He stopped inside the doorway, noticed my expression, and glanced at his watch.

"Two minutes early. Is that enough to qualify as punctual?"

"Depends whether you've read the script."

"Three times."

"All of it?"

"Do you often ask questions you don't actually want answered?"

Marta coughed in a hopeless attempt to disguise her laughter.

I had no intention of smiling, but one corner of my mouth apparently had other plans.

"Into the booth," I instructed.

Ignacy set his bag on a chair but didn't move.

"First, I'd like to establish one thing."

"Marta will send you the contract. The fee is exactly what you agreed."

"It's not about money."

That should have reassured me. Instead, I straightened in my chair.

"Then what?"

"The way we work. If I think a line rings false emotionally, I want to be able to say so. Without every comment being treated as an attempt to take over the direction."

Marta stopped chewing.

"You're welcome to make suggestions," I replied. "You cannot rewrite the script on your own."

"I have no intention of doing that. But I don't want to pretend something works simply because somebody has approved it."

"I'm responsible for the final interpretation."

"I know."

"Yet you're starting with conditions."

"Because I'd rather establish them before the first recording than argue with you at two in the morning."

I studied him carefully.

He wasn't being provocative. He wasn't deliberately trying to unsettle me, although he seemed remarkably good at it. He stood calmly beside the chair, waiting for an answer, his coffee cup held loosely between his fingers.

There was something disarming about the absence of aggression in his manner. He wasn't demanding authority. He was asking for room to do his job honestly.

That distinction mattered.

"Two alternative interpretations per scene," I decided. "If neither convinces me, we record my version."

"And if I convince you?"

"Then we record yours."

"Fair enough."

"Don't get used to it."

He smiled, and for the first time I noticed how completely it changed his face. His seriousness gave way to something warmer, almost boyish, though there was nothing immature about him.

"I'll try not to," he said.

When he entered the booth, Marta leaned toward me.

"He's good."

"I know."

"And handsome."

"That's irrelevant."

"Of course. Which is why you've already noticed his very nice hands."

I turned to look at her.

"Marta."

"Not another word."

I pressed the talkback button.

"We're starting with scene three. The male lead returns to the apartment after two years away. He doesn't yet know that the woman he left behind is waiting for him with a decision he won't be able to change."

Ignacy adjusted his headphones.

"Does she still love him?"

The simplicity of the question surprised me.

"Yes."

"Does he know?"

"He suspects."

"Then he shouldn't sound like a man returning to ask for forgiveness. More like someone who's afraid he might still have a right to it."

I watched him through the glass.

The script genuinely lacked that distinction. The previous actor had played remorse, an interpretation that was correct but predictable. Ignacy was suggesting something less comfortable: a man who knew his own guilt yet secretly hoped love might excuse it.

"Try it," I said.

He delivered the opening lines almost indifferently. On the surface, there was nothing remarkable about them. Only when he spoke the woman's name did his voice change slightly, as though saying it cost him more than his character was prepared to admit.

I stopped the recording.

"Good. Again, but less guarded."

"Where?"

"When he says he hasn't come back for anything in particular. He's lying. Let him hear himself lying."

Ignacy nodded.

On the second take, the scene acquired an unsettling intimacy. There were no raised voices or exaggerated emotions. Just a man speaking too calmly to be believed.

After a few minutes, Marta gave me a thumbs-up.

"We've got it."

"One more take," I said.

Ignacy looked through the glass.

"What would you like to change?"

"Nothing. I want a choice."

He studied me for a moment, then nodded and returned to the beginning of the scene.

We worked for the next two hours almost without a break.

Ignacy had an exceptional memory for the rhythm of dialogue. He could reproduce an exact intonation when asked, but he never sounded mechanical. Each new take contained a subtle difference I had to evaluate: a hesitation held a fraction longer, a breath taken before rather than after a word, a sentence that revealed uncertainty instead of anger.

It demanded more concentration than I'd expected.

I also discovered that he knew when not to argue. If I rejected a suggestion, he didn't waste five minutes defending his wounded pride. He listened, asked what I wanted, and tried again.

That made him both easier and more difficult to direct.

Easier because I could trust his professionalism. More difficult because he kept discovering possibilities I hadn't considered.

By eleven fifteen, we'd reached scene eight.

"Let's take ten minutes," Marta suggested.

Ignacy removed his headphones and came out of the booth. He took a drink of water, then stood beside the window. Outside, the wet street reflected the lights of passing cars.

"Why do you record at night?" he asked.

"The studio is cheaper after eight."

"Is that the whole answer?"

"It's a sufficient one."

"I wasn't asking about the budget."

I leaned against the desk.

"During the day, people want to explain everything. At night, they're better at hearing the things they can't say."

He turned toward me.

For a moment, he looked at me differently than he had during the recording. Without the professional concentration that seemed to separate him from the rest of the world. As though he were trying to remember not only my answer, but the way I'd said it.

"That sounds like something that belongs in a script," he observed.

"Not everything has to become dialogue."

His expression grew serious for a moment.

"You're right."

Marta returned from the kitchen and asked me to step aside.

Our producer had sent a message.

She wanted a demonstration extract of the audio drama by Friday, three days away. Not ordinary voice samples, but a five-minute scene with music and a proper edit that she could present to the distributor.

I read the message twice.

"That's impossible," I said.

"I know," Marta replied. "But she says the decision about additional promotion depends on it."

I went back into the control room. Ignacy noticed the change in atmosphere immediately.

"Something happened?"

"We've been given a new deadline."

"How bad?"

"Bad enough that we'll be living in this room for the next three days."

"Is breakfast included?"

I didn't laugh.

"Ignacy, what I need right now is concentration, not jokes."

He grew serious at once.

"All right. What are we recording?"

I explained the situation and showed him the scene selected for the presentation.

It was dramatic, full of tension and unmistakable emotion. The producer had undoubtedly chosen it for precisely those reasons. There was a confrontation, a revelation, and enough raised voices to make an impression even on someone listening without much context.

Ignacy read the extract.

"It's the wrong scene," he said.

I felt the familiar irritation return.

"It's the most dynamic."

"But it doesn't show why these two people can't live without each other."

"We're not selling an entire story with one line."

"Exactly. That's why you need five minutes that actually matter."

"You don't choose the promotional material."

"I know. But if you're asking whether I can record it, the answer is yes. I simply think you'd be wasting the best part of the story."

He opened the script to scene eleven.

It was quieter.

The two characters sat in an empty kitchen, unable to say aloud what they both already knew. Their conversation seemed to concern the practical question of whether he would stay until morning. Beneath it lay everything neither dared to ask.

"Here," he said, pointing to the page. "She asks him to stay until morning. He understands she's not talking about somewhere to sleep. This is your story."

Marta looked at me questioningly.

I had to admit that his suggestion made sense.

Unfortunately, it also meant changing the agreed plan, editing a different scene, and having a conversation with a producer who wasn't particularly fond of surprises.

"I can't let you change the direction of this project after one rehearsal," I said.

Ignacy closed the script.

"I'm not asking to change its direction. I'm asking for the chance to show you why I think this scene will work."

"How?"

"We record both. You listen tomorrow. The choice is yours."

It was a reasonable proposal.

Worse, it offered me no legitimate excuse to refuse.

"The additional recording doesn't change our schedule," I stipulated.

"Agreed."

"And I'm not promising we'll use your version."

"I don't need a promise."

For a moment, I wanted to ask him what he did need.

Instead, I pointed toward the booth.

We recorded until one twenty in the morning. Marta left shortly before then, leaving us to finish the last adjustments. When Ignacy was done, I spent several minutes listening through my headphones, comparing the two extracts.

The scene selected by the producer sounded excellent.

The scene Ignacy had chosen made me want to stay with the characters longer.

That was the difference.

One demonstrated the actors' abilities. The other made me care about the people they were playing.

I removed my headphones and turned around.

Ignacy stood near the booth door, waiting without urging me to decide.

"The second one," I said.

"Sorry?"

"For the presentation. I'm choosing scene eleven."

He didn't smile triumphantly.

"Why?"

"Because you were right. It reveals more, even though less happens."

He approached the desk and stopped on the opposite side. Only a few inches separated us, but he made no attempt to close the distance.

"Thank you for listening to it."

"That doesn't mean I'll always agree with you."

"I certainly hope not."

"Why?"

"Because our conversations would become considerably less interesting."

For a moment, we looked at each other in silence.

I noticed that outside the booth his voice was slightly rougher, less perfect. I liked it that way. Unprepared for recording, free of carefully chosen inflections.

"Good night, Sylwia," he said.

"Good night, Ignacy."

After he left, I looked at the schedule.

Three days until the presentation, twenty-four scenes still ahead of us, and a man who had already made me change my mind on his first evening.

What troubled me most was that I didn't regret the decision in the slightest.

Chapter 2 - On the Other Side of the Glass

The following morning, my producer's phone call woke me.

"Sylwia, I hear you're changing the demonstration extract."

I looked at the clock.

Nine twelve.

I'd slept for less than six hours, and Joanna Radecka's tone left little doubt that this conversation would be an unpleasant one.

"I'm considering a better scene."

"We agreed on scene six."

"I know. But scene eleven shows the relationship between the characters more effectively."

"Who suggested that?"

I sat up in bed.

"It's my decision."

I wasn't lying. Ignacy had presented his arguments, but the final choice had been mine.

Joanna was silent for a moment.

"I hope you're not letting the new actor run your project."

"I'm not. But I do intend to make use of his abilities."

"Remember that your reputation is at stake."

She ended the call before I could answer.

I placed my phone on the pillow and looked out of the window.

Warsaw was gray and damp. Cars moved slowly along the street, and people beneath umbrellas looked like drifting patches of color. My world hadn't changed since the previous evening, yet I felt as though someone had shifted an invisible boundary within it.

Over the years, I'd learned that professional independence didn't mean doing everything alone. It meant accepting responsibility for decisions other people were unwilling to make. I also knew how easily a woman in the director's chair could be labeled difficult for demanding exactly as much as her male colleagues.

I had fought too hard for my position to risk it simply because Ignacy Kwiecień's voice could make an ordinary line sound like a personal confession.

At eleven, I sent him a message.

I need an extra thirty minutes before tonight's recording. We have to establish the rules for making changes.

He replied a few minutes later.

Of course. Could we meet outside the studio? It's easier to talk without microphones.

I hesitated.

Seven o'clock. The café on Chmielna Street, beside the bookshop.

I'll be there. And I promise not to rewrite the menu.

I smiled at my phone before I could stop myself.

For the rest of the day, I worked on the demonstration edit.