Laura Bellini

Between One Breath and the Next

Every Step Closer Changes the Rules



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ROMANS

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INTRO

The first thing I heard when I entered the ballroom wasn't music.

It was my own breathing, reflected off the high ceiling and returned to me a fraction of a second later, as though someone invisible were standing on the other side of the dance floor.

I stopped in the doorway. Late-afternoon light poured through enormous windows, turning the damaged plasterwork the color of aged honey. November rain had left streaks across the glass, and the air smelled of dust, wood, and something else - perhaps the perfume of people who had danced here decades ago, its fragrance long since absorbed into the walls.

The ballroom on Karmelicka Street had seen better days. But like certain people I'd known, it could still make an impressive first impression.

I set my bag against the wall and checked the time.

Four forty-seven.

I had thirteen minutes before anyone from the technical crew arrived, and exactly six weeks to create a choreography that could determine the course of my professional future.

I had no intention of wasting either.

I took out my phone, opened the soundtrack I'd prepared earlier, and connected it to a small speaker. The first piano notes spread through the room. They were delicate, restrained, almost hesitant. Exactly what I needed for the opening.

I took off my coat, loosened my hair, and walked to the center of the floor.

On paper, everything seemed simple. Two adult dancers. An empty room. A story about people longing for closeness but unable to agree on the moment when a touch becomes a promise.

No spectacular lifts. No showy acrobatics.

Only movement, pauses, and the space between two bodies.

In practice, the simplest things always proved the most difficult.

I closed my eyes and took the first step.

Then another.

I turned slowly, letting my arm follow the movement. I imagined another person standing in front of me. A presence that wasn't there yet. A hand extended close enough for me to take, but not so close that touching it would become inevitable.

I stopped.

Something was wrong.

Not with the music. Not with the tempo.

With me.

For months, I'd worked as though I had to prove to the entire world that I needed no one to make decisions for me. After leaving a major dance company in Warsaw, I'd made myself a promise: never again would I hand someone else the right to decide what I could create, or whose name would appear above it.

This project was supposed to be the beginning of something that belonged to me.

Not a compromise.

Not another achievement in somebody else's portfolio.

My name on the poster.

"You're not leaving room for an answer."

The voice came from behind me.

I spun around.

A man stood in the doorway, wearing a dark coat with a bag slung over one shoulder. His hair was short and slightly disheveled, and he had the face of someone who observed more than he spoke. He didn't look like a stranger who had wandered into the rehearsal room by mistake.

He looked like someone who'd been watching for several minutes.

"Excuse me?"

He indicated the center of the floor with his chin.

"You stop the movement before the other person has a chance to respond."

I switched off the music.

"And you are?"

"Jakub Serafin."

The name sounded familiar. Of course it did. He was the composer whose music the producer had described as one of the most important elements of the performance.

We were supposed to meet the following day.

Not today. Not here. And certainly not while I was working on something I wasn't ready to show anyone.

"Ada Witek," I replied coolly, although I knew perfectly well that he already knew my name.

The corner of his mouth twitched.

"I know."

"Then you should also know that I've reserved this room until five."

He checked his watch.

"You have eight minutes left."

"Seven, if you're planning to keep arguing with me."

He didn't leave.

Instead, he took off his coat and laid it over one of the chairs against the wall. There was nothing hurried about the gesture, but it didn't seem dismissive either. It suggested an irritating confidence that he had every right to be there.

"I'm not arguing with your choreography," he said. "I'm wondering whether you're hearing the same thing I am."

"Which is?"

"That the music is asking for one more breath."

I studied him more closely.

He was in his early thirties, perhaps thirty-four. Dark eyes, a defined jaw, and a calm way of speaking that would have been far less irritating if his observation hadn't touched on exactly what I'd been struggling with moments earlier.

"It's a work in progress," I explained.

"I know."

"Then judging it after a few seconds is rather bold."

"I'm not judging. I'm listening."

He moved toward the speaker but stopped his hand before touching it.

"May I?"

That small request surprised me more than it should have.

I nodded.

He started the recording from the beginning. The piano filled the ballroom again, but this time Jakub stopped the piece a few seconds before the point where I'd made my turn.

"Here," he said. "I imagine silence."

"There's already a pause."

"No. There's a break in the sound. That's not the same thing."

I wanted to tell him that composers always complicated things dancers understood instinctively.

I didn't.

Because I knew what he meant.

Jakub walked to the edge of the dance floor.

"Will you show me again?"

I folded my arms.

"And if I say no?"

"I'll come back tomorrow for our scheduled meeting."

He said it so matter-of-factly that, for a moment, I couldn't think of a suitable retort.

I looked at the empty floor, then at the clock, its hands advancing relentlessly toward five.

"Once," I decided.

I pulled off my sweater, leaving my black practice top on, and returned to the middle of the room.

Jakub started the music.

I performed the sequence I'd been practicing for three days. A step, a shift of weight, a turn. But at the last moment, I changed the ending. Instead of drawing my hand back, I left it extended into the empty space.

I waited.

The piano fell silent.

For a moment, all I could hear was rain striking the windowsill.

Then Jakub spoke.

"Exactly."

There was no triumph in his voice. The single word sounded almost intimate, as though we'd discovered something together that wasn't yet meant to be spoken aloud.

I lowered my arm.

"Don't get used to it."

He smiled properly for the first time.

"To what?"

"Me admitting you're right."

"You haven't admitted anything."

"Precisely."

He laughed softly.

Only then did I realize that I was standing closer to him than I'd intended. Perhaps two steps separated us. Far enough for our conversation to remain professional, yet

close enough for me to notice a small scar beside his left eyebrow.

I didn't move away immediately.

Neither did he.

"Ada," he said, all traces of his earlier teasing gone, "there's something in this choreography that shouldn't be drowned out by music."

It was the loveliest thing anyone had said about my work in a very long time.

And that was precisely why it made me uncomfortable.

"Then we'll have to learn not to get in each other's way."

"Perhaps something even harder."

"What?"

"Leaving room for each other."

Voices drifted through the open doorway from the corridor. Someone was dragging a heavy equipment case across the floor; someone else was asking about extension cords. Our eight minutes had passed, and with them went the extraordinary silence that had briefly enclosed us in the same space.

Jakub was the first to step away.

"See you tomorrow, Ada."

He reached for his coat. Before leaving, he took out his phone and glanced at the screen. I saw an audio-recording application open, displaying the waveform of a file.

"Were you recording?" I asked.

He looked up.

"I was working on a sketch earlier. I left the session open."

"Did you stop it?"

For a brief moment, he looked at his phone instead of me.

"Yes. It's stopped now."

But he hadn't answered the question I hadn't yet asked.

Had the application been recording while I danced?

He slipped the phone into his pocket.

"Have a good evening."

I watched him disappear through the doorway, then turned back toward the empty ballroom.

I had my own plan. Rules written in my notebook. Boundaries I'd learned to guard more carefully than my sense of rhythm.

And yet, after those few minutes, the hardest thing to bear wasn't the thought that Jakub Serafin might complicate my work.

It was that I wanted to hear his voice again.

I walked over to the speaker but didn't turn the music back on.

I remained in the middle of the dance floor with my hand outstretched, remembering the moment when I'd waited for an answer from someone who wasn't there.

And for the first time in months, I wondered whether I could let another person come close enough to truly see me without giving him the right to decide who I was.

Chapter 1 - The Terms of Closeness

The following morning, I woke with the unpleasant feeling that someone had already changed the rules before I'd even taken my seat at the table.

A message from Marta Lewandowska, the producer of our performance, was waiting on my phone. It had arrived at 7:12 a.m., an hour when sensible people were either still asleep or at least pretending their professional responsibilities didn't exist.

"Ada, a small change. Jakub has prepared a new musical concept. He wants to present it before rehearsals begin. Meeting at ten. Keep an open mind."

I read the last sentence three times.

Keep an open mind.

Ten years of working in theater had taught me that those four words usually meant someone had already made a decision, and I was expected to accept its consequences gracefully.

I put down my phone and walked to the kitchen window. Kraków was waking beneath a heavy gray sky. A tram crossed the wet street, leaving a metallic groan in its wake. My apartment smelled of coffee I hadn't made yet, because the previous evening I'd spilled coffee beans across the counter and hadn't had the energy to clean them up.

I was thirty years old. I ran my own business, had modest savings, and had built a professional career I was proud of. Over the past few months, I'd turned down two offers to work on other people's productions so I could create something under my own name.

I hadn't done all that so the first composer I met could rearrange my life according to his own ear.

My phone vibrated again.

This time, the message came from an unknown number.

"Good morning. I hope you won't consider today's proposal another case of premature judgment. Jakub."

I stared at the screen longer than it took to read two sentences.

I replied, "That depends on whether you're bringing arguments or just confidence."

His answer came almost immediately.

"Arguments. I keep the confidence for myself."

I smiled before I could stop myself.

Then I remembered the phone in his hand, the open recording application, and the brief hesitation when I'd asked whether he'd stopped recording.

My smile disappeared.

By five past ten, the old ballroom was full of people, cables, and overlapping voices. Marta was speaking with the technical director, while our two performers warmed up beside the tall windows.

Lena Krawczyk and Michał Radecki were thirty-two and thirty-six, respectively. Both were experienced dancers, accustomed to physical intimacy onstage but also to clearly established boundaries. I'd chosen them personally because they could tell an entire story with a single glance without turning every movement into a demonstration of athletic ability.

Our performance, provisionally titled Between, was supposed to last forty-five minutes. No words. No scenery beyond two chairs and a movable wall of light. A story about two people who had spent years passing each other by, choosing safety over honesty.

I'd already prepared a detailed dramatic outline, movement sequences, and the structure of the scenes.

The music was supposed to accompany them.

Jakub apparently had other ideas.

He stood beside a small table against the wall, leaning over his laptop. He wore a navy shirt with the sleeves rolled up. Without his coat, he looked less formal than he had the previous day, but considerably more dangerous to my peace of mind.

He noticed me almost immediately.

"Good morning, Ada."

"That depends on how this meeting goes."

"Good to know you set the bar high."

"Only for people who ask me to raise it."

Marta clapped her hands.

"Now that everyone's here, let's begin. Jakub?"

I moved my chair a little farther from the table. Before sitting down, I opened the notebook in which I'd been recording successive versions of the choreography for weeks.

Jakub didn't open a presentation.

He played the music.

I recognized several chords from the material he'd sent me earlier, but after a few seconds, the piece changed

character. The piano gave way to a low, barely audible pulse. Irregular silences appeared between the musical phrases, as though the composition were trying to accommodate someone's breathing.

There was something unsettling about it.

And something beautiful.

I had no intention of letting that show on my face.

"I want the performers to influence the rhythm of the piece," Jakub said when the sound faded. "Not simply interpret a finished composition. Their breathing, the weight of their footsteps, and the moments when they stop could become part of the music."

Marta straightened with interest.

"So, live music?"

"Partly. We could prepare flexible sequences and respond to the dancers during the performance."

"And the choreography?" I asked.

Jakub looked at me.

"It would need to allow more freedom."

I closed my notebook.

"More than what?"

"More than the current plan allows."

"The current plan was developed around an agreed dramatic concept."

"I know. I've read it."

"Then you also know that changing the musical structure means changing the order of certain scenes."

"Yes."

"And preparing some of the material with the performers all over again."

"Yes."

"Excellent. Then you understand why I can't agree to something like this after listening for five minutes."

Marta shifted uncomfortably.

"Ada, we're only discussing it."

"Which is precisely why I'm asking questions."

Jakub rested his hands on the table. He didn't try to interrupt me or look to the producer for support.

"I'm not asking for permission to change the entire performance," he said. "I'm proposing one rehearsal. If it doesn't work, we'll return to the agreed version."

"And if it does?"

"Then we'll have a problem."

I raised my eyebrows.

"An interesting way to persuade someone."

"I'd rather be honest about the risk."

I looked at Lena and Michał. Both were listening attentively. I knew Jakub's idea might interest them. Instead of performing a precisely prescribed sequence, they could help shape the tempo of the production.

But I also knew how easily that kind of freedom could turn into chaos.

"Let's test it with an actual scene," I suggested. "Not just promises."

Jakub straightened.

"Agreed."

I chose the sequence I'd provisionally called "The Return."

Lena and Michał were supposed to approach each other from opposite sides of the floor. Each time they were only one step apart, one of them would change direction. Only in the final section would they both consciously abandon the impulse to escape.

It was choreography that required precise counting, built around three recurring phrases that gradually grew shorter.

Jakub watched the first run-through in silence.

"May I suggest something?" he asked when the dancers stopped.

"Go ahead."

He approached Michał.

"On the second approach, try not to walk away immediately. Wait until Lena genuinely decides whether she wants to stay."

Michał looked at me.

"Ada?"

I appreciated that he hadn't automatically obeyed the instruction.

"Let's try it," I said. "But don't change the direction of your shoulders. I want to preserve the impression that the body has made its decision before the mind."

Jakub nodded.

The music started again.

This time, when Lena found herself opposite Michał, a longer silence settled between them. It wasn't empty. It held

anticipation. Lena raised her hand, but Michał didn't respond immediately.

Only when she took a step herself did his body follow her movement.

For a moment, the comment I'd prepared deserted me.

Not because the choreography had suddenly become perfect.

Because it was telling a story that hadn't been there before.

A story about choice.

"Stop," I said.

The music fell silent.

Lena turned toward me.

"Too long?"

"No. Quite the opposite."

I stepped onto the floor and positioned myself between the performers.

"Michał, in the final phrase, you'll initiate the approach. Lena, don't respond immediately. I want to see whether you can reverse the tension without changing the entire structure."

Jakub watched me from the edge of the room.

"That will change the meaning of the ending," he observed.

"I know."

"Make it more mutual."

I looked at him.

"Exactly."

For a brief moment, we smiled at each other without speaking.

Then Marta announced that we'd just watched the best section of rehearsal since preparations had begun, and the spell broke.

During the break, I found Jakub by the window. He stood holding a cup of coffee, watching people walk along the wet pavement.

"Satisfied?" I asked.

He turned his head.

"With what?"

"You've managed to prove my concept needs changing."

"That wasn't what I wanted to prove."

"Then what?"

"That we don't have to choose between your choreography and my music."

I studied him carefully. His voice was calm, but this time I noticed tension in the way he held his cup.

"Do you know what I dislike most about artistic collaboration?" I asked.

"People with good ideas?"

"People who claim they're only suggesting a small change, and then it turns out they've taken over the entire project."

He turned fully toward me.

"Has someone done that to you?"

The question was too direct.

"We're not discussing my past."

"All right."

He didn't press.

I noticed that, too.

For a moment, we stood in silence. Rain streamed down the window, blurring the headlights of passing cars.

"I have a condition of my own," he said eventually.

I felt a familiar prick of irritation.

"I'm listening."

"If we're going to work on a performance like this, I don't want to compose music for finished steps. I need access to the process. The rehearsals, the changes, everything that emerges between successive versions."

"You can attend rehearsals."

"Not just watch them. I'd sometimes like to work with sound material from the room."

I remembered his phone.

"What kind of material?"

"The sounds of movement. Footwork. Chairs being moved. The dancers' breathing, if they agree."

"And if they don't?"

"I'll find another solution."

I didn't know whether he was saying exactly what I wanted to hear or genuinely understood the importance of the question.

"We don't record anything without prior agreement," I said. "No private conversations, impromptu rehearsals, or material someone hasn't agreed to let us use."

Jakub put down his cup.

"I understand."

"I'm also asking about yesterday."

His expression grew serious.

"The application?"

"Yes."

He didn't answer immediately.

"I was working on a sound sketch of my own before I came into the room," he finally said. "I didn't deliberately start recording in order to capture you."

That was an answer to a slightly different question.

"I'm not asking about your intentions, Jakub."

He looked straight into my eyes.

"I know. I'll check the session properly and tell you exactly what was saved."

I could have demanded that he do it immediately. I considered that possibility for several seconds, but Marta called us back to work from the other end of the room.

"I expect a specific answer," I said.

"You'll get one."

He didn't sound like a man accustomed to making promises he had no intention of keeping.

That didn't mean I had to trust him.

We held two more rehearsals that afternoon. Jakub no longer tried to change everything. When he offered a comment, it concerned a specific passage. When I said a solution didn't fit the structure of the scene, he accepted that without argument.

He was infuriatingly competent.

Even more infuriating was the fact that I increasingly found myself waiting for his opinion.

Near the end of the day, Lena sat down beside me on the floor.

"You like him," she announced.

I looked at her.

"He's a good composer."

"That wasn't what I meant."

"You didn't actually ask anything."

She smiled.

"I've noticed that when he speaks, you stop correcting your notes."

"Because sometimes he says something sensible."

"Of course."

I had no intention of continuing the conversation.

Lena, however, wasn't the kind of person who needed my permission to make observations.

"Just be careful you don't confuse fighting for control with fighting against someone who doesn't actually want to take it away from you."

Her words stayed with me longer than they should have.

When everyone began leaving, I stayed behind to organize my notes. Jakub was packing his equipment on the other side of the room.

"Ada?"

I looked up.

"Yes?"

"Tomorrow, I'd like to show you something without the entire team present."

"That sounds suspicious."

"It's only a composition sketch."

"Only?"

"And a proposal for how we might work together without constantly getting in each other's way."

I closed my notebook.

"The second part sounds more ambitious than the entire performance."

He came closer, but stopped at a distance that left me free to walk away.

"I know a quiet place near the Planty. We could talk over coffee."

"A professional meeting?"

"It will certainly start as one."

I looked at him.

He could have delivered that sentence with the smile of a man who had just proposed a flirtation. Instead, his expression remained serious, and I had the impression he was deliberately leaving me free to interpret the invitation however I wished.

"Six o'clock," I decided. "And bring concrete proposals."

"I always do."

"And an answer about the recording."

His smile vanished.

"Yes."

After he left, I remained alone on the dance floor.

Some of the technical lights had already been switched on beneath the ceiling, revealing the unevenness of the old floorboards and the fine cracks in the mirrors.

For most of my professional life, I'd believed that independence meant keeping everything firmly in my own hands.

That day, for the first time, I wondered whether there might be a difference between surrendering control and allowing someone else to help create something.

The problem was that Jakub Serafin was beginning to interest me beyond the boundaries of our work.

And I had absolutely no plan for that.

Chapter 2 - Room for Two

At 5:39 the following afternoon, I stood in front of my bedroom mirror wondering why choosing a sweater for a professional meeting was taking longer than preparing the opening scene of a performance.

Three rejected tops lay on the bed. One was too elegant. Another made me look as though I'd just come back from training. The third had a neckline I'd personally decided was entirely inappropriate for a discussion about musical structure.

In the end, I chose a dark green sweater and black trousers.

Ordinary.

Practical.

Nothing to suggest that anyone's opinion of my appearance mattered to me.

I studied my reflection for a moment. My hair was tied back, I wore small silver earrings, and I had the expression of a woman trying very hard to convince herself that she wasn't preparing for anything special.

My phone vibrated.

"I'll be five minutes early. Apparently the tables by the window are the best. Jakub."

I replied, "Don't judge the tables before the meeting is over."

"I'll try to restrain myself."

I laughed softly.

Then I slipped the phone into my bag and left before I could change my clothes again.

The café occupied the ground floor of an old tenement building on a side street branching off the Planty. There were no fashionable neon signs or people photographing every plate they ordered. Inside, the air smelled of freshly ground coffee, cinnamon, and wood warmed by the radiators.

Jakub was sitting at a small table beside the window.

A notebook lay in front of him, with two mugs beside it.

He stood when he saw me.

"Hi, Ada."

"Hi."

I indicated the mugs.

"A risky start. You don't know what I drink."

"One is mine. The other is empty."

I looked more closely.

It was.

"All right," I conceded. "One point for resisting the temptation to make decisions for other people."

"Am I going to be collecting points all evening?"

"That depends on your behavior."

He pulled out my chair without turning the gesture into a performance. Once I was seated, he took the chair opposite me.

For a moment, we looked at each other across the table.

In the rehearsal room, it was easy to hide behind responsibilities. Someone always needed instructions, the