
Laura Bellini
Give Me Back This Dance
An old step. New courage to let someone close

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ROMANS

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INTRO

The first rule I taught my students was that dancing didn't mean surrendering control of your own body to anyone. You could trust your partner, allow them to lead, even close your eyes for a moment, but you should always know where their decisions ended and yours began.

That Thursday evening, I was having trouble following my own rule.

I stood in the middle of the ballroom at a hotel in Olsztyn, holding a rehearsal schedule in one hand and a phone that had been vibrating nonstop for ten minutes in the other. Beyond the tall windows, the November rain blurred the city lights. Inside, the air smelled of freshly polished flooring, coffee, and flowers that someone had arranged on the windowsills far too early.

"Renata, tell me you're not planning to rearrange all the couples again," Marta said.

My friend and fellow dance instructor of twelve years watched me over the rim of her teacup. She knew me well enough to recognize an impending disaster by the way I shuffled my papers.

"Not all of them. Just three."

"Of course. So half the routine."

"You're exaggerating."

"And you're forty-seven years old and still believe that if you plan enough things, life won't dare surprise you."

I gave her a reproachful look but said nothing. She was right, which was one of her most irritating qualities.

The charity ball was scheduled for six weeks from now. The money raised would go toward equipping rehabilitation rooms for children, and my dance school had been asked to prepare the opening performance. But it wasn't just about the show. For months, I'd been looking for a way to establish a permanent program at the school for adults returning to physical activity after a long break. The ball's organizers had promised to introduce me to potential financial partners.

After fifteen years of running my own business, I knew exactly how valuable opportunities like that could be.

I also knew how quickly they could disappear.

"I've found someone to replace Paweł," Marta announced.

I looked up.

"Who?"

"Someone who's apparently a very good dancer."

"Marta."

"And he's agreed to help without being paid."

"Marta, give me a name."

My friend set down her cup.

"Krzysztof Orłowski."

For a moment, all I could hear was the rain beating against the windows.

That name didn't belong to my present life. It had been locked away somewhere between a school gymnasium, cassette tapes, and a blue dress my mother had altered for my school-leaving ball. It belonged to a time when I'd believed that loving someone deeply enough was all it took to stop being afraid of the future.

"That Krzysztof Orłowski?" I asked.

"How many do you know?"

"One too many."

Marta smiled cautiously.

"Then we're in luck."

"We?"

"You need a partner for the main choreography. He's back in Olsztyn. He's photographing the ball, and apparently he still remembers how to dance."

I remembered.

I also remembered how, when we were seventeen, he could lead me through a crowded room as though no one else existed. How he never counted the steps aloud but quietly hummed the melody instead. And how, on the last day of school, he'd kissed me behind the gymnasium building, then left for Warsaw before we'd had a chance to decide what that kiss actually meant.

There had been no great tragedy. Two teenagers, two different cities, two separate lives.

And yet memory had a strange habit of preserving details that any sensible person should have discarded long ago.

"No," I said.

"You haven't even seen him yet."

"That's exactly why I'm saying no."

Marta opened her mouth, but the ballroom door swung inward, letting in a gust of cool air from the corridor.

I turned.

The man standing in the doorway wore a dark coat, a gray sweater, and black trousers. He carried a camera bag in one hand and a folded umbrella in the other. He seemed taller than I remembered, or perhaps my memory had simply preserved the proportions of our younger selves. Gray had appeared in his dark hair, and his face had acquired sharper, more severe lines.

One thing hadn't changed.

The way he looked at things.

He never rushed to form an impression. First, he took in the room, the dance floor, the lights reflected in the mirrors. Only then did his gaze settle on me.

"Renata Gawron," he said quietly.

It didn't sound like a question.

"Krzysztof."

A faint smile touched his lips.

"I was hoping you'd recognize me."

"It's hard to forget a man who stepped on my foot during our first dance competition."

"That was forty years ago."

"Thirty-four," I corrected automatically.

His smile widened.

"So you do remember."

Marta looked from one of us to the other with the expression of someone who had just discovered excellent material for months of conversations over wine.

"I'll leave you two for a moment. I need to check the music."

I made no attempt to stop her. I had enough dignity left not to beg my friend to rescue me from a man I'd last seen in the previous century.

Krzysztof came closer. Not too close. He stopped on the other side of the table where I'd spread out my documents.

"I hear you need a partner."

"I need someone who'll turn up for every rehearsal, learn the choreography, and not try to improvise."

"So not me, then."

"I was just about to say that."

He gave a short laugh. There wasn't the slightest trace of offense in it, which unsettled me more than any teasing remark could have.

"Do you still plan everything?" he asked.

"Do you still think planning is a character flaw?"

"No. I just remember the time you lost the choreography sheet and we danced better than we ever had before."

I remembered that evening too. The competition in the school auditorium, the smell of hairspray, his hand against my back, and the moment when, instead of panicking, I'd allowed myself to follow the music.

I had no intention of telling him that.

"It was a long time ago."

"I know."

For several seconds, we looked at each other without speaking. I noticed the fine lines around his eyes and the pale mark where a wedding ring had once been, more pronounced than the surrounding skin on his finger. When

he caught me looking, he instinctively slipped his hand into his coat pocket.

I didn't ask.

I'd long believed that other people's marriages, divorces, and unfinished stories shouldn't become my problem.

Especially when they belonged to a man whose presence had suddenly reminded me of the woman I'd been before learning how to protect my own heart.

"Could we give it a try?" he asked.

"Try what?"

"Dancing. One minute. If you decide I'm no good, I'll leave and won't bother you again."

I glanced at my watch. The next rehearsal was due to begin in twenty minutes, and I still needed to adjust the couples' positions.

I had every reason to refuse.

"One minute," I agreed.

Krzysztof took off his coat and laid it over a chair. He rolled up the sleeves of his sweater, then offered me his hand.

I hesitated.

Not because I was afraid of dancing. I'd spent my entire adult life teaching others how to move to music, how to trust their own feet, how to regain confidence after a failure. I was afraid of something far less rational.

That my body would remember him faster than my common sense could catch up.

I placed my hand in his.

His hand was warm, slightly roughened by work. Krzysztof didn't tighten his fingers any more than necessary. He waited until I stepped closer of my own accord.

The opening bars of a waltz floated from the speakers.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Always."

"You're just as convincing a liar as you used to be."

I wanted to answer, but he took the first step.

And suddenly, I stopped thinking about schedules, sponsors, the cost of renting the ballroom, and the endless list of responsibilities waiting for me. Not because any of those things had ceased to matter. Simply because, for a few bars of music, another possibility existed as well: I didn't have to lead. I could respond to another person's movements without losing anything of myself.

Krzysztof didn't dance perfectly. He was a fraction late on one turn, and on the next, he had to adjust the position of his arms. But he listened to the music, and he listened to me. When I changed direction, he didn't try to force us back into the previous step. He followed my decision, then smoothly took the lead again.

That was exactly what partnership should look like.

We stopped when the music faded.

His hand remained against my back for a moment.

"Your minute's up," he said.

"I noticed."

"And?"

I slowly stepped away.

"You need to work on your turns."

"So I'm staying?"

I looked across the empty dance floor, then back at him.

I no longer knew this man. All I knew about him was what I'd gathered from a few photographs published in the local press and occasional scraps of news passed along by old acquaintances. I had no idea why he'd really come back or what he was searching for in the place we'd both once left behind.

What I did know was that, for the past minute, I hadn't wanted the music to end.

"You can stay for a trial week," I replied. "After that, I'll decide."

Krzysztof nodded.

"Fair enough."

He reached for his coat, but before putting it on, he looked at me once more.

"Renata?"

"Yes?"

"It's good to see you again."

He said it without smiling. Without flirting, without a joke he could hide behind if the words revealed too much.

And that was precisely why I couldn't answer straightaway.

After he left, I was alone again in the ballroom with my schedule, my cold coffee, and the reflection of a woman who had spent years teaching herself not to need anyone's arms around her.

I stared at the closed door, still aware of the place on my back where his hand had rested.

Could I allow him to come closer without once again accepting a life lived in the shadow of someone else's untold story?

Chapter 1 - The Steps We Never Forgot

On Friday morning, I discovered that the name Krzysztof Orłowski could shake me out of my morning sluggishness more effectively than strong coffee.

It appeared at the very top of an email from the ball's organizer, just below an announcement about changes to the rehearsal schedule. I scrolled through the message on my phone, trying to ignore the strange satisfaction I felt at seeing his name. Yesterday, I had agreed to give him a trial week. Today, I was going to treat him like any other participant in the project.

That was the plan.

The problem was that the other participants hadn't kissed me behind the school gymnasium thirty years ago.

"You look like a woman who's just received a summons from the tax office," Marta observed.

She was sitting on the floor of our dance school, surrounded by boxes of decorations. Pale November morning light filtered through the tall windows. Two cups stood on the windowsill, and an instrumental version of an old hit drifted from the speakers.

"Worse. I've received a new schedule."

"With Krzysztof?"

I didn't answer.

Marta laughed triumphantly.

"I knew it."

"Knew what?"

"That man was going to turn your head."

"He's disrupted my schedule. There's a fundamental difference."

I opened my laptop and brought up the choreography plan. The main performance was supposed to begin with a waltz, move into a quieter section performed by six couples, and finish with a contemporary routine in which traditional leading gave way to freer movement. I wanted to show that dancing didn't end with youth, and that closeness didn't require perfection.

That last thought sounded dangerously personal, even inside my own head.

"He's fifty-one," I reminded Marta. "I'm forty-seven. We're both old enough not to turn a few memories into a melodrama."

"Interesting that you're the one bringing that up."

I closed my laptop rather too forcefully.

"I need to check the lighting setup before today's rehearsal."

Marta raised her hands in surrender, but I could see her smiling.

By five o'clock, the hotel ballroom was still empty. I'd arrived early to mark the entrance positions for the different couples with tape. The technicians were finishing the spotlight setup, and someone from the hotel staff was moving chairs along the wall. I liked this moment before a rehearsal, when everything still seemed possible, before human exhaustion, ambition, and misunderstandings began complicating even the simplest plans.

I spread my notes across the table and started the music.

"Do you always begin without me?"

I turned.

Krzysztof was standing by the door in dark trousers and a navy-blue shirt. He had neither his coat nor his camera bag. He looked less like a visitor and more like someone who genuinely intended to take part in the rehearsals.

"You're ten minutes early," I said.

"You're twenty."

"I'm the organizer."

"And I wanted to find out whether you're equally strict with everyone."

"Of course."

"In that case, I feel sorry for everyone."

He approached the table but didn't look at my notes without permission. I noticed that small gesture immediately. Over the years, I'd grown accustomed to people treating my plans as an invitation to offer their own ideas.

"You have fifteen minutes to learn the first section," I announced. "Then the others will join us."

"Fifteen?"

"Not enough?"

"Enough to memorize the steps. Not necessarily enough to learn you."

I looked at him over my papers.

"You don't need to learn me."

"If we're going to dance together, I need to know when you're about to change direction."

"I'll tell you."

"That's exactly what I'd like to avoid."

I straightened.

"Excuse me?"

Krzysztof walked to the middle of the dance floor. For a moment, he studied the markers I'd laid out.

"I noticed something yesterday during that one minute. You know every beat, but you're also trying to decide what my next movement should be. If you lead both of us, the audience will see two people following instructions, not a couple."

I felt the familiar sting of irritation that usually appeared whenever someone judged my work before understanding the thinking behind it.

"I've been creating choreography for more than twenty years."

"I know."

"Then perhaps you could let me do my job?"

"Gladly. On one condition."

I laughed without amusement.

"You're not exactly in a position to set conditions."

"Then you don't have to agree."

He said it calmly, without provocation. He wasn't trying to gain the upper hand. He simply stood in the middle of the dance floor, prepared to accept my refusal.

"What condition?" I asked.

"First, we'll dance the routine exactly as you've prepared it. Then we'll do it once without your instructions. Only after that will we decide what to keep."

"I'm not changing the entire choreography to accommodate one partner."

"Nor am I asking you to."

I studied him for a moment. He was every bit as stubborn as the boy I remembered, except that the seventeen-year-old Krzysztof had usually hidden his stubbornness behind a joke. Now he didn't seem to need anything to hide behind.

"All right. Two versions. But the final decision is mine."

"Agreed."

I turned on the music.

We performed the first sequence correctly. Krzysztof memorized the steps quickly, although his movements remained slightly stiff. When I corrected the position of his arm, he didn't object. He repeated the more difficult sections without comment, concentrating, his forehead lightly furrowed. I knew people who disguised their uncertainty with jokes. He allowed himself not to know something.

It was surprisingly attractive.

At the third turn, I stopped the music.

"You're shifting your weight too early."

"I know."

"Then why do you keep doing it?"

"Because I'm trying to anticipate what you're going to do next."

"You don't have to anticipate. You only have to listen."

He raised his eyebrows.

"Exactly."

It took me another second to understand.

"Don't use my own instructions against me."

"I had no intention of doing that."

"You're lying."

He smiled.

We repeated the sequence. This time, I slowed down slightly to give him time to shift his weight. He responded more smoothly, and the transition between figures became natural. For a brief moment, I felt a satisfaction that had nothing to do with proving him right or wrong.

We were simply beginning to dance together.

When the music stopped, Krzysztof didn't immediately step away.

"Now my version," he reminded me.

"I remember our agreement."

He selected a quieter recording with a distinct piano rhythm. I didn't recognize the melody, although its simplicity appealed to me immediately.

"What is this?"

"A piece I once photographed during a chamber ensemble's performance in Warsaw. The musicians let me keep a rehearsal recording."

"You photographed music?"

"The people making it. I got the music as a bonus."

He offered me his hand.

I accepted it, this time without hesitation.

We didn't follow a prepared routine. Krzysztof led carefully, leaving me room to respond. At first, I tried to guess what would come next. Twice, I moved ahead of him, and once I nearly stepped into his path.

"Stop planning," he said softly.

"Easier said than done."

"Try it for four bars."

I gave him a skeptical look.

"Only four?"

"I wouldn't demand a miracle from you."

I laughed.

And that was when something changed.

Not in him. In me.

I allowed my movements to emerge from his lead rather than from a decision I'd made in advance. Krzysztof didn't try to show off with complicated figures. When he sensed that I'd relaxed into the dance, he increased the pace slightly, and I responded without thinking. We passed one of the markers and turned in a spot my plan hadn't accounted for.

There was something dangerously familiar about it.

He had once been able to make me forget about the audience, too.

We didn't stop until applause broke out.

Marta was standing in the doorway with two of our students.

"Sorry to interrupt," she said with an innocent expression. "But I think we've just seen something that isn't in the script."

I stepped back.

"We were warming up."

"Of course."

Krzysztof went over to the speaker and switched off the music. I noticed that he made no attempt to prolong the moment or comment on our closeness. I was grateful for that, although I also felt a disappointment I didn't want to examine.

For the next hour and a half, we worked with the entire group. Krzysztof didn't behave like an old acquaintance of the school's owner. Whenever he made a mistake, he asked to repeat the section himself. He helped the less experienced participants find the rhythm, but he never corrected them without my approval. Toward the end of the session, one of our students, Mrs. Elżbieta, admitted that she was afraid of turns because she'd injured her knee several years earlier.

"We don't have to do a full turn," Krzysztof said. "We can make it smaller and still keep the rhythm."

"But then everyone will look different," she protested.

"We all look different anyway. Fortunately."

Mrs. Elżbieta laughed, and I suggested a safer figure for her. Krzysztof looked at me with approval he made no attempt to conceal. That single gesture pleased me more than all the compliments I'd received during the past month of preparations.

After rehearsal, we began collecting the tape markers from the floor.

"You were right about the first section," he said.

"I know."

"You're not even going to pretend to be modest?"

"Not when it comes to my work."

He smiled and handed me the last piece of tape.

"But the second version showed us something, too."

"It showed that you can still improvise."

"And that you can allow someone else to lead."

I looked at him.

"Don't read too much into that."

His smile disappeared, but not because I'd offended him.

"I won't, Renata. I know I'm not the boy you used to know."

For a moment, all I could hear was the rustling of cables being packed away.

"I'm not that girl anymore, either," I replied.

"I noticed."

The way he said it robbed me of the sharp response I'd been preparing.

Krzysztof reached for his phone. The screen lit up with an incoming call. I caught a glimpse of a woman's name before he turned the device away.

"I need to call back," he said.

"I'm not keeping you."

But he didn't leave immediately.

"I'd like to talk tomorrow about photographs for the promotional materials. The organizers asked me to prepare a proposal, but I don't want to do anything without your approval."

"Send me the concept."

"I'd rather show you a few examples. Photographs can be more honest than descriptions."

"Professional obsession?"

"Probably."

I studied him more carefully. For the past hour, I'd watched a man who could accept correction, listened attentively to others, and didn't try to take over the space around him. Yet now, once again, I saw the pale mark left by a wedding ring and the phone he'd slipped into his pocket.

I didn't know his present life.

That realization brought back my caution.

"We'll talk tomorrow at the school," I decided. "Ten o'clock."

"I'll be there."

He started toward the door, then stopped for a moment.

"And Renata?"

"What now?"

"Thank you for letting me try the second version."

I was left alone in the middle of the ballroom, holding a roll of tape. I didn't like how much his gratitude meant to me. I liked even less that, for the first time in months, I wasn't thinking exclusively about whether the ball would be a success.

I was thinking about a man who could respect my rules while somehow making me question them myself.

The next morning, I was supposed to discuss photography with him.

At least that was the official reason for our meeting.

Chapter 2 - Between Light and Shadow

On Saturday, I arrived at the dance school half an hour before our appointment, even though I knew perfectly well that preparing the room didn't require nearly that much time.

I wiped the mirrors, organized the documents, and changed the water in the vase on the reception desk. Then I spent several minutes wondering whether my navy-blue blouse looked too elegant for a professional meeting.

That last activity irritated me the most.

I had no intention of returning, in my forties, to the behavior of a teenage girl who changed her clothes three times before meeting a boy.

So I took off the earrings I'd just put on, then immediately put them back on again.

"Excellent consistency, Renata," I muttered to my reflection.

Krzysztof arrived precisely on time.

He was wearing a dark green sweater and a light-colored jacket. A camera bag hung from his shoulder, and he carried a paper bag from a nearby bakery.

"I didn't know whether you'd had breakfast," he said. "I bought two croissants. If you don't want one, I'll eat both."

I gave him a suspicious look.

"Are you trying to bribe me with pastries?"

"That depends. Is it working?"

"I haven't decided yet."

"Then we have a good starting point for negotiations."

I let him into the small office behind the practice room. The space served simultaneously as an office, a storage room for documents, and a place where I occasionally managed to eat lunch without interrupting classes. Photographs from my students' performances hung on the walls, but there wasn't a single picture of me.

Krzysztof noticed almost immediately.

"You don't like having your picture taken?"

"I prefer standing on the other side of the room."

"That's not an answer."

"Then you'll have to make do with it."

He didn't press.

He opened his laptop and showed me a series of photographs from previous charity events. They weren't the typical pictures of elegantly dressed guests posing in front of sponsors' advertisements. In one photograph, an elderly man was adjusting his wife's necklace. In another, a woman was laughing so heartily that her makeup had smudged. There was also a photograph of hands intertwined during a dance.

"I look for moments when people forget they're being watched," he explained.

I enlarged the last photograph.

"Aren't you afraid someone might feel uncomfortable?"

"That's why I ask permission. Always, before publishing a photograph that captures a private moment. Sometimes the best photograph stays in my archive."

I looked at him.

"Even if it could make you money?"