

Laura Bellini

Stay After the Last Dance

Her Former Partner Came Back for
More Than One Performance.



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ROMANS

CONTENTS

INTRO	4
Chapter 1 - The Envelope That Shouldn't Exist	10
Chapter 2 - The Price of Coming Back.....	27
Chapter 3 - What We Didn't Remember	48
Chapter 4 - The First Step Isn't Coming Back.....	64
Chapter 5 - A Signature Beneath Someone Else's Decision	90
Chapter 6 - The Eight	109
Chapter 7 - Who Was Watching Through the Glass.....	133
Chapter 8 - The Message from Berlin	153
Chapter 9 - The Voice I Don't Remember	178
Chapter 10 - The Truth Between Us	195
Chapter 11 - The Woman with the Red Notebook.....	214
Chapter 12 - The Line That Must Not Be Crossed.....	235
Chapter 13 - 11:58 PM	254
Chapter 14 - What You Didn't Tell Me	271
Chapter 15 - Other People's Rights	294
Chapter 16 - Don't Save Me Without Me	311
Chapter 17 - The Name That Returns	331
Chapter 18 - Staying Without a Promise.....	348
Chapter 19 - The Last Dance	370
Chapter 20 - After the Last Dance	389

INTRO

The last dance of the night always belonged to me.

Not to the audience who had still been applauding a minute earlier. Not to the technicians coiling cables or the cleaner waiting with her cart behind the side doors. Not even to the company, though they were the reason I stayed after rehearsals longer than common sense should have allowed a thirty-three-year-old woman with a knee that remembered every badly landed jump.

When Przejście Movement Theatre emptied out, I switched on a single light above the stage, closed the auditorium doors, and danced alone.

That night, I needed it more than usual.

A piano recording I had chosen for the new choreography played through the speakers. Slow. Spare. No melody demanding to be felt. I counted under my breath as I shifted my weight from my left leg to my right.

Five, six, seven.

Turn.

Stop.

I didn't trust the eight.

On eight came the moment when a dancer had to let their partner take their weight.

That was why I hadn't created a duet in three years.

"You still stop before eight."

I froze.

The music kept playing.

I didn't have to turn around. A voice I hadn't heard in six years hadn't changed enough for me to mistake it for anyone else's. It was still calmer than it had any right to be. It still carried that irritating certainty of a man who never raised his voice because he assumed he would be heard anyway.

I switched off the music with the remote.

Only then did I look toward the audience.

Adrian Kostecki was in the third row.

For a moment, the fact that he had chosen that particular seat irritated me more than his presence itself. Third row, seat nine. He had always claimed it was the best place to see the entire stage while still being able to read the dancers' faces.

He wore a dark coat and a white shirt open at the collar. His hair was shorter at the temples than it used to be. His face a little sharper. Only the way he sat - leaning slightly forward, forearms resting on his knees - remained indecently familiar.

"The theatre is closed," I said.

"The door was open."

"That's not an invitation."

"I never needed an invitation to step onto this stage."

I gave a short laugh.

"You've managed perfectly well without it for six years."

Something moved across his face. Not regret. Adrian had never given emotions away that easily. It was more like the acceptance of a blow he had prepared himself to take.

He stood.

That was worse.

While he was sitting far away, I could pretend I was watching a projection from an old film. But as he walked down the aisle toward the stage, every half meter he crossed reminded me of things I had spent years sealing inside very neat, very airtight boxes.

His hand against my back before we stepped onstage.

His breath at my ear as he counted the tempo.

His fingers tightening around me seconds before a lift.

The empty dressing room the next morning.

No goodbye.

Adrian stopped at the edge of the stage.

"Did you get Zarębska's message?"

"If you came here to check whether I read my work email, you could have stayed in Berlin."

"So you got it."

I felt the familiar prick of irritation. Anna Zarębska, the theatre's director, had spent the entire day trying to catch me between rehearsals. Her last text had read: "We need to talk about the gala. Urgent." I had ignored it in full awareness that sooner or later I would pay for that decision.

"The gala is five weeks away," I said. "The choreography is ready. So is the cast."

"Not all of it."

I looked at him more carefully.

No.

Absolutely not.

"Anna invited you?"

"She called me three weeks ago."

Three weeks.

My fingers tightened around the remote.

"And she decided it wasn't worth mentioning to me."

"She decided you'd refuse before you heard the proposal."

"Correctly."

Adrian climbed the side steps onto the stage. I didn't ask who had given him permission to cross that line. The answer was obvious.

He had.

He stopped several meters away from me.

Far enough to preserve some semblance of propriety.

Too close for me to forget what it had been like to dance with him.

"The foundation will pull its funding if the anniversary gala doesn't meet its sales target," he said. "The main sponsor wants something they can sell to the media. Zarębska proposed reviving Pomiędzy."

This time, I said nothing.

Pomiędzy had never been just another duet. We had performed it more than seventy times over two seasons. It was the first production after which people started recognizing my name. The first one that brought Adrian offers from abroad.

And the last one we ever danced together.

"No," I said.

"Julia."

"Don't say my name as though we're halfway through a conversation."

"We are halfway through a conversation. The first half just ended six years ago."

I turned away from him.

That was a mistake, because I caught our reflection in the mirror covering the side wall of the studio.

We were standing exactly where we used to begin rehearsing the final sequence. Him half a step behind me. Me turned sideways. Even the distance between us was almost identical.

"I won't dance with you," I said.

"That's not the only reason I came."

I looked at him in the mirror.

Adrian reached inside his coat and pulled out a flat cream-colored envelope.

My breath caught, not because I recognized the handwriting. I couldn't; the envelope was turned the wrong way.

I recognized the seal.

The small embossed logo of the former Sokołowska Foundation, which had closed two months after our last performance together.

"Where did you get that?"

He didn't hand me the envelope.

"From an archive that supposedly doesn't exist anymore."

I stepped closer.

"What's inside?"

"Something I should have shown you six years ago."

Anger came faster than fear.

"Then show me."

His fingers tightened around the paper.

"First I need to know whether you still want the answer."

"To what question?"

Adrian watched me for several seconds. This time, none of his old certainty was there.

There was something much worse.

Hesitation.

"Why I really left."

Suddenly the vast, empty room felt too small.

Somewhere above the stage, one of the technical lights went out. I heard the dry click, and we were left with only the side light - the same one beneath which, only minutes earlier, I had been trying to make it through the eight.

I looked at the envelope.

Then at the man I had spent six years teaching myself not to ask anything.

"You have three minutes," I said.

Adrian shook his head.

"Three minutes won't be enough."

"You're not getting more."

For the first time that evening, he smiled, but there was nothing light in it.

"Then I guess I'll have to stay after the last dance."

Chapter 1 - The Envelope That Shouldn't Exist

"Then I guess I'll have to stay after the last dance."

For several seconds, I stared at Adrian, trying to decide whether I wanted more to snatch the envelope out of his hand or open the side door of the stage and remind him that six years ago he had been much better at leaving buildings than staying in them. I chose a third option. I walked to the control desk, stopped the last track on the playlist, and switched on the work lights. The white fluorescent strip above the stage killed what was left of the theatrical atmosphere. We were left with the black dance floor beneath our feet, rows of empty seats, and a truth that - judging by his expression - was going to look considerably less romantic under full lighting.

"You started your three minutes almost a minute ago."

"You still do that."

"Do what?"

"You make rules the moment you're afraid someone else might make them for you."

I crossed the distance between us so quickly that he instinctively drew back the hand holding the envelope.

"Don't analyze me. Not after six years."

"I'm not analyzing you."

"You just did."

"I remember."

That one word sounded worse than anything else he could have said. I had prepared myself for excuses, evasions, maybe even apologies. Not memory. Memory meant that what I had spent years sealing into a closed wound still had a definite shape for him too. That he hadn't vanished from my life and turned me into some random name from an old program.

At least not completely.

I held out my hand.

"The envelope."

Adrian looked at it, then at me.

"I want to give it to you. Just not here."

"We're past the age when the place where you hand someone documents changes what's written inside them."

"The contents, no. What you do with them, maybe."

"This is the theatre where I work. You didn't come here to drag me into a forest. Give it to me."

This time he didn't argue. When he placed the envelope in my hand, he did it carefully, almost excessively so, making sure our fingers didn't touch. I noticed.

And hated the fact that I noticed.

The paper was old, stiffer than modern envelopes, slightly yellowed at the corners. I knew the embossed logo of the Sokołowska Foundation from hundreds of programs, invoices, and sponsor boards. During my first years as a professional dancer, that symbol had been practically everywhere. Above rehearsal-room entrances. On banners. In contract footers. The foundation had financed half the more ambitious projects in the city until it suddenly