

My Paso Doble
by Bavand

(I have never met Maks and have never taken any dance lessons from him. This is the work of fiction based on watching *Dancing With The Stars* & his interactions with Laila in that studio and my imagination. I may have it all wrong, but I hope I captured the essence of his character...)



Different answers quickly crossed his face before he finally shrugged impatiently.

Session 1

My friends set this up.

It was my combined birthday and Christmas present. Otherwise, believe me, I would never be here in a million years. They made all the arrangements and paid for the lessons, all I had to do was show up. I figured it was more of a joke kind of thing—me, taking dance lessons? Yeah, right. And probably from some flaming pretty boy, but when I walked into the studio, wow, this was no joke.

Wow was an understatement... tall, dark and dashing good looking in jeans and a light blue shirt with a scrumptiously scruffy face. The first three—no, four buttons, not counting the one at the neck—were open, revealing several chic necklaces. Basically, just all around very suave and very sexy leaning against a table full of CDs, a player and bottled water. He was studying a clipboard, water bottle in hand.

I hesitated at the door, gawking like an idiot. Run, Julie, run—he hasn't seen you yet. Damn, too late. He glanced up and gave me a dazzling thousand-watt smile. "Julie?" I nodded, still gawking like an idiot and feeling my cheeks getting red hot with a bright blush.

He put the clipboard down and came to me, extending his hand. His touch was warm and friendly. "Hi, I'm Maks." Oh man... his voice was like a Velvet Russian* chilled to perfection with an accented finish. Starts out smooth and savory, then grabs your heart on the way down.

"Hi, I'm Julie." Well, that was lame since he knows that already, but I was momentarily distracted by being up close to him. Yes, all around very cajun. Then I noticed all the mirrors on every wall, which confirmed that I looked like the lame, blushing gawking idiot from every possible angle in the room.

He turned and starting leading me over to table before releasing my hand. I followed closely behind with my head down to avoid the mirrors and admire the fabulous fit of his stylish jeans. Suddenly, those jeans stopped and I almost bumped into him. "Oops! Sorry! Oh man, I was—"

"It's alright. Umm, you can put your things down here. And I do appreciate you being on time. This is your time and if you're late—well, there might be someone scheduled after you, so you should make the most

of your time.”

I agreed with a nod and he chuckled. “You don’t say much do you?” Actually, I do, but I’m trying real hard not to be a blabbering idiot—just a lame, blushing, gawking idiot—and not say anything stupid like how I could imagine making the most of my time here—alone—with you...

“So do you have any dancing experience?” Maks asked as he moved out into the center of the dance floor. This time I watched where I was going as I followed.

“Well, not like this. I mean, I think I have a good sense of rhythm and I can, you know, shake my—you know—groove thing at a nightclub or something. But not anything so formal and elegant like this.”

“Alright, why don’t we start with the basics and go from there, yeah?.” He planted himself an arms length away from me, facing the same direction, and made eye contact in the mirror. I guess there was no avoiding the mirrors now, which wasn’t so bad as long as I stayed focused on him.

“We will start with the foxtrot, the waltz and then the swing. Now, dancing with a partner is the balance between frame and connection, so that one partner is not doing all the work. And to achieve that balance you need good posture with relaxed, confident movement—this is what we call your “frame”—and not be tense and stiff. Very hard to move around all tense and stiff—and more importantly, very hard for your partner to move around with you.”

“Okay.”

“The stepping pattern is the same in foxtrot and waltz—real easy—you won’t believe how easy it is, but the timing is different. Slow-slow-quick-quick for the foxtrot and 1-2-3 for the waltz.”

“Okay.”

“Now, in ballroom dancing the woman “is always right” and the man leads. I say “right” because you will always step off with your right foot and that’s an easy way to remember that—you’re always right, but I lead. Get it?”

“Okay.”

“This the foxtrot basic.” I watched his feet as he defined each step and then added the timing. “Forward, forward, side, close. Forward, forward, side, close. The timing is slow, slow, quick, quick...” His fluid, mesmerizing movement was almost hypnotic. I can do this... just watch him move around and listen to that velvety accent all day and feel like I had gotten my money’s worth.

Sudden silence made me look up questioningly. He paused with a sly smile, then shook his head, “never mind, I’m teasing.”

“Oh, am I suppose—?”

“No, I was waiting for you to say ‘okay’”. Maks mischievously explained.

“What? Oh, man! Sorry, ummm, I guess I’m a bit nervous trying to get all this and not mess up.”

“Relax, you need to relax, yeah?.” He said giving the nearest shoulder a quick rub. “We’re just getting started and you’re already tense. You will not “mess up”. This is me you’re talking to and it’s just us—no one else is watching.”

Exactly! It’s just us and you are way, way too fine for me to relax... “Okay,” I answered taking a deep breath, “I’m relaxed.” He looked askance at me in the mirror. “Okay, darlin’, this is—“

“Darlin’?”

“Umm, yeah, I lived in Atlanta for a couple of years and it comes out. But what I mean is, this is it. This is as relaxed as I’m going to get now, okay? So what’s next? Is that what I’m suppose to do?”

He couldn’t quite wipe that smile off his face, but he got back into instructor mode. “No, no—that was man’s part. These are your steps going back. Back, back, side, close.”

“Wait, what? You mean “back” as in going backwards, as in “not facing the way I’m going” backwards?” Now it was my turn to laugh. “Yeah, right, darlin, without falling or tripping? I thought you said this was easy.”

Maks unexpectedly turned very serious as a brooding darkness clouded his eyes at what he thought was an affront. “Not with me leading—not with my instruction. No one falls in my class.”

“Oh, I’m sure it’s okay, really. I’m kind of clumsy—never did learn how to skate backwards—you know, and now I’m confused. Darlin, why show me what you’re doing if I’m not going to be doing it?”

“Because I was showing you what the dance looks like and most people traditionally see it that way.”

Oh. Okay. Umm, so what do I do?”

“These are your steps: back, back, side, close.”

Whew, back to business—sort of, but now it was like he had to prove himself. Man, I didn’t think his dark eyes could get any darker, but they were down right intensely incensed. I mimicked his movement as he stepped through it again. He did it several times until I felt I could actually do it semi-gracefully on my own.

Then he came directly in front of me so close I could see the smattering of freckles on his face. And I’m sure he could see the different shades of red rising on my cheeks again. Oh please, oh please God, don’t let me faint. Why does it have to be so hot in here?

He held his left hand up and slipped his right hand under my arm, reaching for my back. Oh yes, the classic dance hold like you see people doing in ballrooms and those old movies. I clasped his left hand and rested my right hand on his upper arm. Once we were in place, he shifted slightly to his right so our feet were not directly in front of each other.

“With the right connection, I can easily lead you across the dance floor—and you will not fall.”

“Okay.” Ah, that brought a hint of a smile back to his face.

I felt the slight push in his grasp, compelling me to move back. “Now I want you to take a big step back with your right foot—no, the other right foot—and we’ll walk through the steps I showed you. Go ahead, big step back. Excellent. Now an even bigger step with the left foot. No—no, don’t look down at your feet. You know the steps, just do them. If you are not sure of yourself, watch in the mirror, but keep your head up. Always keep your head up—not looking down. Don’t start any bad habits now.”

“Okay.”

“Now step back again—no. Why are you doing looking back?”

“Well, when you’re skating back—“

“What is it with this skating business? This is a dance floor,” he contended, cutting me off. “We-are-not-skating. Get that out of your head.”

“Okay, okay.” Man, this hard! And when he gets mad, it makes it even harder. I don’t care how good looking he is—is it time to go yet?

“Now, no looking down, no looking back. Again, right foot—step back, left foot—step back, side and close. Back, back, side, close. Back, back, side, close. See? See how easy that is, “darlin”?” He smiled triumphantly.

Oh man, we had actually moved across the dance floor and I didn’t trip! “Darlin” coming out of his mouth with the slight Russian accent was kind of cute—and he was teasing me again, but so what. It put the playfulness back in his eyes and I didn’t fall!

Just as I was getting use to—and really starting to love—being in his arms, he released me.

“Next time, we will work on more specifics of improving your frame, getting you more comfortable moving around. And maybe try the waltz, yeah? Your steps are small and heavy, which is common for beginners, so at home I want you to work on your dance walk. Think more like skimming the floor,” I watched as he glided forward, “toe then heel—”

“Okay.”

“—Then heel to toe when you move back. Then you do this,” he spun around and went into a moon walk.

“Now wait! That’s that Michael Jackson moon walk thing! Darlin’, I know that’s not ballroom dancing”

“True,” he shrugged innocently, “but I love doing it. And I could teach it to you?”

“Ah, no. Let’s just stick with the ballroom stuff.” His mouth turned down into a big baby pout and I just shook my head as I grabbed my bag at the table.

He thrust a bottled water in my free hand. “Here, take it with you—stay hydrated. And I’ll see you next week, yeah?” His fingers grazed mine and I felt the color rising in my cheeks again.

All I can say is, it was the longest and shortest 45 minutes of my entire life...

))))((

Session 4 Already

Entering the studio was like accidentally catching a couple who thought they were alone.

Traffic wasn’t bad and for once I got a parking space right in front, making me a few minutes early. They were standing so close they were practically on top of each other—vertically! It was Maks and this pretty, probably-a-size-4, leggy redhead. Their arms were stretched up above their heads, hands palm-to-palm and almost mouth to mouth. Oops, but they should have locked the door if they wanted to, you know...

The resounding thud that followed was my heart and jaw dropping to the floor. That’s got to be his girl friend, or probably his fiancée, with that kind of heat between them. And a beard now, oh man, oh man this way too much. Quick! Get out now, but I was rooted in place by the voyeuristic view of it all. Someone was breathing hard—oh, that’s me—and I swear it had to be 100 degrees in here. Why is it always so hot in here? He slid his fingers seductively down her arms and back up. That gave me goose bumps to offset my red hot cheeks.

Suddenly, he startled the hell out of me by gripping her wrists and breaking the silence. “And drop, 2, 3, 4.” Effortlessly, he dropped her down until she was suspended above the floor, perfectly horizontal and balanced on one leg bent at the knee. The other leg had slid out straight out from under her, creating one

long, languid line of beauty.

He glanced my way and startled me again by acknowledging my presence with a friendly smile as though holding her like that was an every day thing. Then it was all instant passion again as he looked back down at her captivately in complete control. No way! No way can he just turn it on and off like that! And that's a dance?! A ballroom dance??

"And up," he directed, snapping her up, "and side."

She came up and spun out a half turn to his side, exquisitely extending her arm out reaching for freedom. She leaned away from him on her right leg, brazenly bending the inside leg up at the knee until she was only balanced on the one leg and his tenuous touch. Her hand started slipping from his as though he was going to let her go.

But no! He tightened his grip and reeled her back in. She spun back to him, but facing out with her hands at her side as though she was ready to spin around and strike him. But no! She leaned back, grabbing his—what, what, what?? I couldn't tell what from where I was standing, but then I saw their profiles in the mirror. Thank God for the mirrors. Her hands were on his hips—his hips—as she leaned against him for balance. Then she did this impossibly high kick before spinning around to face him and push him back away from her.

And just like that—snap—the sizzling seduction was gone. One minute livid lovers and the next instant, business partners discussing a proposal. How can they do that?? How can they just turn it off and on like that??

"I don't know... maybe it's too much? Maybe just do the drop and then the kick?" She said matter-of-factly discussing choreography.

Wow... so it was a dance. See, no one was counting out the timing like he does with me. Oh... that's because they're pros and probably have been doing this kind of thing for years. And man, they fit so well together like she belonged there with him like that, with that, you know, that passion, that fire. Oh man, I wish I belonged there like that... yeah, right, not in a million years.

"And maybe cut something else out?" Maks gave an unsure shrug, then nodded towards me. "Think about it and we'll work on it some more tomorrow, yeah? "

"Sure, sounds good." Quick hugs and she hurried out after she grabbed some water.

"Come on in, Julie," he gestured with a nod of his head as he went to the table. He picked up his bottle and finished it off in one long swallow.

"Wow..." I said shuffling over—forget the "dance walk" stuff—my heart needed time to slow down and crawl back up into my chest. "Wow, that was so... so, so dramatic! The passion..."

"Yeah?"

"And that's a dance? A "ballroom" dance?"

He nodded. "It's the paso doble, probably the most "theatrical"—the most dramatic of the Latin dances—of all the dances. Remember I said each dance has a style, a character to it, that's almost telling a story?" I nodded. "Well, the paso doble is like the bullfight and the man is like the matador—powerful, commanding, subduing—and the woman is sometimes like the cape, fiery feminine, flowing—."

"Oh really?" I asked, having regained some measure of composure. "The woman doesn't get to do any commanding or subduing?"

“Well, for some—I mean, the passion is in the give-and-take, the love-hate, the fight.”

“Hmm, well I saw some bullfights in Mexico City and a couple of times, the bull won—or would have won if the other guys hadn’t stepped to the rescue. So why can’t the woman dominate and win?”

“Well, I...” Different answers quickly crossed his face before he finally shrugged impatiently. “Fine, tell you what—some day when you can dance like that, you can be the matador. But you,” he emphasized with the point of his finger in my general direction, “are still a beginner and you are talking away your time. Now today, I—”

“Okay, okay, Mr. Matador, sir.”

He stopped and rolled his eyes in a “whatever” look before continuing. “Today we’re going to start learning the Latin dances anyway, so that should give you some passion, yeah? Not so much drama—but some passion maybe. Hopefully.”

My composure collapsed instantly as my heart dropped to the floor—again. Right, like I really need to see him giving out the passion all over again and survive. The room was hot enough as it was.

“Actually, no,” he countered as my face flushed red. “It’s more like a “romance” with the rumba and the cha-cha is more cheeky-cheeky, like a party—a fiesta. Those are the beginner Latin dances—very easy for you to pick up. So what do you want first?”

Obviously my safest bet was the fiesta. “Oh let’s go for the party.”

“Yeah? You don’t want any romance, just cheeky-cheeky?”

Okay, I admit I came this close to smacking that big teasing grin off his bodacious bearded face. “Yeah, yeah—whatever. Darlin’, just show me the cheeky-cheeky, my time is ticking away here, you know.”

I watched him move out into the middle of the dance floor while I took a quick drink of water. I needed a minute to get my heart settled down and my face to cool off. Then he started doing this cheeky-cheeky hip action thing and I figured we might as well just call 911 now. My heart can’t take much more of his sexy swagger and they could hose down my hot face in the process.

Maybe I could just learn to how to turn it off and on? One minute bashful blushing then—snap—total cool and in control passion? Yeah, right, not in a million years...

))))((

The Last Session

I can’t believe this is the last session already.

“So, what would you like to go over?” Maks asked as he popped open a bottled water. We were leaning against the table, discussing what to do. “You know all the basic steps now so I think we should work on improving your frame...”

Definitely like the scruffy beard look better—flatters his features more and not so baby-faceish like last week when he had shaved. Definitely more suave...

“Julie?” He waved his hand in front of my face and snapped his fingers.

“Oh man, sorry, I was—I wish I could—” See, this is what I get for not paying attention, but at least I stopped myself before I said something stupid. However, I couldn’t keep the color from rising on my cheeks.

“What? Do what?”

“Umm, oh, I—no, never mind, nothing...”

Maks shrugged his shoulders, put the bottle down and patted my shoulder as he stood up. “Okay, come on. Your frame has improved a lot, but—”

“The paso doble!” I blurted out and instantly regretted as the flush proceeded down my neck. I swear they should keep these dance studios more air conditioned.

His brown eyes almost bugged out of his head and then he nodded knowingly. “Ohhh, so you think you can be the matador now that you’ve learned—”

“Yeah, right, darlin. No, don’t worry, Maks, you’re still in charge.” I answered in kind, patting his shoulder reassuringly. Damn, there was no backing out now. Well, once he stops laughing hysterically we can work on framing and more holds—those were the best parts anyway. I really, really, really liked his holding me.

He could see I was struggling with this and his eyes softened some what. “Really, Julie, I can’t teach you the paso doble now—it would probably take you months.”

“No, no, I was just, I was thinking—remember a couple of weeks ago when I walked in and you guys were, you know? You were,” I made a grasping motion like I was holding something above the floor, “and she was all, you know, with one leg out...” I swept my hands out horizontally, recalling the Miss Size 4 Leggy Redhead.

“Oh, yes, yeah, I remember that.” He gazed at me intently like he was measuring... what? Like how he was going to hold my leggy but Size 16 up over the floor? My motives? Like how I just wanted a bit of that passion and drama which would never happen in a million years otherwise—especially with someone like him? Like how he was going to give me a crash course on the paso doble in less than 45 minutes? Yes, I’m an idiot so just start laughing now and get it over with before I totally die of embarrassment.

He suddenly made up his mind and jerked his head in a nod. “Sure, we can do that, so let’s get going, we have a lot of work to do.” He glanced at clock as he moved out into the dance floor. Now my eyes bugged out. No way! For real? He gestured impatiently for me to join him. There was no time for my heart to drop the floor, we were actually going to do this. Oh man, oh man, oh man...

“We’re just going to keep walking through the steps until you’ve got it, then run through it a few times without stopping, and then finish by putting it to music.”

“Okay.”

“We’ll start from behind—you behind me. I start like this,” He turned his back to me and went into this defiant stance that actually did look like a matador. He did this striking sweep of his left arm that ended with his hand out and open, waiting for mine.

“Okay.”

He proceeded to pantomime my steps with an invisible partner in his place. “Coming from behind and to the left, you put your left hand in mine. I will direct you into an underarm turn this way. As you come out and around, your turn will bring you in front of me like this.”

He completed the turn, bringing up his other arm and stopped in the position Leggy Redhead had been in when I entered the studio that day.

“Oh man, okay.”

“I grab your wrists—you turn sideways—as you go down, arch your back just slightly for balance. The majority of your balance will be on left leg, bending as you go down. And you slide your right leg straight out from under you. When you come back up, draw in your right leg to stand on both feet. And... I don't know...” He cocked his head inquisitively at me.

“I don't think I can do that kick like she did...”

“No?”

“Oh yeah, right.” He wasn't teasing me and I had to think about it. “Oh man, darlin, this is hard! It looked sooooo easy when you guys were doing it.”

“Like professionals who have been doing it for years and years?” Maks countered, proving his point from the earlier conversation.

I shook my head in defeat. “Yeah, yeah, you're right. I am most definitely not even close to being anything like that. Okay, well thanks anyway. Maybe we should work on the—”

“No, no, no, don't back out now,” he insisted cutting me off. “You can still do this—just that part—I promise.”

“Are you sure? I mean if...”

“I'm sure. And I'm sure you're sure, so let's walk through each step. Come on, one little part of it isn't as hard as you think...”

He walked me through it until we were at the moment before the Big Drop. We were so close that a slight tilt of the head and I would be kissing him. He was so obviously comfortable with himself. I, on the other hand, was so glad I brushed my teeth before coming in and had plucked my eyebrows last night.

He whispered something but my heart was pounding so hard, I didn't hear it. I think he asked me if I was ready because he tightened his grip on my wrists. I made sure I was solid on my left leg.

“And drop. Arch your back slightly, keep it straight. No, you're bent in the middle—think a straight piece of wood—not a pretzel.” And then all of a sudden there I was, mostly horizontal to the floor. Oh man, is he strong—he's got to be, to be to hold me like that. He brought me right back up again, holding me close but he relaxed his grip on my wrists.

“Wow....”

“Good, but this isn't a good way to end—we need more of a finish.”

“Wow... okay.” Finish? What finish? I'm perfectly happy just like this—wow, look at the different flecks of color in his eyes—some are like amber. How can his hold be so strong and so gentle at the same time?

“Julie?” He whispered teasingly. Oops, getting lost in his eyes again. He's got to know the effect he has on women, but I need to focus.

“Umm, like I said, I can't kick like that. Umm, maybe do that turn thing you guys did?” I pulled away into that half turn to side. Hopefully I gracefully stretched my arm out like she did until I was almost out of his grasp. Then he kind of reeled me back in, bringing me back in front of him—although not as close—which was okay, I needed to catch my breath.

“Excellent. Pause, 3, 4, then push me away—no, don't shove—it's more of a theatrical tap on the chest,

and I will fall back.”

“Okay.”

“And now we do it again.”

And again, and again, and again. I got so caught up in going through the routine and memorizing the steps that there wasn't time for drama and generating any passion. I couldn't concentrate otherwise and he was in instructor mode anyway. It was like: Yeah, yeah I'm pressed up against him, and drop. Yeah, yeah deep brown eyes and drop. Yeah, yeah, love his hold and drop. He actually didn't drop me every time, I just leaned back a bit then straightened and went into that turn.

Each time we went through it, he picked up the pace more and started counting out the rhythm. It really didn't take as long as I thought it would until we were running through it fairly smoothly without coaching. And once the movement was automatic, I could feel some of the drama coming in.

“Okay, good. I think we're ready for the music.” He went back to the table and sorted through the CDs. “This piece is really excellent for the paso doble. It's from *Carmen*.” He downed some water, then turned and held the bottle up to me. I shook my head—like that's the last thing I needed or I'd be running to the bathroom in the middle of him dropping me, 2, 3, 4.

Oh man, the energy he was giving out. He seemed genuinely excited to be doing this even though it was just me in some little dance studio. He set the CD to play the last half of the previous score for some lead time. The music came on and in the space of putting the water down and coming back to me, his demeanor changed like he was in some big competition. Oh man, oh man, oh man...

He came up close to me and put his hands on my shoulders reassuringly. “See the judges over there?” he whispered, inclining his head in the direction of where they might be. “Just ignore them. And the crowds? Ignore them too.”

“Wait, what?” It took me a minute to follow what he was saying and then I realized he was setting the stage for me. Oh man, that was so sweet. I could almost picture us in some grand ballroom.

“I know this is your first time in a competition like this, but there's nothing to be nervous about. It's really just you and me in this moment we've been working for.” Oh man...

“Ready?” He asked and I nodded lamely like no way, this can't really be happening. Oh God, please, please don't let me faint.

He turned his back to me and actually started dancing—I guess they were the steps that led up to this part—and I was captivated. So powerful, so striking—but it's just me—oops pay attention. He started counting out loud, just loud enough for me to hear and there was his hand out—my cue.

And then it was happening... underarm spin... I tried let myself go and get into it, but I'm sure I looked more floored than fiery... coming around, arms up and there I was so unbelievably close, hands cinched sensuously. The blaze in his eyes took my breath away and there it was... the magical moment! I felt like I belonged there in the passion.

He tightened his grip on my wrists and then drop, 2, 3, 4... arch back, oh God, please don't have me bent in like a pretzel. It felt like a slow motion dream... then up and turning out away from his grasp, let me go... but no! He reels me back to him... pause for a contemptuous stare down and I finished by pushing him—really the light tap, though—pushing away the proud matador—you will not have me! I gave a haughty shake of my head and stomped one foot definitely as he fell back. Wow...

And then he was just Maks again, but he seemed sincerely pleased we had pulled it off. “We did it! See, that wasn't so hard.”

“Wow...”

He took my hand and led me back to the table—I think. I was in too much of a daze to track my surroundings. Oh, yes, table bumping hip, I guess we are here.

“You did excellent... are you okay?” he asked, pressing a bottled water in my hand.

“Oh man, darlin’ you have no idea...” but I think he actually did have an idea.

“Good. Maybe you’ll consider more lessons then, “darlin’”. Think about it and then call to schedule...”

It occurred to me how Maks was almost like a character actor, turning it on and off like that. Director yells action and your in character—music comes on and you’re in the character of the dance... but his heart is always there for you whether you’re dancing or not.

I, on the other hand, was still turned on and desperately needed to cool off with a Velvet Russian and some air conditioning. I was tempted to invite him for a drink in appreciation for all of this, but that just didn’t seem appropriate. And Lord knows what idiot things would come out of my mouth after one drink anyway. Okay, I’m just going to get out of here and maybe save money for more lessons later.

The whole thing was fabulous and probably one of the greatest—once in a life time—birthday and Christmas present ever! I wonder what they’ll do when I turn 50...?

))))((

*Velvet Russian

2 parts premium vodka

1 part white creme de cacao

1 part dark creme de cacao.

Best served neat in a chilled old fashioned glass: first put some ice in the glass, mix the liquors in a shaker with ice & strain into the glass after dumping out the ice.

It’s okay on the rocks if you want the melting ice to take the edge off the liquor, but I prefer it chilled to perfection.

[No chic necklaces, leggy redheads, or *Carmen* CDs were harmed during the production of this story. Apparently the air conditioning had been running full blast, but I’m still thinking it was hot in there.

Dancing With The Stars is the property of ABC TV and Maks is the property of Maksim Chmerkovskiy. I just had those dance lessons for fun and not for profit. First posted on maksimchmerkovskiy.com /forum in 3 parts, jk2007.]