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# **FLEETING SHADOWS OF PASSION**

*GLAMOROUS EROTIC ROMANCE*

**Kox Emma**  
**Fleeing shadows of passion.**  
**Glamorous erotic romance**

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**Аннотация**

After ten years, Anna returns to Boston and unexpectedly reunites with Maxwell,

reigniting a love she once abandoned out of fear. Amid professional projects, chance encounters, emotional tension, they confront past regrets, jealousy, and unspoken desires.

Faced with Anna's engagement to another, both must choose between safety and true love. Ultimately, they embrace vulnerability, commit to each other, and begin a new life together, building a lasting emotional «bridge» between them.

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# Fleeing shadows of passion

## Glamorous erotic romance

**Kox Emma**

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«**Fleeing Shadows of Passion**»

### **Epigraph**

*Passion is not fire.*

*It is a shadow that follows us  
wherever we go.*

*And one day we stop running—  
and allow it to become light.*

# Chapter 1. Return to Boston

Spring in Boston greeted her with rain. Not the light, romantic kind that lays gently on the pavement, but real rain — cold, persistent, as if the city was testing her resilience in advance. Drops slid along dark facades, ran down old brick, left a sheen on the sidewalks, turning streets into mirrors that reflected the lead-colored sky. Anna walked slowly, not trying to hide from the piercing wind and cold raindrops. Her umbrella lay in her bag — she had deliberately left it closed. She wanted to feel the city with her skin, just like she once had, when everything seemed possible.

Boston had a unique, unmistakable scent. The air was always steeped in history — the damp aroma of the river, the bitter smell of coffee from small cafes, the mustiness of old libraries, a faint metallic note from the ocean breeze. It was a scent that could not be confused with anything else. She inhaled deeply. Along with the air, memories flooded in. She had grown up here. Here she had first believed she could build something bigger than just a career. Here she had first allowed herself to love — without hesitation, without calculation. And it was from here that she had once run away.

Not loudly. Not dramatically. She simply packed her things, signed a contract in another city, and disappeared, leaving behind everything that had seemed too intense, too dangerous.

She told herself she was leaving for ambition, for career, for independence. But if she was honest, she had left because she had been afraid of the depth of the feelings that had overwhelmed her.

Through the rain mist, the building of an architectural firm appeared. Its glass facade reflected the gray sky, while nearby, as if reminding her of the past, stood 19th-century brick houses — solid, enduring, having survived decades, changes of eras, and people. This combination of old and new had always seemed symbolic to her. It was here she had learned to merge tradition with risk, form with courage.

Anna paused. For a moment, it seemed time had rewind. That she would now see herself at twenty-two — with burning eyes, with plans, with belief that love could not hurt.

«Returning is not a romance,» she whispered to herself. «In books, heroes always know why they came back.» She did not know.

The door opened automatically, letting her in along with the cool wind. The lobby welcomed her with the smell of freshly ground coffee and paper — the scents that had once marked beginnings for her. Light from the lamps reflected off glass tables; colleagues chatted at the reception desk, someone laughed. Life here had gone on without her all these years. Some faces seemed familiar. A few nodded, a few smiled in mild surprise. In their eyes she read: «She's back.» Anna responded with a restrained smile. She had learned to wear a mask. In her

years away, she had mastered calm, rational composure, almost impenetrable. But inside, everything was different. Her heart beat faster than it should.

She walked down the corridor lined with photographs of completed projects. Among them was the first one they had worked on together. She stopped.

The photo was black and white: they stood on a construction site, still young, hair tousled, smiles sincere. Their shoulders nearly touched. The look in their eyes — open, trusting. She remembered that day: how they argued about the facade line, how they laughed at their own mistakes, how they stayed late, discussing not just work. How he had looked at her then, as if seeing more than a colleague.

Anna looked away. The past always returns unexpectedly, even when you think it's fully lived.

She approached her new desk, set down her bag, and pulled out a folder with drawings. Her fingers were slightly cold — either from the rain or from excitement, she didn't know.

At that moment, the door to the conference room quietly opened. First, she heard footsteps. Confident. Even. Familiar. She didn't turn immediately. Her body reacted before her mind — with a light, almost painful impulse under her ribs. Only then did she look up.

He stood in the doorway. Tall. Calm. In a dark jacket that emphasized his straight posture. Time had touched him slightly — adding depth to his gaze, sharpness to his features. But it

hadn't erased the essential. Maxwell Harrison. Max. Her past embodied in the present.

The world seemed muted. The office sounds became distant, as if behind glass. Even the rain outside slowed. He saw her too. For a split second, something flickered in his eyes that could not be hidden — surprise, pain, recognition. And something else. Something unfinished.

«Anna,» he said. Her name sounded different from anyone else's mouth. It carried a story — unspoken but alive.

She felt the air in her chest thicken. She had prepared for this meeting mentally, imagining dozens of scenarios: cold politeness, formal distance, confident composure. But now all scripts fell apart.

«Maxwell,» she replied, striving for a steady tone.

And at that very moment, the unexpected happened. A woman came out of the conference room.

Beautiful, elegant, with a slight smile. She approached him naturally, as someone accustomed to being near. Her hand gently touched his elbow — a gesture not showy but too close to be accidental. Anna felt something tighten inside her. The woman looked at her with interest.

«Oh, you must be Anna?» she asked.

Maxwell tensed slightly but quickly regained composure. «Yes. This is Anna, our new lead project architect.» *Our*. The word sounded deliberate. Anna forced herself to smile. «Nice to meet you.» The woman introduced herself with a calm, confident

voice. And in her tone, there was something impossible to ignore: she knew her place beside him. Inside Anna, several emotions sparked at once — jealousy, shame for that jealousy, anger at herself, cold professional composure. She reminded herself: you came back for work. For the project. Not for the past. But the heart does not obey logic.

Maxwell looked at her slightly longer than politeness allowed. His gaze carried tension, as if he understood that this encounter was inevitable, yet no less painful.

She sat at her desk and opened her laptop, pretending to focus on documents. Lines on the screen blurred.

She had returned to Boston thinking the past was just memory. But the past was alive and possibly already occupied. Slowly, a storm was rising within her — not youthful, not blind, but mature, conscious. She realized: this was not just a meeting of former lovers. It was the start of a complex game — with feelings, ambitions, and what remained unsaid. She didn't know if he was free. Didn't know what bound him to this woman. But one thing was clear immediately: this story wasn't over.

And now she would have to live it again — differently. Anna lifted her gaze to the office's glass wall. Beyond it, the city went on living, the rain gradually eased, and the first bright breaks appeared in the gray sky.

«Am I ready?» she asked herself again. No answer came. But she had already taken a step. And Boston had accepted her back — along with everything she had tried so long to forget.

## Chapter 2. An Unexpected Meeting

Anna slowly sank into the chair, letting it give slightly under her weight, and closed her eyes for a moment. In this seemingly ordinary office, where each day flowed in a steady, almost monotonous rhythm, her heart suddenly began to beat differently. Unusually fast, almost painfully. Inside, anxiety still churned, the kind she had long tried to suppress. She felt a tremor in her palms, barely noticeable, yet so treacherous that it could not be ignored.

The office was quiet. The faint hum of the air conditioners, the barely audible creak of chairs on polished parquet, the distant tapping of keys — all of it blended into a strange kind of music, each sound echoing inside her. She listened, and every rustle, every movement seemed incredibly significant. Even the clock on the wall seemed to echo the rhythm of her own heartbeat.

Then the door to the meeting room quietly opened. A light creak, a barely perceptible rustle, the subtle movement of the lock — and the air seemed charged with tension that Anna felt with her entire body. Everything around her froze. Time lost its usual rhythm. She felt as if every part of her body, from the tips of her toes to the ends of her hair, was ready to recognize him at a glance, from a single intonation.

He stood in the doorway. Maxwell Harrison. Tall, upright, self-assured, with shoulders one could always lean on. A faint,

almost imperceptible smile, but now with a quiet caution in his eyes that Anna recognized immediately. The same caution they once trusted each other with, yet feared, because they loved too deeply.

Anna felt something ancient tighten in her chest, long forgotten, as if her heart remembered its rhythm from ten years ago. A slight dizziness washed over her, defying logic. Ten years. Ten years — and everything was before her again, almost tangible, almost alive.

«Anna,» he said calmly, evenly, though his voice trembled slightly, almost imperceptibly.

Her name on his lips sounded like a whole world. A word that contained memories of laughter, arguments, long nights discussing projects, casual walks along the waterfront, unspoken words, and their first careful touches. She breathed softly and replied:

«Maxwell.»

Her voice trembled, but just enough to seem steady. The tremor was hidden beneath the mask of the adult woman she had become over the years, but her heart knew the truth.

They stood facing each other. Between them lay a dense, almost tangible space. Colleagues behind glass partitions rustled papers, spoke, and laughed, but for Anna, it was happening in another reality. In their world, there were only the two of them, and each moment was charged with a tension that words could not measure.

Anna noticed small details: the slight silver at Maxwell's temple, the strict line of his jaw, the faint scent of woody cologne. She remembered how he smelled in those days when they spent sleepless nights in the office, arguing about facade shapes and how light fell on brick walls.

She sat at her desk, opened her laptop, and pretended to immerse herself in work. But her gaze kept drifting back to him, searching for details: how he furrows his brow slightly when thinking, how his fingers glide over the drawings, how he barely touches his lip. It was all simultaneously familiar and new, painful and magnetic.

Maxwell leaned over the drawings. Their shoulders almost touched. She felt his warmth — a sudden electric jolt that ran through her body, making rational thoughts fade. She clenched the edges of the paper to hide the tremor.

He noticed her tension and stepped back. In his gaze, there was not confidence, but attentiveness, a cautious desire to understand who she was now, ten years later.

«You've changed,» he said.

The words landed on her lighter than she expected, yet sparked a small explosion in her chest. Not praise. Not reproach. Just a statement of fact: time had changed them both.

«Yes...» she said, «ten years change a lot.»

She left unsaid that not everything changes, that the same girl who once trusted him completely still lived in her heart.

They began discussing the project. The words were precise,

businesslike, but beneath them pulsed an invisible energy. Each sentence, glance, and pause carried more than just information. Between them remained an invisible thread, thin yet strong, connecting their hearts even if they tried to ignore it.

Anna caught herself watching him in secret. How he leans to check a drawing, how he slightly moves his eyebrows when thinking, how barely any emotion escapes the carefully hidden depths. These details, once ordinary, now felt almost sacred, reminding her that she still felt.

By evening, the office emptied. The light softened, lamps cast a warm glow, and long shadows slid across the floor. She gathered papers, trying not to look at him, but her gaze inevitably sought him among the desks, between lamps and drawings. She felt two Annas collide inside her: the grown, rational woman who could keep everything under control, and the girl who once laughed until dawn, trusting him completely.

Outside, the rain had stopped. The wind swept through the streets, carrying the scent of wet brick and freshly cut grass. Streetlights reflected on the wet asphalt, turning the road into a line of light, inviting one to walk slowly, thinking about what stirred within. She walked home, feeling each step, each sound, each movement of light on the wet cobblestones. Memories flared in her mind: their first joint project, arguments and laughter, accidental touches, walks in the rain, nights when they discussed not buildings, but dreams.

«Too early... or too late?» she whispered to herself.

There was no answer. Only the gentle rustle of leaves, the soft murmur of the fountain, the reflection of light in the shop windows. And a quiet thought that would not leave her: this story is not over yet. And I can no longer run away.

Inside her heart, an old truth awoke: the past does not return to hurt us, but to show that the feelings we thought forgotten are still alive.

And Anna sensed that a long path lay ahead, one where past and present would intertwine, where every step beside him would test her strength, courage, and perhaps a new, true love.

Anna stepped out of the building, and the cool spring air immediately enveloped her, awakening a sense of aliveness she hadn't felt in years. The rain had just stopped, leaving behind the damp scent of brick, asphalt, and wet grass, mingled with the aroma of fresh coffee from nearby cafés. The city seemed both familiar and strange — familiar in the lines of the buildings, the creak of tram rails, the smell of morning bread from the bakery on the corner, and strange, because now everything was seen through different eyes, the eyes of a woman returned from a long, solitary journey full of mistakes, discoveries, and losses.

She walked along the sidewalk, feeling each step on the wet cobblestones, listening to raindrops still falling from roofs and eaves, rustling under the heels of passersby. Every movement of the street resonated in her chest; every window casting light onto the wet asphalt became a tiny mirror reflecting her own thoughts and feelings.

Her thoughts kept returning to Maxwell. How he looked at her in the office doorway, that slight caution in his eyes that made him both familiar and distant. She remembered the past, moments that seemed forgotten: their first joint projects, sleepless nights with drawings, nighttime walks along the waterfront, laughter until tears, talks about a future that once felt endlessly far away.

«Too early... or too late?» she whispered again, feeling the light wind brush her face, mixing the scent of wet earth with coffee. But there was no answer.

Anna paused on the pavement, looking at the reflections of the streetlights in the puddles. Each tiny light seemed like a miniature beacon, and she realized that her path now was not just to go home, not just to forget the moment. She was standing on the border of past and present, where every detail mattered: the rustle of leaves, the reflection of light on wet cobblestones, the sound of the occasional car, the flicker of a window where someone stayed late, working.

Inside her, the girl who once trusted him completely awoke again, along with the grown Anna who had learned to keep her emotions in check. They collided within her, two worlds: the desire to dissolve in him and the fear of losing herself again.

She remembered how he leaned over the drawings, how their shoulders almost touched, how the warmth of his body struck her heart like an electric shock. And how she had clutched the edges of the paper, trying to hide the tremor. Each of those moments

echoed within her like a long chain, as if the entire city — the skyline, the sidewalks, the buildings, the streetlights — merged with her inner world, with her emotions, with what had been and what was yet to come.

Anna walked down the street, and a true inner monologue began in her mind: Why am I so afraid? Why does my heart pull me where reason says to stop? Why does the past I tried to leave behind come alive again, like a ghost?

She remembered the moment Maxwell had said: «You've changed.» The words were quiet, almost imperceptible, yet they echoed in every corner of her consciousness. Not praise and not reproach — just a statement of fact. She had changed, and he saw it.

The wind carried the scent of wet grass, and Anna inhaled it deeply. Every molecule seemed to fill her with energy while simultaneously sharpening her anxiety. She walked slowly, watching the people hurrying past, noticing how their steps thudded against the wet pavement, how the café windows glowed, creating an illusion of warmth and comfort. And inside her grew the understanding that this night was not just a return home. It was a night when past and present wove together, where each moment could change everything.

Anna saw Maxwell's reflection in a shop window, and her heart fluttered. She realized she felt too much, too sharply. And at the same time — that this impulse, this nerve, this tremor was not frightening but surprisingly alive. This was life returning,

demanding courage.

She continued walking, watching the city lights reflected on the wet asphalt, turning the street into a fiery bridge. Each tiny light seemed like a thread connecting her to what had been and what might be. And she understood: nothing could be the same now.

In her mind, scenes from the office flickered like old film reels playing without permission: Maxwell's steps on the parquet, the slight tilt of his head, his gaze full of emotion, his breath near her as he leaned over the drawings, barely touching her hands. She caught herself realizing that each detail was encoded in her heart and would never vanish.

Anna stopped on the bridge, looking at Boston's night reflected in the water. The river flowed lazily but constantly, like her thoughts: past, present, feelings, fears, desires. She allowed herself a deep breath, feeling the damp air, the light chill of the wind, and the warmth of memories.

«Still too early... or already too late?» she whispered to herself, but now not with anxiety, but with realization: feelings cannot be predicted. They are alive, they are strong, and one must dare to face them.

She understood that this night, this city, this street, and this rain framed a moment when life offered a second chance. A second chance at courage, at love, at a confession that could no longer be postponed. And Anna knew: a long path lay ahead, full of trials and joys, and she was ready to walk it.

Her heart beat steadily, yet too strongly for her mind to ignore. The past was near again, the present demanded courage, and the future was still unwritten.

And in this moment, among wet streets, streetlights, and the faint rustle of leaves, Anna felt for the first time that the story she had left ten years ago had begun anew. Not with the question «what was,» but with the answer «what will be,» if she allowed herself to live, love, and feel fully.

Anna stepped into the street, and the cool spring wind immediately enveloped her, stinging her cheeks and pressing her coat snugly against her body. The rain still lingered in the air as the scent of wet brick and asphalt, mingled with spring grass and rare flowers, almost dissolved in the light of the street lamps. Each breath brought a sense of freshness and, at the same time, a strange tremor, as if the city itself reminded her of what had happened and what was yet to happen.

She walked slowly, noticing how the wet pavement reflected the streetlights, turning the road into a shimmering path of tiny lights that flickered and danced with every step. These reflections seemed alive, whispering stories of what had been, of what could not be forgotten. She remembered her first day in this city, arriving young, full of hopes and ambitions. She remembered how each morning smelled of coffee and fresh paper, how each sunset painted the sky in colors that seemed unreal, almost magical.

Thoughts of Maxwell flared again like a sudden strike. She

saw him standing in the office doorway, and her heart began to race, a shiver running down her spine. He was the same — the confident, tall man whose shoulders seemed a support for anyone nearby, the gaze full of hidden caution now mixed with warmth and anxiety.

She remembered moments from the past: their nights together in the office, arguing about projects and laughing until they forgot the time, the accidental touches that left traces on skin and heart, quiet conversations about what mattered, dreams that seemed impossible. Each memory was sharp as a blade, yet sweet like the smell of fresh bread on a cold morning in the city.

On the pavement, wet asphalt reflected the streetlights in long fiery streaks, and Anna walked, immersing herself in the reflections, trying to capture her own thoughts. Why am I still afraid? Why do I tremble when he is near, after ten years? Why does the past I tried to leave suddenly come alive so strongly? These unanswered questions hung in the air like invisible clouds.

She noticed Maxwell's reflection in a bookstore window. He stood there, motionless, yet his gaze was alive and attentive. Anna's heart tightened and then expanded with the realization: she still feels. And this feeling was not weak, not childish — it was adult, mature, full of memories, pain, joy, and hidden hope.

Passing a café, Anna inhaled the scent of freshly roasted coffee, mingled with the smell of wet cobblestones and a hint of floral spice from the flowerboxes along the street. The aroma awakened memories of shared mornings, when they sat together

with cups of coffee, discussing projects and simultaneously sharing pieces of life that no one else knew.

The wind picked up, lifting her hair and light coat, bringing new scents: wet earth, the faint smoky aroma of fires, and even the distant scent of the city subway, barely noticeable but reminding her that the city lived, breathed, and watched every step she took.

She approached the bridge, where the river flowed quietly beneath the arch, and paused. The water reflected the streetlights, turning them into long, trembling lines of light. Anna inhaled deeply, feeling the cold air mix with the warmth of memories. She allowed herself to remember her first projects with Maxwell, their laughter, conversations until dawn, their silences filled with an understanding that required no words.

«Too early... or too late?» she whispered to herself.

There was no answer. Only the sense that this city, this night, the rain, and the streetlights were framing her inner world — a moment where past and present intersected to form a future that demanded courage.

She continued walking, feeling her heart beat faster, every cell responding to memories and expectations. Every sound — the footsteps of passersby, the soft whisper of the wind, the faint clatter of tram rails — echoed inside her, creating an internal symphony where fear and hope, desire and caution, past and present intertwined.

Passing shop windows, Anna caught her own reflection: tired,

yet determined. She understood that these days, these encounters with Maxwell, would change her life. And whether it brought happiness or pain — she was now ready to feel fully, to face what she feared but to which her soul was drawn.

A long path lay ahead: meetings in the office, conversations, moments of tension and understanding, the return of memories, and the realization of new emotions. But she knew one thing: she could no longer run away. And for the first time in many years, she felt a lightness mixed with excitement, anticipation, and fear.

She walked along the streets, listening to how the lights reflected in the puddles, how the wind played with her hair, how the city breathed around her, and she realized that the story that began ten years ago was beginning anew. But now she was no longer the naive girl who once trusted completely. She was a grown woman, ready to feel, to fear, and to love all at once.

Amid this mixture of fear and courage, memories and expectations, the night-time Boston with its lights, scents, and sounds, Anna finally understood: her heart no longer wanted to hide. It was ready to open to the one who had returned to her life, who had made the past come alive and the present become real.

Anna walked on along the wet pavement, where the reflections of the streetlights became shimmering lines of light, spreading over the puddles like liquid gold. The wind glided softly over her shoulders, lifting her light coat and hair, weaving them into her thoughts. Every movement of the city — footsteps of passersby, the clatter of tram rails, the occasional creak of shop doors —

felt like a special rhythm accompanying her internal storm.

She noticed how the streetlights reflected in the bookstore window, where quiet voices of late visitors mingled with the scent of fresh pages. In her reflection, she saw herself — tired, anxious, yet determined. It felt as though the past was compressing and stretching inside her at the same time, intertwining with the present, forming something new, unknown, and simultaneously expected.

Each memory of Maxwell washed over her in waves: their first joint projects, nighttime walks along the waterfront, debates over facade shapes, laughter until tears, awkward touches, the trust so strong it felt as though it could shatter everything around if unleashed. It was alive and simultaneously dangerous — alive because she felt it every second; dangerous because the fear of disappointment was as strong as the desire to trust again.

Anna stopped at the bridge, looking at the river reflecting the city lights. The water flowed slowly but continuously, just as her thoughts rolled in waves — memories, anxieties, and quiet hope. She felt the light chill penetrate to her bones, yet along with it came a strange warmth, as if the city itself supported her, whispering that everything was still possible.

«Too early... or too late?» she murmured quietly to herself, feeling the wind stir her hair, raindrops left on her clothes and skin chilling and awakening her at the same time. There was no answer, but an understanding was growing inside her: feelings cannot be predicted, and attempts to do so only amplify anxiety.

She walked slowly, watching people rushing about their business, rare cars whose headlights glided over wet asphalt. Everything around her seemed alive and yet strange, reflecting Anna's inner state — where past, present, and future overlapped, creating a fragile yet astonishingly clear picture of her inner world.

Every detail, every sound was important now: the creak of steps on a wooden stairwell, the smell of freshly roasted coffee from a café with late-night visitors working on laptops, the subtle spice of spring flowers carried by the wind, the soft rustle of leaves in the breeze. All of this became part of her internal monologue: I can no longer hide. I no longer want to conceal my feelings. I am ready to face the truth and embrace it fully.

She remembered how Maxwell leaned over the drawings, how their shoulders barely touched, how the warmth of his body struck her heart. Back then, it had been almost dangerous; now, it was almost sacred. Each such moment remained in her memory, like a small spark capable of igniting an entire fire of emotions.

Anna walked through a small park, where the lamps cast a soft light over wet grass and the trees whispered their leaves in the wind. Here, amid the quiet night nature and the city's hum, her thoughts began to connect into a single thread: the past returned not to torment, but to show that feelings are alive. I may fear, I may doubt, but I must go toward the one who returned to my life.

She stopped on the pavement, watching her reflection in puddles and how the streetlights danced on the wet asphalt. Every

movement of her body, every breath felt special, filled with both fear and hope. Her hands trembled slightly, but it was not mere shaking — it was the sensation of life she felt fully.

Soon, she reached the waterfront. The water lapped gently against the shore, whispering stories of the past, of losses and discoveries, of love that could still be real. Anna allowed herself to slow down, inhaled the damp spring air, and for a moment the world around her dissolved. Only she remained, her heart, and the understanding that everything that had happened had led to this moment — to night-time Boston, to the sound of water, to its scents and lights, to the wind that seemed to repeat: You are ready.

«Yes,» she whispered, smiling faintly to herself. «I am ready.»

She continued walking, feeling how each detail of the city intertwined with her inner world, how past and present wove into a single tapestry where emotions, fears, desires, and hope coexisted. Every street, every lamppost, every sound was part of her decision: no longer to hide, no longer to fear, no longer to postpone life.

And when she lifted her eyes to the night sky above Boston, sprinkled with rare stars, softly lit by city lights, she understood: the story that began here ten years ago was beginning anew. But now she was grown, strong, conscious, ready for love, ready for life, ready to face the one who had made her heart beat so strongly it could no longer be ignored.

Anna took a final breath, letting the cold air fill her lungs, and

stepped forward. Step by step, she felt it: the past no longer held her, the present was her space, and the future was her choice. And in that moment, among the night city, the rain, the wind, the lights, sounds, and scents, Anna felt fully alive for the first time.

Anna walked slowly down a narrow street, where the streetlights reflected in the wet asphalt and the windows of old buildings. Every sound — passersby's footsteps, the faint hum of a car, distant laughter — resonated in her chest, intensifying the tremor she tried to hide. Her fingers unconsciously gripped her bag straps, as if this small action helped maintain balance between fear and desire.

The night's chill pierced her to the bone, but in that cold was something pure, awakening. The wind carried the smell of fresh bread from a night bakery and the faint scent of wet earth after the rain, mixed with the subtle spice of spring flowers from the planters along the sidewalks. These scents seemed both familiar and foreign, as if reality itself reminded her that everything had changed and now she must move forward.

She stopped on the pavement by the river. The water splashed quietly against the shore, reflecting the city lights in gentle ripples. Anna looked at her reflection — tired, yet resolute — and allowed herself a moment to recall everything that had happened over the past ten years: moments of joy, loss, mistakes, victories, and failures. Each memory was part of her, now intertwined with the present, creating a new pattern in her life.

Thoughts of Maxwell would not let go. She remembered his

cautious yet interested gaze, the slight tremor in his voice when he spoke, as if he dared not cross the delicate boundary between past and present. These memories warmed and unsettled her at once: I am afraid to dissolve into him again, yet I cannot deny that I want to.

Every step along the waterfront echoed in her heart, and Anna felt everything inside her tighten and release simultaneously: fear, hope, desire, anxiety. She allowed herself to remember their first joint projects, how they argued and laughed, whispered until dawn, how silence sometimes mattered more than words because understanding was complete.

She passed a café, where through the window she saw the silhouettes of late visitors working on laptops. The aroma of coffee penetrated her lungs, mingling with the smell of wet cobblestones, with the subtle spice of the night air. These little details — smells, light, movement — formed the sense of a city that lived with her, that observed her internal storm while seeming to whisper: You are ready, this is your moment.

Anna reached a small park, where the lamps cast soft light over wet grass and the tree leaves whispered in the gusts of wind. She paused, allowing herself to take in every sound, every scent, every shadow. Here, among the quiet whispers of nature and the city's rhythm, her thoughts began to form a single picture: the past does not just return — it warns and simultaneously offers a chance.

«Everything I feel is not accidental...» she whispered to

herself, feeling her heart beat fast, yet steadily. «I am ready to feel, even if it hurts.»

She sat on a bench, gazing at the river, where the city lights trembled on the water's surface. Every raindrop remaining on leaves and grass seemed a small mirror, reflecting her inner world: anxieties, hope, the desire to love and be loved. Anna allowed herself to close her eyes, inhale the damp air deeply, feel the cold and warmth simultaneously.

Images of Maxwell surfaced in her mind: his smile, his gaze, his quiet voice, the steps across the office parquet. She allowed herself to feel every detail, every movement, every emotion she once tried to hide. And now that feeling was almost sacred — alive, real, demanding courage to let go of fear and meet him honestly.

Minutes passed. Anna slowly rose and continued home, each step dissolving anxiety and strengthening her resolve. The wind played with her hair, the rain left wet droplets on her coat, and the city breathed quietly around her. Every detail — the streetlights, reflections in puddles, the soft murmur of water, the scents of night-time Boston — was part of her. She became part of her own internal decision: no more hiding, no more fear, more living, more feeling.

She reached her home. The keys trembled in her hands, but inside her was a sense of confidence she hadn't felt in years. Opening the door, Anna inhaled the familiar scent of the entryway, yet it no longer felt the same — it was now part of her

present, part of her choice. She paused at the threshold, letting the silence wrap around her, and realized: the story that began here ten years ago starts again, but now she is grown, strong, ready to face the feelings waiting behind the door.

She sat on the couch, looking at the city through the window, where the streetlights reflected as a river of light. Inside her, there was both anxiety and calm, as if her heart knew the path while her mind still tried to maintain control. Anna allowed herself to smile, fully realizing for the first time in many years: she was ready to love again, ready to open up, ready to go through fear, doubt, and joy.

And that night, among the lights, wind, rain, and the quiet of her apartment, Anna felt fully alive for the first time. Her heart beat steadily, yet with such strength, such anticipation, that it seemed the world around her was only a backdrop for her inner triumph. She knew: now there was no turning back. Everything that was and will be intertwining here and now.

With a quiet smile and a new understanding inside, Anna allowed herself to close her eyes for a moment. She knew that tomorrow, when she saw Maxwell again, everything would change — and it would be the beginning of something real, strong, and lasting.

## Chapter 3. Meeting in the Office

Morning in Boston began with a gray, damp light that seemed almost alive. The drizzle gently touched Anna's face, turning the air into a dense, slightly cold fabric that enveloped the city and her alike. Puddles on the cobblestones reflected the tall glass towers and old brick façades, blending past and present as if the city itself were trying to remind her of every moment she had lived. Each step echoed softly, merging with the inner rhythm of her heart. This echo was not just a sound — it was a harbinger of changes she could not avoid.

Passersby rushing through the streets seemed to exist in another, parallel reality; they didn't notice the reflections or the small details that Anna observed with acute brightness — raindrops gathering on the edge of a lamppost glass, a lone pigeon carefully spreading its wings, the scent of wet earth mingling with the haze of coffee from the nearest shop. All of it gave the impression that life itself was watching her, preparing trials hidden in the fog of the everyday.

When she entered the office, the familiar smell of coffee, paper, and the light dust of old drawings mixed with the new — the plastic panels, the hum of machines, and the cold sterility of the air conditioning. She froze for a moment, allowing these sensations to engulf her fully: the creak of a chair, the soft clatter of keys, the faint scent of ink on paper. All of it spoke of a past

that could not be reclaimed but still held her heart in a delicate film of memories.

In the meeting room, the large oval table was covered with drawings, tablets, coffee cups, and notebooks. Light reflected softly off the glass wall, through which the gray, rainy city looked like a living canvas. Anna sat across from Maxwell, and her breath quickened slightly. She caught every glance, every subtle gesture, feeling something inside tremble, like a taut string ready to snap at any moment.

«We propose extending the façade by five meters,» she began, struggling to keep her tone steady. «This will give the project harmony and emphasize the building's historical style.»

Maxwell leaned slightly forward, his gaze precise and cool, but a faint tension flickered in the corners of his eyes. He studied her face, lips, and movements, as if trying to read every thought hidden between the lines.

«That will complicate the structure, increase the timeline and budget. Estimates and approvals will need revising.»

A chill ran through Anna's chest. It wasn't fear of the project — it was the fear that comes from someone seeing right through you, when there is no corner of the soul left to hide. A slight shiver ran through her body, but her voice remained even:

«I understand the risks,» she said. «But sometimes beauty matters more than calculation. Lines and forms can speak more than numbers and estimates.»

The silence that followed was almost tangible. His gaze slid

over her face, lingering on her lips, the subtle movement of her shoulder, the way she furrowed her brow in concentration. Colleagues felt the tension but didn't understand what was happening; an invisible energy hung between them, delicate and piercing, like an electric current.

Inside Anna, a storm raged. Every glance from Maxwell made her heart race, every movement made her tremble. She noticed the almost imperceptible lift of his eyebrows, which spoke volumes: interest, caution, the desire to understand. Her heart tightened, her chest warmed with a strange mix of heat and chill. Inside her roared a combination of anxiety, admiration, and nostalgia she could not control.

«I think we should discuss this later,» she said, trying to return her voice to a business tone, though the tremor still slipped through her throat.

«Agreed,» he said softly, but his eyes spoke more than words: *You're still here. You've changed. And it frightens me.*

After the meeting, Anna stepped out onto the balcony. The drizzle had turned into a light gray veil, softening the city's contours. Before her lay a living, breathing urban landscape, reflecting lights in the puddles, the rare footsteps of passersby, the hum of trams. All of it merged with her thoughts, creating the sense that inner and outer worlds had blended into a single canvas. She inhaled deeply, feeling the cold wind brush against her skin, awakening an inner fire that had slumbered too long. Memories surged with renewed strength: their first joint projects,

debates until dawn, quiet words that meant more than any official statement, casual touches, laughter that made the city brighter. Her heart tightened with bittersweet sweetness, her eyes glistened with a restrained moisture, delicate as fragile crystal, afraid to shatter her own equilibrium.

The wind brushed her hair, the rain left droplets on her coat, mingling with the scent of coffee and wet earth. Everything felt alive: the city, the rain, the reflections in the puddles — as if life itself were observing her inner world, preparing new trials. Maxwell remained inside, watching her figure on the balcony. His own inner fire flared again: every movement of hers reflected in him, resonating with memory, awakening old feelings. He understood that their work together was no longer just a project; it was an invisible duel of hearts, where even the word «contract» mattered less than a glance or a breath.

«She's changed,» he thought, «but she's still the one I once loved so deeply.»

Anna returned to the office, her breath uneven, her heart racing. The lines and numbers on the drawings seemed empty compared to the storm within her. Thoughts leapt between fear and desire, caution and readiness to trust. She understood that the past had awakened, and the future was yet unwritten.

As the rain softly drummed on the glass and the city lights shimmered in reflections, the world around her paused. Only Anna's internal rhythm and Maxwell's heartbeat created an invisible symphony, where past met present, and the future

remained hidden behind a gray haze of uncertainty — enticing, frightening, and alluring at once. She allowed herself a brief smile, fully aware for the first time in a long while: there was no turning back. Everything that had been and everything to come was entwined here and now, and every step she took now mattered. Anna inhaled deeply, feeling the rain on her skin and the cold wind whisper: *You are ready*. And this was only the beginning.

After the meeting, Anna remained at her desk, trying to focus on the drawings, but her thoughts fractured. Every word from Maxwell echoed in her mind, every gesture left an imprint in her consciousness, as if an invisible brush were painting old feelings anew. Her hands trembled, and she gripped her pencil tighter, trying to channel the storm onto the paper, but the lines felt cold, lifeless.

Suddenly, the door creaked softly, and Maxwell entered. His gaze was tense, as if he, too, felt the invisible thread between them. He approached her desk, closing the distance to a dangerously intimate proximity. Anna's heart pounded so fiercely it seemed audible throughout the office.

«Anna...» he began quietly, his voice steady yet trembling. «You know that I...»

He paused, and the silence grew louder than any words. Anna felt everything constrict within her, a mixture of fear, anger, and desire all at once. She lifted her eyes and met his gaze — eyes reflecting the past, regrets, and a desire she dared not voice.

«I...» she began, but the words stuck in her throat. Her face flushed, palms sweaty. She felt vulnerable as never before. «I'm afraid I'll lose myself again if... if we allow this...»

Maxwell stepped closer, their hands nearly touching. He spoke softly, almost in a whisper:

«I don't want you to get lost. But I'm afraid too... afraid it might already be too late.»

Those words sounded like both a confession and a challenge. Anna felt everything inside ignite: anxiety, sweet pain, the desire to trust, and the fear of rejection. She remembered all their old arguments, awkward silences, the words they had never dared say. And suddenly, she realized: every moment of distance had been preparation for this.

«Maybe... maybe this is the chance we've both been too afraid to take,» she whispered, allowing herself to feel, for the first time, the taste of what she had always hidden.

Maxwell smiled faintly, his eyes shining — a mix of relief and apprehension flooding them both. He gently touched her hand, and the contact was like an electric spark running through her nervous system, awakening memories thought long forgotten.

Anna inhaled deeply and suddenly felt a strange calm within — as if the storm in her heart had found shape, and fears became mere shadows against the bright light emerging between them.

«I thought I could never trust again...» she admitted quietly, «but now... now I want to try.»

Maxwell leaned slightly closer, and she caught his breath,

mingled with the cold freshness of rain seeping through the window. For a moment, time seemed to stop: the city vanished, the office emptied, leaving only the two of them, their hearts, and the invisible thread connecting them.

«Then we'll try,» he said, his voice sounding like a promise.  
«We'll try together.»

Anna closed her eyes for a moment, letting the warmth spread through her body. The mixture of fear and joy, tension and relief, past and present created a unique moment felt fully by both of them. This was the beginning of something new, something that could become either a disaster or a miracle — and they were both ready to take the risk.

When she opened her eyes, Maxwell looked at her with the same mixture of apprehension, wonder, and tenderness. Within Anna, a confidence awakened, whispering: *If this is a moment of choice, I choose him. Completely.* The wind rattled the windows, the rain drummed on the roof, and the city below lived its gray, rainy life. But for Anna and Maxwell, it all became the backdrop to an inner symphony: fears and doubts, pain and memories, romance and anxiety fused into one, leaving space only for the choice — to be together, no matter what. And in that choice, a spark was born, one that could become a fire.

## Chapter 4. Memories

The rain drummed against the windows, turning the apartment's glass into a shimmering, wavering wall behind which the city seemed both near and distant. The street below her window looked like a living painting: wet asphalt reflected the lamplights and neon signs, and the tram glided slowly along the rails, leaving behind a long, muffled hum. Every sound, every glimmer of light resonated within Anna, like vibrations of memories she tried to keep under control but which had long since slipped free.

Anna sat on the windowsill, hugging her knees, and closed her eyes. First came the smells: the scent of wet brick mingled with coffee smoke from a tiny café on the corner, and the faint tang of wet earth. These scents instantly transported her to the past. She remembered the day she first saw Maxwell at a contemporary art exhibition. He stood among the crowd, slightly detached, confident, his gaze scanning the paintings as if searching for something hidden. And when his eyes met hers, time froze. She was laughing at a friend's joke, and he spoke a single short word that left a deeper mark than any painting:

«You... are special.»

Those words had gripped her heart then, and they gripped it now, years later. They awakened memories of the first spark of trust, the first quiet smiles, the thrill that washed over her

so intensely it felt as if the air inside her had thickened, every breath interrupted. She remembered how she had feared losing herself in feelings back then, hiding her heart behind a mask of confidence, thinking she could protect herself.

Opening her eyes, Anna saw the rainy city through the glass, and tears came unbidden. Her heart pounded so loudly it seemed the whole world could hear its rhythm, as if it were a melody made just for her. The wind stirred the curtains, and for a moment she felt as if it carried his presence, as if Maxwell were near, even though he was far away, lost in his thoughts, in his office, in feelings that were perhaps as restless as her own.

Anna recalled their first joint projects, noisy office mornings, arguments and debates, late nights when they stayed behind together, striving to perfect every drawing. She remembered how his voice could sometimes be soft and gentle, sometimes sharp and demanding, how his presence could warm or wound her, and how, despite everything, she had always wanted to be near him.

«I didn't leave you because I didn't love you,» she whispered to herself in her mind, «I left because I was afraid of losing myself.»

These thoughts brought both relief and pain. Relief, because now she could acknowledge her feelings without hiding them behind a frozen mask; pain, because every choice had consequences, every decision could shatter what she had long built inside herself.

She ran her hand across the wet glass, smearing the reflection of the city. In that gesture was a kind of cleansing ritual, as

if by touching the glass she could connect past and present simultaneously. Her thoughts raced: «*What if I let myself trust again? What if I open my heart again and... suffer again?*» Her heart clenched at the mere thought, yet behind that fear a relentless longing emerged — a longing for him, for Maxwell, for the feelings she had once thought impossible.

The wind intensified, the curtains twirled, the rain's reflections in the glass danced in shades of gray and blue. She felt the past pressing to burst out, to fill every corner of her mind. Her chest tightened: every breath was a mixture of pain and joy, fear and hope. She closed her eyes and allowed herself to recall every little detail: the scent of his cologne mingled with the damp air of the exhibition hall; the warmth of his hand guiding her to a drawing; the slight tremor in his voice when he explained something; the way his silence sometimes spoke louder than words.

Her phone rang sharply in her bag, pulling her back to the present. In her mind, the city, the rain, the memories, and Maxwell fused into a single sensation — anxious, trembling, vivid. She realized that any future between them was now impossible to imagine without this inner fire, without these storms of feeling, without the tension that was at once frightening and magnetic.

Anna pressed her palm to her chest, feeling her heartbeat. «*Tomorrow will be different,*» she thought. Tomorrow they would have to meet again, look into each other's eyes, work together,

but now with new awareness: of feelings, of fears, of the invisible thread that still connected them. And the thought was both frightening and empowering.

She looked at the street once more: the rain continued, reflections of lights danced on the wet asphalt, people hurried about their business, the city lived its life, and she stood on the threshold of an inner change. Her heart beat as if it wanted to shout, but instead she took a deep breath and let herself dissolve into the moment: into memories, into the city, into her own feelings, into the realization that fears were only shadows concealing what truly mattered.

For a moment, Anna felt a strange calm: past, present, and future merged into a single sensation, in which fear, love, regret, and hope formed a fragile but brilliantly vivid harmony. Her chest warmed, tears gleamed on her lashes, but they were no longer blind pain — they were a sign that something real, alive, and meaningful lay ahead. She knew that tomorrow a new day would begin, and with it a new chapter in their relationship. And she was ready to meet it — with fear, with hope, with an open heart, with love she no longer wished to hide.

## Chapter 5. Chance Encounter

Boston woke in morning dampness and gloom. Wet asphalt reflected gray clouds, interspersed with rare patches of sunlight, as if the weather itself were trying to mix hope and anxiety in one glance. Anna walked down the street, gripping a cardboard cup of hot coffee, trying to warm not only her hands but her soul. Inside, everything felt fragile, as if hanging by thin threads about to snap: memories, fears, hope, desire, anxiety, and the sense that the city itself breathed her emotions, echoing each step.

She reached a familiar café and decided to go in. It smelled of freshly baked bread and genuinely good coffee. Anna allowed herself to relax, closing her eyes, resting, absorbing the sounds, familiar scents, and her own sensations.

Then, an unexpected nudge from an elbow. Anna's heart leapt, as if her body had lit up in an instant. She looked up — and froze.

«Oh...» she exhaled, and for a moment the world shrank, leaving only him.

Maxwell stood before her. His gaze was attentive yet soft, evaluating and admiring at the same time. Her heart tightened — not with fear, but with the premonition of something about to happen, something she simultaneously feared and desired.

«Seems fate has a sense of humor,» he said, his voice carrying both light irony and genuine warmth. The simple phrase struck her deeper than she could have allowed herself. They

sat at a nearby table. Raindrops slid down the window, forming whimsical patterns, and Anna caught their reflections as if they mirrored her thoughts — a weaving of past and present, fear and desire, shame and hope.

«I didn't expect to see you here...» she breathed almost in a whisper, though her words were lost in the street's noise and the rhythm of the rain.

He smiled, but the smile carried restrained unease, as if he too felt the weight hanging between them. Maxwell spoke of the project, of business, of details, but to Anna, these were merely background sounds. Her attention was caught by subtle movements: how his eyes skimmed the table, how his fingers touched his cup, how his shoulders tensed for a moment — everything readable as words that could not be spoken aloud.

And then something unpredictable sparked between them. A tiny touch of hands as he adjusted his notebook made her heart jump as if it might leap out of her chest. Inside Anna, something shifted — a mix of thrill and panic, joy and fear. She felt the past crashing into the present, desires she had kept locked away breaking free.

The conversation went on, but the words lost their power. What mattered were the moments of silence, every glance across the table, each breath synchronized with his. Anna noticed how his eyes lingered on her face slightly longer than necessary, and how the barely perceptible tension spread through her like sparks in her chest.

When they left the café, the rain had stopped, leaving the streets wet and shiny, reflecting the last lights of sunset. They walked side by side, each step both heavy and light. Anna felt an invisible force emerge between them — a certain attraction that thrilled and frightened her simultaneously.

«He's still here... and it's both wonderful and terrifying,» she thought, feeling her heart beat almost painfully fast. Every moment with him was a test: fear of losing control, fear of dissolving in feelings, fear that the past could destroy the present.

Anna felt the wind brush her face, carrying the scent of wet leaves and dusty asphalt. In that wind, she sensed something painfully familiar, a feeling that Maxwell knew as intimately as she did. She barely restrained a sigh, trying to hold back her emotions, but inside, a storm raged without boundaries.

And in that moment, she realized: their meeting was no coincidence. It was a trial, a game of fate, a collision of feelings that could not be ignored. And at the same time — it was the beginning of something they had both feared. The truth was that past and present feelings could no longer remain on the sidelines.

Anna walked beside him, and every step felt like a challenge to herself: to leave fears behind, release control, allow her heart to feel, even if it broke. The rain, the city, the lights, the reflections — all became the backdrop for their silent confession, for an explosion of emotions that could no longer remain inside.

She allowed herself to smile through the fear, through the tremor. And for a moment, it seemed the entire city stopped:

only the rain, the reflections of lamplights, her heart, and his gaze formed an invisible symphony, where past collided with present, and the future hung in a delicate, almost tangible tension.

## **Chapter 6. Evening Project Review on the Rooftop**

Evening had fallen over Boston with a soft, damp darkness, painting the streets in shades of gray and warm golden-orange lamplight. The city breathed cold — rare cars glided over wet asphalt, raindrops drummed rhythmically off the rooftops like distant drums, and the wind, carrying the scent of salt and concrete, whipped through hair and coats. Anna climbed to the roof of one of the buildings, carrying her drawings, each step echoing in her chest with a mix of anxiety and anticipation.

She spread the papers on the smooth concrete surface and looked toward the horizon, where the lines of rooftops blended with the soft city lights. In that reflection, she felt the past come near again. The wind played with her hair, sliding silkily across her neck, and Anna felt her heart begin to race, as if anticipating something about to happen. And then Maxwell appeared. His figure stood out against the city lights, casting shadows over the drawings, and his voice, quiet and even, cut through the surrounding air.

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