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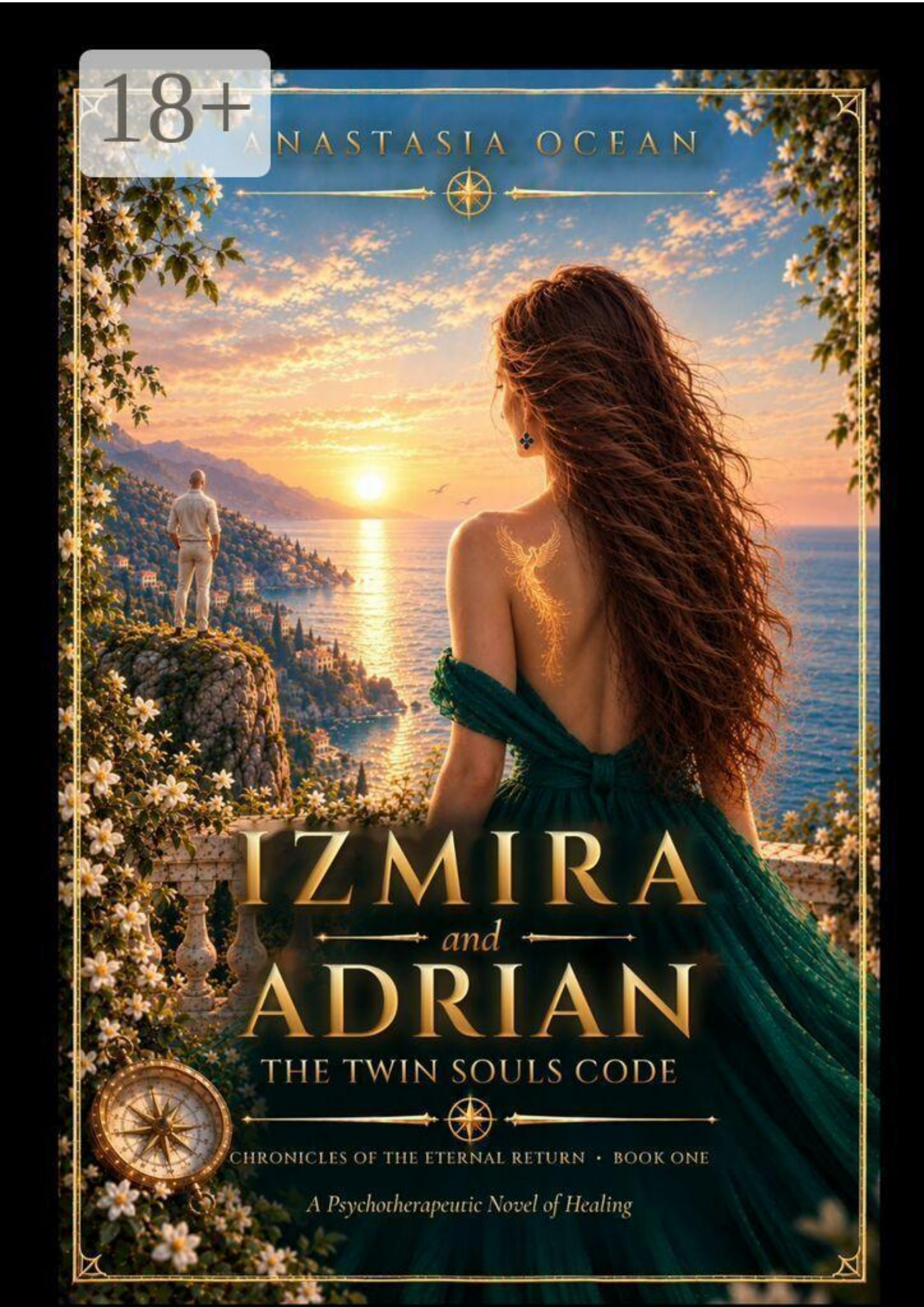

IZMIRA and ADRIAN

THE TWIN SOULS CODE

CHRONICLES OF THE ETERNAL RETURN · BOOK ONE

A Psychotherapeutic Novel of Healing

Anastasia Ocean

Izmira and Adrian. The Twin Souls Code. Chronicles of the Eternal Return. Book One

«Издательские решения»

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Izmira and Adrian. The Twin Souls Code. Chronicles of the Eternal Return. Book One / A. Ocean — «Издательские решения»,

You hold everyone together: family, work, a man who comes and goes. Your shoulders live up by your ears; you stop breathing while you wait for his message. Izmira lives in Nice, by the sea, and can carry anything. Meeting Adrian feels like recognition from another century. But he learned to vanish, and she learned to hold on. This is not a story about winning a man back. It is about coming back to yourself. Scenes, author's diagrams and practices in every chapter.

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Izmira and Adrian. The Twin Souls Code Chronicles of the Eternal Return. Book One

Anastasia Ocean

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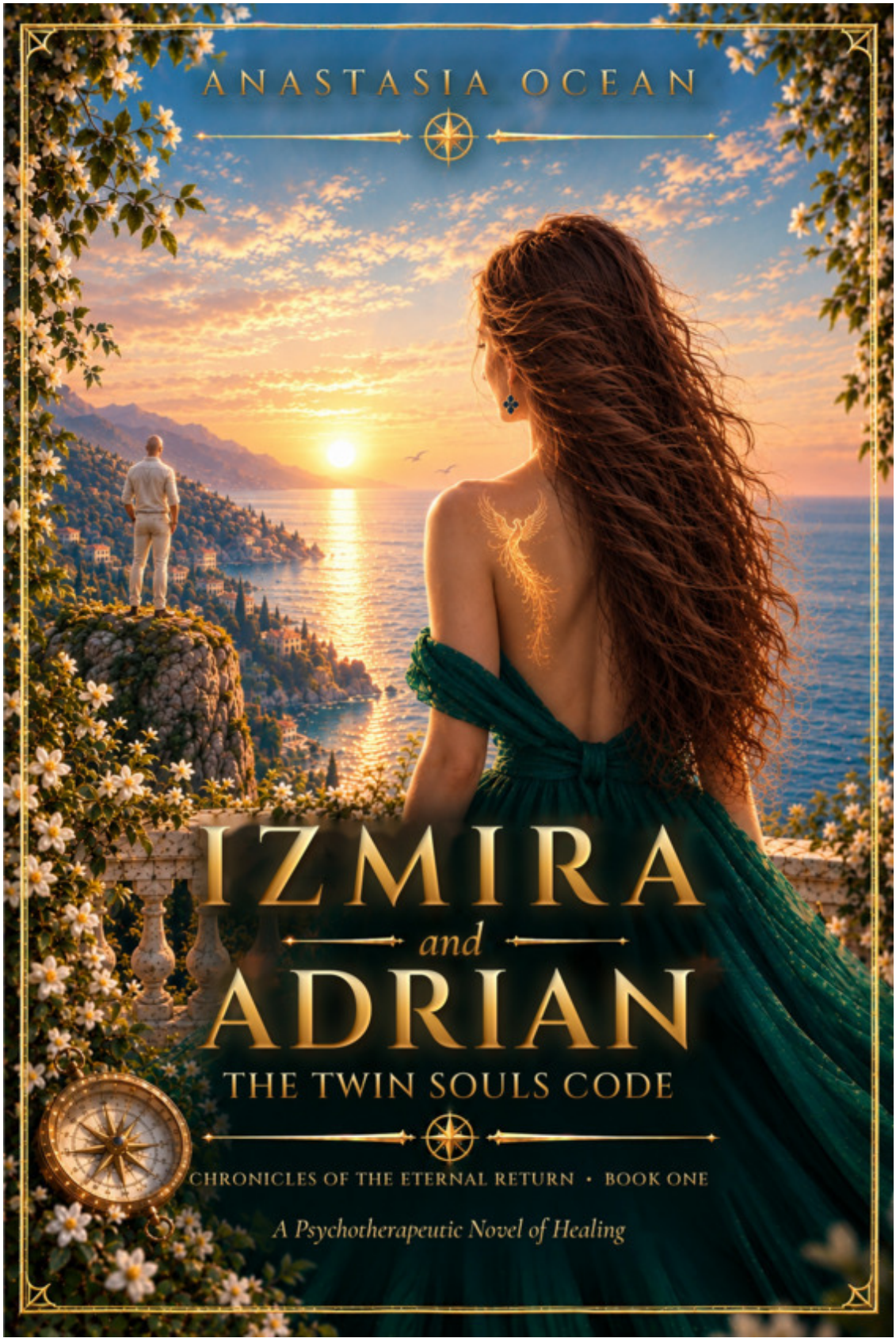
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IZMIRA AND ADRIAN

The Twin Souls Code

Chronicles of the Eternal Return. Book One
A Psychotherapeutic Novel of Healing

Anastasia Ocean



To every woman who learned to carry the world on her shoulders
and one day decided to set that weight down and simply be.
And to those beside them who are learning not to rescue, but to love.

“He learned to disappear. She learned to hold on.
And somewhere inside that paradox lies the whole story
of how two people become whole: not through each other,
but each on their own — and therefore able to be together.”

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This is a work of fiction. The names of characters, certain circumstances, and some geographic and biographical details have been changed or blended into composite figures. Any resemblance to real people or events, except where expressly noted by the author, is coincidental.

The practices and exercises in this book are intended for personal reflection and are not a substitute for working with a licensed psychologist, therapist, or counselor. If you are in acute crisis, please seek in-person professional help or contact your local emergency or crisis line.

Prologue

This is not a book about finding “the one” and living happily ever after. It is about what happens to a person who finally stops waiting to be rescued — and turns toward herself.

Izmira and Adrian are not a couple waiting to be brought together. They are two different ways of failing to cope with the same early wound: he learned to disappear so he would never be abandoned; she learned to keep everything under control so no one would ever be lost. Their story is a doorway into something larger: how to recognize your own old script — and stop living inside it.

If you are a therapist, you may recognize familiar mechanisms in these chapters: projection, separation, the way trauma speaks through the body. If you are simply a reader moving through your own pause, your own silence, your own breakup, I hope this book gives you not comfort in place of action, but a little more clarity about what is really happening inside you.

And if this book finds its way to a father raising a daughter, I ask you to linger a little longer on the pages about Izmira and her father. Among other things, this book is about how one drawn-out silence can decide, for decades, which men a woman will call “her type.” You don’t have to be perfect. But the warmth, the words, and the attention your daughter receives right now are the very foundation on which she will one day build — or fail to build — her relationship with her own worth.

This book does not promise you a miracle from outside. It offers what has always been yours: the right to come back to yourself.

While I was writing these chapters, I kept seeing the same picture. A city at night. Thousands of dark windows. Behind each one, someone sits over a phone, waiting: for an answer, a call, an explanation, permission to go on living. And suddenly a warm light comes on in one window. Then in the next. Then in another. Not because someone came to the rescue. But because the person behind that window finally stopped waiting and turned on the light herself.

This book was written for those windows. It is about stepping out of learned helplessness: that state in which it feels as if your life can begin only after someone else decides. It is for women who are used to carrying the world on their shoulders, and for men who are used to vanishing from that world when things get too close. Both habits come from childhood. And both can be outgrown.

My greatest hope is a simple one. That there will be more strong families. Not perfect ones — living ones, where the grown-ups are grown-up enough that children don’t pay for their immaturity. Where people don’t run from a partner but grow beside one. Where no one looks for rescue in another person, but grows themselves. Because you can only see real worth in someone else once you see it in yourself.

Review

Alla V. Galuza, PhD in Psychology, Department of Social and Organizational Psychology, Belarusian State University

The book's great strength is its honest separation of two languages: where the text speaks about the neurobiology of attachment, grief, and stress, it genuinely reflects what science knows, without the temptation to pass off a metaphor as a fact. The practical part woven into the narrative deserves special attention: the questions for reflection and the step-by-step practices are not decorative. They are methodically built, and a reader can use them on her own — while respecting the limit the text itself names: this book is not a substitute for in-person psychotherapeutic help in an acute crisis.

As for what readers should keep in mind: the book works most powerfully for those who recognize their own pattern in the heroine — rescuing, self-betrayal, a lack of a father's attention. It is not a universal textbook for every kind of emotional pain, nor should it be. In this sense, its precise focus is not a weakness but a sign that the author knows the boundaries of her own method.

I recommend this book both to women who recognize themselves in this story and to professionals, as an example of how fiction can convey psychoeducational content more accurately than dry nonfiction, without losing scientific integrity.

How to Work with This Book

This book is a psychotherapeutic novel of healing — my own genre. I believe therapy is best passed on not through explanation but through lived experience: you live the story alongside the heroine and then do the practice right away. I wrote it for everyone who wants to step out of their closed loop, and especially for those who will never go see a therapist. The whole trilogy, Chronicles of the Eternal Return, is written in this genre, and you are holding its first book.

Why "Chronicles of the Eternal Return"? The philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche used the phrase "eternal return" for the idea that life repeats itself again and again. For me, it means something else. We return to the same pain: in similar people, in similar breakups, in the very words we heard as children — and sometimes, as Izmira believes, even across centuries. It is like a code written into us long before we were able to choose. The loop repeats until we see it. And once we see it, the code can be rewritten: lived through, named, and chosen differently. These three books are chronicles of such returns, and of the way out of the loop. In the first, a woman stops burning herself up for love. In the second, she learns to let go. In the third, a man rewrites the code of his family.

How a chapter is built. First comes Izmira's story, in which you recognize yourself. Then the "Observer's Note," a single thought in the margin. "What the Science Says" explains what is happening in the body and the psyche; you can skip this part. "The Language of Meaning" says the same thing in the language of images. Now and then the Observer-Provocateur drops by and shows, with humor, how we cling to our pain. And at the end comes the practice: science shows what is happening to you, and the practice shows what to do about it.

Two paths.

If you read it as a novel, you will get a beautiful and very recognizable story of a woman who stopped waiting and chose herself. Comfort, words for your own story, and permission to let go.

If you work with it as a psychotherapeutic novel of healing, you will get a map of your own closed loop and simple skills to step out of it: telling words apart from actions, naming your fear, moving anger through the body, and closing what was left unfinished — on your own.

The choice is yours. If you choose the work, read no more than one or two chapters a day: read, do the practice, give yourself time. As in therapy, people grow in the pauses between sessions, when they take the steps themselves. The responsibility for what this book gives you is yours.

About the images. Dreams, visions, and past lives here are a language of images — not a doctrine and not proof. When you meet them, don't ask yourself, "Did this really happen?" Ask, "What is this image telling me about myself?"

You will find the Questions for Reflection for every chapter at the end of the book.

Part I. Recognition

The body recognizes before the mind has time to be afraid.

Chapter 1. A Gaze into the Sun

The body remembers what the mind has not yet dared to admit.

The South of France. Nice. The end of summer. Every summer her parents brought the two sisters here, to stay with old family friends, and Nice had become their second home, their summer home. Noon hung heavy and still, as if the air itself had thickened with heat. It smelled of sun-warmed pine needles, sea salt, and blooming jasmine — a scent that would follow Izmira all her life, rising up at the most unexpected moments like a password into someone else's memory.

Not a breath of wind, not a single cloud. Only even, blinding light and the chirring of cicadas, so thick it felt almost like silence. Somewhere far off, the promenade hummed: voices, the clink of dishes through an open café window, children laughing. Below, the sea lay like a motionless emerald-blue mirror, and the sun was melting in it.

Izmira was twelve.

That morning she had already argued with her twin sister, Amina, over who could swim farther past the buoys, lost, sulked for exactly seven minutes, and made up over ice cream. She was one of those girls who get picked as team captain in the yard and asked to "keep it down" at home. She collected lizards with broken-off tails in a jar so she could "make them better," gave her hair clips away to the neighbors' kids, and could make even the strict music teacher laugh. The grown-ups said of her: "She's fire." And it wasn't always a compliment.

She stood on a small stone terrace, flushed, her palms a little damp from the heat, and looked at the water. Everything was as usual — an ordinary, unremarkable day, the kind that later fades from memory. She had no idea this noon would be the one where everything began.

And at that moment her gaze, all on its own, was drawn to the blazing disk of the sun.

She looked straight into it, unable to look away. The sun didn't blind her. It called to her.

The space around her froze and thickened like amber resin. The sounds of the promenade receded, as if wrapped in cotton. Time stopped being a straight line. Questions that didn't fit her age burst into her child's mind:

Why am I here? Why am I walking this path? What is hidden behind this visible reality?

An instant shiver ran through her body. It didn't come from the cold. It was a physical, cellular knowing that bypassed the mind, bypassed words. Izmira felt it: right now, at this very second, a soul carrying her other half had stepped into this world.

On the other side of the planet, under the same sky, Adrian was born.

The difference between them was exactly twelve years.

She couldn't explain it. But she knew. Not with her head — with her body, her blood, every cell.

And after this flash of insight came a serious illness. Five days of burning fever, pneumonia, alarming blood counts. The doctors spoke of a state hovering between life and death.

It was as if her body were burning away the old to make room for something new — for the frequency on which Izmira would have to live from then on.

One night, at the peak of her delirium, Izmira opened her eyes. In the pitch dark, by the old wardrobe, the clear silhouette of a young man appeared.

He stood perfectly still, head calmly tilted, and looked at her with such depth that the girl screamed. Her parents ran in and switched on the light — and the silhouette vanished instantly.

When the light came on, a black cat was sitting where the silhouette had been. It looked at the girl with a strange, almost ghostly gaze. The animal didn't stay in the house long; her parents soon decided to give the cat away.

But Izmira remembered its gaze. And the cold that came from it — a cold that wasn't evil, but some kind of premonition. As if this had been her first meeting with something that would happen much later.

Izmira didn't know then that two old wounds would live in this story: Adrian's wound and her own.

Adrian was four when his father left on business for another country. It was an ordinary trip — at least, that was how it was presented. A suitcase, a quick packing, a door that closed no louder than usual. No one said goodbye to the boy — not even a simple "See you." No one crouched down beside him to explain what was happening. His father simply never came back.

There was no fight, no last conversation — only emptiness where a person should have been. And that emptiness turned out to be heavier than any goodbye.

Did I cry too loud? Did I ask for too much? Wasn't I good enough? Adrian never said these questions out loud. He felt them as a quiet, cold weight inside that he couldn't name. He became obedient. He became quiet. He began trying to be perfect — so Daddy would come back, so Mommy would stop crying, so the house would be warm again.

Daddy didn't come back.

But the abandonment inside him stayed. It lives in a place no one's love can reach. It would become part of Adrian — the part that would always be afraid of being left again. The part that would leave first so as not to wait. The part that would look for a reflection because it didn't know how to shine on its own.

And Izmira had her own wound, one she would know nothing about for a long time.

At five, Izmira understood: no one is coming, no one will save me, I have to do it myself. She began rescuing everyone around her — because if she was needed, she wouldn't be abandoned. If she was useful, she wouldn't be left. If she kept everything under control, the world wouldn't fall apart. That was also when she picked up a habit she would notice only many years later: in hard moments she held her breath, and her hands reached on their own for something to hold. A cup, a bag, someone else's hand, someone else's trouble.

When, many years later, Izmira met Adrian, she felt his pain. And she mistook it for depth.

Six years passed. Izmira was eighteen. A warm, honey-colored evening was settling slowly over a seaside terrace in Nice; the western sky was still burning orange, and the first star was already lighting up over the sea. It smelled of fresh coffee, slightly burnt sugar, and sea salt. At a family party thrown by Greg and his wife, Claudia, old friends of her parents, guests laughed, crystal chimed, and someone in the distance was strumming a guitar.

Izmira was bright, bold, full of life — with blazing eyes and that rare, vivid presence that draws every gaze. On her left shoulder she already had a Phoenix tattoo.

She'd gotten it at seventeen, without really knowing why. She had simply felt one day that here, on her left shoulder, just above her heart, should live a bird that knows how to rise from the ashes. Back then it was about daring and beauty. About the fact that she couldn't be broken. The real meaning of that bird would reveal itself to her much later, and more than once.

That evening she managed to do everything. She danced with Greg's old uncle, who hadn't danced with anyone in twenty years, and gave him back his youth for ten minutes. She noticed that a waitress, barely more than a girl, was about to drop her tray, caught it with her, and laughed as if it had been part of the show. She argued with a serious guest about whether a woman can want everything at once — and won without raising her voice once. One of the aunts shook her head: "Too bright. Life will be hard on her." Izmira heard and only laughed. She was eighteen and didn't yet know that one day she would have to defend her brightness.

Her gaze happens to land on a six-year-old boy holding his grandfather's hand: it was Adrian, Greg's nephew.

Izmira looks at him the way you look at something vaguely familiar that you can't quite place — like a scrap of a dream melting as you wake. A strange feeling — *I've seen these eyes somewhere before* — flickers and is instantly lost in the noise of the party. She turns away at once — the thought is too strange to hold on to — and a minute later she has forgotten it.

Only years later, looking back, would Izmira remember this moment and understand: it had been the first recognition — *it's you* — meaningless in the moment, whose meaning would reveal itself much later, when they were both grown.

Twelve more years passed. Izmira was thirty. She had been living in Nice for several years; she loved her husband sincerely and deeply and was raising their three-year-old son, Damir. A fulfilled woman who carried her roles honestly and had learned to be strong. That is exactly why what would happen to her that evening came as a complete surprise: everything was fine with the man she loved, and she never expected that anything could turn her inside out like this.

Her mornings began with small palms on her cheeks: her son woke her up by checking whether "Mommy's eyes are open." They made oatmeal together, and he sprinkled in raisins so generously that it became raisins with a side of oatmeal. Then she walked him to preschool and went to her small office with a window onto the sea. People came to her with something cracked inside, and they left standing a little straighter. She knew how to listen in a way that let a person hear themselves for the first time. And she knew how to laugh at exactly the right moment: once, a woman who had spent half an hour crying about her unfaithful husband suddenly burst out laughing at Izmira's question, "Did you actually find him interesting?" — and left that session freer than she came. In the evening Izmira picked up her son, and they built sandcastles on the beach that the waves immediately washed away. She taught him not to cry over washed-away walls, but to build new ones. She hadn't yet applied that rule to herself.

Adrian was turning eighteen.

The night is warm and windless. Along the Nice promenade, old-fashioned streetlamps glow cozily, casting golden glints on the white tablecloth and the glasses. The waves at the shore whisper under their breath, as if they don't want to interrupt the conversation at the table.

Izmira, a married woman of thirty, and eighteen-year-old Adrian are seated across from each other.

A conversation begins.

From the very first sentences, Izmira is swept over by a sense of deep recognition: in the chair across from her sits herself — only in male form, with the same scale of thought, the same daring, the same fire.

Adrian caught her sentences in midair, as if reading them off an open page. He looked at her as if he had known her for a thousand years — and there wasn't a shadow of pretense in his eyes.

He sees right through me. All the way to the bottom, flashed through Izmira's mind.

That evening, their egos took fright at their own nakedness. The time for a real meeting had not yet come. Nothing happened between them that evening except a conversation. Izmira went home to her husband and her sleeping son and lay awake for a long time. Not from guilt. From the strange feeling that, for the first time in many years, someone had seen her whole.

Later, when the guests had gone and Claudia was clearing the glasses, Izmira caught herself watching Adrian leave and thinking about his father, who had once walked away and never come back. Only now, watching him go, did she feel that story for the first time not as somebody else's, but as his wound.

And somewhere beneath her ribs a cold, not at all festive thought stirred: *What if the same thing lives in him? What if it runs in the family, like eye color? A runaway gene.* She brushed it off at once, almost angry with herself: what did that have to do with anything, he was eighteen, they had just talked at a dinner table. She exhaled, long, all the way down, and set her glass on the table. But the thought didn't go away. It sank to the bottom, quietly, like a pebble to the bottom of a well. Izmira didn't yet know how many times she would come back to it.

Years later, remembering that evening by the sea, Izmira asked herself more than once:

Why him? Why then, and not earlier or later?

And each time her inner voice — the one that doesn't speak right away, but after a long silence — gave the same answer: *Because earlier you couldn't have withstood this meeting. You needed those twelve years — not for him, but for yourself. So that by the time you met, there would be someone there to meet him.*

People talk a lot about "twin souls" these days. The image itself is very old: in Plato's Symposium, Aristophanes tells how humans were once whole, until the gods split them in two, and ever since, each half has searched for the other. The phrase "twin flame" appeared much later, in twentieth-century esotericism. A psychologist will look at the same encounter in their own way. According to Carl Gustav Jung, beside such a person a woman meets her own inner masculine image, the Animus, and a man meets his Anima. That is why such an encounter turns a life upside down: in the other, we recognize our own scale, the one we haven't yet allowed ourselves. And escaping into status, into the race, or into silence is sometimes a defense against that scale — not against the woman.

Here, the twelve-year age difference worked as a kind of safety catch: had they met as peers, two strong egos would have collided in a codependent struggle. As it was, each had time to mature: Izmira built her inner support, Adrian his own backbone.

OBSERVER'S NOTE

Sometimes we fall in love not so much with a person as with what, beside them, we see in ourselves for the first time: our own fire, our own scale, our own depth. That doesn't make the feeling false. It makes it a clue. The task of such an encounter is not to rescue, not to wait, and not to dissolve, but to take that strength back for yourself.

What the Science Says[1]

The body knows first. What Izmira calls "cellular knowing," science calls interoception: the ability to sense signals from your own body. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio described "somatic markers": a bodily reaction points toward a decision before the mind has had time to think it over.

The chemistry of recognition. Mirror neurons, discovered by Giacomo Rizzolatti, fire both when we act and when we watch someone else act. How much they explain human empathy is still debated. Meanwhile, research suggests that oxytocin and dopamine, released in moments of warm, safe contact, are linked to feelings of closeness and joy. So "chemistry" is more than a metaphor.

Why people get sick after a shock. Intense stress triggers a release of cortisol, and for a while the immune defenses weaken. Janice Kiecolt-Glaser and Ronald Glaser showed that after painful experiences, people — especially children — fall ill more often.

Fever visions. At a high temperature, on the border between sleep and waking, the brain often produces vivid images woven from memory and anxiety. That doesn't strip them of psychological meaning.

Déjà vu. One leading hypothesis explains it as a brief glitch, when for a split second the brain tags a new moment as "already familiar." Science and symbol don't argue here: you can look at that instant either way.

A child thinks it's their fault. At four or five, thinking is magical: if something bad happened, it's because of me. According to John Bowlby's attachment theory, a sudden break with a close adult leaves a child's nervous system with a habit of expecting loss. It fires before thought and can live in the body for decades.

The grown-up questions of small children. The prefrontal cortex, which handles doubt and self-control, keeps maturing until about age twenty-five. Perhaps that is why children sometimes ask strikingly direct, "grown-up" questions: their inner filter hasn't formed yet. This is a hypothesis, not a proven fact.

[1] Researchers and authors are named briefly and only once in this book. Who they are and what the book borrows from them is explained in the "Names and Schools" section at the end of the book.

Two defenses against one pain. One child freezes and disappears so as not to be abandoned. Another takes everything on so that no one gets lost. For Izmira this began very early, before words; for Adrian, at four, when there are no words for such things yet. That is why, meeting as adults, they recognize each other through the body faster than through words.

What you know about a person, you look for in them. If you know Adrian's father once left, the brain starts looking for proof of the fear. Psychologists call this the expectancy effect. That knowledge says nothing about Adrian himself. It says where Izmira already has a wound.

The Language of Meaning: The Phoenix

The Phoenix is an ancient image of a bird that burns and rises from its own ashes. For a girl who decided at five that no one was coming and she had to cope on her own, it is a very honest symbol. It says: *I survived. You can burn me, but you can't destroy me.*

In this book the Phoenix will appear again and again: on the night of the downpour, on the nails, on the shore of another ocean. And each time it will tell Izmira a little more. For now it simply lives on her shoulder, like a promise: whatever happens, she will rise. She will learn the price of that promise later. To be reborn, the Phoenix has to burn every time.

Practice: "Bringing Attention Back to Center"

Science shows that the body notices recognition and danger before the mind does, and that a child takes someone else's leaving upon themselves. So we start with the body: bring your attention back from the other person to yourself, and separate their story from yours.

If you are living through a painful pause in a relationship right now, try this:

Step One. Grounding. Take off your shoes and stand with your feet on a firm surface. Take a deep breath in through your nose and a slow breath out through slightly parted lips. (Breathing with a lengthened exhale activates the vagus nerve, the main pathway of the parasympathetic nervous system, which is responsible for rest. That's why the body literally calms down after just a few rounds.)

Step Two. Withdrawing the projection. Place your right palm in the center of your chest. Picture the person you are worried about. On the exhale, say silently: "I take my attention and my energy back from you. My strength returns to my center. You are free to go your own way, and I choose my wholeness."

Step Three. Setting the boundary. Feel your chest fill with dense golden-emerald light on every inhale. You are no longer holding anything. You have been returned to yourself.

Anchor. Place your palm on your left shoulder, where Izmira's Phoenix lives, and say quietly: "My body remembers. And I can choose." Then ask yourself: What do I choose right now?

He learned to disappear. She learned to hold on. And somewhere back there, twelve years and thousands of miles before their first real conversation, their nervous systems had already recognized each other — long before they did.



How, years later in France, the Kiss-Key happened, what the mystery of the emerald dress was, and which memory broke the seals — in the next chapter.

Chapter 2. The Kiss-Key

Sometimes a single touch can break open a door that memory kept locked for centuries.

June. The Côte d'Azur was ripening into summer, but the sea still held a spring freshness. The air was clear, with a light salty bitterness that stayed on your lips. Gulls cried somewhere far off, and the sound mixed with the whisper of waves running up the shore and rolling back, like breathing.

Sometimes the unconscious seals our memories with heavy wax — until the body and the psyche are fully ready to meet a scorching truth.

After that meeting at the party table, when Izmira was thirty and Adrian eighteen, fate split their paths again — for twelve whole years. Adrian left: university, confidential international projects, the hard and complicated road of forming his identity as a man. They didn't see each other and didn't write. During those years, Izmira's marriage ended too: quietly, without enemies. She and Mateo stayed Damir's parents and learned to be that apart. Izmira's mind gradually wiped away the sharp details of their earlier meetings, leaving only a deep, ringing calm.

But the unconscious has its own script.

Izmira sat at her desk, focused on her notes — serious training, lecture after lecture. A cup of coffee was going cold beside her. A message from Greg, Adrian's uncle, lit up her phone. Adrian was coming back and flying into Nice, but he and Claudia lived far away, in another city at the other end of the coast. "Please meet him," Greg wrote. "Warmly, like family. So he doesn't get lost and doesn't feel like a stranger. And put him up for a few days."

A tremor. Light, almost imperceptible — as if someone had touched a string that had been dozing inside her for years. And right after it, a powerful surge through her body. It wasn't just joy: Izmira was swept by a wild, hot wave of life energy; her thoughts tangled instantly, her breath caught.

And then shame and her panicking mind: *Oh my God! He's going to stay with me?! How old is he now, anyway?! I'm ashamed even to think about it!* Her mind floundered in embarrassment, but her body had already given its concentrated, honest answer. Izmira placed her palm on her chest and waited until her exhale grew longer than her inhale. Then she laughed at herself and wrote back: "Of course I'll meet him."

Izmira spent the following week as if in a fever. Getting ready for the meeting, she primped with a teenage girl's flutter, wondering whether the real man would match the fiery phantom that had woken in her blood.

She had felt something similar back then, at the party table. Back then she had told herself: he couldn't have made it up, couldn't have staged it. He was too young, too inexperienced, too real. And that was his greatest strength — and his greatest vulnerability.

The day of the meeting. Izmira stood in the arrivals area of the Nice airport, watching the passengers come out, and felt a strange calm — not excitement, not anticipation, but something else, as if she already knew she would see him and was simply waiting for it to happen.

He came out through the glass doors of the arrivals hall. Medium height, a smoothly shaved head, and a slight smile. More grown-up than last time. But his eyes were the same — deep, attentive, a little tired.

Izmira stepped toward him and hugged him warmly. And in that second all the fear and fever melted away. The panic gave way to an incredible, enveloping calm — as if after long wanderings through a stormy world you had finally come home. To yourself.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi," he answered.

When two people meet in order to remember, they don't talk about important things. They just look at each other and feel what doesn't fit into words.

The first days were full of silence and a strange coziness. They sat in the kitchen, drank coffee, talked about simple things — the weather, life, what each had done over the years. But between the words there was something else that didn't need a voice. He knew when she was sad. She sensed when he was tired. They moved as if they had done this before — together.

"I don't know what this is," he said once. "I've never felt anything like it. That I can be quiet with you and it's not awkward. As if I already know what you're going to say."

She smiled. She knew that feeling.

One morning she took him to the market. He followed her between the stalls, big and a little lost, while she greeted every vendor by name, tasted olives, argued with an old fisherman about how fresh his sea bream was, and ended up getting a bunch of dill from him as a gift "for the lovely madame."

"How do you do that?" Adrian asked. "Everyone here loves you."

"I just see them," Izmira shrugged.

In the evening they cooked together. He cut the tomatoes too big; she laughed and didn't correct him. He talked about his work, and she listened, chin propped on her hand, and asked the kind of questions that made him stop midsentence: "Nobody's ever asked me that."

Then they went down to the sea. The water was still June-fresh, prickly. Adrian stood ankle-deep, hunching his shoulders. Without a second thought, Izmira dove in headfirst, came up sputtering, and called out:

"Well? What are you waiting for? Life isn't going to get any warmer!"

And he went in. All the way, up to his shoulders, yelping from the cold, and then he laughed the way he apparently hadn't laughed in a very long time. Izmira watched that laugh and thought that moments like this are probably what life is worth living for: when the person next to you suddenly allows himself to be alive.

She noticed one more oddity: she couldn't smell him. She always caught people's scents without trying, but not his.

"I can't smell you," she said once, not as a reproach, just an observation.

He smiled.

"Maybe it's because we're one?"

She didn't know whether he was joking. But there was a truth in his words she couldn't deny. She remembered how she herself had once noticed in him that barely perceptible readiness to become invisible — as if part of him were always ready to disappear.

On the fourth day that readiness showed itself again, this time without words. One evening a neighbor dropped by with her daughter: noisy, with a pie and the latest news. Izmira turned to introduce Adrian, but he wasn't in the room. She found him on the balcony. He stood with his back to everyone, looking at the sea as if he were judging how far it was to the horizon. When the guests left, he came back cheerful and light, as if nothing had happened.

"Where did you disappear to?" she asked.

"Just breathing," he smiled.

The question was already on the tip of her tongue: Why do you leave when it gets crowded and warm? Who are you running from? Her jaw clenched; her hands reached on their own to straighten his collar. And she swallowed the question. She didn't want to spoil the evening. She told herself she'd imagined it. Later she would come back to that minute on the balcony more than once. It was the first thing she saw and decided not to see.

Provocative Therapy: The Voice of the Observer-Provocateur

This voice comes from the Provocative Therapy of American psychotherapist Frank Farrelly: an illusion is taken to the point of absurdity, and laughter helps you let it go. The Observer-Provocateur speaks to the heroine respectfully and laughs not at her, but with her, at the trap she's in. From here on he will drop into the chapters now and then.

The trap of "instant certainty" sneaks up quietly: if your body reacted right away and very strongly, then it must be destiny — and not hormones, a coincidence of circumstances, and flattering lighting.

"Allow me to clarify," says the Observer, adjusting a pair of invisible glasses. "Your heart beat faster, and you couldn't smell his cologne. And from this it follows that you are one soul, separated back in ancient times?"

"Sounds convincing," Izmira replies.

"Extremely. Especially if you don't ask what kind of person he is. Why ask when you've got a pulse? The pulse, as everyone knows, is the world's finest lie detector. Science! And did you account for the lighting? At sunset, every man is a little bit of a soulmate."

Izmira smiled at her own readiness to explain physiology as fate — and still decided to listen not only to her body, but also to what he would say and do next.

It happened unexpectedly. An ordinary evening, silence. His hand touched hers. She didn't pull it away — she simply went still.

"What do you feel?" he asked.

"I don't know," she answered. "It's as if I've been here before. With you."

He leaned in and kissed her.

That kiss became the Key. Not the kind that unlocks doors, but the kind that lifts the seals from the Soul itself. It turned out to be a burglar of the unconscious. The seals flew off one after another. In a single instant a lightning-fast film flashed before Izmira's eyes: the sun at twelve, the illness that rebuilt her, the glances of years gone by. The puzzle pieces fell into place. But the film pulled her deeper still — into the memory of past incarnations.

France, the fourteenth century.

Izmira sees herself — headstrong, wild, with long dark hair and an indestructible inner fire. She wears a bright green skirt. In her early youth her father made her sell goods at the market, and something in her rebelled against it. When her father tried to marry her off to a rich man, she revolted: "I will marry only my soul! My other half!"

She chose Adrian. They lived modestly, but their home was filled with a ringing, absolute richness of spirit. Their thirteen-year-old son, Damir, was growing up with them — the same name her own son bears in this life. Izmira found her true calling: people came to her, and she passed on deep knowledge to them; under the awnings, students traced letters with sticks, listening to her clear voice. Her husband adored her; her son was proud of her. She was happy.

They were expecting a daughter — black-haired, blue-eyed Sophia. But fourteenth-century medicine was powerless against what we now call placenta previa: the placenta blocks the opening of the womb, and during labor a heavy hemorrhage begins. Today, surgery saves mother and child. Back then, they could not be saved. She died in childbirth, together with Sophia, who was never born.

Grief destroyed those left behind. Izmira's father, mad with rage, fell upon the grief-stricken Adrian: "It's your fault! You're a pauper! If she had married a rich man, she'd have had the best physicians, and she'd be alive!"

That night a poisonous fear of poverty and powerlessness ate its way into Adrian's unconscious for good: *I couldn't protect my woman. My poverty killed her.*

He survived that night. But he did not survive the grief.

Izmira saw it as clearly as if she were standing there. Adrian wandered through the house that still smelled of her herbs, unable to cry or speak. He stopped eating. He sat for hours on the doorstep, looking at the road she used to walk home on from the market. Thirteen-year-old Damir tried to rouse him, brought him bread, called him by name, but his father looked straight through him, as if through glass. Grief drained him in a single winter. One morning he simply didn't wake up.

Damir was left an orphan. First without his mother, then without his father. And neither of them said goodbye to him.

Here, at this point in the memory, Izmira's breath caught. Because she knew what came next, centuries later. In this life, Adrian's father left four-year-old Adrian and never came back. No goodbye. No explanation. The one who had once failed to survive his grief and left his son alone now found himself in that son's place. He was living from the inside the very pain he had once caused his own child, without ever meaning to.

And suddenly she understood why he runs. Not from her. Not from love. He runs from a loss he once already failed to survive. Somewhere in its very depths, his body remembers: *If I stay close and lose again, I won't survive it.* That's why he will always leave first. To him, it feels safer.

She opened her eyes. Tears were running down her face.

"Are you okay?" he asked, looking at her anxiously.

"I remembered everything," she whispered. "I know who you are. I know who I am. We've been together before. In another life."

He said nothing. His mind couldn't grasp it. But it seemed to her that he had felt something too.

The Night after the Key

That night Izmira didn't sleep.

Adrian fell asleep quickly, the way people do when something inside them has shifted and needs silence. She lay beside him, staring into the dark. She could still see the stone walls, smell the herbs in the drying room, the heavy wooden doors. She wasn't sure any of it had happened. But she knew for certain that she had felt it.

Around two, she got up quietly, threw a shawl over her shoulders, and went to the kitchen. She switched on the small lamp over the table, took out a notebook, and began to write. Everything she remembered. Colors. Smells. Faces. Voices. The sensations in her body at the moment she saw each picture. She wrote quickly, without correcting, the way you write down a dream before it melts.

Then she stopped and read it over.

As a psychologist, she understood: this could be anything. A metaphor her psyche had created to explain the inexplicable force of this recognition. A waking dream. Her imagination at play against a backdrop of strong feelings. She had no intention of proving anything to anyone. Not even to herself.

But one thing mattered, and she underlined it twice. It didn't matter whether it had really happened. What mattered was that this story told her the truth about today. About his fear of loss, which was stronger than he was. About her habit of carrying everything on her shoulders, even when there was no one left to carry. About the fact that both of them were carrying something that had begun long before this meeting.

Her left shoulder was burning.

Izmira touched the Phoenix and felt that the tattoo was warm, almost hot, like skin after a day in the sun. She remembered walking into a small tattoo parlor at seventeen and telling the artist, "A Phoenix. So I remember that I'll always rise." Back then it was the vow of a girl who had already fallen too many times. But now, on this night, the bird seemed to speak to her in another language. Not *You will rise.* But *You have already risen. Many times. Many lives.*

She closed the notebook and sat for a long time, hands wrapped around a cup of tea gone cold. Outside it was dark and quiet; somewhere below, a lone car drove by.

In the morning Adrian found her asleep right at the table, her head on her folded arms. He didn't wake her. He covered her with his jacket and made coffee for two. When she opened her eyes, he was sitting across from her, looking at her as if he were seeing her for the first time.

"You were writing something," he said.

"Yes. What I saw."

"Will you show me?"

Izmira thought about it and shook her head.

"Not now. Maybe someday."

She didn't know then that "someday" would come many months later, and that he would read all of it not in a notebook, but in a book.

That evening she went back to the notebook and added a few more lines. Not as a psychologist, but as a woman trying to understand.

"There's an old belief: souls meet again not in order to finally be together, but to finish what was left unlived. I don't know if it's true. But here is what I see for certain.

"He needs to stop proving that he's strong enough to hold on to his woman and protect her. When a man is driven by the race for status, with icy silence in the pauses, there is often not coldness behind it, but a very old fear of failing to protect. And the hardest thing for him: to stop leaving first. To discover that today's grown man can withstand what Damir's grief-stricken father once could not.

"I need to stop being the guide who carries everything on her own back. I don't need to burn myself up in service again.

"And both of us need to learn to be close not out of fear of loss, but as two adults, each with their own footing. And to give each other the freedom to choose."

There was one thought she didn't write down, but remembered: the knot comes undone not when two people have agreed on everything, but when one of them stops waiting and starts living their own life.

OBSERVER'S NOTE

A flash of memory is neither proof nor a verdict. It's a flashlight: it shows where it hurts. But you still have to walk there on your own two feet, in this life, today.

What the Science Says

As if we've always known each other. The feeling that you can be silent with someone without tension was called limbic resonance by psychiatrists Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon: the nervous systems of people who are close tune in to each other — to breathing, tone of voice, rhythm. It's an image from their book A General Theory of Love, not a mechanism measured by an instrument, but it helps many people understand what is happening to them.

Memory that comes on its own. There is no scientific proof of past lives, and this book does not offer any. Stanislav Grof and transpersonal psychology suggest understanding such experiences as deep images of the psyche rather than trying to verify them. The mechanism of the flash itself is well known: a touch, a smell, or a taste can instantly bring up a whole layer of images and feelings. This is involuntary memory; writers think of Marcel Proust's madeleine.

Why someone who has lost once leaves first. A child who has gone through the sudden loss of a close adult often grows up into someone who avoids deep attachment. For their nervous system, closeness is linked not to warmth but to the threat of another loss. Leaving first feels safer.

The Language of Meaning: The Kiss-Key

In old fairy tales, a kiss wakes the sleeping princess. That is no accident. A touch the body trusts can unlock what the mind has kept under lock and key. In this chapter the kiss works like a key: it doesn't create memory; it breaks its seal.

Something else matters too. A key opens a door, but it doesn't oblige you to walk through it, and it doesn't promise happiness on the other side. Behind Izmira's door there was no fairy tale, but grief, guilt, and the orphaned Damir. Sometimes the most valuable thing a meeting with another person gives us is not the person, but what finally opened up in us in their presence.

Practice: "Unsticking the Roles of Time"

Science shows that the feeling of "having always known each other" and sudden images from memory can be set off by old pain, and that someone who has lost once leaves first. That's why this practice separates the times: what happened then, and what is happening now, with this person.

If you feel that your relationship carries the weight of someone else's responsibility or unfounded fears of "not being enough," try this exercise:

Step One. Separating the layers of time. Sit comfortably, take a deep breath in and a slow breath out. Place your hand on the center of your chest. Say silently: "Everything that was in the past stays in the past. I separate the experience of past generations from my 'here and now.'"

Step Two. Releasing your partner. Picture the person close to you. Look into their eyes and say: "I no longer demand proof of your strength. You no longer need to rescue me or prove your worth. You are free from old obligations."

Step Three. Returning to the body. Feel a heavy, invisible cloak slide off your shoulders. Take a deep breath and feel your lungs fill with the clean air of the present moment.

Anchor. Remember one touch in your life after which you understood something important about yourself. Not about him. About yourself. Write it down in one sentence. And ask: What do I choose right now, knowing this?

He survived that night, but not the grief. And he left, taking with him a guilt that wasn't his, and leaving his son alone. She died without saying the most important thing. And now, centuries later, both bodies were in the same room again — to finally finish the conversation.

What special contract Adrian signed, why he left for a risky confidential project, and how Izmira lived through the first trial of icy silence — read on in Chapter Three.

Chapter 3. The Emerald Dress

Choosing yourself doesn't mean falling out of love. It means finally loving yourself too.

When the unconscious minds of two people tune to the same frequency, reality itself begins to thicken around them, turning ordinary days into a hypnotic, slow-flowing dream. The Côte d'Azur stood in its usual beauty — salty air, the chirring of cicadas, the distant splash of waves — but for Izmira and Adrian these days sounded different than for everyone else.

The first few days that Adrian lived in Izmira's home became pure, concentrated delight. Love hung in the air like a thick, warm cloud. Wherever they were — over morning coffee, in a narrow hallway, in the quiet of a room — that dense closeness burned.

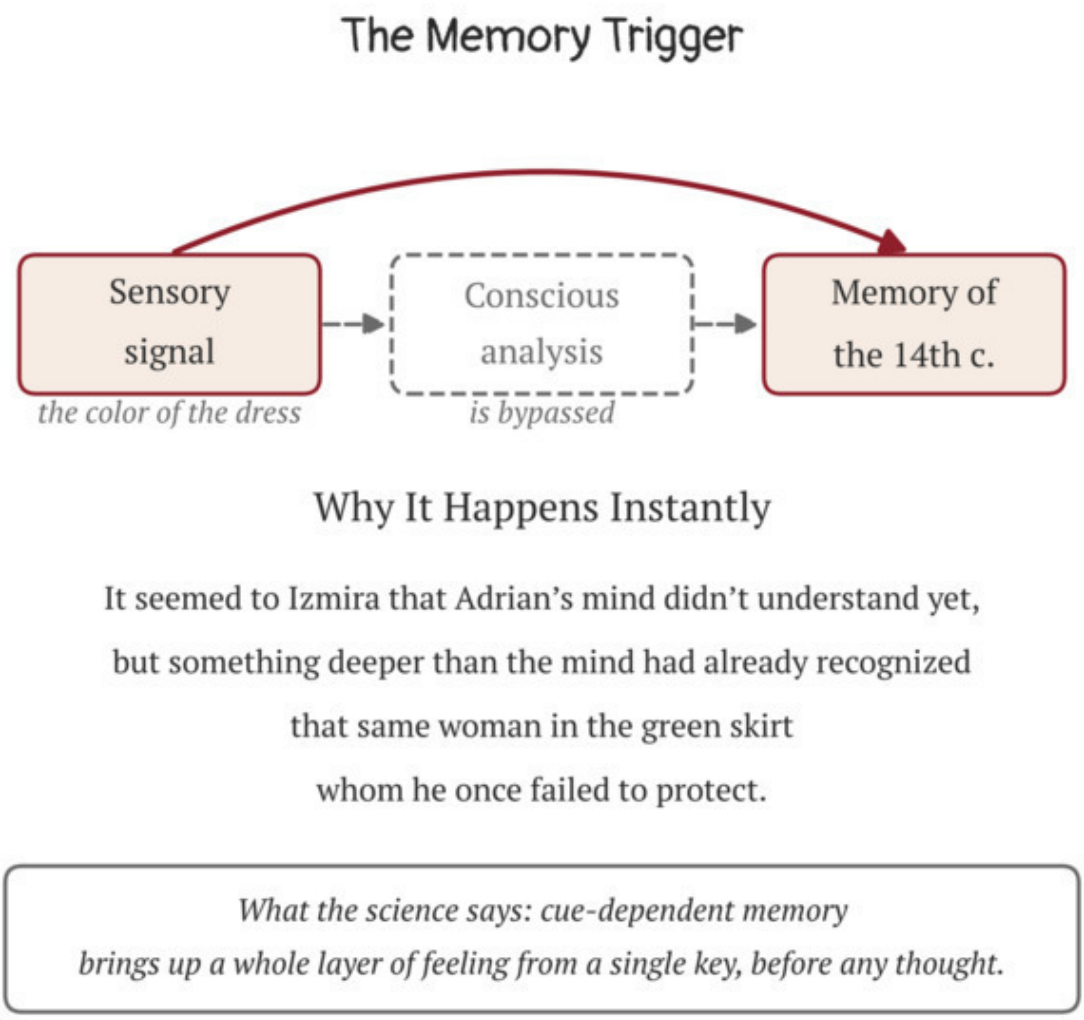
Neither of them dared say the main thing out loud. They simply moved through the house in wonder: could there really be a person on earth so identical to you? You know their choice in advance. You read their tastes without a single word.

Soon they had to drive to another city for a family dinner at Greg and Claudia's. And here a strange psychological split occurred: two grown, accomplished adults seemed to be thrown back into adolescence. They had to hide their glances and code every accidental touch.

Before dinner, Izmira went into a back room and, instead of her usual clothes, put on an emerald-green dress.

When she came out to the table, something incredible happened to Adrian. He lost the power of speech; his gaze froze. His mind didn't yet understand why, but something deeper than the mind reacted instantly: before him stood that same headstrong woman in a green skirt from the memory of the fourteenth century — the one he had loved more than life and had not been able to protect.

Greg, who noticed this silent, electrified exchange of glances, made a good-natured joke to ease the mood at the table. It seemed to Izmira that the code had worked and he had remembered everything. Later she would ask herself more than once whether she had imagined that look. But at that moment she was sure.



That night, when the whole house was asleep, Adrian quietly slipped into Izmira's room.

It was the most honest night of their lives. There wasn't a drop of vulgarity in it. He fell asleep first, and even in his sleep he didn't let go of her hand — he held her fingers as if he were afraid she would vanish. And she lay there, listening to his slow, even breathing, and for the first time in many years she was not afraid. A fear that had been piling up for centuries was quietly turning into trust.

Adrian knew that the documents for his new project could arrive any day. Holding Izmira in the dark, he whispered to her about the future:

"You'll fly with me. We'll live right by the sea. You won't even need makeup — you're always beautiful to me."

They were building a shared world. Adrian sincerely believed he could take her with him.

Their first argument happened the next morning, over nothing, the way it usually goes. Over coffee he said, almost in passing:

"Out there, by the sea, you won't have to work at all. You'll finally get some rest."

He wanted to give her rest. What she heard was: your work is something you need to be rescued from.

"My work isn't what I'm tired of," she said, more sharply than she meant to. "It's who I am. I have people here. And my son."

"That's not what I meant," he said, thrown. "I just wanted things to be easy for you."

"I don't need easy. I need to be seen."

He fell silent. Not offended — more like all at once, as if a blind had been pulled down inside him. He picked up his cup and went out onto the balcony. And Izmira, instead of giving him that minute, was standing beside him thirty seconds later, stroking his back and saying she'd overreacted, that everything was fine, that it didn't matter. She saved the morning. And she didn't notice that she was saving him from his own silence, and herself from the fear that he would leave.

It was then that he first said out loud what she would go on not hearing for a very long time:

"If the documents come, I may have to leave earlier. Alone. Alone at first."

She nodded and heard only the words "at first."

Only ten days. Later, Izmira would wonder more than once how a whole life had fit into ten days: the airport, the kitchen, a silence that didn't feel tense, the emerald dress, that night. As if the time they hadn't had last time had decided to repay its debt all at once, in a single gulp.

Provocative Therapy: The Voice of the Observer-Provocateur

There's a belief that is amazingly hard to kill: one magical night is a guarantee of a future together. And the stronger the feeling was at night, the less, for some reason, you want to test it with words in the light of day.

"Let's do the math," the Observer says, counting on their fingers. "One emerald dress. One night of confessions. One line: 'You won't even need makeup.' Total: a lifetime plan by the ocean. Have you tried, oh, maybe a week of watching what he actually does?"

"A week is a long time," says Izmira.

"Well, of course. In a week, reality might butt in. Better to get the castle built before it wakes up and checks its email."

Izmira laughed at the speed with which she built castles in the air — and still stayed grateful for that night. She simply let it remain a night, not a foundation.

The next day brought a hard blow.

Adrian was a top-level specialist connected to classified research projects. The documents came sooner than he had hoped, and with a condition: he was to go to a closed facility alone — no family, under conditions of total secrecy and isolation. No exceptions.

When Adrian brought this news, he was physically unsteady. The color had drained from his face — shame and guilt toward Izmira were burning him from the inside. It seemed to him that he had once again destroyed their shared world.

The rational, hurt part of Izmira first asked the logical question: *Why didn't he set boundaries right away? Why didn't he turn down the project for our sake?*

But the next moment, another, more mature part of her spoke up.

She looked into his lost eyes, full of pain, gently put her arms around his shoulders, and did something his Ego never expected. She completely lifted the guilt from him.

"You don't have to carry this weight, Adrian," she said quietly. "And it's not only about your contract. I choose to stay. I choose myself and my own life."

Izmira realized that she could not, and had no right to, simply drop everything and fly after him, canceling her own life. She needed to finish building her own foundation — to close out her work and study commitments, to stand on her own two feet fully, independent of anyone.

She let him go not out of weakness but out of real strength. Adrian was leaving for his classified project knowing that he had not been cursed or blamed. He had been released in peace.

On the last evening, his bag already packed, he held her and said, "You're strong. You can handle anything." At the time, she thought it was a compliment.

And then he cried. Really cried, his face pressed into her shoulder, the way boys cry: he was leaving alone, and it was unbearable to him. She stroked his head and believed every tear. *No one could fake this,* she thought. *You can't make something like this up.*

The Last Morning

On the last morning, Izmira woke up before him.

Outside the window, the sky was just beginning to gray. Adrian was sleeping on his back with his arms flung out, the way children and very tired people sleep. One palm lay open on the blanket, as if even in sleep he were letting something go. Izmira looked at that palm and memorized it. The life line. The small scar at the base of his thumb that he never got around to telling her about. The warmth that came off his skin even from a distance.

She got up quietly so as not to wake him. On the dresser lay a handful of change he had emptied from his pockets the night before. She made coffee. She took his shirt out of the closet — the only one he had brought with him — and began to iron it. Slowly, crease by crease. She wasn't thinking about anything. She just ironed and breathed in the smell of hot fabric. Then she caught herself thinking: this is how the women before her ironed shirts. For hundreds of years. Before a war, before a long journey, before the sea. In silence. Putting into every movement what could not be said out loud.

Adrian came into the kitchen barefoot, still sleepy, and stopped in the doorway.

"You're ironing my shirt," he said, as if he were witnessing a miracle.

"I am," she smiled.

"No one has ever ironed a shirt for me. Except my grandmother."

He came up behind her, wrapped his arms around her, and buried his face in her neck. They stood like that for a long time. The iron cooled on its stand. The coffee cooled in the cups. Neither of them said "I'll wait" or "I'll come back." Both knew that any words right now would be too small.

On the way to the airport, he held her hand on his knee and kept stroking her wrist with his thumb. Back and forth. Back and forth. As if he were checking her pulse. As if he wanted to make sure she was real.

At passport control he turned around. He looked at her for a long time, attentively, the way people look when they are trying to memorize a face forever. And suddenly Izmira saw in him not a grown man but a boy. A lost, frightened boy who was once again being taken away from the one he loved.

"See you," he said.

Simply, quietly, the way people talk about tomorrow. And he smiled that very smile that had warmed her chest for ten days straight.

"See you," she answered.

She didn't cry. She held her breath, raised her hand, and waved, smiling. She kept smiling while he walked down the long corridor, until he disappeared around the corner, until the line with his flight went dark on the departures board.

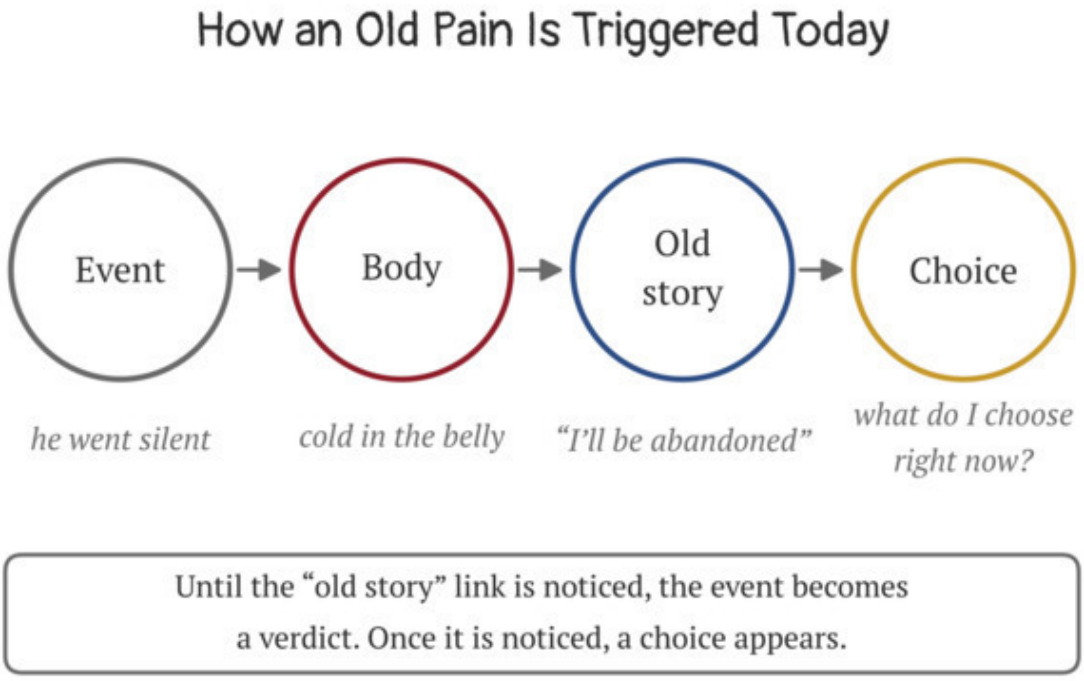
And then she got into the car, gripped the steering wheel, and sat for a long time without moving. Inside it was quiet and empty, like a house after the guests have gone. She didn't yet know that this silence would last a long time. She knew only one thing: whatever happened next, those ten days had happened. And no one could ever take them from her. She unclenched her fingers from the wheel, exhaled — long, all the way to the bottom — and started the engine.

For the first few weeks he wrote. Often, tenderly, with photos of the sea and voice messages in which his voice was lost and warm: "I don't want to hurt you. You're the best thing in my life. I'll come soon." He never once called, he only wrote. And then, almost a month later, the messages grew rarer, shorter. And one day they stopped altogether. A deaf, absolute silence set in.

And in that silence, that same little pebble rose up from the bottom.

He left and went silent. Like his father. The thought came not as words but as a chill in her stomach. Izmira stood in the kitchen with a cup in her hands and couldn't take a sip. Her mind understood: his plans had collapsed, he was ashamed, he needed time. But her body wasn't listening to her mind. Her body was screaming what it had known since earliest childhood: *Again. Again someone leaves without explaining anything. And again you're left behind, not understanding what you did wrong.*

She didn't yet know that this fear had nothing to do with Adrian. That it was about the little girl inside her who had once already stood at a closed door, not knowing whether anyone would come back for her. That girl was finally going to be met. But for that, someone was needed who would be able to see her.



Later, without anger, Izmira would be able to see his side, too. In the memory of the fourteenth century, he had remained the one who failed to protect his woman. In this life, he probably felt that he first had to prove his strength to himself, to walk the path alone, and only then be by her side. The price of that choice turned out to be high for both of them. And still, it was his choice.

And her choice was a different one. In the fourteenth century, her death had been a tragedy no one chose. In this life, his departure also happened without her say. But how to meet it was her decision. She stayed to finish building her own support, and no one had asked her to.

OBSERVER'S NOTE

A night can be real and still not become a foundation. Feelings are tested not at night but in the daytime: by what a person does when things get hard. And by what you do.

What the Science Says

As if you know him in advance. The brain is constantly building predictions about what a person close to us will do. The tighter and more open the contact, the more accurate the prediction. Hence the feeling of "I know what he's going to say" — and it can be deceptive: a prediction is not yet knowledge.

The dress as a key. A color, a silhouette, a scent can instantly bring up a whole layer of feelings before a person has time to think. This is memory triggered by an external cue; psychologists Endel Tulving and Donald Thomson showed how strongly recollection depends on such cues.

Shame goes mute. A person in acute shame feels that admitting weakness equals catastrophe. That's why shame so often steals our voice exactly when a simple, honest conversation is needed most.

When a pause in texting feels like death. The nervous system is bad at telling the difference between "he hasn't written in three days" and "Mom left, and I don't know if she's coming back." In attachment theory this is called activation of the attachment system: anxiety rises faster than the mind can explain what is happening.

The Language of Meaning: Emerald

Emerald is Izmira's color. In the fourteenth century it was her green skirt, the color of an herbalist who knew which herb soothes and which one helps you let go. In this life, it is the dress in which she was recognized. Green is the color of the heart, alive and growing. It isn't about being liked. It's about being recognized for who you are.

Notice: Izmira didn't put on the emerald dress to hold on to Adrian. She put it on because that evening she was herself. Sometimes the strongest thing a woman can do is simply stop hiding her color.

Practice: "Letting Go with Dignity"

The science says: the brain is constantly predicting what a loved one will do, and a pause in texting registers in the body as a threat. This practice brings you back from predictions to facts and to your own foundation: what is mine and what is theirs.

If you have to let someone go while still carrying pain and a sense of things left unfinished, try this:

Step One. Acknowledging your part of the truth. Sit quietly and say honestly to yourself: "It hurts that things turned out this way. This pain is real, and I don't have to hide it."

Step Two. Returning responsibility. In your mind, speak to the person you are letting go: "Your choice is your choice. I don't take it on myself, and I don't blame you for it."

Step Three. Returning to your foundation. Ask yourself: "What of my own, separate from them, do I need to finish building right now?" Write down one concrete step and take it today, however small.

Anchor. Find something you own in your color — the one in which you feel like yourself. Put it on, or simply hold it in your hands, and say: "I don't need to hide in order to be loved." What do I choose right now?

She let him go without humiliating herself or him. And in the silence left behind after he flew away, for the first time in a long while, what she could hear was not despair but her own breathing.

How Izmira lived through the trial of silence, what was hiding behind Adrian's cold defenses, and what sign the universe sent her — read on in Chapter Four.

Part II. Silence

When the other person is silent, you begin to hear yourself.

Chapter 4. Two Gray Check Marks

Another person's silence isn't always about you. Sometimes it's simply their own winter.

Two gray check marks.

Izmira noticed them once, in the evening, while she was replying to a student. Her message to Adrian had been delivered but never read. She looked at those two little gray check marks a moment longer than necessary and felt something inside her quietly tighten.

She wasn't one of those people who never let go of their phone. She knew how to switch off: from the news, from other people's expectations, from noise. Work, students, writing, the sea in the mornings kept her in a living rhythm. But that evening she decided to do a small thing that turned out to be not small at all.

She removed their photo together from her lock screen. The one where they are laughing on the waterfront and the wind has blown her hair right into his face. In its place she set a white background. Just white. No picture, no caption, nothing.

The screen instantly felt unfamiliar, like a clean room after a move. And then Izmira realized that white is not empty. It is clean. It isn't a wall, it's a page. Nothing has been written on it yet, and that is exactly why anything can be written on it.

She put the phone in the desk drawer. Not hidden away forever. Just put there, the way you put away your glasses when you don't need them. It wasn't a ban, it was a gesture: my attention belongs to me. I choose where to give it.

The days that followed were full and warm. Sessions, writing, classes, conversations with friends. She had plenty to live for. Waiting didn't eat up her days, because she didn't hand them over to waiting.

But one night did happen.

Izmira woke up around three. Not from a dream, not from a sound. She simply opened her eyes, and inside her it was already there: thick, hot, alive. She wanted to write to him. Not beautifully, not wisely. Honestly. The way people write when they no longer want to be only the one who does everything right.

She got up and wrote. At length, haltingly, from the heart. That she was hurting. That she missed him. That she didn't understand his silence. That she was angry and surprised at her own anger. That she didn't need him to promise anything — it was simply important to her to tell the truth.

She reread it. Every word was true. Not a single word about how bad he was. Only about what was happening to her.

And she sent it.

First came embarrassment. A grown woman, a psychologist, someone who teaches others to hold boundaries, writing at three in the morning to a man who isn't answering. She lay down, pulled the blanket up to her chin, and stared at the ceiling for a long time.

And then came relief. Wide, like an exhale after holding your breath for a long time. Her shoulders dropped. Her jaw unclenched. Inside, there was room again.

And right behind it came a thought, sly and very familiar: *See, since I feel better, that means I'm right.* Izmira caught the thought and examined it, the way you examine an unfamiliar pebble in the palm of your hand.

No. Relief after sending a letter is an exhale, not a sign of being right. Her body exhaled because it had stopped holding in what hurt to hold. But that says nothing about whether he will answer, whether he will understand, whether anything will change. It says only something about her: she is no longer pretending that it doesn't hurt.

In the morning she reread the letter and didn't delete it. She wasn't ashamed of it. And for the first time in her life she thought that maybe being a grown-up and being alive are one and the same.

That being grown-up isn't about never writing at three in the morning. It's about not demanding an answer from the other person afterward as payment for your honesty.

He never answered. The two check marks stayed gray.

Izmira closed the desk drawer and went to work.

The urge did come once more. A few days later, late in the evening, her hand reached for the drawer on its own. She suddenly had an unbearable desire to open the airline's website and look at flights from Nice to Manila. Just to look. The price, the layovers, how many hours in the air. She could already see herself stepping off the plane into the humid heat, and him standing in the arrivals hall.

She recognized the urge. Izmira knew how to switch gears; she had learned that long ago. But knowing how didn't cancel the fact that the urge was there: hot, childlike, almost irresistible. And it was more honest to admit it than to pretend it didn't exist. She sat down on the floor by the desk, put her palm on her belly, and waited. Three breaths. Five. The urge rose like a wave, hung there for a moment, and receded.

The drawer stayed closed. Later her mentor would say about that evening: "You don't need to be ashamed of a craving. You need to see it. Weakness isn't having it. Weakness is pretending it isn't there."

When the connection between two people is so dense that the boundary between "I" and "you" blurs, a break in contact is felt almost physically, like a burn. Izmira felt as if she could sense his cold and his heaviness in her own body, even across thousands of miles of ocean.

After flying to the Philippines and heading out to sea on a research vessel, Adrian faced a hard trial. The ambitious project for which he had sacrificed his time with Izmira collapsed because of outside circumstances. His male ego took a crushing blow.

Instead of admitting his vulnerability and saying, "Everything has fallen apart for me, but I'm free — let's build our world," Adrian fell into the classic trap of male shame. If you believe what Izmira saw in the memory of the fourteenth century, something had been sealed in him there: *You didn't save your woman. You weren't strong enough.* And now, when everything had collapsed again, his psyche blocked the possibility of simply coming back and telling the truth. To him, coming back without a victory meant losing for good.

He agreed to a new contract, even more classified and even longer, and withdrew into what could be called a cold defense.

When Izmira realized that the silence was stretching not into days but into weeks, a wave of crushing indignation washed over her. One part of her understood what was happening with her mind, while the wounded, childlike part inside was screaming with hurt and injustice.

Izmira realized: if she gave in to this pain, she would slide into destructive rescuing.

Provocative Therapy: The Voice of the Observer-Provocateur

Almost every Rescuer knows this logic: if he's silent, that means he's hurting; if he's hurting, that means she has to warm him; and if she stops warming him, he'll freeze to death, and it will be her fault.

"So," the Observer says, in the tone of a doctor reading a chart. "Adult male, thirty years old, top-level specialist, responsible for a complex project in the middle of the ocean. And unable to send a single message. Your theories? The entire universe lost Wi-Fi at the same time? Both his arms were amputated?"

"He's hurting," Izmira says quietly.

"Naturally. And you, naturally, are the only woman on the planet with a built-in heating function, without which he'll freeze in the middle of the ocean. Shall we issue you a certificate as an emergency psychological first responder? Twenty-four-hour shifts, no weekends, no thank-yous included. Dental not covered."

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