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VICTORIA DOVGAN

ONCE, 33,000 FEET ABOVE THE GROUND



A love story where time
and distance lost all meaning

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**Once, 33,000 Feet Above the
Ground. A love story where time
and distance lost all meaning**

«Издательские решения»

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A love story that begins 33,000 feet above the ground and unfolds across oceans and cities. From Miami's beaches to the hidden corners of Paris, it's not a fairytale but a raw, unforgettable journey of passion, loss, and rebirth. This book is about encounters that awaken you and the kind of love that transforms you forever.

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Once, 33,000 Feet Above the Ground

A love story where time and distance lost all meaning

Victoria Dovgan

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Prologue

I write these pages as a map of inner landscapes – where passion collides with fear, where trust wrestles with doubt, and where distance both separates and binds.

This book is about finding freedom through closeness, and strength through vulnerability. About how love becomes a space where we learn to be honest with ourselves, to face our fragility, and to discover within it a source of power.

Every love story, even someone else's, is always partly our own. Because as we read, we recognize ourselves – in another's glance, in their words, in their hesitation. We relive, alongside the characters, our own inner choices: to stay or to leave, to open or to withdraw, to trust or to turn away.

These pages are an invitation. To touch what is alive. To remember that the heart still knows how to open, that it is vibrant and longing to feel. And perhaps, as you read, you will discover not only their story. You will discover yourself.

Chapter 1. Moscow. When Staying Becomes Impossible

Golden strands slip between my fingers, naturally wavy, free. How many years had I stood in front of the mirror with a hair straightener in my hand, waging war against my own essence? Every morning was a battle with the curls that stubbornly reached for freedom. I straightened them, subdued them, forced them into compliance. My ex-husband would smile when he saw the sleek strands: “*So beautiful.*” Colleagues nodded approvingly. Everyone seemed to love the obedient version of me.

But in every strand, I forced straight, my true nature was hiding – wild, passionate, untamable. The same nature that once made me bend to other people’s expectations, smooth the edges of my character, make myself convenient for others. Straight hair. A quiet voice. No excess emotion. I was learning how to be a shadow.

Now those strands brush against my shoulders in light waves. Unruly. Alive. In every curl there is defiance against the person I once pretended to be. In them is all of me – the true me, the one who will no longer hold back her fiery essence.

Sometimes life approaches you quietly, like a cat, and simply sits down beside you. It doesn’t demand attention, doesn’t meow, doesn’t scratch. It just sits. And you realize – something has to change. Not because anything was wrong. But because... I was empty inside.

I was about to turn thirty, and there was no triumph or tragedy in that number. Only a strange sensation, as if I were standing on the threshold of a room I had long outgrown. Outside my Moscow apartment window, February kept sweeping snow across the streets with the persistence of a janitor – methodical, hopeless, the same every day. The sky hung low, like the ceiling of a cramped Khrushchevka, and it seemed that if I jumped, I would bump my head against the gray cotton of the clouds.

I sat with a cup of cooling herbal tea and thought about my birthday. Thirty years. Everyone said it was a milestone, a turning point, a moment to look back and measure your life. But when I tried to sum it all up, what appeared in my mind was nothing but a white void – like a page still waiting to be written on.

In the five years since my divorce, I had been learning to let go – not only of the man who left me because “*we have nothing in common anymore*” – but of my old self. The convenient, invisible self who lived in someone else’s shadow and called it love.

Now I shine from within. My friends say it outright: “*We never really noticed you before. But now we see you.*”

I live across from a forest – the only thing that still anchors me here. Inside, the space breathes light: white walls, a pink kitchen, a big mirror reflecting the paintings I create myself. But it feels like a temporary harbor. My true home exists in dreams: vast, open, with windows that reach the sky and a spaciousness you could dissolve into it.

What do I have? A job at TSUM – once a dream, now a golden cage. From sales associate to department head, a path that taught me to read people, to adjust to any client. I can tell what a person wants before they even know it themselves. But every day there feels like acting in someone else’s play. Beautiful, prestigious, but not mine.

My soul longs for air, yet I sell luxury to people trying to fill their emptiness with things. Not so long ago, I thought of it as success. Now I feel something inside wither from the weight of such elegant meaninglessness.

In the evenings I become someone else. I teach people to speak with their bodies what they cannot express in words. Dance therapy – my true calling. Movement that heals. Breath that liberates. Each class is a chance to uncover in a person what they hide even from themselves. Because I don’t know how to merely exist. I need to carry meaning, to help, to touch souls.

My apartment that was comfortable enough, yet left no room for my soul to breathe. My friends are good companions for casual conversation, but not for speaking about what really matters. And then there is the emptiness. A vast, echoing emptiness where love, family, and true connection were meant to be.

My hands are rarely still – I gesture when I speak, I crave to touch the world with my fingertips, to sense it through every fiber of my being. In that is the same passion for life I had so long suppressed. All-consuming, insatiably curious, unwilling to accept half-measures – just like my hair that no longer wants to stay straight.

That passion seeps into everything. I can walk thirty thousand steps through Moscow simply because my legs carry me forward toward something new and unknown. I can spontaneously go kart racing, feel the speed in my skin. I can take a snowboard and race down the slope, not caring about what might happen next. Or feel another human being so deeply it takes my breath away but now I let myself feel that depth fully, without shame.

For years I kept my fiery nature under control, pretending to be calm, rational, predictable. Like those straightened strands – polished, but lifeless. Now I allow myself to burn with passion. And though that fire unsettles some, even frightens them, I am no longer willing to extinguish it just to make others comfortable.

That same resolve shaped my relationships. For two years I hadn't been with anyone – not out of lack of desire, but because I made a deliberate choice: intimacy only in real relationships. Deep ones. The kind where I can show myself completely, without masks, without hiding.

After the divorce, I learned a simple truth: it's better to be alone than to spend yourself on encounters that leave you emptier. I was tired of shallow connections, of dates for the sake of dating, of trying to force myself into someone else's frame. If intimacy, then with complete trust. If a relationship, it would be one that allowed me to expand and grow, not shrink.

Of course, I handled life on my own – I worked, traveled, solved problems, made plans. But surviving and living are not the same. Surviving is merely functioning. Living is knowing that each day is filled with meaning, that you are not simply existing but expanding, growing, and allowing yourself to be both vulnerable and strong at once.

And so, sitting in my apartment, staring out at the snowy window, I realized: if I celebrate my thirtieth birthday here, in the same setting, with the same people, with the same repetitive conversations – I would be stuck, not just in this room, but in this life, in the suffocating sense that everything important is happening somewhere else, with someone else.

I needed to leave. I needed to meet myself again.

"Let's go somewhere," I said to Lena when she called to ask about my birthday plans.

"Where?" she asked, surprised.

"Anywhere. Somewhere warm. Somewhere by the sea. Somewhere I can breathe."

Lena was silent for a while. Then she said: *"My vacation doesn't line up..."*

I called Katya. She had already planned a trip with colleagues. Marina had no visa. Olya had no money. Dima didn't see the point of going anywhere when I could just celebrate at home.

With each call, instead of disappointment, I felt something else – relief. As if the Universe were gently, but firmly, telling me: *"This is your path. Walk it alone."*

But why is it so terrifying to take important steps alone? Why do we crave someone beside us even when our inner voice is already clear about where to go? Maybe because since childhood we've been taught that the right decisions are collective, and that choosing for yourself is risk and selfishness. *"Ask for advice."* *"Don't rush."* *"Think of others."* These phrases root themselves deep within us, whispering: *"You can't do this alone. You need support."*

Sometimes the most important choices can only be made when you are alone. Because no one else knows the pain of your missed opportunities. No one else wakes at night with that piercing sense that life is moving past without you.

Still, the thought of flying across the ocean alone terrified me – my knees shook with it. In my passport was an American visa, untouched for six long years, silently reproaching me: “*Well? When?*”

It was still valid for four more years. Plenty of time, it would seem. But I knew – if not now, then later there would be a thousand reasons not to go. And then the visa would expire, and I would still be here in this same apartment, sipping cooled tea, wondering: “*What if...*”

There is a special kind of fear – the fear of missed chances. It doesn’t scream, doesn’t sound alarms, doesn’t send your heart racing. It simply drains life from you, drop by drop. And one day you understand: either you step toward what frightens you, or you stay behind with regret for the rest of your life.

I opened my laptop and started searching for travel companions online. Posted in a few groups: “*Looking for company for a trip to the U.S. I already have a visa.*” The few replies I received all asked the same question: “*How did you get a visa?*” People wanted to go, but no one was actually ready.

Time passed. A month to my birthday. Then three weeks. Then two. And I kept waiting – hoping someone would appear, that something would change, that the Universe would send me the perfect travel partner.

But the Universe was silent. Or maybe it was speaking, only in a language I didn’t want to understand.

So I made the decision that would change everything: “*I’ll go alone.*”

I said it out loud, to the empty apartment, and felt something stir inside me. Not joy – not yet, it was still too frightening for joy. But relief. As if I had finally stopped waiting for permission and granted it to myself.

Of course, flying alone across the ocean was terrifying. Especially to a country where I knew no one, where the language wasn’t native, where everything was unfamiliar. But scarier still was imagining myself staying here, in this apartment, with these thoughts, with this sensation of wasted life.

I opened my laptop again and began looking for options. That’s when I found something that seemed perfect: a cruise. A ship sailing from Miami through the Caribbean and back. All-inclusive, all organized, no surprises. I could just buy a ticket and stop worrying.

It felt like a compromise between dream and fear. I’d make it to America, and I’d feel safe. Beautiful, calm, predictable.

I dug into the details, spoke to travel agents. The route was exquisite – days at sea, exotic islands, sunsets from the deck. I was almost ready.

Almost.

But something inside resisted. A quiet voice whispered: “*This isn’t it. This is another escape, only a prettier one.*”

Loneliness doesn’t scare me. What scares me is not fulfilling my potential. What scares me is waking up at forty and realizing I smothered my own fire, simply because it seemed too bright for someone else to bear.

Sometimes the most important decisions aren’t born in moments of revelation, but in moments of honesty with yourself. When you stop searching for the perfect choice and simply decide – will you live, or will you merely exist?

I didn’t yet know what I would choose. But I knew one thing for certain – the choice was coming. And it was already close.

Chapter 2. The Visa That Waited Six Years

There are moments in life when the universe sends signs so obvious, it's a wonder we don't see them sooner. My American visa was exactly that kind of sign.

Six years earlier, I was still married. My husband and I decided to apply for American visas – “just in case,” we said. Like an insurance policy. A possibility we might never use, but one we wanted to have.

First we traveled to Europe, just to get a Schengen visa stamped into our passports. Without it, we were told, it would be harder to apply for an American one. Then began the long process of trying to secure an interview. For half a year we stalked the embassy website, waiting for an open slot. I was ready to give up – convinced it was impossible to get an appointment. But my husband was persistent, and eventually he managed to book a time.

“I got in!” he announced, triumphant.

“And what about me? Am I just going to be left without a visa?” I blurted, frustration creeping into my voice.

“Try again,” he shrugged.

And you know what? That very same day, I managed to catch a slot too – just for the following day. As if someone had quietly freed a place just for me.

Our interviews were scheduled on different days. On mine, the person ahead of me was turned away immediately – a red slip, a refusal. My stomach twisted. What if they reject me too? What if something in my paperwork isn't right?

But when I stepped up to the glass window, everything went surprisingly smoothly. The consul asked only a couple of questions:

“What is the purpose of your trip?”

“Tourism. I want to take a cruise from Miami, maybe travel a little more around the country, and then come home.”

“How long do you plan to stay?”

“A week or two at most.”

He took my passport, typed something into the computer, and said:

“Alright. Wait for the result.”

A month later, the notification came. Visa approved.

When I opened my passport, I couldn't believe my eyes – ten years. A ten-year visa!

I ran to show my husband.

“Look! They gave me a visa for ten years!”

“You're joking,” he said, without even looking. “That never happens the first time.”

“No, really – look!” I handed him the passport.

He scanned the page, frowned.

“Strange. I don't understand why.”

No joy. No “congratulations.” Just confusion – and a hint of irritation. As if I'd received something I didn't deserve.

A week later, his result came: a three-year visa.

I still remember standing there, passport in hand, caught between disbelief and unease. Why had I been given ten years, and him only three? We'd submitted the same documents, shared the same circumstances, the same plans. What was the difference?

Back then I didn't know how to read the signs the universe sends. I didn't realize that a visa isn't about fairness or logic. It's about readiness. About an inner calling that might still be sleeping, but one day will wake.

Two years later my marriage ended. But the visa remained – like a quiet reminder that some opportunities don't appear when you plan them, but when you're finally ready.

Coincidence or destiny? It's a question humanity has wrestled with for centuries. We search for logic in coincidences, try to find reasons where there may be none. But sometimes life gives us gifts for no reason at all – an advance payment, so that when the right moment comes, we already hold the tools for change.

For six years, that visa sat untouched in my passport, waiting. Waiting for me to realize that marriage isn't a life sentence. Waiting for me to find the courage to stand alone. Waiting for me to turn thirty and finally understand: it's now or never.

And now, sitting in my apartment and debating a cruise, I knew: the visa had always known. It knew the moment would come when I'd face a choice between safety and the unknown. And it knew I would not choose the cruise.

Though at the time, I had no idea.

I was still scrolling through cruise websites, convincing myself it was the practical choice. But something in me resisted. A quiet voice whispered: *"The visa hasn't been waiting for this."*

But then – for what? And would I have the courage to find out?

The answer would come tomorrow. For now, I simply stared at that little sticker in my passport, marveling at the strange way life works – how it gives us what we'll need long before we realize we'll need it.

As if someone up there knows our path better than we do.

And prepares us for it in advance.

Chapter 3. The Cruise as an Escape from Choice

Sometimes we don't make decisions because they're right, but because they're convenient. The cruise was exactly that – a beautiful wrapper for my fear of the unknown.

I spent an entire week researching every possible option. I compared cabins, studied routes, read reviews. Miami – Bahamas – Jamaica – back to Miami. Seven days, all inclusive, no surprises. Perfect for someone who wanted to say, *"I've been to America,"* without actually setting foot in it.

I even found the perfect cruise: glowing reviews, gorgeous staterooms, an itinerary that promised breathtaking views. My finger hovered over the *Pay Now* button, but something held me back.

Maybe it was intuition. Or maybe it was just honesty with myself.

Because deep down, I knew: a cruise isn't a journey. It's a way of avoiding a journey while pretending you're on one. Like looking at the ocean through aquarium glass – beautiful, safe, but not real.

Admitting that was terrifying. Because the alternative – flying alone into a foreign country with no ready-made plan – made my knees shake.

So I decided to call my mom.

"Mom, I'm thinking of going to America," I said when she picked up.

"America?" Her voice was instantly tense. "Why so far? And by yourself?"

"I already have a visa. And I want to celebrate my birthday in a way that feels... special."

"But why America? You could go somewhere closer. Turkey, maybe. Or Europe."

I started explaining the idea of the cruise – how safe and organized it would be. My mom listened quietly, but even over the phone I could feel her worry.

"Sweetheart," she finally said, "are you sure you need this? There must be other options. What about the Maldives, with everything included? Why take such a risk?"

And in that moment, something inside me broke.

Not because she was wrong – she was simply being a mother, protective, concerned. But her words landed directly on my deepest fear: fear of risk, fear of the unknown, fear that I wouldn't cope.

"You know what, Mom," I heard myself say, "maybe you're right. Maybe I shouldn't go. Better to just stay home."

"That's my girl," she sighed with relief. "Why put yourself through unnecessary stress?"

I hung up the phone and sat down on the couch. And felt something inside me die.

Not my heart – something deeper. A spark I'd been carrying all along, whispering: *"Try. Risk. Live."*

An hour later, I was running a fever.

The body doesn't lie. It always knows the truth, even when the mind tries to bury it. And mine was screaming at me: *"You betrayed yourself."*

I lay in bed, aching all over, and I knew this wasn't some random flu. It was a reaction to betrayal – my betrayal of myself. I had chosen safety over life. Fear over self-love.

We often don't notice how we abandon our true desires. We tell ourselves: *"I'm being reasonable."* *"Why take risks?"* *"Better a bird in the hand."* But with every so-called reasonable choice, something inside us dims.

This is called authenticity – the ability to stay true to your real needs and desires. When we go against our authenticity, the body rebels. It gets sick, headaches start, insomnia creeps in. It isn't weakness – it's a signal: *"You're going the wrong way."*

Lying there, I could feel the illness draining the life out of me. And I knew: if I didn't change my decision now, if I really stayed home and celebrated my birthday in some "safe and sensible" way, I would never forgive myself.

Some moments in life are points of no return. In them, you choose – remain the old version of yourself, or finally become who you are.

I got out of bed – still weak, still trembling – and opened my laptop.

Do you know the difference between a dream and a goal? A dream lives in the mind and feeds on the word “*someday*.” A goal lives in the calendar and demands concrete action.

That day, I turned my American dream into a goal. And felt something awaken inside me that had slept for far too long.

But this was only the beginning. Ahead lay the packing, the fears, the doubts – and a meeting that would change my life forever.

Chapter 4. The “Tourist of America” Backpack

When you finally make an important decision, the Universe starts sending signs. Sometimes they're subtle, almost invisible. And sometimes they're so obvious you can only throw up your hands and say: *“Alright, I get it.”*

After I booked my ticket, the real preparation began. And every step felt like a lesson: some paths are simply meant for you.

First, the tickets. I spent an entire day trying to find the perfect route. Through Istanbul – direct, quick, inexpensive. Perfect. I'd get to the website, pick the flight, enter all the details, click *Pay* – and then the system would spit out an error.

“Technical issue. Please try again later.”

Alright, I'll try later. An hour later – same thing. The next day – still an error. I switched browsers, cleared cookies, even called the airline. Nothing worked.

I tried another Istanbul flight – the same problem. Another airline through Turkey – error again. It was as if some invisible hand kept whispering: *“Not this way.”*

So I started looking at alternatives. Through Dubai – no flights. Through Frankfurt – layovers too long. Through London – even a transit visa was required.

And then I stumbled on a route through Casablanca. Morocco. Just one connection, not the fastest, but... available. I went to the website, filled everything in, clicked *Pay* – and it went through smoothly, like butter melting on warm bread.

I sat staring at the booking confirmation in disbelief. Casablanca? Why this path? And then I remembered a phrase I'd once heard: *“When one door closes, another opens. Don't waste your strength banging on the locked one – look for the one that's waiting for you.”*

Casablanca was my open door.

Next came the search for a place to stay. I spent hours comparing options, scrolling reviews. In Miami I found a hostel five minutes from the ocean – and it happened to be free on the exact days I needed. In Orlando – a cozy little house that looked like it was lifted straight from a postcard of American suburbia. In New York – a budget hotel right in the heart of Manhattan.

Every single booking went through effortlessly. No obstacles, no “fully booked,” no “system error.” It was as if someone had laid the path for me long ago and was just waiting for me to step onto it.

Friends helped me set up an international payment card. My visa was valid. I had my phone plan sorted. All that was left was to pack.

And then something happened that convinced me completely: I was walking the right path.

I went into the storage room to grab my suitcase and saw it. A gray backpack that had been lying there for years. My mother had bought it once on a whim – saw it in a store and picked it up. *“Might come in handy someday,”* she'd said. I had laughed: *“Mom, why would I need a backpack? I'm not exactly going hiking.”*

But now I stood there staring at the words printed across it: “Tourist of America.”

I froze. It felt impossible, too on-the-nose to be real. You couldn't invent a more perfect coincidence. It was as if the backpack had been waiting all those years for this exact moment – waiting for me to grow into the person written on its front.

I picked it up, ran my hands over the fabric, tested the zippers. Perfect condition, like new. As if it had been preserved just for this journey.

Do you know what I believe? That the Universe is far wiser than we are. It knows our path long before we even sense it. It plants little clues, prepares the tools, opens the doors.

We can ignore the signs, argue with them, push against the current. But when we finally surrender and let life lead us, we discover that everything is already in place. The tickets buy

themselves, the hotels appear at just the right moment, and in your storage closet sits a backpack with the exact words you need to see.

So I began to pack. Miami – heat, the ocean, light dresses. Orlando – still warm, but inland. New York – early March, anywhere between twenty-three and fifty-nine degrees, unpredictable and merciless.

How do you fit three climates into one backpack? How do you bring clothes for all seasons without exceeding the baggage limit for domestic flights?

And yet somehow, everything found its place. Each item seemed meant to be there. Nothing extra, nothing missing. Even my belongings seemed to know this trip was different.

I packed airy dresses for Miami, a warm coat for New York, comfortable shoes for long walks. I added a notebook – for recording impressions. A book I'd been meaning to read.

On the last evening before my flight, I sat on the floor next to my packed backpack and thought about how strange life can be. Six months earlier, I couldn't have imagined I'd be flying alone to America. And now – tickets bought, clothes packed, visa in my passport.

What had changed? The circumstances were the same. The job the same, the friends the same, the fears still with me. Only one thing shifted: I had stopped waiting for permission. I stopped searching for excuses. I stopped inventing reasons why it couldn't be done.

And the moment I did, it felt like the Universe clapped its hands and said: *“Finally! We’ve been waiting for you.”*

The “Tourist of America” backpack stood by the door, ready for adventure. And I sat beside it, feeling someone new stir awake inside me – someone braver, more curious, finally ready to step into the unknown.

Chapter 5. French Music in the Playlist

The universe speaks to us in the language of coincidences. The trouble is, most of the time we're too busy planning to notice. But sometimes the signs grow so loud, so insistent, that ignoring them becomes impossible.

A week before my flight, something strange began to happen. My Spotify playlist – one I hardly ever curated – suddenly started throwing French music at me. First one song. Then another. Then an entire queue of recommendations.

I listened to those melodic, lilting compositions and felt a strange stirring inside. The French language flowed around my mind like warm water – unfamiliar, yet oddly comforting. The singers' voices seemed to echo from somewhere far away, from another life I hadn't lived yet, but that was already waiting for me.

Strange, I thought as I scrolled through the suggestions. *Why now? Why French?*

But there was no logical explanation. I was flying to America and yet the algorithm kept stubbornly shoving Paris in front of me.

At the same time, something else began to shift. My friends – those same people who only a month earlier had shrugged and said, *"My vacation doesn't line up,"* – suddenly caught the travel fever.

"Maybe we should go somewhere too," Lena mused when I told her about my ticket. "While you're in the States, we don't want to just sit around."

"I really need to get an international card," Marina added. "I've been putting it off, but now I feel like – it's time."

"My passport's about to expire," Katya sighed. "Maybe I should combine the practical with the pleasant?"

And then we remembered Kazakhstan. The closest destination where you could not only open international bank accounts for online purchases but also apply for a Schengen visa afterward. Everyone seemed convinced that having the "right" bank card could help with approval.

"Maybe it's silly, but people say bank cards show financial stability," Marina reasoned.

"And besides, it'll just be a nice trip," Lena added. "Almaty is beautiful."

And suddenly everything fell into place as if by magic. The dates lined up, the tickets appeared, the hotel booked without a hitch.

I looked at this sudden burst of activity and realized: my decision had set off a chain reaction. As if I had given my friends permission to want more than their daily routines. As if my choice whispered to them, *"It's allowed. Allowed to dream. Allowed to act."*

"Can you imagine," Katya laughed, "one trip hasn't even started yet, and the second one is already planned!"

And she was right. While my American ticket sat quietly in my phone, waiting for its hour, we were already buying tickets in another direction. Life seemed to have picked up speed, as if time itself had compressed, and everything that once belonged to the category of *"someday"* suddenly became *"right now."*

But what unsettled me most wasn't Kazakhstan, or the tickets, or even the chain reaction of plans. It was the French music.

It played in my headphones as I folded my clothes into the suitcase. It hummed in the background while I studied maps of Miami. It accompanied me through those last few days before departure.

I tried to find logic in the algorithm, but there was none. I hadn't searched for French artists. I hadn't clicked on anything related to France. I had no plans of going there. And yet...

“Maybe it’s just a glitch in the system?” I thought, but my inner voice whispered something different. Something about how coincidences aren’t really coincidences. How signs appear for a reason.

Do you know the difference between logic and intuition? Logic explains what has already happened. Intuition senses what has yet to unfold.

Logic said: *“You’re flying to America. What does France have to do with this? It’s just Spotify being weird.”*

Intuition stayed silent – but each time another French song began, something inside me stirred. As if I were hearing the melody of a future that hadn’t arrived yet, but was already waiting nearby.

Sometimes life sends us signs long before we’re ready to interpret them. It whispers: *“Prepare yourself. Everything is about to change.”* But we only hear what we’re willing to hear.

The French music was one of those signs. Soft, insistent, enigmatic. Like the premonition of a miracle that hadn’t happened yet.

And tomorrow I would board a plane. My story would truly begin.

At thirty-three thousand feet.

To the sound of an entirely different kind of music.

Chapter 6. The Last Night in Moscow

There are nights that split your life into “before” and “after.” You only realize it later, looking back. In the moment, all you think is: *“Tomorrow I fly.”*

My backpack stood by the door, packed and ready. Tickets lived in my phone. Documents in a folder. Everything was done, everything checked twice. All that remained was to wait for morning and head to the airport.

But sleep would not come.

I lay in my bed, staring at the ceiling. Outside, a February night, the silence of a sleeping city, the familiar glow of the streetlamp that for years had shone on this exact spot on the wall. Everything ordinary. Everything known.

And deliberately, I made no plans for what awaited me.

I had long since learned: expectations are the straight road to disappointment. When you expect something, reality almost never matches the picture in your head. But when you expect nothing, everything that happens can feel like a gift.

So I didn’t fantasize about what America would be like. I didn’t imagine how I’d feel. I didn’t build scenarios for my trip.

I simply thought: *“I’ll go. I’ll see. Whatever happens – happens.”*

But my body thought otherwise. My body anticipated.

Lying in the dark, I caught myself in strange thoughts. Images rose up on their own – bright, surprising, almost tangible. An airplane. The altitude. And me... not alone.

Where had this come from? I had never thought about sex on a plane. Never pictured what it would be like to feel someone’s breath at thirty-three thousand feet. And yet now, the fantasy unfolded on its own, like a film I hadn’t chosen but couldn’t turn off.

A private bed on board. Soft sheets. Turbulence rocking not only the metal bird, but also the bodies inside it. What would it be like to make love while clouds drifted beneath you and the air itself trembled with speed?

My hand slid down almost on its own. I closed my eyes and surrendered to this strange, intoxicating vision. My body responded to the images in my mind – bold, feverish, utterly new to me.

I had never been prone to erotic daydreams in flight. But something about this journey was awakening the fiery nature I had kept on a leash for so long – like my wavy hair, forced straight. Untamed, unrestrained, ready for the unknown.

Maybe it was a premonition. Maybe my body knew something my mind refused to admit.

I touched myself slowly, savoring every stroke, every wave of pleasure. In my mind, the images still flickered – an airplane, the height, the press of another’s hands on my skin, somewhere between earth and sky.

It was beautiful. It was liberating. It was about claiming my own sexuality without shame, without apology.

When the waves subsided, I lay in the dark and smiled. Tomorrow I would fly. But tonight, for the first time in a long while, I had allowed myself to be whole, without boundaries.

“What if it’s boring, being alone in America?” a thought flashed. *“So what? I’ll be bored for two weeks and come home.”*

“What if it’s scary?” – “Then I’ll handle it. Somehow I always do.”

“What if I don’t like it?” – “Then I’ll know what I don’t like. That’s useful too.”

I deliberately kept my expectations low. I didn’t let myself dream of how wonderful it might be. Because “wonderful” is different for everyone. But disappointment tastes bitter the same way to us all.

Better to be surprised by the good than crushed by what falls short.

I got up and walked through the apartment. Tomorrow it would be empty, while I would be somewhere over the ocean. The thought felt unreal – but not frightening.

Toward dawn, a strange calmness settled over me. Not anticipation. Not nerves. Just readiness. Like before an important task – you know you'll do it, and you will.

I didn't feel like a heroine heading into an adventure. I didn't feel like I was doing something grand or destiny-defining.

I was simply using the visa that had sat in my passport for six years. Simply flying to the place I had long wanted to go. Finally daring, at last.

Maybe my strength lay exactly in that – not dramatizing, not turning the trip into a world-shaking event. Just buying tickets like you buy groceries. Packing a backpack like packing a gym bag.

Ordinary. Without unnecessary emotions.

I finished my tea and stepped into the shower. Just a few more hours until I left for the airport.

Standing under the warm water, I thought: tomorrow I'll shower in another country. In a hostel where I know no one. In a room with three strangers.

It was a little frightening. But frightening doesn't mean wrong. Frightening means you've stepped out of your comfort zone. And I had long known it was time to leave mine.

Not for transformation. Not for "finding myself." Not for great revelations.

Simply because the comfort zone had become too small.

We often complicate simple things. We load them with meanings they don't carry. We look for signs where there may be none.

Sometimes a ticket to another country is just a ticket to another country. Not fate. Not destiny. Not the call of your soul.

Simply a choice: *I want to go there – so I will.*

And only later, once it's all over, do you realize – yes, that was fate. Destiny. The call of the soul.

But in that moment, standing under the shower on my last Moscow morning, I wasn't thinking of any of that.

I was simply getting ready to fly.

No expectations. No plans. No premonitions.

With an empty heart, ready for anything to fill it.

And it turned out to be the best preparation of all.

Chapter 7. Sheremetyevo Airport

There are moments when reality finally shifts, when you realize the point of no return has been crossed. For me, that moment was Sheremetyevo Airport at six in the morning.

I stood in the departure hall with my *Tourist of America* backpack slung over my shoulders, staring at the screen. My flight glowed in white letters: *Moscow – Casablanca – Miami*. A few hours from now I would be flying over Europe. A few more, and I would be in America.

All around me, the ordinary life of an airport flowed on. People hurried past, dragging suitcases, exchanging words with those who came to see them off. And then I noticed something strange – I could hardly hear any English.

It startled me. I had been preparing myself for English, rehearsing phrases in my head, ready to catch familiar intonations. I expected to hear it everywhere.

Instead, French filled the air. A couple discussed their luggage, their *merci* and *bon voyage* echoing the playlist of French songs that had been haunting me all week. Behind them, a family spoke Arabic. Then a girl rattled away in Spanish on her phone. And, of course, Russian – so much Russian.

Strange, I thought. *I'm flying to America, and yet there's no English. As if the Universe is whispering again: Don't rush. Your America is still ahead of you.*

In the waiting area I felt something unusual. I had this almost irrepressible urge to talk to everyone around me. Not just idle chatter – I wanted to share. To tell them: *I'm going to America!*

It was a childish, almost indecent desire. Like a kid with a brand-new toy desperate to show it to the world. *Look! I've got a ticket! I'm flying across the ocean! Alone!*

I found myself scanning faces, hoping to catch someone's eyes, to start a conversation. I wanted to ask: *Where are you flying? Is it far? Are you going alone?* Not out of curiosity, but from a need to share my joy, my decision, my courage.

Maybe this is how people in love feel – when they want to announce it to every passerby. Only I was in love with my own decision. With my freedom. With the fact that I had finally stopped waiting.

When boarding was announced, I stood and joined the line. A woman beside me struck up a conversation.

"Where are you flying?" I asked.

"To Canada, to see my daughter," she smiled. "And you?"

"To America!" I said, with such pride it sounded as though I were announcing an Everest climb. She laughed.

"That's wonderful! You've set off quite far. Alone?"

"Yes, alone," I nodded. "My first time traveling so far without company."

"Good for you!" she said warmly. "I remember the first time I flew alone. I was terrified, but then I realized – it's freedom."

On the plane, it turned out we were seated next to each other. And then came another coincidence. She pulled a container of salad from her bag and offered it to me.

"Would you like some? I made it myself. Fresh vegetables."

"Thank you!" I said, delighted. "Are you by chance vegetarian?"

"Yes!" she exclaimed, surprised. "You too? How nice to meet a kindred spirit."

"You know," she added, handing me the salad, "I understand what it's like to be in a foreign country and not know what you can eat. Please, take some."

The salad was delicious – fresh vegetables, herbs, some special dressing. But more than the food, it was the care. That this stranger thought of me, shared with me, supported me.

"Thank you," I said softly. "This is so unexpected, and so kind."

"Oh, come now," she waved it off. "We're travelers. We look out for each other."

A few rows ahead, a man traveling alone to Canada occasionally turned to join our conversation.

“My birthday’s coming up too,” he said. “I decided to give myself a gift – a trip to Canada.”

I froze. It couldn’t be. Here I was, surrounded by people with stories like mine.

“How old will you be?” I asked.

“Forty. And you?”

“Thirty.”

We looked at each other and burst out laughing.

Two people celebrating their birthdays alone, across the ocean, in countries they’d never been. Two people who didn’t wait for someone else to join them.

“So we’re not so strange after all,” he said.

“Apparently not,” I agreed.

His story was almost identical – visa ready, friends couldn’t go, so he decided to fly alone. He too had hesitated, almost backed out at the last moment.

“And then I thought,” he said, “if not now, when? And I bought the ticket.”

“That’s exactly my story,” I nodded. “Word for word.”

And there was something profoundly important in that exchange. I suddenly realized: I wasn’t alone in my doubts. Not alone in my fears. Not alone in my decision.

There are others who got tired of waiting for perfect conditions. Who understood that life doesn’t ask if you’re ready. It just moves. And either you move with it, or you stay behind.

Why does it matter so much to know we’re not alone in our choices? Because solitude in decision-making isn’t about who’s physically beside you. It’s about knowing your path isn’t an anomaly.

We fear doing what few others do. We fear seeming strange, reckless, too risky. And when we meet someone with a story like ours, it feels like confirmation: *You’re not crazy. You just chose to live.*

As the plane lifted off, I looked through the window. Below lay snowy Moscow, receding from view. Ahead – Casablanca, Miami, the unknown.

And beside me – fellow travelers, each of whom had once said their own quiet *yes* to the sky.

And it was beautiful.

We are not as alone in our choices as we think. We just rarely speak of them out loud.

Before we parted, the woman handed me her phone number – just in case, she said, worried I’d be all alone in America.

And that, too, felt like part of the Universe’s quiet care that had been accompanying me from the very beginning of this journey.

Chapter 8. Casablanca. The Man in Dark Glasses

We began our descent. The plane slipped slowly through the clouds, and I pressed against the window, searching for the land below. Under the wing spread sandy fields, dusty rooftops, narrow roads drawn like lines on a map. Casablanca did not greet me with brightness, but with something else – its own kind of certainty. A strange, almost theatrical stillness. As if time here moved differently – slower, heavier – inviting me to notice every detail of what was unfolding.

I sat in a hard plastic chair in the waiting area and called my mother. Her voice, warm as always, carried a hint of worry. I told her about the details of my route, all the while sneaking glances at the people around me, as if my intuition was searching for something. And then I saw him.

The man in dark, mirrored sunglasses. He stood slightly apart from the others, not fidgeting, not checking his phone the way everyone else did. He simply looked ahead. Where, I couldn't tell.

Something in his silhouette, in the way he carried himself, drew the eye. Not in a showy or ostentatious way – more like a magnet, subtle but undeniable. Tall, but not imposing. Elegant, but unforced. He had that rare kind of confidence that never needs to be proved.

It felt almost staged: a lone figure cut away from the noise around him. I caught myself thinking he might be a musician. The kind who plays late-night sets, walks out of a club at four in the morning, drinks a glass of orange juice, and lingers on the sidewalk because the silence after music is music too.

I looked at him, let my gaze linger a little longer than politeness allowed, then turned back to my mother's voice and soon forgot about him.

Around me, people spoke in languages I could barely distinguish – French, Arabic, Spanish. Hardly any English, though that was the language I had longed to hear. I had been preparing for America, tuning myself to its rhythm, and instead I found myself in a mosaic of cultures where my readiness suddenly felt premature.

The airport carried its own peculiar atmosphere of waiting. No one hurried, no one jostled the way they did in Moscow terminals. Time here stretched out like honey in the sun, giving space to feel each moment. And in that liminal space – where different languages, cultures, and destinies brushed against one another – I felt myself standing on the threshold of something important.

Casablanca was not just a layover. It was a pause before the next chapter, a place where the old version of me could stop and take a breath before stepping into the unknown. Here, between worlds, between languages, between who I had been and who I might yet become, the space itself seemed to offer me one last moment of silence.

Places like these are called liminal – threshold spaces. They are transitions, where the usual roles and masks lose their weight, where we become more open to new experiences. In airports, on trains, in stations, people often behave differently than they do in ordinary life. Here, it feels possible to strike up a conversation with a stranger, to share a story, to open yourself to encounters that everyday life would make unthinkable.

When boarding was announced, I felt my body tense automatically. In Moscow, this always meant the same thing: everyone stood up at once, shuffled into endless lines, rushed, pushed, scowled. But here – none of that. No one shoved or cut ahead. Each person took their place with the quiet dignity of someone who knows: there will be space enough, time enough, for everyone.

I settled into my seat, stowed my backpack, buckled my belt. The plane was nearly full, the last passengers filing down the aisle, looking for their places.

And then he sat down beside me, by the window.

The man in dark glasses.

Chapter 9. Switching Seats

The plane climbed higher, leaving Casablanca behind. I glanced at him and blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

“You got lucky with your seat.”

He looked up, a faint smile flickering across his face.

“Why’s that?”

“Well, because you’re by the window,” I explained. “It’s always magical to watch the world from up there.”

His answer caught me off guard.

“Want to switch?”

The offer was so natural, without a moment’s hesitation.

“Really?” I asked, surprised. “Are you sure?”

“Of course,” he nodded. “Doesn’t bother me.”

We stood awkwardly in the narrow aisle, shuffling past each other.

Settling into the window seat, I leaned toward the glass – and to my surprise, the window began to dim on its own. First it shimmered with a soft bluish glow, as if we’d slipped inside a video game or some futuristic film. For a moment it felt less like we were flying over the ocean and more like we were suspended in air, weightless.

Then the glass darkened completely, though beyond it the sun still blazed bright. The technology was astonishing – shielding us from the glare yet giving the illusion of gliding through outer space.

“Amazing,” I whispered, transfixed by the darkened oval.

When I turned back to thank him for giving me his seat, I noticed he was rearranging his things, pulling items from his backpack. And then he removed his dark sunglasses.

That was the moment I saw his eyes.

Brown, but not simply brown. They were layers of color impossible to pin down with a single word – honey, coffee, evening sunlight caught in amber. They carried warmth and weariness, tenderness and something more: the quiet depth of a man who had lived, and in whose gaze every experience had settled without being lost.

The image I had conjured earlier – of a DJ slipping out of a nightclub at dawn – vanished. So did the association with music and night. Looking at him now, I thought: perhaps he was a singer. Or a poet. Or simply a man who knew how to truly see.

There was none of the shallow curiosity I so often recognized in men’s eyes. His gaze carried depth. Presence.

And when our eyes met, time seemed to slow. The drone of the engines faded to background noise, passengers’ voices became a distant echo. What remained was the space between us – charged with something unspoken, a quiet understanding.

“Thank you,” I said, my voice softer than I’d intended.

“You’re welcome,” he replied, his tone matching mine in gentleness.

We were already sitting in new positions – me by the window, him by the aisle – but something had shifted more than just our seats. It felt like a first step toward each other, though neither of us knew where that path might lead.

“I’m Theo,” he introduced himself.

“Elian,” I answered.

“What’s your full name?” I asked. Something inside me resisted shortening his.

“Theodore,” he said with a small smile. “But all my friends just call me Theo.”

Yet I wanted to call him by the full name. Not cut it down, not simplify. Theodore carried a kind of dignity, as if the name itself held history, depth, respect for the person who bore it. When

you say someone's name in full, you see the whole of them – you don't trim them down, you don't make them smaller. You honor them as they are.

"It's a beautiful name," he said then. "Yours means 'sunshine,' if I remember the etymology right."

I was startled. Hardly anyone knew the meaning of my name.

"Yes, that's right. And Theodore means 'God's gift.'"

"That's quite a heavy responsibility for one name," he smiled.

And so we began to talk. At first, about the simple things – travel, the circumstances that had brought us to this flight. When I confessed that my English wasn't perfect, he slowed his speech, softened it. And whenever I reached for my phone to open a translator, he would gently stop me with a small gesture or a quiet: *"Try it on your own."*

If I didn't understand, he explained – never impatient, never condescending. He didn't hear mistakes; he heard the effort. The intention. And that, to me, felt unexpectedly tender.

The conversation drifted toward the personal. I told him I was traveling alone, flying across the ocean to celebrate my birthday in a new country. About how long it had taken me to gather the courage, how terrifying it had been to finally book the trip.

"Do you travel alone often?" I asked.

"Lately, yes," he answered simply. "My relationship ended not long ago. Sometimes you need space to remember who you are without someone else beside you."

Something inside me exhaled in relief. He was free. That single fact changed everything – the way I listened to his voice, the way I let myself hold his gaze, the way my body softened in conversation. For me, it had always been a rule: if a man had someone, my words would remain cold, detached, strictly polite.

But now I could allow myself to be me. To laugh at his jokes, to ask questions that truly interested me, to share what mattered to me.

He told me he spoke French. I laughed to myself. France again. It kept appearing everywhere in this journey, though I was flying in the opposite direction.

Slowly, our conversation settled into pauses – not awkward silences, but full ones. We turned slightly toward each other, resting our arms on the shared armrests, our fingers brushing now and then. Each touch was a quiet question: *"Can I?"* And the answer, wordless: *"Yes."*

Two hours into the flight, weariness began to catch me. The long day, the time zones, the emotional weight of my first solo trip across the ocean – all of it pressed on my eyelids.

"Mind if I lie down for a bit?" I asked. "I just want to close my eyes."

"Of course," he said softly. "Make yourself comfortable."

I curled to one side but couldn't fully relax. Between us was that one empty seat – the only vacant spot on the entire plane. We both noticed the coincidence, exchanged a glance. He gave a small smile; I returned it.

"Luck or a sign?" he teased.

"Maybe both," I replied.

I stretched out carefully, making sure not to cross into his space. My eyes closed, but my body screamed otherwise. I longed to take his hand and place it on me – on my stomach, my chest – just to feel warmth, weight, closeness. I longed for him to pull me into an embrace, to let his hand slip through my hair. Everything inside me whispered: *"Please, touch me."*

But I didn't dare. We had just met. And yet it felt as though I'd known him forever.

I could sense he wasn't asleep either. He shifted, adjusted, moved his arms as though unsure where to put them. I could feel his restlessness – the same tension running between us, not anxious but charged with anticipation.

I didn't sleep. I lay still, listening to his breathing, suspended in that strange space between us – a current of energy searching for release.

After five minutes I couldn't bear it. I sat up.

"Can't sleep?" he asked gently.

"No," I admitted.

And then, softly, he asked:

"Want me to help you fall asleep? Mind if I move closer?"

My heart stumbled in my chest. There was no ambiguity in his tone, only a quiet care.

I looked at him. His eyes held so much tenderness it stole my breath.

"Yes," I said simply.

And inside me, everything sang: *At last*.

Chapter 10. A Kiss at 33,000 Feet

He moved. Just stood up, gathered his things, and settled into the middle seat beside me. No fuss, no hesitation. Natural, like breathing.

The space between us shrank to a few inches. I could feel the warmth of his body, hear his breath, catch the faintest trace of his scent – something fresh, clean, free of heavy cologne. Just him.

We turned toward each other. Our hands rested on the armrests, and now our fingers could touch without pretense. He studied me – quietly, patiently, as though memorizing each line of my face.

“Better?” he asked softly.

“Better,” I answered, my voice husky.

Silence stretched between us. My heart pounded so loudly I was certain he could hear it.

His hand slid along the armrest, closer to mine. Our pinkies brushed – barely, like an accident. But neither of us pulled away. That touch was a whispered question.

I looked into his eyes. The same fire burned there as in me: desire laced with hesitation, gravity balanced by restraint.

“Elian,” he said, tasting my name as if rolling it on his tongue.

And then he leaned in.

Slowly. Giving me every chance to turn away, to say no. But I didn’t want to. My whole body reached for him, like a flower turning toward the sun.

His lips touched mine.

And the world vanished.

No plane, no passengers, no engines. No time, no geography. Only us – two souls meeting at thirty-three thousand feet, in a place where ordinary rules dissolved.

The kiss began gently, searching, as if we were carefully unwrapping something precious. His lips were soft, warm, carrying the same restrained passion I’d seen smoldering in his eyes.

Then he deepened it, and I met him with equal intensity. My hands found his face, my fingers slid into his hair. He pulled me closer, and all the boundaries melted away.

But suddenly something inside me faltered. I broke the kiss, catching my breath, trying to steady the storm of thoughts.

“Theodore,” I began, my voice trembling with conflict. “I need to tell you something... I’ve been alone for two years. No dates, no men, no intimacy. After my divorce I promised myself I’d only be with someone if it meant something real. If it was a true relationship. And now here I am, with you... We’ve just met, and I don’t know what’s happening to me.”

He listened without interrupting, without judgment. His eyes held only understanding.

“Who knows how this will end?” he said simply, with a shrug.

And those words cut through the knots inside me.

Yes. Who knows? And why should it matter?

My thoughts tumbled: What if I say no? What if I sit here clenching my fists, clinging to my rules, to caution? What if I spend the rest of my life replaying this moment, this man, this chance, wondering, “What if I had...?”

I had prayed for real love. Longed for it. Asked not to waste myself on the shallow, not to be distracted by the meaningless. I only wanted what was true.

But what if this was it? Not the form I imagined, not the script I had rehearsed – but alive, unvarnished, undeniable. Here. Now. With him.

Inside me, two voices clashed. One – reason, caution, the voice of learned restraint – warned me to be wise, to hold back, to not give myself to the first man I met.

The other – my heart, my intuition – whispered: *What if this is the very thing you asked for?*

The most significant encounters of our lives arrive when we're unprepared. When we release control, when we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, open to the unexpected.

I had flown to America to celebrate my birthday in solitude – to prove to myself that I could be happy on my own, without needing a relationship to validate me. I wanted to know that my joy could exist independently, not because of someone else's presence. And yet, there he was – a man who, in just a few hours, managed to overturn everything I thought I knew about how love is supposed to arrive.

Who knows how it will end? Yes, who knows.

But I wanted to find out.

I leaned toward him again.

And this time, when he kissed me, there were no doubts.

Only truth – his and mine, our shared truth. The truth that sometimes the heart really does outrun reason. That love doesn't always follow rules, it simply arrives. And the only thing left to do is surrender to the moment.

At some point he took my hand. Slowly, cautiously, as if asking permission. He guided it to him. My palm brushed the rough denim of his jeans, and beneath it I felt his arousal.

My first thought was embarrassingly blunt: *God... is that going to hurt?*

I flushed at my own audacity, but I couldn't pull my hand away. The kiss was so intoxicating that I already knew – whatever happened with him would be extraordinary. The thought both terrified and thrilled me. *Lucky me*, I thought, almost smiling at the absurdity of my inner monologue.

He didn't rush. Didn't push. Even in intimacy, he was chivalrous, giving me space to explore, to grow accustomed. My hand moved slowly, feeling his heat and hardness through the fabric.

Then my fingers slipped beneath the barrier of cloth. He let out a muffled groan, pulling me closer.

I glanced around – we were lucky. The passengers nearby were asleep, eyes hidden beneath masks. Theodore quietly reached for the airline blanket and draped it over us, creating a fragile cocoon of privacy in the middle of a crowded plane.

Beneath the blanket my world narrowed to touch. I traced the lines of his body, caressed his skin, and the more I touched, the more my own desire surged. Wetness pooled between my legs, unstoppable, undeniable. My underwear clung damp against me.

A wild thought blazed through me: *What if I just climb on top of him right here, right now?* My eyes darted around, checking again if anyone stirred. The longing was unbearable – I craved to feel him fully, to close the distance.

He caught the change in my expression, the way I scanned the cabin.

"What are you thinking?" he whispered. "You're not considering... the bathroom, are you?"

"No!" I whispered back, almost offended. "No, that never even crossed my mind. I don't want us there. I want comfort, space – I want to feel you without restraint, to move the way I want. I was just thinking... if everyone's really asleep... maybe I could sit on you, right here, to feel more of you."

Desire overwhelmed me. I climbed across the armrest and straddled him, kissing him with all the pent-up urgency of those minutes.

But then the reality of the airplane hit me: cramped, awkward, far too visible if anyone stirred.

Reluctantly, I slid back into my seat, every cell in my body protesting. I wanted his hands on my hips, my waist, everywhere. I wanted nothing between us. But the plane imposed its own boundaries.

So we kept kissing. In silence, pausing only to look into each other's eyes, to confirm this was real. Outside, behind the dimmed windows, clouds drifted, the ocean stretched endless below, and inside we created a universe of our own – contained within two seats, infinite all the same.

Neither of us spoke about the future. We made no plans, no promises. We were simply *here, now, together*. And it was enough. More than enough.

Because sometimes the most beautiful moments begin this way – with a kiss in the sky, with the decision to follow the heart, with the courage to surrender to the present moment at thirty-three thousand feet.

Where time and distance truly lose all meaning.

Chapter 11. Numbers Exchanged, Premonitions Stirring

The remaining hours of the flight passed in near silence. Words no longer seemed necessary. We kissed, we touched, sometimes simply looked into each other's eyes. Time moved in a strange rhythm – slowing to a standstill during our kisses, then rushing forward again, reminding us that ahead waited the landing, the goodbye, the unknown.

When the captain announced our descent, something tightened in my chest. I didn't want to return to the ground. I didn't want this flight to end. Here, suspended between earth and sky, everything had felt possible.

"Miami," Theodor said, his gaze fixed on the dimmed window. "My hometown."

"You were born here?" I asked, surprised.

"Yes. But I live somewhere else now. I came to visit family."

I nodded, resisting the urge to pry. It didn't feel like the moment for biographical details. We knew each other differently – through touches, through glances, through the simple ease of being side by side.

The plane touched down with a gentle jolt. Reality returned with the screech of brakes, the announcements from flight attendants, the rustle of passengers gathering their belongings.

We rose slowly, unhurried. My legs trembled – not from the anticipation of stepping into a new country, but from the knowledge that soon we'd part. Maybe forever.

"Give me your number," Theodor said, pulling out his phone.

We exchanged contacts in silence, intently. As I typed the digits, I thought of them as a fragile thread, perhaps the only one that would connect us once we left this aircraft.

"How are you planning to get to your hotel?" he asked as we walked down the jet bridge.

"By bus," I replied. "I looked up the route. Three dollars instead of a hundred for a cab – seems obvious."

He frowned.

"You just got off a long-haul flight. You're exhausted... No, I can't let you take a bus."

"Theodor, it's fine, I – "

"I'll call you a taxi," he said firmly. "It matters to me."

There was such earnest care in his voice that I couldn't argue. Strange, and so tender – how could a man I'd known only a few hours already care for me like this?

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