

Psychic Love

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First edition.

Printed in the Netherlands.

Chapter 1

He heard her before he saw her.

It had always been like this - people first reached him as sound, as a frequency, as something that moved through the air in a way that his senses recorded differently from eyes or ears. Thoughts had a color for him, a texture, a temperature. Most people thought in gray: functional, flat, the thoughts of people who moved through their day without feeling that it was special.

She thought of something else.

He had felt it like a shock - a sudden warmth that hit his chest as if someone had thrown open a window in a room that had been closed for too long. Fear had been the first. Not his fear - he had known that immediately, with the certainty of someone who had learned the difference between his own emotions and those of others for twenty years. This fear was not his.

She was from someone who was afraid in a way that had been going on for a long time.

Not the acute fear of danger. The chronic fear of someone who has learned that the world shows its teeth at unexpected times. The fear of a body that is always ready.

Nikos Vasilis stood at the window of the cafe and felt her before turning around.

She sat three tables behind him.

He hadn't looked at her yet. He deliberately did not do it - a habit he had developed as protection for himself, because when he looked, when he connected face to frequency, the connection became stronger. Anonymous was safer. For her and for him.

But the thoughts kept coming.

I should have sent the email earlier. He's going to think I'm sloppy. That I don't take the deadline seriously. Why did I postpone it, why do I always do that, why-

He filtered it away.

That was his first reaction always - pushing away, closing the frequency, the mental act he had performed so often that he no longer thought about it. You filtered it

away like you filter ambient noise in a busy space. You heard it but you didn't listen to it.

But her thoughts came back.

Not intrusive. Not loud. They came back to the way a smell returns that reminds you of something you can't name exactly - involuntarily, without announcement, inextricably linked to something you knew before you knew it.

He filtered again.

Again they came back.

Order another coffee or is that weird. It is already the second. The barista is already watching. Or maybe I'm watching too much myself. I always look too much.

A small, involuntary smile drew at the corner of his mouth.

He forbade him himself.

He had rules. Strict rules, built up over twenty years from a gift he had not asked for and which he had learned to carry as a burden he could control as long as he respected the limits. The rules were simple.

Stay out of someone else's head.

Don't touch their emotions.

Never change anything.

He had never broken them.

Not consciously.

He turned around.

Later he would tell himself that it had been reflex - that he had looked because his body had made the decision before his head could intervene. That might have been true. It was also possible that he simply wanted it and that his head had offered him an explanation afterwards.

He saw her.

She sat bent over a laptop, one hand around a coffee cup, her other hand at her mouth - the index finger along her lip, a gesture of concentration or care, he could not yet see the difference. Dark hair that had become a little too long for the cut it

had once been. A sweater that was a little too big on the shoulders. The way she sat - slightly forward, almost folded, the posture of someone taking up space with a kind of apology.

He knew that attitude.

He had seen him in others - in people who had learned that their presence was a burden to the space around them.

The annex. I forgot the attachment. Three hours of work and I send it without the attachment, it goes-

The panic was sharp and fast.

He felt it in his own chest before he could stop it - her panic, her accelerating heartbeat, her thoughts shooting in all directions in the manner of a system that runs too fast.

He did nothing.

He did nothing because that was the rule.

But he looked at her and saw her shoulders rise, how her fingers began to type faster, how she bit her lower lip in a way that indicated that this was not the first time today.

And he thought, before he could stop it: she has already saved the attachment in the draft folder. She prepared it yesterday morning. She hasn't forgotten him.

It was no influence.

It was a thought.

But thoughts had a way to leak with him.

She stopped typing.

For a moment - a fraction of a second - she stopped. Her fingers above the keyboard. Her head tilted slightly.

Then she opened a folder.

She found the appendix.

The tension in her shoulders subsided.

Nikos looked away.

He took his coffee. He looked outside, at the street, at the people walking past the cafe in their ordinary lives with their ordinary thoughts in their ordinary shades of gray.

He had done nothing.

He had only thought.

It wasn't manipulation if you just thought.

He told himself that.

He almost believed it.

She ordered a third coffee.

He knew before the barista had typed him - he heard her decision a second before she told him, the small victory over herself of a woman who had decided she could find it weird but would do it anyway.

He smiled again.

He forbade himself again.

He would leave. He had been sitting here for too long - he had drunk his coffee, he had processed his thoughts, he had done what he had come for. He had no reason to stay.

Tomorrow that presentation. Twelve people looking at me. Twelve people who expect me to know what I'm doing.

He stayed seated.

Not to help her. Not because of her thoughts. Simply because his legs did not move and his coffee cup was not yet empty and there was no specific reason to get up at this exact moment.

That was all.

Sometimes I wonder if anyone notices how much I pretend. Or everyone does it that way. Whether it's just me.

Nikos stared at the street outside the window.

He had heard thousands of people in twenty years. Tens of thousands, maybe. Thoughts on thoughts on thoughts - the infinite stream of human interiority that he

had learned to filter and block and categorize until he could live with it without being overwhelmed by it.

Most thoughts were forgettable.

Functional. Practical. The mental logistics of people who worked through their day.

Sometimes he heard something that touched him - a sadness, a loss, a moment of pure unexpected joy that he felt in his own chest before he could block it. He kept those moments away. Those moments were dangerous, for those moments reminded him of the fact that he heard living people and that living people were in pain and that he could ease the pain if he wanted.

But he didn't.

Rules.

I just want to wake up for one day without being the first to think: what's going wrong today.

The sentence hit him differently than the others.

Not because he was dramatic - he wasn't. He was small and honest and pronounced in the manner of a thought that no one would ever hear. The thought of a woman who sat alone at a table and had ordered a third coffee and had not forgotten her attachment and had a presentation tomorrow.

He didn't know her name.

He barely knew her face - he had looked at her once, five seconds maybe, enough for dark hair and too big a sweater and the attitude of someone who apologizes for her own presence.

He only knew her thoughts.

And her thoughts were the clearest thing he had heard in years.

He stood up.

He put money on the bar. He took his coat.

He walked past her table.

He didn't look at her.

But he felt her - the warmth of her presence, the frequency of her thoughts, the specific sound of a mind that always worked too hard and never found peace.

He smells good, she thought.

And he was already outside before he could stop the smile.

It was cold outside.

October in the city - the kind of cold that had not yet decided whether it would be winter, that tested, that challenged people with their too thin coats and their false hope. Nikos put his hands in his pockets and walked.

He didn't think about her.

He thought of the meeting he had tomorrow, of the reports on his desk, of the phone call he had postponed with his brother in Athens.

He didn't think about her.

He crossed a street. Walked past a bookstore. He stopped for a while at a shop window he didn't see.

He didn't think about her.

But he knew - with the certainty of someone who had known himself for twenty years - that he would go back to that cafe.

Not tomorrow.

Maybe not even this week.

But he would go back.

And that, exactly that, was the beginning of something he couldn't stop later.

Chapter 2

Her name was Lena.

He learned it three days later.

He had gone back - of course he had gone back, he had already known it the moment he closed the door of the cafe behind him - and she was there again. The same table. Different sweater, but the same posture: slightly forward, slightly folded, the body of someone taking up space with an excuse.

The barista had called her name with her order.

Lena. Great cappuccino for Lena.

And he had heard it and felt how it was right - how the name fit the frequency of her thoughts, their color, the specific sound of her innerness. Some names did not match their carriers. You heard a name and the frequency was not right, there was a dissonance, a slight false note.

Her name was completely correct.

Lena.

He had ordered his coffee and sat down - not at the same table as last time, but not far away. Close enough.

He had promised himself that he would listen to his own thoughts. That he would filter her. That he would do what he always did: leave the frequency in the background, present but not turned on, the mental equivalent of background music.

It had worked for ten minutes.

Joost's reaction was so- She stopped in the middle of the thought. He felt her search for the word. Downsizing. No. Shrinking. That's it. Littleing in a way he denies when I point it out. And then I wonder if I see it wrong. But I don't see it wrong.

Nikos looked at his coffee.

Joost.

A colleague, presumably. Or something more - the load in thought was more complex than purely professional, there was a layer in it that suggested that the dynamics reached beyond an office.

It was none of his business.

I'm not going to talk to him about it. That didn't produce anything last time either. I draw my conclusions and I keep my mouth shut and I do my job and finally-

She stopped again.

He felt her frustration as something physical - a tight feeling behind his own sternum, the physical echo of her emotion that penetrated his system before he could block it.

She closed her laptop.

Abrupt. The sound was louder than she had intended.

The woman at the table next to her looked up.

Lena didn't look back. She looked at the table top. Her hands were lying flat on the tight lid of the laptop, the hands of someone trying to hold something or trying to let go of something, he didn't know which of the two.

I'm so tired, she thought. Not from working. Of always having to know how I come across. Of calculating. I'm tired of calculating.

Nikos had his hand around his coffee cup and he felt his grip tighten a little.

He had heard thousands of people.

Tens of thousands.

But this kind of fatigue - the specific, debilitating fatigue of a person who always, in every interaction, calculated how much space he could take up - this kind of fatigue was familiar to him in a way he had not expected.

It was his own fatigue too.

A different version, a different origin. But the same skeleton.

He did something.

He did it before he had consciously chosen it - or he had chosen and his consciousness had recorded the decision a second later, he no longer knew, the order had not been clear.

He didn't touch anything in her head.

He didn't change anything.

He only did... this: he focused his attention on the frequency of her emotion and he left his own state beside it. Don't touch her, don't influence her. Just being next to her, with the calmness he had, the peace he had learned to cultivate as the only useful aspect of a gift he had never wanted.

Like someone opening a window in a stuffy room.

He did nothing.

He was just there.

She exhaled.

Slow, deep, the exhalation of a body that releases something that has held it for too long. She looked up from the table top. She took her coffee. She drank.

Nikos looked away.

He had done nothing.

It wasn't manipulation if you didn't do anything.

It was not manipulation if you were only present.

He told himself that.

She looked his way at a quarter to five.

He knew it before it happened - he felt her gaze like a shift in frequency, a small change in the direction of her attention.

He didn't look back.

He's there again, she thought. And then, quickly, the kind of speed with which thoughts are thought that someone doesn't want to think: he's handsome.

Nikos stared at the table.

Don't do it, her thought continued. You don't know him. He's just a man in a cafe. Stop watching.

He smiled at the table.

He didn't forbid himself.

This time he didn't forbid himself.

He has something, she thought, and he heard how she searched for what that something was, how she went through her own catalog of descriptions and found nothing exactly right. I don't know what. But he has something.

She picked up her laptop again. She opened it. She started typing - different from before, smoother, the fatigue of half an hour ago slightly less present.

He knew he had nothing to do with it.

Most likely.

He got up at half past six. Took his coat. Walked to the exit.

He passed her table.

He looked to the side.

She looked up.

Two seconds. Maybe three.

He saw her face for the first time for real - not the quick scan of the first day, but for real. Dark eyes, a little too big for her face or just right, he didn't know it yet. A small frown that was not of anger but of the kind of chronic thinking that made wrinkles that shouldn't have been there yet.

She looked back.

No smile. No nod. Just watch.

He nodded.

She nodded back.

He continued walking.

It had gotten colder outside. He put his hands in his pockets and walked towards his apartment, eight blocks away, the route he knew with his eyes closed.

He thought of her frown.

To her name.

He has something.

He thought of the rule he had broken - not consciously, not with the intention of manipulation, but broken was broken, there was no gradation in rules, a rule was a rule.

He had given her peace.

She had felt it.

She didn't know about him.

That was the problem.

That was exactly the problem.

At home, he sat by the window for a long time.

His apartment was tall and narrow and quiet in a way he had cultivated - no unnecessary furniture, no unnecessary objects, the decor of a man who knew that his head was already full enough with the world around him and who kept the space around him as empty as possible as a counterbalance.

He thought of the rules.

They were not there for nothing.

In his youth - for the rules, before he had learned what he had - he had done things he no longer looked at. No bad things, not consciously, but things that had gone wrong in ways he had only understood afterwards. A friend who had made a decision that had not felt his own. A girl who had felt something for him that he had unconsciously nurtured. A teacher who had trusted him in a way that Nikos had later analyzed and had known: that trust had not been purely organic.

He didn't want it.

He hadn't stopped either.

That had been the difference - not the intention but the action. Or the lack of it.

The rules had come out of shame, for the most part. From the recognition that a gift that you do not control is not a gift but a force that does harm regardless of whether you want it.

Stay out of someone else's head.

Don't touch their emotions.

Never change anything.

He had hit something today.

Not much. Not consciously. But something.

He stood up. Walked to the kitchen. Put water on.

He thought of her voice - he hadn't heard it yet, only her thoughts, but her thoughts had a sound and that sound was clear and warm and more complex than most people.

He thought he had something.

He thought about what he would say if he met her. Getting to know truly - not through the shortest path of her innerness, but in the way people were known: by words, by time, by the slow unfolding of someone who decided that the other was worth it.

He had never allowed himself that.

He knew people through their thoughts and that made real connection impossible - because how could you get to know someone if you already had the answer before the question was asked? How could you be surprised by someone you already knew inside?

But Lena.

I want to get to know her normally, he thought.

It was a thought he didn't immediately push away.

He let him exist.

He let him sit in the quiet kitchen while the water began to boil and the city lived outside his evening life.

Normal. Without reading her mind. Without influence. Without the shortest way.

The water boiled.

He poured it in.

He already knew it would fail.

Not the introduction. Not the connection.

The distance.

Distance was always unbearable.

That was his own weakness - the weakness of someone who had always heard everything and who could not endure the silence of normal for long.

He would hear her thoughts.

He would exert influence.

The only question was when he would stop telling himself he didn't.

Chapter 3

Nikos was nine years old when he heard his mother's thoughts.

Not for the first time - he had always felt something, a vagueness, a noise he had thought everyone had. The way he sometimes knew his father was angry when he entered the kitchen. The way he always looked at the teacher at school when she wanted to ask a question. He thought he was good at observing. That he could read faces.

But on a Tuesday morning in November, nine years old at the kitchen table with his cornflakes, he had heard his mother's thoughts as if they were talking loudly.

If I left now they wouldn't notice until tonight.

She stood by the window with her coffee. Her back to him. She hadn't said anything.

But he had heard it.

He was so shocked that he had knocked his bowl off the table - the cornflakes across the kitchen floor, the milk spreading in a slow white wave. His mother had turned around, surprised, and he had seen her face and known: she had said nothing.

She had thought so.

What's up? She had asked, and he had heard her voice and at the same time her thought: he looks pale, is he sick, I hope he is not sick because then I can't-

He had pushed his chair back and had ran out of the kitchen.

That would have been the beginning.

The weeks that followed had been a kind of hell he couldn't explain to anyone - the constant flow of other people's thoughts that he couldn't stop, couldn't filter, couldn't understand. His father who thought about money while watching the news. His teacher at school who thought about her weekend while she explained how you shared. His classmate Thomas who thought of the girl three rows in front of him, extensively and in images that Nikos had not wanted to see.

He hadn't slept for a week.

He hadn't told his parents anything.

He had learned to carry it himself, as he would later learn to carry almost everything himself - not out of stoicism but from the simple calculation that there was no one who could understand this.

He had learned the filtering on his own.

Years of exercise. From building mental walls that he could pull up and down, thicker or thinner depending on what the situation required. From learning to distinguish between one's own emotions and those of others - the lifelong first lesson of his existence, the fundamental work of knowing who you were when the world constantly poured its insides out on you.

He had become good at it.

Exceptionally good, he would allow himself to think in his most honest moments.

But being good didn't mean it was easy.

It just meant that it functioned.

Now, on a Thursday morning in October, he was sitting at his desk in the office of the architectural firm where he worked, trying to understand a floor plan while his colleague Marcus sat three meters away, thinking about his divorce.

Marcus' divorce was complete - legally, financially, settled on paper six weeks ago. But Marcus still thought about it with the intensity of someone who opened a wound again and again before he could close.

Nikos had set up his walls.

They helped.

To some extent.

He looked at the map and thought of Lena. He did now - for the past three days he had noticed that he thought of her at random times, not as a decision but as a reflex. Her frown. Her name pronounced by the barista. He has something.

He had skipped the cafe the day before.

Conscious.

He had looked for another coffee shop, a ten-minute walk in the wrong direction, and had drunk his coffee surrounded by the ordinary gray thoughts of people he did not know and did not want to know.

It didn't help.

He had been thinking all the time about what she was thinking at that moment.

That was the problem with her frequency - she had an attraction that he couldn't fully explain. Technically, there was nothing special about it. She was not clairvoyant, not paranormal, not someone with a gift of her own that attracts his. She was an ordinary woman with a laptop bag and an oversized sweater and a colleague named Joost who was belittling in ways he denied.

But her thoughts.

Her thoughts were so clear.

Most people thought in layers - the conscious on top of the unconscious on top of the deeper unconscious, and for Nikos only the upper layer was accessible unless he consciously went deeper, which he forbade himself. The top layer was usually enough to know someone at the level he needed: functional, basal, enough to navigate.

Lena thought in one layer.

Or rather: her layers were completely transparent to each other. There was no distinction between what she consciously thought and what she felt - everything was present at the same time, honest, unprocessed, the kind of innerness of someone who had not learned to deceive himself.

That was rare.

That was - he looked for the word and reluctantly found it - beautiful.

Marcus next to him thought of his ex-wife again.

Nikos raised his walls.

He looked at the map.

He thought about tomorrow.

He went back.

Friday afternoon, half past four, the time he had noticed by now that she was always there - not every day, not always at the same time, but Friday afternoon seemed like a constant. Maybe she worked at home on Friday. Maybe the cafe was her office for that one day.

He went inside.

She was there.

He ordered his coffee without looking at her. Paid. Took his cup. Chose a table.

He chose the table next to hers.

Not the same - that would have been too direct, too intentional, the act of someone who wants something and doesn't hide it. But besides. Close enough that the frequency was clear.

Deadline next week. If I do two chapters a day now- She calculated. He felt how she ranked the numbers in her head, the small satisfaction of a plan that was mathematically correct even if the execution turned out to be a different thing. Maybe. If Joost doesn't let me walk around for his-

She stopped.

He felt her attention shift.

She had seen him.

He's back, she thought. And then, faster: the same man. Three times now. Or four. He is closer than usual.

Nikos looked at his coffee.

Does he know I'm watching? Probably not. I'm not that conspicuous. Or maybe I look too striking. Stop watching.

He smiled at his cup.

He smiled, she thought, and there was something in that thought that tensed up - a small, involuntary tension of someone who observes something she would rather not see. To his coffee. That's weird. Who smiles at his coffee.

He raised his head a fraction.

As if he was toasting with himself.

Oh, she thought.

He heard the thought and everything that was in it - the confusion, the little unexpected warmth, the quick self-doubt that followed: either he just has a good day and I make something of it.

He turned his head towards her.

She didn't look away fast enough.

Got it.

He saw how she saw it herself - the small color that rose to her cheeks, the reflex to look back at her laptop.

"Good afternoon," he said.

His voice sounded calmer than he felt.

She looked up. Caution, if someone who checks whether the soil is load-bearing.

"Good afternoon," she said.

He has an accent. Greek? Something Mediterranean. Dark eyes.

"You're here more often," he said.

It was not a question.

"You too," she said.

He nodded. "It's a good cafe."

"The coffee is average," she said. "But the wifi is working."

He looked at her. She had said it without thinking - he heard how the words had escaped her before she could have filtered them for appropriateness. Now she was waiting for his response with the slight alertness of someone who is used to directness going wrong.

"The coffee is indeed average," he said.

She relaxed a fraction.

He agrees, she thought. That's unexpected. People always defend their choices.

"Nikos," he said.

"Lena," she said.

He nodded as if he heard it for the first time.

They looked at each other for a moment - the specific silence of two people who have just exchanged names and now do not know if this is the beginning of a conversation or the end of it.

Ask something, she thought, and he wasn't sure if she thought it to herself or as a kind of nod to him, consciously or unconsciously. Ask something because otherwise this will be uncomfortable and I'm already uncomfortable enough.

"What are you writing?" He asked.

She looked at him. "How do you know I'm writing?"

"You have a writing attitude," he said. "Bent over. Fingers above the keyboard also when you think."

He paid attention to my attitude, she thought. There was something in that thought that went in two directions - a little nervousness and something that overlapped that nervousness, something that was warmer.

"Reports," she said. "For a construction company. Not so interesting."

"Reports can be interesting."

She looked at him with the look of someone who determines whether someone uses sarcasm or not. "You're an architect," she said.

Now it was his turn to be surprised.

"How do you know that?"

She nodded to his bag on the chair next to him - a shoulder bag from which the corner of a roll of drawings protruded. "Educated guess."

He looked at his bag.

Smart, he thought. And then, a second later: she had observed him. She had paid attention to what he was carrying. She had thought about who he was.

I thought about who he was, her thought confirmed, as if his own had penetrated her - which was not so, what was impossible, the connection was not so, he could not transmit or receive on command. But it was so accurate that he didn't say anything for a while.

"Indeed," he said. "Architect."

She nodded. Looked back at her screen.

The conversation was over.

Whether the conversation had begun.

He didn't know himself.

But he felt - as he drank his coffee and she typed and the cafe around them lived his Friday afternoon life - that something had changed. A small thing. A first stone that was resisted.

He's different than I thought, Lena thought after a while.

He didn't ask herself how she thought he was.

He did nothing with the information.

But he kept him.

Chapter 4

He got to know Joost through her thoughts.

That was the awkward reality of his gift - he knew the people in the lives of others before he had ever met them, sometimes better than people knew themselves. It was voyeurism without intention, a violation that he could not stop alone could manage.

Joost was her superior in the company for two years.

Joost had once taken her out to dinner after work and paid the bill in a way that expected something without saying it. Joost used words like don't take it personally and I say it for your own good at times when he cracked off her work in meetings while others were watching. Joost had once heard her bag fall and did not squat to help but noticed that she apparently carried more with her than was good for her.

Nikos knew all this through the way Lena thought of him - not directly, because she didn't think much of Joost when she was in the cafe, she tried to keep him out of there. But sometimes he seeped through it. Like a name she mentioned while writing an email. Like a shadow over a thought that started about something else.

Joost changed my concept without telling me, she thought on a Tuesday morning, two weeks after their first conversation. My name is still on it but his notes are through. If the customer asks about it I'm going to defend it because my name is on it and he knows that.

Nikos read the sentence in her mind and felt how cold he was.

Not the cold of someone who didn't understand what was happening. The cold of someone who understood exactly.

They were now sitting at the same table.

It had been gradual - so gradual that later he could no longer point out exactly when the transition had been. After the first conversation, they had greeted each other twice without talking. Then a brief exchange about the weather, ironically intended by her, literally received by him, and she had laughed - he had heard her laugh and felt how it was different than he had expected, more complete, less cautious than the rest of her.

Now they were sitting at the same table.

They worked.

Parallel, each in their own world, but the same table.

"Bad day?" He said.

She looked up from her screen.

"Average day," she said. "Average like the coffee here."

"That sounds like a bad day."

She leaned back. Looked at him - the specific look he now recognized as her evaluating gaze, the look that determined how much she said.

"Someone changed my work without asking me," she said. "And I can't say anything about it."

"Why not?"

"Because it's complicated."

He nodded. He didn't ask through - he didn't have to ask, he already knew more than she would tell him. But he wanted to hear from her. In her own way, in her words, to give the version she chose.

"That sounds frustrating," he said.

"Yes." She looked at him. "You'd bring it up, I think."

"Probably yes."

"That's the difference." She turned back to her laptop. "Some people can bring things up and not make them worse. Others can't do that."

I can't do that, she thought, and the thought was more honest than what she had said - not because she wanted to cheat on him but because some things were too big for loud.

Nikos looked at his drawings.

He thought of Joost whom he had never met and of whom he already knew what kind of person he was.

"If someone adjusts your work and doesn't put his name on it," he said, slowly, like someone who tests a statement while formulating it, "he benefits from you and protects himself at the same time."

Lena looked up.

"That's a way of saying it," she said.

"Is it incorrect?"

She was silent for a moment. No, she thought. It is not incorrect.

"It's more complicated," she said out loud.

"That's what people always say about situations that are actually simple but where the simple version is too disturbing to accept."

She stared at him.

He realized that he had gone too far - not in reading her mind, but in saying what he saw. He had crossed a line of the conversation, the unspoken limit of a coffee date that was actually not an appointment but a chance meeting of two people sharing the same table.

"Sorry," he said. "That was -"

"No," she said. She shook her head. "You're right. That's exactly what it is." She looked at her screen. "I just didn't want to hear it like that."

Because if I hear it like that, she thought, then I have to do something with it.

They said nothing for a while.

It was a different silence than the previous silences - fuller, slightly heavier, the silence of two people who exchanged something that was more than cows and calves.

"Nikos," she said.

"Yes."

"Why do you say things that others don't say?"

He thought. Honestly after - not the socially desirable version but the actual one.

"I've been listening to people for a long time," he said. "In a way that most people don't. You learn to recognize patterns."

That's not the whole truth, she thought. He heard her say it in her head - the intuition of a woman who read people well in her own way. But it's not a lie either.

"You're strange," she said.

"People say that more often."

"I mean it as a compliment."

And that, Nikos thought to himself, is the most dangerous thing she has said so far.

Chapter 5

It started so small that he only recognized it afterwards.

On a Wednesday morning, Lena sat at their table - by now it was their table, unspoken, the place they kept for the other if one of them was there earlier - and she had the panic of a presentation that would begin in two hours.

Nikos heard it before she herself was aware of it.

They had prepared the presentation well. Her material was solid - he knew it not only because he heard her thoughts but because he had seen her work, the accuracy of someone who took her work seriously. But she didn't believe it. She walked through the slides in her head and with each slide she didn't see what was good about it but what could go wrong.

Slide seven is too full. When they see slide seven they think I can't select. Joost said something last time about my tendency to want to give too much information. Maybe he's right. Maybe-

Nikos filtered.

Did his job. Looked at his drawings.

Maybe there's just too much to me.

He stopped.

Put down his pencil.

Too much for me. Not too much information on a slide. Too much to her - too many thoughts, too much care, too much of everything that made her who she was. It was the thought of someone who had drawn the wrong conclusion from the wrong source and then used that conclusion to keep himself fundamentally small.

Joost had said that.

Not in those words - Joost was smarter than to put it that way - but the core was planted in her by someone who had an interest in her seeing herself smaller than she was.

Nikos looked at her.

She was sitting with her eyes on the screen but he knew she wasn't reading - she was in her head, in the circle of doubt that was getting smaller and smaller and spinning faster and faster.

He did something.

Later he would analyze it - later, that evening, in his apartment by the window, he would look back on this moment and name it for what it was. But at that moment, at that table, he did it before he called it.

He focused his attention on her frequency.

Not to change anything - or so he told himself. But to watch. To see what was there. And as he watched, while his attention was entirely on her in the way he rarely allowed, he felt his own state - his peace, his relative silence - filled the space next to her.

Not in it.

Next to her.

How a hot object affects the temperature of the space around it without touching it.

She breathed deeper.

Not dramatic - he doubted whether anyone looking at her would see it. But he heard it in her mind: the circle became a little slower. The panic was a fraction.

Slide seven has three key points, she suddenly thought, and the thought was different from the thoughts before - clearer, more functional. Three is enough. I have the rest in the attachment. If they want more, they can ask.

She typed something.

Nodded at her own screen.

Closed her laptop.

"I have to go," she said. She got up. Looked at him. "Presentation."

"You're ready," he said.

She looked at him with an expression he could hardly read - not from her thoughts, because at that moment they were empty of doubt and full of the pragmatic focus of someone who has a task, but from her face. Something that almost asked: how do you know?

"Hopefully," she said.

"Not hopefully," he said. "Just."

She grabbed her bag.

At the door she turned around for a moment.

He looked at his drawings.

How does he do that, he heard her think as the door closed behind her. How does he know exactly what I need to hear.

He knew the answer.

He didn't write it.

That night by the window.

He sat for a long time.

He had served a glass of wine that he didn't drink. He looked at the city outside, the lights that came on in the apartments opposite him, the lives that unfolded behind glass.

He had muffled her fear.

He had done it subtly - so subtly that he could have told himself it wasn't intentional. That it had just been his presence. That people just became calmer in the company of someone who was quiet.

But he knew better.

He had used his gift.

Not heavy. Not drastic. But used.

The rule was clear: don't touch their emotions.

He had touched her emotion.

He drank his wine.

The problem was - and this was the problem he had tried to avoid and which now came up with the inevitability of something that had always been on the move - the problem was that it had worked.

She had made the presentation.

He knew without her telling him, because she had sent him a message. They had exchanged numbers a week ago - so casually that he had almost forgotten the moment itself - and now she had sent him a message: three key points. No questions about slide seven. You were right.

He had read the message six times.

Not because of the content.

Because of the fact that she had sent him a message.

She had told him something. Spontaneously, without reason, the kind of message you sent to people you granted something - the little triumph, the confirmation, the news that wasn't really news but that you wanted to share anyway.

She had shared it with him.

He replied: I knew that.

Too sure. Too direct. But she had returned: annoying, and then a second later: but in a good way.

He sat by the window and looked at the city and thought of the thin line he had crossed that morning.

He had touched her emotion.

He had helped her.

She didn't know.

That was the problem - not what he had done but what she didn't know. Because if she had known - if she could have chosen - she might still have said yes. Maybe she would have accepted the help.

But she couldn't have chosen.

And choice was the only thing that counted.

I won't do it anymore, he decided.

He believed it when he thought it.

Chapter 6

He did it again.

Four days later, a Sunday afternoon, they had agreed - not in the cafe but in a park nearby, her idea, she had said she needed fresh air and asked if he would come along in the tone of someone who was already ashamed of it immediately after asking.

He had gone along.

They walked along the water. October had continued, getting colder, the leaves on the path enough to crack at every step. She had her hands in her pockets and talked about a book she was reading - he listened to her voice, the real voice, not the thoughts underneath but the voice itself, and discovered that he liked her voice the same way he liked her thoughts: honest, a little uneven, the voice of someone who didn't always know what she was going to say before she said it.

He wasn't quite there.

Because under the conversation he heard the other layer - the layer she hid, the layer of the day she had had before she called him. Joost had discussed her work in a meeting and not mentioned her name once. She had noticed it. Everyone had noticed but no one had said anything.

She was talking about the book.

But she thought about the meeting.

Stop, she said to herself in her head - he heard it clearly. Not today. Today you are here. Today is the park and the leaves and Nikos who listens to you in a way that people rarely listen to you.

He missed a step.

She was right - he listened to her in a way that people rarely listened to. But not the way she thought. Not because he was very good at listening. Because he literally heard everything.

"You're not quite there," she said.

He looked at her. "Sorry."

"No - not sorry." She smiled. "I wasn't quite with the story either. I had a bad day."

"Tell me."

She shook her head. "I don't want to talk about it."

But I want to think about it, he heard. I can't stop thinking about it and that's the worst - that it stays in my head even if I don't want it.

They walked on.

She was talking about something else - a restaurant she had seen, a movie she might see, little things that didn't go anywhere. Her voice was lighter than her thoughts. She built a shell of ordinary afternoon while the meeting was still playing underneath.

He didn't do it consciously.

Or he did it and didn't call it consciously - that was the distinction he no longer dared to make himself.

He let his presence go a little further than usual. Not in her mind - he didn't touch her thoughts, he didn't change anything. But the peace he carried, the specific calm he had learned to cultivate, he made it grow a little bigger. A fraction. Enough.

She stopped in the middle of the path.

"That's weird," she said.

He looked at her. His heart beat too fast once.

"What?"

"I just stopped thinking about it." She looked at him with a frown that was questioning, not angry. "I couldn't let it go all day and just - it's just gone."

It's the sky, she thought. Or walking. Or because I'm talking.

He said nothing.

"Maybe you're good company," she said, almost as a question.

"Maybe," he said.

They walked on.

He counted it in his head.

First time: the presentation.

Second time: now, in the park.

He kept a counter.

As if counting made it fairer - as if naming the frequency compensated for the fact that he kept doing it.

They came to a bench by the water. They sat down, close enough to each other that the cold left no choice. Her shoulder touched his.

She didn't say anything about the contact.

He did nothing with the contact.

They looked at the water.

This is nice, she thought, simple and direct in the way her thoughts sometimes had when she forgot to put a filter on it. This is just nice.

Nikos looked at the water.

He thought of the counter.

He thought about how easy it was.

That was the most dangerous thing - not the gift itself but how easy it was. How little it cost. How big the effect was compared to the effort. He had to do nothing but be present in a certain way and she felt it - she called it his presence, his peace, good company, never knowing that it was not a passive trait but an active choice.

The counter was at two.

He knew three would come.

Chapter 7

November.

They now saw each other three, four times a week.

Sometimes in the cafe. Sometimes outside - a walk, a lunch, once a museum that had been her idea and where she had walked through the halls and commented on everything out loud in a way that irritated others but not him, because he heard her thoughts with every painting and her thoughts were funnier and sharper than what she said.

They were friends.

Or something close to friends - the word felt too even to him for what it was, but it was also the most correct word available. They knew each other now. They knew things about each other. They had reached the layers beyond the first layers, the layers that unfolded when people spent enough time in each other's company.

He knew more than she thought.

That was the constant, the fundamental asymmetry he couldn't solve - he knew everything she told him and everything she didn't tell and everything she didn't even know she thought. She only knew what he chose to show.

And he had chosen a lot not to show.

The counter was at seven.

He had stopped counting somewhere at five because counting had created the illusion that he was in control of it, and he could no longer lie to himself that he had control over it.

He did it every time she was with him.

Not heavy - never heavy, he told himself it was never hard and that was true, it was never drastic, he did not change decisions and did not plant thoughts. But he muffled. He calmed down. When she was tense, he made the space next to her quieter. When she thought in circles, he left his own brightness beside it.

She had become dependent on him.

That word - dependent - he had long circumvented. But it was the right word.

She called him when she had a bad day. She visited him when Joost had done something that was under her skin. She had once told him - carelessly, almost, the way people say the most important things - that she slept better in recent weeks.

I think you have something to do with it, she had said. That sounds weird.

"It doesn't sound strange," he replied.

She had looked at him with that evaluating look.

He doesn't deny it, she thought. That's weird. Most people would deny it.

He had not denied because denying would have been a lie and he had already not told her enough things. One less lie felt like integrity. It wasn't that - he knew it wasn't - but it felt that way.

The counter had become redundant.

He had stopped counting because counting had suggested that it was exceptional - that he did it and then stopped and then did it again. But it was no longer an exception. It had become the rule. Every time she was with him, he was there in a way that influenced her.

And he had become addicted to her thoughts.

That was the word he finally used on a Thursday night, alone in his apartment, his wine untouched. Addicted. The thoughts of other people had always burdened him - a constant flow that he had to filter and block, the price of a gift he had not asked for. But her thoughts - he didn't ask to filter her thoughts. He wanted to hear her thoughts.

He wanted to know what she was thinking when she woke up.

He wanted to know what she thought when she thought of him - and she thought of him, more often now, the thoughts he heard when he was too close in her frequency, the thoughts she wouldn't say out loud herself but that were there.

He understands me in a way I can't explain.

I feel different with him than with others.

I trust him and I don't know exactly why but it feels unshakable.

He nurtured that trust every time he calmed her.

He knew it.

And he kept doing it.

On a Friday night in November they called - not agreed, she had called, her voice a little too flat in the way that indicated that it had been a hard day. They had talked for an hour about nothing and everything. He had heard her, her thoughts and her voice, the two layers he knew just as well by now.

After the conversation, she had said, "I don't know what I would do without you lately."

He had said nothing.

That's a problem, he thought.

Because she said it as a compliment.

But it was a diagnosis.

She was dependent on the rest he gave her - a rest that he actively cultivated, which he administered to her in doses she could not see. She thought she had felt herself becoming more stable. She thought it was him - his presence, his way of listening, the fact that he said what others didn't say.

She didn't know it was his gift.

She didn't know that every time she calmed down with him he was the reason.

She couldn't choose something she didn't see.

And he - Nikos Vasilis, who twenty years ago had made rules out of shame about exactly this kind of situation, who had sworn never to intentionally influence the emotions of others - he looked at his phone after the call and saw her name on the screen and felt something he couldn't imagine without.

He was happy when she called.

Truly happy - not the superficial satisfaction of a gift that worked well, but the real, heavy, dangerous happiness of someone who finds someone else and who thinks she wants to keep that person.

And he loved her.

Not with chains. Not with compulsion.

With peace.

With calm.

With the gift he should never have used on someone he couldn't let go of.

He put down his phone.

He looked at the city.

He thought of the counter he had stopped at five but who now had two digits.

He thought of her voice that had said: I don't know what I would do without you.

He thought about how it would feel if he stopped.

When he retreated.

When he left her completely alone - her emotions, her frequency, her thoughts - and just sat next to her like an ordinary man with no gift.

She would feel it.

The silence would be there.

She wouldn't know what was missing, but she would know that something was missing.

And that was perhaps the worst proof of what he had done - not that she had become dependent, but that the dependence was so deep that removing it would hurt.

He had repaired her.

And he didn't know how to leave her unrepaired.

Chapter 8

It started with her hand.

They had found a wine bar on a Tuesday night - not planned, as most things between them were not planned but just happened, the organic expansion of two people who wanted to spend more and more time in each other's company. They had been drinking two glasses and talking about his work, about a building in the city center that he was restoring, a nineteenth-century building whose original plaster ornaments turned out to be hidden under seven layers of paint.

She asked if he had any pictures.

He had grabbed his phone.

She had bent towards him to see the screen better - close, closer than the space between them was normally, her shoulder against his. And while she was looking at the picture she had put her hand on his arm. Not consciously. The action of someone who stabilizes himself as she leans forward, the automatic grip that had no meaning.

But he had felt it.

Her hand on his forearm, warm by the fabric of his sleeve, the pressure of five fingers that asked nothing but changed everything.

He hadn't moved.

She had looked at the photo. Had asked about the ornamentation, about the technique of uncovering, about how you knew what was underneath before you started.

He had answered.

His voice had sounded normal.

Internally there had been something sharp and hot - not of his gift, not of her frequency, but purely physical, the simple biological reaction of a man being touched by a woman he wants to touch.

That's beautiful, she thought as she looked at the photo. How something can be preserved under all those layers. How it is even if no one knows.

She had taken her hand away.

He had put his phone back in.

They had continued to drink.

But something had changed in the room - a subtle shift in the air, the temperature of something that was beginning to get a name.

They walked back through the city.

November had shown his teeth that week - it was cold in a way that meant, the cold of a season that had decided, no longer the soft transition of October. Lena had pulled her scarf tighter and he had adjusted his step to hers, a little slower, because she walked slower than she thought.

She thought a lot tonight.

He heard it - not the content always, because it had become a bit vague at the edges because of the wine, but the tone. The warm, confused tone of someone who feels something and has not yet named it.

"Nikos," she said.

"Yes."

"Can I ask you something?"

"Always."

She looked straight ahead. The street was empty with the earth of one late cyclist, his light an orange dot that moved through the darkness.

"Are you ever afraid?" She said.

He looked at her. "For what?"

"Not specifically for something." She searched for the words. "Just - scared. For how things go. For what can go wrong with things that are good."

With things that are good, he heard her think. And then, deeper: with people you don't want to miss.

"Sometimes," he said honestly.

"How do you deal with that?"

He thought. The fair version was: I hear the thoughts of others and because of that I know too much about how people fail and abandon and leave, and that makes the fear greater than it is for most. But he couldn't say that.

"I remind myself that fear of loss means there is something to lose," he said. "That's something in itself."

She looked at him.

That's something in itself, she repeated in her head, and he heard how she turned it around, how she tasted it.

"You say things that stick," she said.

"That sounds like a complaint."

"It's not a complaint." She smiled - he saw it in the corner of his eye. "It's an observation."

They walked on.

They stopped at the corner of her street. This was now a ritual - the place where they broke up, the ten seconds of farewell that always lasted a little longer than the time before.

She turned to him.

In the light of the street lamp above them, she looked different than during the day - softer, the sharp corners of her daily concern less present. She looked up at him and he saw in her eyes something he also heard in her mind: the specific hesitation of someone who wants to say something and is not sure if she has the right.

I don't want to let him go, she thought. Simple. Directly. The honesty of an unconscious thought. I want him to stay a little longer.

He moved.

Not much - a fraction towards her, the minimal adjustment of someone who makes the space between them a little smaller. Enough to say: I'm not leaving anytime soon.

She exhaled.

"Thank you for tonight," she said.

"I didn't do anything."

"You were just there." She looked at him. "Sometimes that's enough."

He didn't know what to say.

She held out her hand - not to his arm this time but to his hand, a short, light contact, her fingers that touched his and let go immediately. The gesture of someone who tests a line and jumps back before they know for sure what they have touched.

"Good night," she said.

"Good night, Lena."

She walked into her street.

He stopped until he could no longer hear her footsteps.

Then he stood for another minute.

His hand where she had touched him.

He still heard her thoughts - vaguely, because the distance grew, but still present, the frequency he now recognized as his own heartbeat.

I think I'm falling in love with him, he heard.

And then nothing more, because she was too far away.

He stood on the corner of her street in the November cold and felt the desire descend into him as something heavy and beautiful at the same time.

I think I'm falling in love with him.

He had done everything he could.

And he had done nothing about it.

That was the paradox that kept him awake that night - the impossible question of whether what she felt was real or had been made by him. Whether the line between the two still existed. Whether he was still there, that line.

Chapter 9

He had built a system.

Not consciously - or partially consciously, honesty obliged him to acknowledge that some architecture was intentional even if you pretended it had grown organically. But he had built a system of justifications, a construction so solid and so sophisticated that he sometimes almost believed in it himself.

The justifications were as follows:

One: I don't change her mind. I influence her emotions, but thoughts and emotions are not the same. Emotions are fleeting, temporary, they come and go regardless of whether I do anything with them. I only shorten the duration of the difficult.

Two: she got better because of it. Objectively measurably better - she sleeps better, she works better, she spoke to Joost once about something small. If I had let her go, if I had never done anything, she would still have been in the same spiral. Is it really that bad if the result is good?

Three: she chooses to be here herself. I don't force anything. She calls me. She makes the agreements, sometimes. She put her hand on my arm. She says she doesn't want to go. These are her choices.

He had written down the justifications - literally, in a notebook that he kept in the top drawer of his desk, because he believed in writing things down as a way to possess them rather than the other way around.

He read them back on a Saturday morning.

He immediately saw the holes.

Holes in one: he had influenced her emotions enough and often enough that she had adjusted her thoughts afterwards. Emotions drive thoughts. Thoughts determine choices. There was no line between emotion and thought, there was a continuous system, and he had intervened in that system.

Gap in two: the result was good for her as he defined it. But who was he to define what was good for her? Joost did the same - Joost also decided what was good for her and acted accordingly. The only difference was intention, and intention was the most self-deceptible part of any moral reasoning.

Gap in three: she chose him. But she chose a version of him she didn't know. She chose a feeling that was partly created by him. Choice without complete information was not a free choice.

He closed the notebook.

He stood up. Walked to the kitchen. Put coffee.

He thought of her hand on his arm.

To her fingers that had touched his at the corner of her street.

I think I'm falling in love with him.

The system was useless if he was honest - and he tried to be honest, it was the least he could give himself when he already denied her so much. The system was useless because he hadn't built it to stop himself. He had built it to continue.

That was the difference.

A system of justifications that you build to stop looks different from a system that you build to move forward. He recognized the difference now that he looked at it. He had always recognized the difference.

He poured his coffee.

His phone was shaking.

Lena: Good morning. Do you sometimes feel like going to the market? There is a book market two streets away from me.

He looked at the message.

He thought of the notebook in the drawer.

He thought of a hole in three: choice without complete information is not a free choice.

He typed: What time?

The market was busy in the manner of Saturday markets - people who wanted to go somewhere but were not in a hurry, the pleasant chaos of people browsing into stalls full of items they didn't need but might want.

Lena was wearing a coat he didn't know - longer than her other coats, dark red, the kind of coat someone wore on the days they wanted to take up more space than usual. He had noticed it and said nothing about it and thought about it.

They walked past the stalls.

She picked up books, read the back flaps, put most of them back. She did it at the speed of someone who reads a lot and knows what she is looking for - not browsing but selecting, her eyes fast and sure.

He looked at her hands on the books.

"This one," she said, and she held up a book. A novel, the cover dark blue with gold-colored letters. "Do you know him?"

He read the title. He knew him - had read him, three years ago, the kind of book that stays with you in ways you don't expect. "Yes."

"Good?"

"Depending on what you're looking for." He looked at her. "It's not easy."

"I don't read for ease."

I know that, he thought.

She bought the book.

They walked on.

He stopped at a stall with old prints - architectural sketches from the nineteenth century, technical drawings of buildings that were still there and buildings that were long gone. He bent over it, his attention completely on the drawings, and for the first time that morning he was not with her.

Not with his gift. Not with his attention.

He was just with the drawings.

She stood next to him.

She said nothing.

After a while she said, "This is the first time I've seen you think of somewhere other than the conversation."

He looked up.

She smiled - not the smile she used when she experienced, but the real one, the asymmetrical one.

"Architecture," he said, almost as an apology.

"You don't have to apologize for loving something." She looked at the drawings. "It looks good on you."

He looks different when he forgets to observe himself, she thought. Younger. Softer.

He looked back at the drawings.

They stood shoulder to shoulder.

He did nothing.

Not his gift, not his peace, not his presence in the way that influenced. He just stood next to her at a stall at a Saturday market and looked at drawings of buildings.

And it was nice.

Uncomplicated nice in a way that made him realize how long it had been since he had felt something uncomplicated.

This, he thought. This is what I wanted.

Normal. Without his gift. Without the shortest way.

It took ten minutes.

Then she began to think of Joost - an email she had received that morning before she left the door, a three-line comment that had said five things he had not said but had meant. He heard it coming in her frequency, the familiar tone of something that pulled her tight.

He felt the reflex.

The automatic reflex to make the space next to her quieter.

He stopped him.

One second.

Two seconds.

Don't do it, he said to himself.

Three seconds.

She sighed next to him. Small, almost inaudible, the sigh of someone who puts something off.

Not now, she thought. Later. Now it's market.

She did it herself.

He had done nothing and she had done it herself.

He stood by the stall and felt something he couldn't properly name - a combination of relief and shame, the specific feeling of someone who discovers that the other person can do without him and wonders how long he had known that.

Chapter 10

Lena had a list.

She didn't keep real lists of this kind of thing - she wasn't the type for lists about people, she had seen too many friends who kept lists about men and had always gotten worse. But in her head there was something that looked like a list: things about Nikos that she couldn't explain.

One: he always knew when she didn't want to say something.

Not in the pushy way of people asking until they let go of something - he didn't ask. He waited. And the specific nature of his waiting was different from the waiting of others. Others waited impatiently, their next question already ready. He waited as if he already had the answer and only wanted to hear it from her at her own moment.

Two: the peace.

She had already thought about it - more than once, on evenings when she came home after an evening with him and found that the tension of the day had disappeared in a way that could not be fully explained by good company. She had friends with whom she also had good company. She didn't sleep better after an evening with Noor from work. She missed the rest of the world no less after a cup of coffee with her sister.

But after him.

After him, the world was quieter.

She had named it as his personality - he was quiet, he was thorough, he was the kind of person who made room for silence without finding it uncomfortable. That was a logical explanation.

But there was something about the peace that was greater than personality.

She couldn't formulate it properly. It was as if the peace was not only next to her but also in her - as if she was not only becoming calmer in his company but as if something in her actually changed, a kind of reset that she couldn't manage at home no matter how hard she tried.

Three: he looked at her in a way that no one had looked at her.