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## TO THE READER

Take a comfortable seat, relax and join me on my journey of a lifetime  
towards spiritual awakening.

I need to warn you though.

You need to be brave.

But don't worry: if I could do it, so can you.

Ready?

Three...

Two...

One...

*'Men go abroad to wonder at the heights of mountains,  
at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of the river,  
at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motions of the stars,  
and they pass by themselves without wondering.'*

*-Saint Augustine*

## Chapter 1 - Die Before You Die

*'The path to paradise begins in hell.'*

*-Dante Alighieri*

'The lorry's here!' Mama exclaimed from the kitchen on hearing Cezar, our German Shepherd, barking relentlessly in the garden.

I ran outside and saw two men climbing out of a white lorry while my stepdad was opening the gate.

'Come on; you can drive inside!' he exclaimed, waving his hand invitingly and once the lorry had backed into our driveway, the men opened the back door.

My whole life was in there.

I helped with unloading the boxes which contained most of my personal belongings. One of the men took out my white bike with a straw basket which had, when I last saw it, contained groceries and tulips. Next came boxes of different sizes, each labelled 'Monika—Poland.'

'It's over. My life is over.'

It was quiet. Nobody said anything, as if two surgeons were performing an autopsy to examine the cause of death. Only Cezar barked occasionally, running around the lorry and unaware of what was REALLY happening.

'Can you please sign here, ma'am?' one of the men asked, giving me a pen and a clipboard.

I didn't cry as I signed.

I had to be strong.

After the lorry's departure, I walked into my room which was now filled with stacks of boxes. Opening them one by one, I noticed the print canvas of John and me standing cheek to cheek, lovingly holding hands at the bottom of the white doorsteps of Schönbrunn Palace in Vienna. Then, in between randomly-thrown-in shoe boxes and my jackets, I noticed the book that John had designed shortly after we'd met. The cover featured a picture of us in a warm embrace outside Windsor Castle. The title said:

*Monika and John*

*First Month Together*

I ran out of the house and then through the back gate into the fields of barley, feeling sharp stalks cutting my bare legs, as if enemy swords were about to strike the final blow in my losing battle of the game of life. Breathless, I fell on my bleeding knees, gazed at the red sky of everlasting fire at the gates of Hades, the Hell on Earth I had found myself in, and I screamed out, crying, ‘Why?????????????????????????????????????’

The next morning, I woke up to the sound of the birds singing in the garden and a massive pain all over my body, letting me know that I was still alive.

‘Why have I woken up?’ I asked myself, ‘I don’t want this reality. This is not how I’m supposed to be living.’

Sleeping was the only thing that stopped this excruciating pain, but only because it made me unconscious of the world around me. It wasn’t so much about the pain being physical, even though it was, but because it tore my soul into pieces. The moment my consciousness came back from the sleep, telling me: ‘Wake up, it’s another day,’ I could already feel needles pushed into my heart. My eyelids, swollen from crying for weeks, could hardly lift their own weight, making me want to stay buried in the darkness of my soul. The torturing muscle spasms, radiating from my back and squeezing my chest in a deadly embrace, made it hard for me to breathe. The beating of my heart, louder than the ticking of the clock, forced me to beg for one thing.

I yearned for it to stop.

And stop the agony of losing everything I had worked so hard for. But most of all, from losing the man who WAS the love of my life.

‘What am I going to do now? It’s over. My dream is over.’

I couldn’t have failed more if I’d tried. It was the biggest downfall of my life, and I could not understand why it had happened. I’d trusted John with my whole life. I’d given him my beating heart on a silver tray, so he could lock it up in the safe of his heart and treasure it forever. I had surrendered, for the first time in my life, giving up my independence as a woman and letting a man, another human being, take full control of what would happen to me, just as I would have entrusted God: ‘And I give you my heart and soul, I trust in your guidance, and that you will provide me with all I need in return.’ The kind of prayer that shows faith in the Higher Power and its limitless ability to look after you. Just like the plants and trees blindly know the universe will provide them with enough nutrients, rain, and sunshine so they can grow effortlessly to become the masterpiece of God’s creation. John was not God—far from it—nor any other deity. But he was part of my soul and I’d believed that he wouldn’t have let me experience such an annihilation of my heart.

Staring, from my bedroom window at the garden immersed in twilight, I could hear nothing but the crickets, dogs barking across the fields, and millions of thoughts in my head, as if my brain was software infected by a vicious virus that was about to cause damage to the whole system. But I didn't hear *him* anymore. No calls. No text messages. The voice of the man I loved so much was the most wonderful sound in the world and its sudden absence now was deafening.

Only a year ago, we'd been squeezing each other's hands, listening to the most touching Strauss concert in the Great Gallery of Schönbrunn Palace.

'*Kocham Cię,*' I'd whispered, gently kissing the most wonderful man on Earth, tearful from this surreal experience.

'I love you more, baby! You're my beautiful princess!'

Only a few months ago, we'd danced on the marble floor of our million-euro villa in Holland, after walking in for the first time.

'Welcome home, baby!' he'd said, twirling me around and gluing me to his chest so he could kiss me.

'We can finally be happy now,' I replied, thrilled from this historic—for us—moment.

Only a few months ago, we'd been wrapped in the intimate embrace in the warm waters of the infinity pool, overlooking the snow-capped Alps, clinking Champagne glasses.

'Is this really happening?' I'd asked, kissing his warm, wet lips.

'Get used to it! This is our new life. I will always look after you.'

Only a few months ago, we'd gone skiing for the first time in Innsbruck.

'I can do it! Look!' I'd shouted with childlike enthusiasm, dressed in a white skiing outfit with a Russian-style hat with flaps over my ears, making me look like a Cocker Spaniel.

'That's great! Me too!' he'd replied, falling on his backside for the hundredth time, making me burst into laughter.

Only a few months ago in Austria, my neck had become home to the most exquisite, sparkling-with-a-million-crystals necklace, given to me by the most generous, loving man I'd ever met.

'It's for you. The most beautiful necklace in the store for the most beautiful woman!'

'Oh, thank you so much. You are too kind. How much? A thousand euros? Oh, no... It's too expensive!'

'You deserve it. Happy birthday!'

Only a few months ago, John had been shielding my back when standing on a boat, dressed in white, admiring the passing lights of the spectacular sights of Prague.

These and hundreds of other memories filled my mind, torturing my soul as if they were traumatic war flashbacks. They hurt me now, and I didn't know how to stop them. They were the most wonderful moments of my life and I wanted them to live with me forever.

My life abroad was over now, even though I still didn't want to believe it. My mind showered me with desperate images filled with hope that it was just a bad dream, that John would come back for me any day now. Just like he'd promised he would when I'd seen him for the last time.

'I'll come and get you when it's all over,' he'd said, kissing me gently on the forehead before driving off.

Since that day, I had waited to see his smiling face when he would get out of the car in front of our gate. Cezar, sensing his arrival quicker than any of us, probably because of the tractor noise of our super car's engine, would jump up and down from excitement, barking like a complete lunatic. Mama would rush to open the gate so he could run to me, lift me high up in the air and say:

'*Kocham Cię*, I'm sorry I hurt you, baby. I was so stupid. I've missed you! You are my life!'

My mind gave me this vision in the only hope of my salvation. But maybe I was not to receive my salvation just yet? Maybe I had to experience this spiritual crucifixion to awaken fully, stop letting my ego control my mind, and ultimately find the secret to happy life? Maybe I had to 'die before you die,' which according to Zen masters, would magically transform me into the human being who finally finds peace?

I woke up each morning, looking at the crystal chandelier, hoping that today would be the day when John would come and take me back to our home in Holland, where we would live the ultimate freedom from the anguish we had been going through for years. That we would finally be happy and enjoy our lives to the fullest.

My mama tried to help me as much as she could, trying to understand it all, just like I did, not knowing what to say, other than: 'Maybe it's for the best,' but with such little conviction in her voice that it made this statement suspiciously untrue to me.

'I got you your favourite cake!' she said, sitting next to me on my bed, distressed from the state I was in.

She had never expected this to happen. There had been no visible signs of it being possible. She had hoped that my loving relationship with John was so strong that we would live happily ever after in our villa in Holland, after having got married in the Gothic cathedral,



whisked away into the sunset by a white horse-drawn carriage, kissing passionately under a shower of rice, thrown high up in the air by the cheering guests.

I had never thought our love would end, either. It just could not. It was the deepest, most powerful love any human being could experience in this physical dimension. Or maybe, I had had the premonition of this disaster, and if so, why was I surprised that I ended up imprisoned in my family home in Poland, losing everything I had worked so hard for in all those years abroad.

Lying on my heated amethyst mat, which gave my muscles a relief from turning into hard lumps of knots, excruciatingly painful even at the slightest attempts to massage them out, I stared at the walls, trying to understand.

‘Is this the final message from God? Give up, Monika! It’s over! Should I finally stop this silliness of pursuing “that thing,” a better life and happiness in a foreign land? What do I want to achieve? Career? Money? Husband? Are those an achievement anyway? Is that all that can be achieved in life? Everyone can do that, with better or worse outcomes. And in any country. What is my soul so desperately searching for? Weren’t my last few years abroad a big enough adventure to teach me what I needed to know about myself? Should I just live a peaceful, less adventurous, and “safer” life back in Poland? Should I accept the defeat? But how can this journey be over? Not now. Not yet. I’m not ready for the end of it. But can I do it again? Can I start all over, bruised emotionally and physically, with a heavy heart filled with pain? Do I have the strength to lift my body from this heated mat and face the petrifying world out there?’

True, I had already done it once before. I had gone to England a naive 25-year-old girl and started from zero. But it was different now. I was ill and I was defeated, even before I started. My body and soul had been wrecked to the ground by a bulldozer driven by the man of my dreams.

True, I had already taken that leap of faith and a two-hour flight to the ‘dream island’ where anything was possible. The country of endless opportunities, if only one were ready to work hard and not let any obstacles stop them along the way. But could I do it once more? How? Where would I go? Who could I ask for help, embarrassed about my biggest life failure?

I had always hated that horrible feeling of having to rely on other people, showing my total vulnerability of not being strong enough to look after myself. But over those years back in England, trusting others and counting on complete strangers’ help and their good-will had been the only way for me to survive some of my biggest challenges. I will always thank God

for sending them onto my path in the most unexpected ways, helping me to go through that journey, full of dangers lurking around the corner, some of which could have easily ended tragically.

‘Should I try again? Should I take another leap of faith and go back to England, rising spectacularly like a phoenix from the ashes? Should I prove that I can do it once more? Should I reclaim my independence as a woman? But most of all, should I regain my dignity as a human being?’

One of John’s last messages had said:

*‘YOU WILL NEVER MAKE IT WITHOUT ME.’*

## Chapter 2 - Leap of Faith

*'Two there are who are never satisfied-  
the lover of the world and the lover of knowledge.'*

*-Rumi*

My plane had landed at London Stansted Airport, on a December evening in 2004, nine years before.

As a qualified English teacher, I could already speak the language of the 'natives', but my peaceful life with my mama, stepdad, Cezar and cat Miki, in my small town near Toruń, in northern Poland, had not prepared me for the journey I was about to embark on. I had learnt my first English words as a young girl from an American TV programme which I had watched over and over, relentlessly repeating words and the alphabet sung by animal puppets.