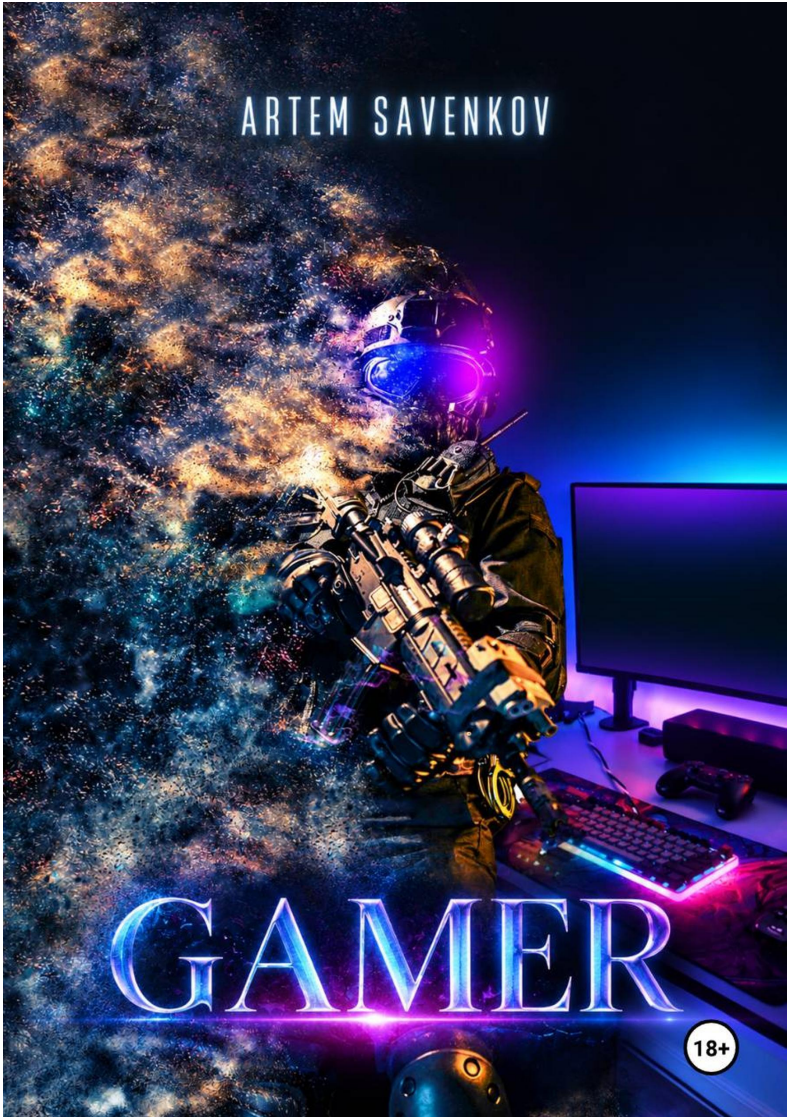
ARTEM SAVENKOV
GAMER
18+

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Gamer

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Аннотация

In Counter-Strike, Andrey knows what to do: take position, cover a teammate, wait for his chance. Beyond the screen, everything is harder. His parents are heading for divorce, his first love needs his help, and adult life begins long before he is ready for it.

A job in a store, a rented apartment, a baby daughter. Andrey does his best to provide for his family, but money barely stretches far enough, and he has less energy to spare each day. Then the hobby he has been criticized for so often offers an unexpected opportunity: a place on a team, his first tournaments, a path into professional esports.

He is ready to train through the night and fight for every round. But at home, he is increasingly met with silence. As Andrey learns to win in front of thousands of spectators, what matters most is happening where the cameras never look.

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Артем Савенков
Gamer

Gamer
Artem Savenkov
A Novel
English Edition
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An Interview with Myself

Where do I start? With childhood, probably. My name is Andrey, and I grew up when computers were gradually finding their way out of offices and into ordinary homes. The trend took a while to reach our town. Hardly anyone was going to buy an expensive machine just to work on it. But once kids discovered you could play games on one, parents all over the country had to listen to the same pleas. Dendy and Sega consoles weren't enough anymore. We wanted a new toy. Out in the provinces, few families could afford one. Anyone lucky enough to own a computer instantly became best friends with half the neighborhood.

I begged my parents for that technological miracle, too. They kept putting it off: too expensive. Meanwhile, my classmates were getting computers. Some showed theirs off; others kept quiet about the loans their parents had taken out. At last, my turn came. One day Dad brought home several boxes. I saw the picture on the biggest one and knew right away.

"Andrey, come and see what Dad brought!" Mom said as she opened the front door for him.

Dad set a big white box with a picture of a monitor in the middle of the hallway and went back for the rest. I stood over it, afraid to believe it was ours. Mom looked at me, smiled, and went to clear my desk. Of course the computer was going in my

room. I could do my homework in the kitchen. At that moment, I'd have settled for a windowsill.

Next came the tower, the cables, the mouse, and the keyboard. All white, all new, still in their packaging. I tried to lift the monitor, but it was too heavy. Dad asked me to step aside and put it on the desk himself. I was in charge of where everything went, though. I'd seen how it worked at my friends' houses. When we got to the cables, Dad sat down with the manual. While he read, I plugged everything in. Mom laughed: he'd only just put the booklet down, and the computer was already humming. Later, I could recognize that sound from any room in the apartment. And the silence when I switched it off always surprised me.

At first, Solitaire and Minesweeper were enough. Kids and grown-ups alike played them, trying to beat each other's scores. Then I wanted something more substantial: FIFA, Need for Speed, and, of course, Counter-Strike. We bought games at the market, where copies burned onto blank discs were sold alongside glossy boxed editions. They were cheap, but as a schoolkid I still had to beg for the money. I couldn't walk past a stall like that. I'd pick up the boxes, read the titles, work out how much more I needed to save. I dreamed of growing up, earning money, and buying every game I wanted. For now, I played whatever I could afford.

There were fewer of us out on the streets. Gaming cafés were opening up. In our town, six rubles bought you an hour on a computer loaded with dozens of games. You could play over the

local network, too, and later online matches became more and more common. Some of my classmates started skipping school to go to the gaming cafés. Their parents would be called in, and there'd be a scene at home. The kid would behave like an angel for a week, then start disappearing from class again.

At first, I didn't skip school. I had a fairly powerful computer at home, just as good as the ones at the cafés, and before long my parents got us an internet connection. Everything I needed now fit on my desk. One summer, I went outside to see the neighborhood kids maybe twice over the entire vacation. They stopped coming to get me. It took me a while to notice.

My grades slipped. My eyesight wasn't doing so well either: I was prescribed glasses at fifteen. By then I was used to sitting in front of that bulky monitor late into the night, hardly taking a break. Giving up games because my eyes were tired never crossed my mind.

I wasn't looking for new friends. Talking to people online was enough. I did get good at gaming, though. Counter-Strike was my favorite. When I came across recordings of esports tournaments on YouTube, I watched them with my heart pounding. Then I'd launch the game and try to copy what the pros had done.

"Why are you always on that computer? Go outside with the boys!" Mom often said. She'd come home late from work, exhausted, cook dinner, and sit down to eat with me at nearly nine.

Dad almost never made it home for dinner. He got back

around midnight and left early in the morning. My parents worked so hard to provide for the family that they had no time left to spend with us. Sundays were the only days we spent together: haircuts, groceries, shopping for clothes. We'd get home toward evening, turn on the TV, and watch a movie, exchanging a few words now and then. I soon got bored and went off to play. Later, my parents began arguing more and more often, and I put on my headphones so I wouldn't hear them.

An Overheard Conversation

I often stayed up gaming until almost morning, and sometimes slept through my first classes. Mom began to notice. Before leaving for work, she'd try to make sure I was up in time for the first bell.

"Get up. Time for school!" she'd say, tugging my leg to make absolutely sure I was awake.

Once I'd opened my eyes, she'd go out into the hallway. The front door slamming shut finished waking me up.

"I don't start till second period!" I'd sometimes try, when I was desperate for more sleep.

Mom didn't believe me. But the school wasn't complaining, and I rarely came up at parent-teacher meetings. I suppose she thought things were still going all right.

I didn't stand out at school. I scraped by, said hello to everyone, let people copy my work or asked to borrow a notebook. Other kids bonded over sports, afternoons hanging out, and cigarettes sneaked behind the garages. I didn't have a group like that. There was only Inna, a skinny girl with dark hair and slightly curly bangs. She had three dresses for school and wore them in rotation. She'd recently had her braces taken off. Our classmates had said plenty of cruel things about them, and Inna kept to herself. The teachers often seated us together, usually in the second row on the left.

“Together again?” I asked when our biology teacher put us at the same desk.

Sometimes I did want someone to talk to. It was easier with Inna than with anyone else.

“Again!” she said with a smile.

I don’t know whether she was pleased or just used to smiling back. The teasing about her braces had made her even quieter. She probably felt safer with me. I didn’t make fun of her, and I stayed out of other people’s business.

We sat next to each other for years. Even when we were allowed to move, we stayed at our desk. Gradually we became friends, although we hardly saw each other outside school, apart from walking part of the way home together. Sometimes we talked about homework or sent each other jokes. Inna spent a lot of time at her computer, too, and that brought us closer. Our classmates were already getting together and breaking up, while we still couldn’t bring ourselves to move beyond friendship. I couldn’t, anyway. I liked her. I just didn’t know what to do about it.

“Listen, we always walk home together, and we sit at the same desk, but we’ve never actually gone out. You know… just to hang out. Want to meet up today?” Inna asked one day as we walked our usual route.

I could tell from her face that she’d prepared for this conversation. I hadn’t.

“Sure! Where do you want to go?”

“Anywhere. We’ve never been anywhere together!” she said pointedly, looking at me.

I wasn’t nervous then. I’d thought something like this would happen sooner or later, only I’d imagined being the one to suggest it. The more we talked, the more we realized we liked the same things, and we both wanted to spend more time together.

“All right! In two hours, then. At the turnoff to your street.”

I chose it because I could walk there and save the bus fare.

“Okay. See you!” Inna said, going her way.

“See you!” I smiled and hopped onto a bus that had just pulled up.

As it carried me toward the turnoff, I watched her through the window. For the first time, I wished I hadn’t gotten on.

We were supposed to spend those two hours doing homework. Inna did, as I learned later. I checked my school planner: I wouldn’t get called on in one subject, there was no homework in two others, and I’d have to copy the rest anyway. Time for a couple of matches, then. I reached our meeting place with a whole minute to spare and began looking out for her.

She appeared a couple of minutes later. Instead of her usual school dress, she wore a light jacket and jeans, her hair loose. Looking at her, I only then understood that we weren’t walking home from school. We’d come here specifically to see each other.

Inna smiled. I became painfully aware of my old, pilled T-shirt and worn sandals. She’d gotten ready to meet me. I looked as though I’d just run out to buy potatoes.

“You look so beautiful!” The words came out before I could stop them.

Inna blushed a little, but I could see the compliment had pleased her. She softened.

“Thank you!” she said. We stood there for another few minutes, trying to think of something to say and somewhere to go.

“Come on, I’ll show you the river!” I suggested. It was the first thing that came to mind.

The silence was getting awkward. And the river was the only place I could think of where I had anything interesting to point out.

“It’s still too cold to swim,” Inna said. April had been warm, but the water was bound to be freezing.

“We don’t have to swim! It’s pretty down there.” I looked straight into her eyes, waiting for an answer.

“Let’s go to the park instead,” she suggested, a little shyly.

“The park it is.”

I didn’t care where we went as long as I was with her. But I couldn’t stop thinking about my clothes. Next to Inna, I looked as if I’d come out to take out the trash. All I could do was hope she cared more about the company than the T-shirt and shorts, too.

“Why didn’t you want to go to the river? Afraid of getting dirty?” I asked as we approached the park.

Inna hesitated, apparently trying to decide whether to tell me her secret.

“I can’t swim. I nearly drowned when I was little. I’ve tried to stay away from water ever since…” She lowered her eyes, as if ashamed of being afraid.

I wished I hadn’t asked. I wanted to cheer her up as quickly as I could.

“Oh, sorry. We’ll even steer clear of puddles, then!” I tried, hoping she’d take it as a joke.

“I’m not that scared of it. Otherwise I’d smell pretty bad. There’s water in the bathtub, too!” she said, and we entered the park smiling.

I had a little pocket money left. When I spotted a cotton candy stand, I bought one and handed it to Inna. She took the stick in both hands and smiled.

“Thanks. Why didn’t you get one?” she asked, pulling off the first piece and putting it in her mouth.

“I don’t really eat it.”

“How come? On a diet?” she teased.

I certainly didn’t need to lose weight. I’d forget to eat while I was gaming, and when I remembered, I’d make do with something I could carry back to the computer. It was hard to put on weight eating like that.

“Looks like it!” I said, unable to think of a better answer.

“Or do you want me to get fat so nobody else will want me? Is that your plan? Have I figured you out?” Inna said brightly, bouncing around me with exaggerated energy.

I hardly ever saw her like this at school: loud, cheerful, ready

to tease me. Apparently the quiet girl beside me at school could be someone quite different.

"Only if the plan means nobody can steal you away from me…"

It wasn't until I'd said it that I realized how bold it sounded. I could hardly believe the words were mine.

Inna stopped laughing and looked at me. I waited for her answer, already imagining several reasons she might decide to leave.

"That's sweet…" she said very softly, suddenly shy.

We walked in silence for a few more minutes, then started talking about ordinary things. Somewhere along the way I forgot about my clothes and was simply myself, thinking every so often how lucky I was to be with her.

We walked until evening. My legs ached, and hers must have too, but she didn't complain. As the sun began to set, we finally reached her house.

"We should do this more often!" she said, rocking slightly on her feet and glancing around.

I stood a little below her on a small slope. From the side, she might have looked an inch taller than me, although it was actually the other way around.

"Yeah. Only next time we should sit down at least once, or our legs might fall off!" I said, looking at her shoes.

I looked up. Inna smiled and nodded.

"So… bye?" she said, half raising her hand, unsure what to do

next: go inside, wait for me to leave, or hug me.

The older kids at school hugged goodbye, but we didn't yet know whether we could. I waited for her to go. Inna swayed forward; I thought she was reaching for me and stepped toward her. I think she was only shifting her weight. But it was too late to back out. We hugged awkwardly, froze for a couple of seconds, and let go. Then she went to the door.

"Bye!" I called, raising my hand just as she turned to look at me. She opened the door and disappeared inside.

All the way home, I thought about how we'd hug every time we saw each other now. I didn't have much to compare it with, but I'd have traded ten wins in Counter-Strike for one goodbye like that.

By the time I got home, all I wanted was my bed. I didn't even feel like gaming. The windows were lit up. Mom was back, and maybe Dad too, although he was rarely home this early. I was bursting with happiness after our walk. I wanted to do something silly, like sneak into the kitchen and give Mom a fright.

I opened the door carefully, took off my sandals, and tiptoed toward the kitchen. The door was ajar. I was about to peek inside when I heard voices. My parents were arguing about something.

"…Look, I get all that! What do you want?" Dad asked roughly.

With the TV on, they hadn't heard me come in. Dad had his back to the doorway. I couldn't see Mom from where I stood.

"I want us to get divorced already!" she shot back. A short

silence followed, and I could clearly hear a commercial for alcohol-free beer.

"But we agreed we'd do it when he turned eighteen, so we wouldn't traumatize the kid!"

"We agreed on that more than ten years ago! Sasha, are you serious? We're ruining our lives over that decision! You and your mistresses… I can't have a proper relationship with anyone. Everyone looks at me sideways. If Andrey finds out what's really been going on, it'll hurt him even more! Do you understand that?"

"I do. But what are you suggesting? We just walk away?"

"I suggest we sit down with him and talk calmly. I think he'll understand. He's not a little boy anymore!"

"I know that! But do you want him living with you? I'm guessing not. So what do we do with him?"

"I've thought about that! We leave him the apartment. Then we won't have to divide it between us, and he'll have a decent start in life!"

"And who's going to live with him?"

"He can live on his own. He's old enough! You were already working at his age!"

"Where will you live?"

"That's none of your business anymore, just as where you live is none of mine. We'll send Andrey money to begin with, and then, with any luck, he'll learn to stand on his own two feet. He can't play computer games forever. It's time he grew up!"

"Maybe you're right. But I need to think about it," Dad said,

and another silence fell.

I stood by the door, unable to move. A minute earlier, I'd thought nothing could spoil this day. Now it turned out my parents had been planning to separate for more than ten years and had only been waiting for me to grow up. So Dad's late nights, Mom's business trips, all their arguments… They'd known all along. I hadn't. The only people I trusted had been pretending we were a family, every single day.

Something rustled in the kitchen. I thought one of them was coming out. I crossed half the hallway in one long stride and ducked into the bathroom. I turned on the water and started taking off my clothes.

"Andrey, are you home?" Mom called from the hallway.

"Yeah, just got in. I'll have a shower and be out in a minute."

"All right!" She sounded slightly frightened.

I could hear it in her voice: she was afraid I'd overheard. Whatever Dad said to her was lost in the sound of running water. I stood under the shower, trying to cry without making a noise. I wanted to go back an hour, to Inna's house, when everything had still been all right.

Living alone at sixteen. Plenty of people probably dreamed of it. I didn't even know how to pay the bills. I wasn't ready for adult life at all. Especially not today.

Someone to Lean On

The next day I barely spoke to Inna. She got called on in class, wrote things down, while I sat beside her wondering how I was supposed to live now. After school I headed for the exit without even waiting for her. She caught up with me at the gates and fell into step beside me without a word. I knew I should at least say hello, but I didn't have the strength.

Instead of turning off for my bus stop, I went on to walk her home. Inna gave me a surprised look. Several times she seemed about to ask something, but couldn't quite bring herself to.

When we reached the spot where we'd had our first and only hug, I stopped and looked at her, forcing myself to try to say a proper goodbye. None of this was her fault.

"Andrey, what's wrong?" Inna finally asked, looking straight into my eyes.

I lowered my eyes.

"Nothing. It doesn't matter…" I mumbled. I couldn't lift my head. I was afraid I'd start crying.

I wanted her to go inside quickly, so she wouldn't see me like this. At the same time, I wanted to tell someone, and she was probably the only person I could trust.

"What do you mean, it doesn't matter? You've been miserable all day. Did I do something wrong yesterday?" Inna gently took my chin, trying to see my face.

I couldn't hold it in anymore.

"My parents are getting divorced…" I turned away, but it was too late to hide the tears.

Inna put her arms around me. I buried my face in her shoulder and, for a while, all I could do was sob. When it eased a little, I pulled back and wiped my face. Inna began fanning my wet cheeks with her hands, as if that could hide the fact that I'd been crying. Without thinking, I helped her. Then we sat on the nearest bench, and I told her everything.

"Andrey, I don't even know what to say…" Inna paused. "But they're not leaving you. They want you to have the apartment. They'll help you. Maybe being together really is that hard for them? Arguing all the time isn't much of a life either."

"Yeah, but they've been lying all this time! It means I grew up in a lie!"

"Yes. And you have every right to be angry. It's just… maybe they were afraid of hurting you and didn't know how to tell you? I'm not making excuses for them. But they're still your parents."

"God, I hadn't looked at it that way. Maybe you're right!" I said. It felt as though half the weight I'd been carrying had fallen away. I really did feel better.

"Just don't decide it's all over, okay? Talk to them when you can. In the meantime, I'm here."

After that, the whole thing seemed to loosen its grip on me. Then panic crept up without warning.

"But how am I supposed to live on my own? I've never done

it… How do I cook? How do I pay the bills? What else do grown-ups even do?”

“Well, I can help with the food! I’ll cook for you, and I’ll teach you. Don’t worry. Paying bills isn’t hard either. I’ve done it a couple of times. And you can count on me for everything else. We’ll figure it out somehow!” Inna said encouragingly, looking at me.

I hugged her tight. Nothing at home had changed, and the hardest conversation still lay ahead. But now I could at least imagine surviving it. We arranged to meet that evening. On my way home, I’d remember what my parents had said, then think about Inna, and each time it got a little easier.

The exams at the end of ninth grade were almost upon us. I knew I’d manage a passing grade, even if it was only a three out of five. I gave up on schoolwork altogether and started playing Counter-Strike. It was great for keeping the thoughts away. I set an alarm for five so I wouldn’t be late to meet Inna, and threw myself into each new round harder than the last.

Romance

“How are you?” Inna asked when we were the last ones left in the classroom.

We’d stayed behind after the lesson. Inna was packing her schoolbag, and I waited by our desk. The teacher had already gone, leaving the room open for the next class.

“I’m okay! I thought about what you said and decided not to let it get to me. I don’t always manage it, but I’m trying!”

Inna let out a breath and smiled. So she’d been worried about me. After yesterday, I especially needed to know I mattered to someone.

Two boys from another class met us at the door. They stepped aside to let us through, peering over our shoulders.

“Well, well! What were you two doing in here all alone? Getting romantic?” One of them smirked and made an obscene gesture.

At our school, there weren’t many subjects people wouldn’t joke about, so you answered one joke with another. You didn’t immediately start a fight. That was a last resort.

“Yeah, you got us. We even left room for you two!” I shot back. The boys’ faces fell as they realized they’d lost that round.

Inna thought it was hilarious. All the way upstairs to the English classroom, we talked about how neatly I’d put the comedians in their place.

After school we collected our jackets and took our usual route. The weather was getting warmer, and more and more kids were lingering outside after class, walking around and playing games.

"Have you heard the rumors about us?" Inna asked out of nowhere once we were off the school grounds.

"Rumors? About us? What rumors?" I fired questions at her faster than she could answer.

After a short pause, she went on:

"Yeah, about us. I overheard some girls in the bathroom saying we're going out and sleeping… Well, you know." She lowered her voice for the last few words.

"Wow! What did you do?"

That surprised me a little. Of course, I wouldn't have minded if the gossip were true, but I thought of Inna as someone far too good for me.

"What could I do? They hadn't seen me, and I didn't want to make a scene. You know what people are like at our school. You can get a black eye for that…" Her answer left me no opening to ask how she actually felt about it.

I wanted her to say she wouldn't mind going out with me. Then I'd have been the happiest person alive. I needed to say it myself. But when? And how? I couldn't just tell her right there in the street. It had to be somewhere special.

"Right… But if you could have said something, what would you have told them?" I persisted, hoping for an answer I'd like.

"I don't even know. Probably that it's none of their business."

Her answer told me nothing. Another chance to tell her how I felt slipped past.

We passed my bus stop, but I no longer turned off there. Time with Inna mattered more than the time I'd save by taking the bus.

"What would you have said?" she asked. There was no way out now. I tried to find one anyway.

"Probably the same. If there's something between us, or if there ever is, that's our business. Besides, if they're talking about us, our lives must be more interesting than theirs!" It was meant to be an opening, but I'd handled it so clumsily that I must have sounded ridiculous.

Inna smiled. By then we'd reached her house.

"Will I see you tonight?" I asked, scuffing one foot back and forth, unable to stand still.

"Probably not tonight. Mom asked me to help with some things, and I've got a ton of homework. Tomorrow?" Inna pulled a face. She didn't seem thrilled about the chores either.

"Then I'm copying your physics tomorrow!" I said brightly, trying to hide my disappointment and salvage something from the disappointment.

"Then I'm copying your math!" Inna shot back, deciding to make her own life easier too.

"Now I'll actually have to do it!" I complained. Math would take up time I'd already promised to Counter-Strike.

"A fair trade!" Inna protested cheerfully.

We hugged goodbye. Just then, a little girl ran out of the

house and stared at us. Her mother followed, and the two of them caught us with our arms around each other. We both noticed and blushed.

"Well, uh, I'd better go. Bye!" I rattled off and hurried home.

Inna stayed by the door with her mother and sister. I didn't find out how she'd explained the hug until that evening.

We talked about it in messages once we were both home.

I. 20:04 well, we really got caught there :))

A. 20:12 what do you mean? did you get in trouble?

I. 20:14 no, but there were a lot of questions. who are you, what's your story?

A. 20:22 And what did you tell them?

I. 20:23 The truth!

A. 20:27 Which truth would that be? :))

I. 20:29 Not telling! That's what you get for taking so long to reply!

A. 20:34 Sorry, I was in a game. I'm staying out of the next one just for you :))

A. 20:35 So what did you say?

I. 20:37 That you're my boyfriend and we're getting married soon!

A. 20:38 Um, whaaaaat?

I. 20:39 Relax. I said you're my friend and we get along really well.

I. 20:45 You've read it. Why aren't you saying anything????

A. 20:48 I was celebrating when you said we were getting

married :))

A. 20:48 Mom got home. I had to help with the shopping bags.

I. 20:49 Would you want to marry me? :))

A. 20:50 Never had anyone else in mind for the position :)

I. 20:51 So sweet :)) Well, tomorrow you can take the first step!

A. 20:52 Propose?? :)))

I. 20:54 No, get to know them! Mom said we should come over for tea after school tomorrow.

A. 20:57 That's a very serious step for me.

I. 20:59 Scared? Or don't you want to meet your bride's parents? :))

A. 21:01 I don't even know what you're supposed to do at these things. Maybe we shouldn't?

I. 21:02 It has to be done, Fedya. It has to be done!

A. 21:03 I'm not Fedya :((

I. 21:04 What's wrong with you? It's a movie quote!

A. 21:05 Which movie?

I. 21:06 Operation Y. The one with Shurik.

A. 21:08 Never heard of it…

I. 21:10 Are you serious? Everyone in the country knows it!

A. 21:12 Seriously. Never seen it, never even heard of it.

I. 21:13 Oh, you. Looks like we'll have to fill in the gaps in your education.

A. 21:15 Only if you're there!

I. 21:17 That's the idea. But first you meet my parents

tomorrow. Dad's just arranged to swap shifts with someone so he'll work Sunday instead. So you definitely have to come over tomorrow.

A. 21:19 He didn't need to go to all that trouble for me, did he?

I. 21:21 It wasn't for you, don't worry. Someone asked him to swap. It just worked out :))

A. 21:23 What am I going to talk to them about?

I. 21:25 Oh, there'll be plenty. Do you love her? How did you meet? Where will you live after the wedding? Lots of things!

A. 21:27 I'm serious!

I. 21:28 I don't know. They just want to know who their daughter spends her time with. Wouldn't you worry if you had kids?

A. 21:31 I haven't even thought about that :))

I. 21:32 Well, you should! You want to get married, but you haven't thought about the children!

A. 21:34 Oh, forget it…

I. 21:34 Don't worry. They don't bite :))

A. 21:36 Okay.

I. 21:40 I'm off to bed. Good night :))

A. 21:41 Night :)) I'm going to play a bit longer.

Meeting the Parents

"Do we really have to?" I asked again, already knowing the answer.

That afternoon, we walked toward her house, and I grew more nervous with every step. At sixteen, you don't meet a girl's parents every day. Especially when you haven't even properly told her you love her yet.

"No turning back now!" Inna gave me a firm push between the shoulders. She'd apparently realized I might not make it there of my own free will.

"Oh, look, my bus stop! And here's a bus!" I tried to turn it into a joke.

"Andrey, seriously?" Inna frowned a little. I had the feeling she was about to stop trying to persuade me and get upset instead.

I couldn't let that happen.

"No, Inna, I'm kidding! I just feel like a fish out of water, so I'm trying to joke my way through it."

"Don't worry. We'll find you a nice bowl!"

"You little troublemaker!" I said, trying to tickle her.

She laughed and fought me off. In the scuffle, my hand caught her somewhere it shouldn't. I pulled it away at once, and we both froze.

"Enjoy that?" she asked seriously, almost accusingly. I already felt ashamed and embarrassed by the clumsy accident.

“Inna, I… It was an accident…” I couldn’t put any more words together. All I knew was that my cheeks were burning.

“Meet my parents first. Then you can start getting fresh!” she said so sternly that it took me a moment to notice her smile.

Once I realized she was joking, I could finally breathe. Inna laughed, and I joined in. When we’d calmed down a little, we walked on.

“For you, I’d meet every parent in town!” I boasted.

“Just mine will do for now!” Inna turned serious. “But don’t worry. We’ll find you some more motivation!”

She started laughing again. This time, I wasn’t laughing. I wanted to find that motivation. Besides, the joking was over as far as I was concerned: we’d reached her gate. It was an ordinary wooden house with a small vegetable garden in the yard. The fence around the property was about eight inches taller than me. Inna’s father was waiting in the yard.

“Nikolai Stepanovich!” her dad said, holding out his hand.

He was a man of average height, wearing a striped sailor’s shirt and old sweatpants. His dark hair was going gray, and his beard had been left to grow a little untidily. He’d probably been working in the vegetable garden before we arrived. Something about him reminded me of a truck driver in an old Russian movie.

“Andrey!” I shook his hand and stood there, not knowing what to do with my smile.

“Come on inside. Lyuda’s got everything ready,” Nikolai

Stepanovich said, ushering us in.

I was a little embarrassed that they'd prepared for my visit. You didn't go to all this trouble to meet an ordinary friend. It suggested a long conversation, and I wasn't ready for one.

"Mom, this is Andrey. Andrey, this is Lyudmila Zakharovna."

In my confusion, I held out my hand. Lyudmila Zakharovna shook it as though that were exactly what I was supposed to do. She wore a formal dress, her curly, dark-blond hair neatly styled. A little girl peeked out from behind her.

"And this is Alina!" Inna smiled at the child and picked her up. Alina looked at me for a few seconds, then clung to her sister and buried her face in her shoulder, making it clear to the family that she was scared of me.

I was no good with children. The moment I was left alone with one, the conversation died. I never knew what to ask or what to play. Luckily, nobody expected me to do that now.

We sat down at the table. Inna showed me my place. Apparently they'd planned that part too. As we settled in, the head of the household appeared, now wearing black pants and a gray T-shirt. The gardening clothes were gone.

The table was set with a tea service for four, plates of candy, spiced cookies, and sweet rolls. Lyudmila Zakharovna brought in a hot pie. Everything in the kitchen was simple and somehow solid: the dishes, the curtains, the table itself. I thought of Inna's dresses and realized how perfectly they belonged here. As her parents took their seats, we exchanged glances and tried to smile

as if nothing special were happening.

"Well, tell us! How's school?" her mother asked as she settled Alina into her high chair.

I hadn't expected that question. I hadn't expected any questions. But Inna quickly took over, explaining that we were doing well. Her parents already knew that about her. As for me, she'd stretched the truth a little.

"…So, good overall. The exams are coming up, so we're spending more time preparing for those…"

"And you, Andrey? What do you think about the exams? Will you two manage?" Inna's mother turned to me. The whole family waited for my answer. Even the child seemed to have gone still.

"I don't think they'll be hard! Ninth-grade exams are just a formality. It's the ones at the end of eleventh grade you have to worry about!" I tried to sound confident, and for a moment I thought I'd pulled it off.

At school, they were always threatening us with not getting our certificates. I didn't really believe them. I thought they'd give us passing threes out of five anyway. The final exams after eleventh grade were another matter. Luckily, those were still a long way off.

"Your homeroom teacher certainly likes to frighten us. She says we need to keep an eye on you and make you spend more time studying!"

Her mother did most of the talking. Her father was probably saving up the more serious questions while his wife tried to draw

us out and put us at ease.

"They get a salary bonus for good results, so of course they're trying. In reality, everyone will pass. Obviously, I'd like straight fives, but I won't be upset if I get a three!" I declared, somewhat disappointing Inna's parents, who surely wanted nothing but top grades for their daughter.

"How long have you been friends?" her mother went on.

I knew the more interesting questions were about to start.

"Since elementary school. The teachers always used to put us together. I told you!" Inna fielded that one flawlessly.

"And are you just friends, or something more…?" her father cut in. He clearly wanted to know and seemed to have been waiting for the right moment to ask.

"Daaaad!" Inna said, turning visibly red.

I didn't know what to say either. If they'd asked me, I'd probably have called us friends. I hadn't found the courage to go any further. But Inna looked so embarrassed that I suddenly wondered whether I understood our relationship at all.

"What do you mean, 'Dad'? I want to know what sort of relationship my daughter is in! Am I not allowed to ask anymore?" Nikolai Stepanovich said cheerfully, looking at Inna.

This time, I couldn't get the word "relationship" out of my head. I felt as if there was something I didn't know.

"Stop embarrassing the children!" Lyudmila Zakharovna said with exaggerated cheerfulness, and everyone smiled.

After that, things got easier. We talked about school, then

the town and one or two things around the house. Inna's parents turned out to be warm, friendly people. I stopped monitoring every word I said and even dared to take a second piece of pie.

When Alina started falling asleep, I realized our visit was drawing to a close and I ought to leave. They needed quiet in the house. Lyudmila Zakharovna suggested I stay and sit with Inna in her room, but I took it as a polite gesture and tactfully declined. We said goodbye to her parents, and Inna went to see me out.

"That went great, and you were so worried!" she said, unlocking the door.

"Yeah. Your parents are really nice!" I said. A smile appeared on Inna's face. She was pleased by the compliment.

"We'll meet yours next!" she said automatically, then immediately realized she'd touched a sore spot and apologized.

I knew she hadn't meant anything by it, so I didn't take it personally.

"Mission accomplished!" I winked, making her laugh.

She reached up to hug me goodbye, no longer worried that her parents might see. I put my arms around her too.

"Just make it quick!" Inna whispered seriously.

"But I… Um… Your parents are right here…" I floundered. The remark had left me completely at a loss again.

"I'm joking, silly!" She wriggled out of my arms and laughed softly.

I was bewildered, but managed a smile anyway. We said goodbye, agreeing to meet that evening, talk about her parents'

reaction, and walk up to the bluff.

All the way home, I thought about the visit, about Inna, her bold jokes, our relationship. I had to ask her to be my girlfriend!

Disaster

"Home?" Inna asked when the bell rang.

Our classmates were already disappearing through the door. First out were usually the ones who never thought to double-check whether everything was in their bags. The tidy ones stayed behind, stacking textbooks and closing pencil cases. To me, owning a pencil case was a sign that you took school seriously. Some kids couldn't even find a pen, while these people had a whole supply, sorted by color.

"Home!" I said.

We weren't the last to leave, but we didn't rush. We still had the coat check ahead of us. Rain had been forecast that morning, so everyone had come in jackets, and a hundred people were already crowded around the counter. Some chatted; others passed their numbered tags forward to get their coats sooner. At first people shouted at the kids cutting in line, but eventually everyone got used to it. Inna and I stood in silence, exchanging glances, as though any conversation might give us away completely.

A loose thread stuck out of my shirt pocket. I hadn't bothered with it, but it clearly bothered Inna. Spotting a lighter in an older boy's hand, she snatched it, quickly singed the thread, pressed the burned end flat with her finger, and handed it back. He didn't even have time to protest. She gave him a smile of thanks

and turned back to me. Sometimes she did things that made it hard to recognize the quiet girl who shared my desk. I liked that boldness. We hadn't actually agreed we were going out, but if anyone asked whether I had a girlfriend, I said yes. I hoped Inna wouldn't object.

Our relationship felt as though it was about to begin. I'd thought over and over about kissing her and making it official, but whenever the perfect moment came, I lost my nerve and put it off. We were both spending less time at our computers now. Only Inna's plans included studying as well as our evening walks. I left education out of my schedule. It didn't interest me.

At last we collected our jackets and left school. Inna walked beside me, lost in thought. I waited for her to speak. She wasn't in a hurry.

"You know, Inna, I'm on a real streak in Counter-Strike. Twenty-seven wins in a row. I really want to make it to fifty. Think I can?" I said.

Starting a conversation was always hard. When I was nervous, I often fell back on lines like that, and after a while we'd settle back into each other's company and be able to talk about anything.

The rumors had been going around for ages: together at school, together after class, together on our walks. And the more confidently our classmates called us a couple, the harder it became just to start talking.

Inna didn't answer. She turned away from our usual route, and

I followed. We used to part at my bus stop. More and more often now, I walked her all the way home, then walked back to mine. It took longer, but the bus money stayed in my pocket.

"Well, I know you're not that interested. I just wanted to show off a little…" I said, wondering if she found me boring and hunting for another subject. "Look at all that smoke over there!" I pointed.

Thick, dark smoke was rising above the roofs. Nothing like smoke from a stove. Old wooden houses caught fire in our town from time to time, and I assumed another one was burning somewhere over there. Inna looked that way, then back at me, and stopped.

"Andrey, tell me honestly. Do you like me?" This was a serious question.

It felt like a slap. I caught my breath, my heart beat faster, and I grew flustered and red. The answer had always been yes. But Inna wasn't supposed to be the one asking.

"Yes. A lot!" I said timidly, waiting for her reaction.

She lowered her head. I waited. A few seconds later, she looked into my eyes again.

"I like you too!" she said, and everything inside me seemed to tangle up.

I was happy, then immediately frightened. I probably had to do something now. Kiss her? What if that wasn't what she wanted? Nothing like this had ever happened to me. I didn't have an answer ready.

“I’ve wanted to… you know… tell you for ages, only somehow…” I stammered, unable to say anything coherent.

I tried to explain that I’d wanted to tell her for a long time but had been afraid of ruining our friendship. While I searched for the words, Inna stepped closer and kissed me. Now I had something else to worry about: what if she immediately realized I didn’t know how? The kiss was brief and awkward. But I remembered it better than anything we’d talked about before it.

When we drew apart, Inna hugged me tight. One of the studious girls from our class walked past, saw us, and smiled. Then she caught our eyes, faced forward, stared at the sidewalk, and hurried on. Inna laughed.

“Now the rumors have an eyewitness!” she said, loosening her arms a little.

Inna was smiling. I’d already found something new to worry about.

“Inna, I don’t know how to kiss. But I’ll learn!” I promised, for some reason, as if that were what she’d been waiting to hear.

“Only if you practice on me! And tomorrow’s Sunday…” she added. All my doubts and fears vanished.

I knew I’d chosen the right girl, and I held her close. I felt her against me, breathed in her scent, felt her hands on me. It was so good I never wanted to let go.

“Now the rumors really won’t leave us alone!” Inna said, spotting our math teacher.

The teacher walked past and smiled at us. I let Inna go, but

for some reason I wasn't embarrassed anymore. I looked into her eyes again and leaned closer. This time we leaned in almost at the same moment.

"Getting better. But we'll keep practicing!" she said with mock seriousness, and we set off for home.

As we walked, her fingers brushed mine. I took her hand. Now we were walking like a real couple, and I kept wanting to look at her.

"The way you talk about kissing… have you kissed anyone before?" I asked out of curiosity, not realizing the question might hurt.

"Yes!" she said. I felt a little wounded. I pictured her kissing someone else, and for a moment it made me feel sick.

Inna noticed my expression. Her smile broadened until she couldn't help giggling.

"You, a couple of minutes ago! Nobody else! I've just seen how people do it in movies!" she said brightly, looking at me.

My spirits lifted. I felt a rush of energy and put it into a kiss. This time it was a grown-up kiss. Carried away, I even put my hands on her lower back and pulled her toward me. Inna was a little surprised, but she didn't resist.

"Now that was serious!" she said, sounding a little astonished.

I was happy I'd managed it. Nothing ahead seemed impossible now. I had everything I loved, and I didn't want anything to change.

We walked and told each other stories as usual, talking about

this and that. Only now it was different. Every so often, one of us would try to steal even a moment for a hug and a kiss. I thought that if life had a save function, so you could go back and start again when things went wrong, this was the moment I'd save. For probably the first time, I wasn't thinking about Counter-Strike after school.

When we turned onto Inna's street, we noticed the smoke again. I bounded up to her and kissed her, but she grew serious, trying to make out where it was coming from. I saw the strange look on her face and turned the same way.

"It's still smoking. Though I think they've put it out. It's not as black as it was," I said. She didn't answer.

Inna stood like that for a few seconds longer, then suddenly ran, almost straight into the path of a passing car.

"Wait! Where are you going?" I shouted. Then I realized the smoke was coming from right where her house stood.

The street divided the neighborhood in two: apartment blocks on one side, single-family homes on the other. Around the first intersections stood some very old wooden cottages, then the sturdier timber houses built in the seventies. Inna lived in one of those. The newer brick houses began farther on.

The smoke was rising from roughly that spot. I still hoped I was wrong, but Inna knew her street better than I did. I didn't catch up with her until she reached the charred fence. It was her house that had burned.

"Move along, kids. Nothing to see here!" a firefighter said.

He blocked our way. Inna didn't answer. She just stared at what was left of the house. Her parents had been home today: her mother with Alina, her father off work for the weekend. I remembered almost at the same time she did.

"She lives here. Lived here, I mean. Or whatever you're supposed to say…" I explained.

The firefighter went over to another man, who said something into his radio.

"Yes, that's her. Their older girl…" came a voice from around the corner.

It was a neighbor. She was walking with a police officer and pointing at Inna.

"Are you Inna?" the officer asked sternly, a notebook in his hand.

She said nothing.

"Yes, that's her," I answered for my girlfriend, looking at the officer.

"Then you'll have to come with us!" he told Inna. When she didn't react, he grabbed her roughly by the arm and led her toward the car.

"Hey! What are you doing?" I protested, shoving him.

"And who the hell are you?" He turned toward me, irritation on his face.

"I'm her friend!" I said firmly, stepping beside her.

The officer came right up to me, seized me by the throat, and pinned me against the fence. I tried to breathe and couldn't.

“You can go… Yeah, you heard me. One more word and I’ll slip some weed in your pocket and arrest you with these same witnesses watching. Understand?” His voice was low, almost calm.

When my vision began to darken, he let go and dragged Inna toward the car. I sank to my knees, gasping. My legs wouldn’t hold me. Inna looked back for a moment, but I couldn’t tell whether she saw me. The door slammed shut. A woman I didn’t know got into the car with her.

I wanted to call Dad and had already taken out my phone when I saw people carrying black bags toward a vehicle. One stopped to adjust his load, and a small white hand with a smear of soot appeared through the unzipped edge. Alina. I didn’t know for certain, but in that moment I was sure. The phone slipped from my fingers. I doubled over and vomited. When I could finally lift my head, the neighbor was standing beside me.

“Are you feeling sick?” she asked, bending down to look at me.

I glanced around and got to my feet, putting the phone in my pocket.

“I’m okay. Do you know where they took Inna?” I asked, pointing to where the police car had been a moment earlier.

“Where do you think? The children’s home! Her parents are over there… Well, you understand. Then child welfare will take over, all that sort of thing. You know…”

Strangely enough, I did. I nodded goodbye and went home,

trying not to look at anything else happening around me.

Red Tape

After the weekend, I barely heard a word in class. All I could think about was Inna. I'd found the address of a children's home online. Whether it was the right one, I'd have to find out when I got there. After school, I went. About an hour later, I reached a tall iron fence. Behind it were gazebos, sandboxes, and children playing tag. It looked like an ordinary kindergarten. Across the street stood an apartment building with broken windows. I didn't know why nobody had replaced them, but the sight made me feel even worse.

After watching the children, I walked around the perimeter several times. I couldn't see Inna, so I decided to go in and ask directly.

"Hello. Inna Smirnova was brought here recently, wasn't she? Could I see her?" I asked a woman sitting near the entrance, her head propped on one hand as she read a newspaper.

She raised tired eyes to me. Apparently I'd interrupted the most interesting part.

"Hello. Yes. And who are you to her?" After a moment, she lowered her head and lazily looked me up and down.

"I'm her… friend. We go to school together!" The question threw me, even though I'd already heard it twice.

For some reason, I couldn't bring myself to say boyfriend. Friend sounded more familiar. Safer.

“A friend, then. I see!” she drawled, looking me over again. After a pause, she went on in an almost accusing tone. “Friends aren’t allowed to visit. Relatives only!”

“Then I’m her brother! Her cousin, I mean! Please let me talk to her!” I said with deliberate friendliness. I was determined to try anything that might get me in touch with Inna.

“And how can you prove you’re her cousin?”

“How is a cousin supposed to prove it? He can’t. You’ll just have to take my word for it!”

“Sorry, then! Against the rules!” The woman seemed ready to argue, then thought better of it and returned to her newspaper, making it clear she would ignore anything else I said.

I understood and went outside to look for another way. An idea soon came.

“Hey! Come over here!” I quietly called to a girl who looked about my age, trying to make sure only she heard.

She noticed me, approached the fence, and discreetly indicated where I should move. Then she turned her back, as though she’d simply decided to stand in the shade. I copied her.

“What do you want?” she asked briskly, turning her head a little to the left so she could hear better.

“A new girl was brought here recently. I want to talk to her, but they won’t let me in. Could you get her?” I asked, trying not to look at the person I was talking to. I must have looked ridiculous.

“Oh, the quiet one! She won’t come out. She’s sitting in there in a trance. Nobody’s touched her yet. We haven’t even put her

through the initiation. We understand. We're not animals…"

"What initiation?"

"You'll find out later, if she wants to tell you!" the girl said with a nasty laugh that left me speechless.

This wasn't going to end well. I had to do something. Meanwhile, a staff member began lining the children up to count them and take them inside.

"Could you… tell her I'll come back at the same time tomorrow? Maybe she'll come out…" I said as I saw the girl getting ready to leave.

"I could. What's in it for me?" she asked, turning to face me, secrecy forgotten as she looked me up and down appraisingly.

I patted my pockets and realized I had nothing to offer but money.

"Here!" I said, holding out ten rubles.

She took them quickly and pocketed them, still watching me.

"Is that all?"

"I've got another five!" I said. Her hand immediately reached for them.

I had to hand them over.

"Okay. Come back tomorrow, same time. We'll see what we can do. No promises!" she said, running to join the others. The group was already assembled and waiting only for her.

I nodded and headed home. Once I was around the corner, I checked my pockets. I'd given her every last ruble of my bus fare. I had to walk back.

Bargaining

The next day, I got permission to leave my last class and arrived about twenty minutes early. Inna wasn't among the children in the yard. I was beginning to think she wouldn't want to come out when yesterday's acquaintance spotted me and took up her position by the fence.

"I talked to her. She'll come out!" the girl said briskly, waiting for my reaction.

"Great. Thank you!" I was delighted, then immediately at a loss. What would I say to her? Ask how she was? That much was obvious. I just had to avoid saying something stupid.

"What do you mean, thank you? Pay up!"

"But I paid you yesterday!"

"That was for talking to her. Results cost extra. So does getting her permission to come out!" she said with a smirk.

Since I had no other options, I held a ten-ruble note between the bars. She took it without looking. A professional, clearly. She pocketed it, turned, and silently held out her hand for the remaining five. I put the money into it, and she vanished, leaving me to worry. I even began to think I'd been scammed. But ten minutes later, I saw a familiar figure, and the doubts disappeared.

"Hi. How are you?" I said, looking at Inna.

She no longer stared through me as she had at the fire. But her face was so exhausted that I could barely recognize the Inna

I'd known only days before.

"Hi… It couldn't be worse… Get me out of here…" she said, bursting into tears.

Her eyes were swollen, tears running down her cheeks again. She reached through the bars. I took her hands. We couldn't get any closer. The fence was in the way.

"Are they hitting you?" I asked. I desperately wanted her to say no.

"Not yet. I think they've given me time to recover, but I can feel something awful is going to happen. I've heard their 'welcome' leaves girls with scars. Sometimes worse…" Inna said, stumbling over her words and sobbing.

Her words chilled me. Only days before, I hadn't known how to tell her I loved her. Now I had to work out how to get her out of here.

"I'll think of something, I promise. Just hold on! Is there anything I can bring you? Anything I can do?" I asked. Just then, the staff member began calling the children together. Inna had to go.

She only looked at me before following the others. Clothes, food, notebooks: I could bring any of those. But that wasn't what she'd asked for.

All the way home, I went through the options. I hadn't managed to persuade the woman at the entrance. I had no money left. And who could I have bribed anyway? By the time I got home, I had two ideas, one worse than the other.

First I thought of helping her run away. But where would we live? How would Inna take her exams? She couldn't hide forever. That left the second option: ask my parents to take her in. I knew almost nothing about guardianship or adoption, but I understood that we needed adults. My parents were planning to leave their own son behind, but I hoped to find words that would make them at least try to help.

I called Mom and Dad and asked them to get home as soon as they could. By evening we were sitting at the table, and I decided to get straight to it.

"Mom, Dad, I need to talk to you. Just hear me out." I gripped the edge of the table. "I know you want a divorce. Have wanted one for years. And that you're going to leave me the apartment and move away. I heard you talking. It hurt, but that's not what this is about. I have a friend. Inna. You probably heard about the family who died in that fire? That was her family. She's in a children's home now. They're threatening her there. She's begging me to get her out. I want her to live here. Adopt her, become her guardians. I don't know what you call it. Just help. The two of us can live here, and you can move away. I'll never ask you for anything else."

Mom looked at Dad. I waited for objections, but neither spoke. That was harder than if they'd started arguing right away.

"Andrey, listen. That's a very serious step. It's not an easy thing to do…" Mom said. Silence fell again.

Dad still hadn't said a word. Mom stared at the table. I didn't

know which had shocked them more: my request, or the fact that I'd heard them discussing the divorce.

"I understand! But I've hardly ever asked you for anything! I've never been a problem or made your lives hell doing stupid things! What I'm asking matters to me. To Inna. If she stays there, they could ruin her life. And if you do nothing, you could ruin mine. I've been through a lot lately. I just want some kind of ending that isn't completely awful. Give me a chance. Give us a chance!"

"Maybe it's not as bad as all that? As an orphan, she'd be entitled to housing later…" Mom stopped herself. "That's not what I mean. We can't decide everything in one evening."

"What matters more? An apartment sometime in the future, or what they'll do to her now?" I looked at Dad, hoping at least he would understand.

"First of all, not adoption," Dad finally said. "At your age, it would probably be guardianship. And you don't arrange that in a day either. We'd have to find out what's involved."

"Then find out! You know people. Call someone. Ask how we could bring her here, at least for now. I'm not asking you to break the law. And… you promised to help me with money. Give us a lump sum. We'll be careful with it. Then we'll find jobs. You won't have to worry about sending me money every month. You were going to move out and start new lives anyway…"

"We've already filed for divorce!" Mom said, staring at the floor in shame.

That shook me a little, but I had to keep going.

“Do you even understand what you’re proposing?” Dad attempted a smile. “We’d be responsible, but you’d be living on your own.”

Mom was thinking. That seemed like a good sign.

“I understand. But we won’t fall apart. Please. Help us now, and we’ll manage from there.” I looked from Mom back to Dad. “At least we’d have a chance.”

Dad gave a tired smile. Another pause followed.

“We’re not promising you anything. We need to think carefully about what can be done,” he said slowly, looking at Mom.

Mom looked at me, then at Dad, and gave an almost imperceptible nod. I couldn’t tell whether she’d agreed to my plan or merely to discussing it.

“I believe in you!” I said, and went outside, leaving my parents alone. I knew they had plenty to talk about.

Inna hadn’t been online for two days, so there was nothing for me on social media. I decided to walk around the neighborhood and visit places I hadn’t seen for a long time. The river I’d never shown her. Nature. Fresh air.

I got back close to midnight. My parents were asleep. I made my way to my room in the dark, then lay in bed for a long time, unable to sleep.

A Change for the Better

In the morning, my alarm woke me. I could stay in bed a little longer. We had PE first, and the teacher had promised to overlook absences if we were preparing for exams. What was strange was that Mom hadn't come to wake me. She usually checked my room regardless of the schedule.

Two towels were missing from the bathroom. I looked in the washing machine. Empty. I ate the breakfast Mom had left in the kitchen and drank the cold tea. While dressing, I noticed more space in the closet. There were no sheets on my parents' bed. Were they doing laundry? I had no time to investigate. I was already running late for second period.

On the way, I tried to think about the odd things I'd noticed in the apartment, but couldn't concentrate. Thoughts of Inna and the conversation with my parents kept breaking in, refusing to leave me alone.

After school, I went back to the children's home to tell Inna about our conversation. The girl I knew met me at the fence. I handed over my bus money. She pocketed it and leaned closer.

"Your lady won't be available today!" she said, keeping up her act.

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