

I'm With You

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*Some bonds
do not end.
They just change
form.*



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Im With You

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Your son died in the war. But tomorrow, he will speak to you again. In a small town outside Moscow, this sounds like an impossible miracle. But the Descendants Corporation has created a technology capable of preserving human consciousness after death. When Vadim signs a military contract, he agrees to take part in a digital immortality program. A few months later, he is gone. And a few days after that, his mother hears his voice again. Not a recording. Not a memory. Vadim himself. A small device the size of a silver coin gives the family back what seemed lost forever. Their son is with them again — supporting them, advising them, helping them survive their grief. But soon it is his voice that is the first to sense danger, when his parents find themselves at the center of a fraud scheme that could take everything from them. *I'm With You* is a warm work of science fiction about family, hope, and a future where death no longer means a final goodbye.

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Im With You

Part 1. The Price



Pavlovsky Posad, an old textile town east of Moscow, greeted the morning of mid-August with the smell of weaving mills and sun-warmed water from the lake. The town woke slowly, like an old loom — creaking, straining, but inexorable. Vadim stood at the window of his room on the seventh floor of a Soviet-era prefabricated apartment block, looking at the construction site of the future park around the lake. Cranes moved — slowly, heavily, but they moved. Excavators dug pits, dump trucks hauled away soil, concrete mixers turned their red drums. The town was being built despite the war. Or in spite of it.

He was thirty-five. The age when boyhood is already over but manhood hasn't quite begun. Stocky, with the broad shoulders of a weaver — a trade he'd inherited from his father, and his father from his grandfather. Three generations, three shifts, the same Workshop No. 14. Vadim's hands remembered thread better than they remembered people's faces. He'd worked at the weaving mill since he was eighteen. Loom number seven knew his hands — rough, with permanent calluses from thread and metal. In Pavlovsky Posad, where everything breathed shawls and wool, this was an ordinary thing. Thirty-five — the age when others had long since had children, built extensions onto private houses, or left for other towns in the Moscow Region or for Moscow itself in search of better work. But Vadim had stayed. Palms in calluses, fingers with denim dye permanently worked into the pores — the mill had switched to special orders for military uniforms six months ago.

The old dressing table mirror he'd inherited from his grandmother reflected a face women called interesting. Not handsome — interesting. A nose broken in his youth, shallow wrinkles around the eyes that shouldn't have been there at thirty-five, light-brown stubble he shaved every three days because shaving more often irritated his skin. Gray eyes with yellowish whites — the years in the dye shop had left their mark, despite all the respirators.

On the nightstand by the bed lay a photograph in a cheap plastic frame. Alina. A young woman with long chestnut hair and a mole above her left eyebrow, like a tiny map of an unknown island. They'd been together two years.

Vadim often replayed in his memory the evening they'd first seen each other. It was at a disco in an abandoned workshop of the former weaving mill, which locals had nicknamed Fabrika Party. People chipped in a thousand rubles a head, rented the old warehouse for the night, hung a mirror ball, and hired a DJ from a neighboring town. Vadim had come with friends, already quite drunk, and was standing by the speaker when she walked onto the dance floor. Alina danced with fiery energy — not the way everyone dances, but as if music flowed through her veins instead of blood. She moved her hips and legs with a kind of frightening precision. At one point she bent slightly and tossed her loose hair forward — one! And immediately threw it back — two! Like in those modern American teen movies where the heroine dances at a party, flipping her hair to the beat. At that very moment their eyes met. Alina looked straight at him, eye to eye, and a spark jumped between them — not a metaphor, but a physical sensation, as if someone had flicked a lighter inside his chest. Vadim didn't go up to her then — he got shy, froze like an idiot. But a week later they bumped into each other in line for coffee, and he finally squeezed out, "Hi, I remember you from the disco." She smiled and said, "I remember you too. You never asked me to dance." They hadn't been apart since.

Alina worked as an administrator at a dental clinic in the center of town. Ten-hour shifts, perpetually dissatisfied patients, paperwork. Her salary was enough only for herself — she lived with her parents, saved for the wedding penny by penny, occasionally allowed herself a cheap manicure. She didn't complain — she was used to it. But when Vadim brought up the contract, fear appeared in her eyes for the first time — not for herself.

Vadim had planned to propose on New Year's Eve, but the war had other plans.

"Vad, are you going to eat?" his mother's voice came from the kitchen, muffled by distance and the smell of fried onions.

"Coming."

He pulled himself away from the window and walked down the corridor, past walls hung with rugs and photographs. The apartment smelled of old things and new anxiety. A three-room apartment in a modest Soviet-era apartment block where every square centimeter was soaked with thirty years of life. His father's armchair with the sagging seat, covered by a blanket his grandmother had knitted back in the nineties. His mother's violets on the windowsill — the pots were so crowded they barely fit. Every morning she came to admire them, water them, so they'd stay fresh and look beautiful. Vadim knew that after his departure the flowers would demand her care like never before. They always felt her hands, her mood — faster than people did.

His father was already at the table. Viktor Ivanovich, fifty-eight, with a face carved by wrinkles deeper than his son's, and hands that trembled — not from illness, but from nerves. Three years ago at the mill, two fingers on his left hand had been cut off — a circular saw, night shift, human error. Now he worked as a storekeeper and took phenazepam prescribed by a neurologist. Today he hadn't taken it — he planned to take it later, when his son returned from Noginsk.

"Sit down," his father said, not looking up. His voice was hollow, as if he were speaking from underwater.

His mother — Nina Pavlovna, fifty-five, a woman with faded blue eyes and a perpetually worried face — set a plate of fried eggs and bacon on the table. She always fed him as if it were the last meal of her life. Vadim suspected that it was — not the last ever, but the last in this configuration. Son at home, father at the table, war somewhere far away.

"Are you sure?" his mother asked, sitting down across from him. The question she'd asked every day for the past two weeks.

"I'm sure, Mom."

"When are you signing the contract?" his mother asked, driving the word *when* into the beginning of the phrase like a nail.

"Today, in Noginsk. At the military recruitment center."

His father crunched his bread. Loudly, deliberately. Vadim knew that gesture — the old man didn't want to hear details. Details made reality too tangible.

The war to the west of the country had been going on for eight months now. A war against a country of mad Nazi fanatics — that's what they said on TV. Vadim didn't pay much attention to politics. He didn't care about ideology. He needed money. A wedding cost four hundred thousand rubles. A studio apartment in a new building by the lake — another two and a half million, financed with a mortgage. Alina worked as an administrator at a dental clinic; her salary was enough only for herself. Vadim pulled in thirty-five thousand rubles at the mill, plus taxi gigs in the evenings. The war paid three hundred thousand rubles a month — nearly nine times what he earned at the mill. Three hundred thousand for a life.

The simplest arithmetic, which he ran through his head every night.

After breakfast he went to shower. The water ran rusty for the first three seconds — the eternal problem of the high-rise. He stood under the hot stream and looked at his fingers. Legs. Chest. All of it could turn into mincemeat at any moment. But he forbade himself to think about it. The thought of death led to paralysis of will. He had to move forward, like walking a tightrope over an abyss — without looking down.

His father was waiting for him in the hallway when Vadim came out of the shower, hastily toweling himself dry.

"Take this." The old man held out a small black cross on a leather cord. "Mine. I've worn it since I was twenty. Don't take it off."

Vadim took it. The cross was warm from his father's body. He put it on over his T-shirt, then tucked it under the fabric.

"I won't take it off, Dad."

"See that you don't."

They didn't hug. In their family, embraces were something alien, like vegetarianism or yoga. Love was measured in silence and tea served on time.

At ten in the morning Vadim left the house alone. His parents stayed — his mother washing dishes, his father turning on the TV to the news. Vadim went down the stairs (the elevator had broken down last month), passed the children's playground where grandmothers had already settled on benches, and walked to the minibus stop.

He decided to take public transport — it was cheaper. First a minibus to the bus station, then a regular bus to Noginsk. The trip took about an hour if there were no traffic jams. Vadim sat by the window and put his backpack on his knees. In the backpack — passport, military ID, a spare T-shirt, and sandwiches his mother had shoved in for the road, wrapped in parchment.

The bus started. The town floated past the window: first the five-story buildings, then a neighborhood of detached houses, then fields and tree lines. Vadim looked at the trees and counted. Three hundred thousand rubles a month. In six months — almost two million. The wedding, the down payment on the apartment. His mother could retire early. His father would buy new prosthetics for his fingers — there were modern technologies now. He didn't think about death. He forbade himself.

The military recruitment center was located in the building of a former vocational school on the outskirts of Noginsk. A three-story Soviet-era building with peeling plaster and cracked steps. A tricolor flag hung on the roof — huge, faded in the sun. In the parking lot stood buses with tinted windows and a few civilian cars. About ten men in camouflage were smoking by the entrance — some already in uniform, some in civilian clothes, like Vadim.

Inside it smelled of government-issue canned stew, bleach, and sweat. A lot of sweat. Vadim walked down a corridor with yellow walls to an office with a sign: Military Recruitment. Contract

Signing. A line of four people. All men between twenty-five and forty. Some with serious faces, some deliberately carefree. One guy, very young, with trembling hands, kept adjusting his belt though it already sat perfectly.

Vadim joined the line, took out his phone — wrote to Alina: *I'm here. Everything's fine*. She answered immediately: *I love you. Come back*. He didn't answer. Not because he didn't want to, but because the words got stuck in his throat.

Twenty minutes later he was invited into the office. Inside sat two people — a major with tired eyes and a female doctor with a mole on her nose. The major was flipping through his documents, the doctor was looking at a monitor.

"Vadim Viktorovich." The major raised his eyes. "Volunteer. Reason?"

"Financial."

The major smirked — without humor, just stretched his lips.

"Honest. That's good. Better than for the Motherland. For the Motherland, you know, they fight the first year, drink the second, and collect disability papers the third. But for money, a man will always fight."

Vadim didn't answer. He waited.

"The medical commission has already cleared you," the major continued. "Healthy, fit. All that's left is to sign the contract."

The female doctor pushed a stack of papers toward him. Vadim started reading, though he understood it was useless — the legal language was designed so a man in uniform couldn't understand anything. He looked only for numbers. The amount. The terms. The liability.

"Three hundred thousand rubles a month," he read aloud. "An advance of one hundred fifty thousand rubles on signing."

"Correct." The major nodded. "But that's not all. You're from the Moscow Region, from Pavlovsky Posad?"

"Yes."

"Then listen carefully. For residents of the Moscow Region, there are additional regional payments. A one-time payment upon signing the contract with the Ministry of Defense — 1.9 million rubles from the government of the Moscow Region. Plus the federal payment — 400 thousand. You'll receive a total of 2.3 million right after being sent to your unit. On top of the monthly allowance."

Vadim felt something jump inside him. 2.3 million. Right away. Plus three hundred thousand a month. Plus three million rubles in insurance coverage for the family in case of... He forbade himself to think about the last point.

"And if..." he began and faltered. "And if I destroy something in battle? Equipment, a plane?"

The major smirked for real now, showing yellowed, smoke-stained teeth.

"You're thinking far ahead, soldier. But correctly. They pay separately for destroyed enemy equipment. For a downed plane — three hundred thousand. For a helicopter — two hundred. For a tank — one hundred thousand. Not by planes alone, but those are the sums. So if you turn out to be Rambo out there, consider yourself a jackpot winner."

The doctor giggled again, but Vadim wasn't listening. He was counting. 2.3 right away. 300 a month. If he served six months — another 1.8. A total of more than four million in half a year. Plus possible bonuses. Alina could stop working. His mother would pay off the mortgage. His father would buy proper prosthetics.

"Insurance?" he asked, returning to the papers.

"Three million rubles to the family in case of death," the major repeated. "Hope it won't be needed."

Vadim nodded. The papers rustled under his fingers. He took the pen. Signed. Put the date. The second copy — for himself. The third — into the file.

The major extended his hand.

"Congratulations on signing the contract, soldier. In a week we expect you at the military unit at the address indicated in the orders. Bring your passport, military ID, contract, and personal items according to the list. On the day of departure, a minibus from the training center will come for you — at exactly seven in the morning. We know the address."

"Thank you."

Vadim stood up, put the contract in his backpack. He was about to leave when the office door opened without a knock.

A man entered. About forty, in an expensive dark-blue suit, with a badge on his lapel. Descendants Corporation — Department of Cognitive Copying. The man was clean-shaven, smelled of expensive cologne — sweet and woody, with notes of tobacco. His face — unremarkable, the kind you forget a second after you turn away. His gray eyes regarded Vadim calmly, with a hint of amusement, like a car salesman who knows you'll buy the car anyway.

"Forgive the intrusion." His voice was soft, insinuating. "Vadim Viktorovich? My name is Andrei Viktorovich. I represent Descendants Corporation. We cooperate with the Ministry of Defense within the framework of a program of psychological support for servicemen. We have a proposal. It will take three hours of your time."

The major nodded — he knew, he approved.

Vadim frowned.

"What proposal?"

"We want to copy your memory and consciousness onto a digital medium."

Silence hung in the office. The doctor with the mole stopped breathing. Vadim looked at the representative of Descendants Corporation and waited for the catch.

"Why?" he asked.

Andrei Viktorovich sat on the edge of the desk, like an old friend about to tell him something important.

"A lot can happen in war, Vadim Viktorovich. Concussion, memory loss from a wound... and the worst. Your physical body may not return. But your personality — your memories, character, voice — can live on. A copy of consciousness will help restore memory if you suffer trauma. Or help your loved ones survive the loss. Imagine: your mother could talk to you after you're gone. Hear your voice. Get advice."

Vadim smirked. The smirk came out crooked, nervous.

"I'm not planning to die," he said. "I'm planning to come back alive and well. Get married. Have children."

"Of course." Andrei Viktorovich nodded. "No one plans to. But people fasten seatbelts in cars even when they're excellent drivers."

The doctor giggled — nervously, immediately covering her mouth with her palm.

Vadim was silent. A thought was spinning in his head: the idea was remarkable. A copy of consciousness. Immortality in digital form. He'd read about such experiments — the Americans did it, the Chinese, even the Europeans. They said the technology was raw but working.

"And you won't use my copy without my consent?" Vadim asked. His voice came out harsher than he'd planned. "For scams? Creating clones or replacements? What if in five years I retire, and there's already a me who signed documents in my name?"

Andrei Viktorovich smiled. The smile was perfect — neither warm nor cold.

"This is a confidential technology still undergoing testing, Vadim Viktorovich. We are not going to use your copy illegally. Everything strictly within the framework of the signed agreement. The copy will be stored on a secure server and activated only upon the occurrence of one of the conditions: your physical death, severe traumatic brain injury with memory loss, or at your personal request after your return."

"And if I come back alive and well, what happens to the copy?"

"We'll delete it. At your request."

Vadim looked at the major. He nodded. There was essentially no choice — he'd already mentally agreed. Not because he believed in corporate nobility. But because he didn't exactly have three hours to spare, but he was curious. And something else — a vague hope that if something happened to him, his mother wouldn't be left completely alone.

"All right," Vadim said. "I agree."

"Excellent." Andrei Viktorovich clapped his hands — dryly, businesslike. "The copying process will take three hours. You'll be given a sleeping pill if you're not ready to stay awake that long. Many prefer to sleep."

"The sleeping pill," Vadim said. "Let's do that."

"Reasonable decision."

Vadim signed the agreement with Descendants Corporation. Thin sheets, small print, legal language he didn't understand. He signed where they showed him and added the date. Andrei Viktorovich took one copy, left the second for Vadim.

"Follow me."

They went out into the corridor, descended the stairs to the basement. A clean room, painted white. In the middle — a chair like a dentist's, with a headrest and armrests. Around it — equipment: screens, wires, units with blinking lights. It smelled of ozone and something sweet.

"Have a seat."

Vadim sat. The leather upholstery was cool. A technician — a young guy in a white coat — began attaching sensors to his head. Discs with gel, wires, tape. There were many sensors — twenty, thirty. They covered his scalp from forehead to nape.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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