

Amal Akhmedov



Decent lies

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Alison is caught between two lives. In one, she is a devoted wife to Robert, a man slowly dying of stomach cancer, counting his last months in a darkened bedroom. In the other, she is someone else entirely — a woman rediscovering warmth, desire, and a version of herself she thought she had buried long ago. She cannot leave her husband. She cannot give up the man who makes her feel alive. And she cannot outrun the secrets she has kept for years — from Robert, from her children, from herself. Decent Lies is a novel about the impossible choices we make in the name of love and duty, about the lies we tell to keep our lives intact, and about the truths that surface when everything else falls away. Some secrets are revealed. Others we carry with us — to the very end.

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Decent lies

To my friends — Rushan and Emilia. I'm glad I have you.

Prologue. The Day of Death

December 2000.

Christmas was just around the corner, but the snow that night didn't feel like a holiday. It fell in heavy, wet clumps that refused to melt—sticking to car roofs, to asphalt, to everything. The white blanket that usually promised celebration had already swallowed the streets and trees.

In a townhouse kitchen in Boston, the silence was almost surgical—broken only by the clatter of plates and the hiss of water in the sink. The chef, focused and eerily calm, was bringing a sauce to perfection for a private dinner. Allison stood at the sink, scrubbing the last of the day's cookware. Her mind was already far from the stale bedroom of her house, where her husband Robert was slowly fading into a ghost.

Suddenly, the silence shattered. A harsh, rattling ring—the wall phone. The chef didn't flinch, continuing to plate the dishes. Allison dried her hands, walked to the phone, and picked it up.

"Hello?"

The chef couldn't hear the person on the other end, but he felt the air in the kitchen turn cold.

The receiver slipped from her fingers and swung on its coiled cord, knocking against the painted wall. Allison didn't apologize. She didn't look at the chef. Grabbing her burgundy coat, she bolted for the door. The heavy oak slammed shut, leaving him alone with the scent of exotic spices and braising veal.

He didn't see her run out—only the swinging receiver, a long, hollow tone coming through. He walked over and hung it back in place. Shedding his chef's jacket, he moved to the living room window and watched the taillights of Allison's old Cherokee cut through the darkness, carrying her down the slope.

At the same time, two doors down from the Laytons' house, it was warm inside Miss Martha's home. Seven-year-old Remy and five-year-old Mark sat on the rug in front of the television. Some Christmas cartoon was playing, its flickering colors dancing across their faces.

"Miss Martha, when's Mommy coming to get us?" the boy asked, not turning away from the screen.

"Soon, sweetheart. She should be done with work in a couple of hours."

Remy said nothing. She stared out the dark window, where the light snowfall was already turning into a blizzard. At seven, children already know the difference between a reassuring tone and an honest one. And Miss Martha's voice sounded hollow to her—like the word "soon" itself. The girl hugged her knees, feeling a draft creep up her legs.

On the highway leading out of town, the road was empty—just one or two cars flashing past Allison. She could barely see the road. Before her eyes, blurred with tears, was Robert's face as she'd seen him that morning: gray, hollow-eyed, beads of sweat on his forehead. She pressed the gas harder, trying to outrun death itself, which had been breathing down their necks for months.

Blinding headlights. A screech of brakes that drowned out the wind. A dull, heavy crunch that shook the trees along the shoulder. The truck emerged from the snow wall like a ghost.

Then—silence.

The worst silence in the world, broken only by the hiss of a ruptured radiator and the ticking of the dashboard clock, still counting seconds from a life that no longer existed.

Robert had already tied one end of his bathrobe belt to the outside handle of the bedroom door, looping it over the top so the other end hung inside. He closed the door. He tied the other end around his neck, adjusting the knot so it pressed against the side, under his ear. He dropped to his knees. Slowly, he leaned forward, letting his weight pull against the belt.

The belt tightened.

His legs twitched weakly a few times. Warm moisture trickled down the inside of his thighs, soaking his pajama pants and the carpet. His face was lit by the flickering Christmas lights his children had strung up just days ago. In the house, the only sounds were the wet snow hitting the glass and the old refrigerator groaning in the empty kitchen.

Winter had finally settled in for good.

Chapter 1. Expiration Date

Nine Months Before Death.

Robert's parents had died before his son Mark was born. But he'd known since he was young exactly what kind of family he wanted—the same kind he'd grown up in: warm, close-knit, where Saturday mornings smelled like bacon and everyone gathered around the TV, or went on picnics, or took long walks.

He tried his best to live that life. He spent as much time with his family as he could.

That evening, he was watching TV with his wife and kids, like any other Saturday night. His younger son was building something out of blocks. His daughter and wife were laughing at some comedy. Robert, though, was somewhere else—counting days in his head. The mortgage payment. The car loan. Trying to figure out whether he'd have to pick up extra shifts to cover everything. He was already planning a family trip for the next month—something small, but the kids needed it.

Outside, it was June. Remy had already outgrown last year's sandals. Allison had been dropping hints about a new washing machine for a couple of months now—gently, carefully. He knew she was right. It was time to replace the old LG. Not his wife, of course. The washing machine. The one his company had given them when Remy was born. Seven years old, and it had been running nonstop.

He scratched the back of his head absently, and his fingers found something he didn't want to admit—less hair on top than anywhere else. He wasn't ready to go bald. Gray hair? Fine. Distinguished. But a bald spot at twenty-seven? Humiliating.

Then he threw up on the rug. Right in front of the TV.

His vision went dark. His forehead hit the wooden coffee table with a loud crack, and he slid to the floor. The kids screamed. Allison rushed over, trying to shake him awake. The next four hours were a blur—he never remembered them.

When he opened his eyes again, he was in a hospital bed. Weak, groggy, head pounding. The first face he saw was Allison's. She looked like she hadn't slept—like she'd been bracing for the worst. She rushed to him as soon as she saw his eyes open.

"What happened?" he rasped. "Where are the kids?"

She barely had time to answer before the doctor walked in.

Dr. Abraham Miller—tall, sharp cheekbones, blue eyes, a smile that looked like it belonged in a commercial. The kind of face that was supposed to put people at ease. But the way his eyes moved told a different story. He was carrying bad news in that folder.

"Good evening. You're in the hospital, you're safe. I'm Dr. Abraham Miller. You passed out at home. Do you remember what happened?"

Robert glanced at his wife, then back at the doctor.

"I remember watching a Jim Carrey movie with the family. That's it."

"We've got the CT and biopsy results. We stopped the bleeding, but the situation is serious. I won't sugarcoat it, Mr. and Mrs. Layton. Robert, you have stage IV adenocarcinoma of the stomach."

Robert squeezed Allison's hand. The room seemed to tilt.

His stomach had always been a problem—soda, chips, fast food. He'd been to gastroenterologists more times than he cared to count. He'd go on diets, feel better, then fall back into old habits.

"Is it the spicy food?" he asked. "I had a bucket of wings from KFC last night. I know I shouldn't, but I can't help it."

Allison shook off her daze. "Do we operate? A diet?"

"I'm afraid a diet won't help here," the doctor said gently. "The tumor has spread beyond the stomach—we found multiple metastases in the liver and signs of peritoneal carcinomatosis."

The words hung in the air like a bad smell.

Allison went pale. Robert gripped her hand tighter, waiting for the rest.

"In this case, removing the stomach won't do much. It wouldn't stop the progression, and his body might not survive the procedure. Simply put—you're looking at terminal cancer, Mr. Layton."

"No," Allison cut in. "That's wrong. Remember when Remy had those spots on her neck and the doctor said it was chickenpox? It was just an allergy. This is just a gastritis flare-up. He's been eating junk food, that's all."

Her voice was sharp, but it cracked at the edges. Robert could hear it. She was falling apart, and she was trying not to show it.

Dr. Miller took his time. He removed his glasses, set them aside, and looked at Allison without judgment. He waited until she'd run out of steam. Then he spoke—low, steady.

"I understand," he said. "This kind of news can't be absorbed in five minutes. I'd feel the same way if I were in your shoes. Seeking a second opinion is the smartest thing you can do right now."

Allison blinked, caught off guard.

The doctor continued: "We'll prepare all the materials if you decide to go to New York. The secondary growths in the liver are clearly visible. While you're looking for other specialists, he'll stay on an IV—saline, H2 blockers to prevent another bleed. His hemoglobin is dangerously low. If it drops any further, we'll need to transfuse. That should give him enough strength for transport."

His pager buzzed—a Motorola clipped to his belt. He glanced at it, then back at them.

"Robert, Allison... I need you to hear me. I'm going to say a lot of numbers and terms, but the important part is what's behind them."

He paused.

"I have to be honest with you. At this stage, we can't talk about a cure. We're moving into palliative care. And if you ask me about time... statistically, we're looking at four to six months."

He raised a hand, anticipating the reaction.

"But that number isn't written in stone. It's a window, not a sentence. Four to six months on average—but every patient is different. If we focus on treatment, if Mr. Layton fights, and if we manage complications, we have a real chance of getting him to Christmas. At home. With his family."

He paused again.

"But to get there, we have to stop fighting the diagnosis and start working with it. Right now. Our goal is to make sure he has the strength to sit at the holiday table, not just lie in a hospital room. We'll fight for every holiday, Mrs. Layton. Every single one."

Dr. Miller had done this before. Hundreds of times. He knew how to deliver bad news and still leave people with something to hold onto. Allison believed him. Robert saw it in her eyes—she was gripping the thread he'd given her.

And then Robert felt something break inside him. Tears came, hot and fast, rolling down his face. He hadn't expected that. He'd never been much of a crier. But he felt so alone—even with Allison right there, holding his hand. He was standing at the edge of a cliff. No one could jump with him. He'd have to go alone.

He was angry. At the world. At the unfairness of it all. And then he wasn't angry anymore—just broken.

He pulled Allison close and sobbed into her shoulder. Dr. Miller quietly slipped out, closing the door behind him.

Chapter 2. Denial

The next few days were among the worst the Layton family had ever endured. Hospital rules were merciless: even if you felt strong enough to walk to the parking lot, you had to leave in a wheelchair. Robert hated it. He sat there, gripping the cold metal armrests, a heavy kraft - paper envelope on his lap — the kind with the NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital logo stamped across it. Inside: his new life, neatly captured on black X-ray film. His one - way ticket.

Allison walked beside him, too fast, almost tripping over her own feet. She wasn't looking at him. Her eyes were fixed on the automatic doors ahead, beyond which shimmered the heat haze of a New England June.

"Allison, slow down," he said, his voice hoarse — his throat still raw from the endoscopy.

She didn't answer. Just tightened her grip on the wheelchair handle.

When they finally made it to the parking lot, Robert was hit by something that wasn't physical — a sensory punch. The smell of sun-baked asphalt and cheap gasoline hit him like a wall. A silver Dodge Neon rolled past, windows down, blasting a Britney Spears hit at full volume. Everyone around him was living in the new millennium. They were planning vacations, waiting for the weekend, worried about nothing more than the Y2K bug that never came. Robert, though, had been thrown into a different era entirely — one where time wasn't measured in years, but in milliliters of IV fluid.

Allison helped him into the front seat of their old Cherokee. She fussed — adjusting his seatbelt, checking the air conditioning wasn't blowing directly on him.

"We'll be home soon," she chattered, glancing in the rearview mirror.

"The kids are with Miss Martha. She'll bring them over. I'll make you some broth. Dr. Miller said you need to eat small meals. We'll get that juicer from Good Housekeeping—you know, the one that squeezes everything dry. Vitamins are key, Robert. We'll build a diet. We'll... we'll make this thing back off."

Robert watched her profile — the way her jaw was clenched tight. She was deep in denial, building barricades out of vegetable juice and hope.

"Allison," he said.

"And I already got the number for that specialist in New York. I'm calling tomorrow. We'll bring him the scans. They probably messed something up at the lab — they always mess things up."

"Allison!" he said, louder. She slammed on the brakes.

"What?" Her voice cracked.

"Just drive me home."

The house greeted them with silence. Robert walked in and stopped. His golf bag was still in the corner. The electricity bills — the ones he'd meant to pay last Monday — were still on the hall table. That was from another life. The one where he wasn't vomiting blood in front of his kids.

He made it ten steps to the living room couch, but his chest was already heavy with a sticky, suffocating shortness of breath. His stomach throbbed — a dull, gnawing pain. The tumor reminded him every time he thought about being home.

Then noise from the hallway. The door burst open, and Remy and Mark rushed in. Remy, who'd just turned seven, froze at the doorway, hugging her backpack to her chest. Mark, the youngest, tried to run to his father, but Allison blocked him — as if Robert were made of glass.

"Dad?" Remy stared at him with wide eyes. Robert saw what he feared most in that look: fear itself. The image of his solid, unshakable father collapsing into a pool of bloody vomit on a peaceful Saturday night had left a scar.

Mark didn't understand the word "stage," but he felt the tension coming off his mother. He stood frozen, glancing from his father's pale face to Allison's shaking hands.

"Allison, let him go," Robert said quietly, but firmly.

She reluctantly lowered her arms, and Mark scrambled onto the couch, pressing himself against Robert's side. The sudden movement sent a white-hot spike through Robert's stomach. He gritted his teeth, forcing his face to stay still. He couldn't show pain. Not now.

"Hey, buddy," Robert said, placing a hand on his son's head. His hair smelled like summer and kids' shampoo. "I'm home. See? It's fine. The doctors just gave me some nasty pills and let me go."

"Swear word!" Mark yelled.

"Yeah, sorry, bud. I'll put a dollar in the swear jar."

Remy was still standing by the door. She hadn't moved. Her eyes were fixed on a spot on the rug — the one Allison had scrubbed furiously two days ago, while Robert was in the ICU. The stain was gone. But for Remy, it still glowed like neon.

"Remy?" Robert reached out a hand. "Come here, sweetheart."

She took a step. Then another. Her movements were stiff, wooden. She came close and touched his fingers, gently, as if afraid they'd crumble to dust.

"Mom said you ate something bad," she whispered. "Like in the story about the wolf and the rocks in his belly."

Robert glanced at Allison. She was standing in the kitchen doorway, her hand pressed to her mouth. Her version of the truth. A fairy tale.

"Something like that, honey," Robert said, smiling through the effort. "My stomach just threw a little fit. But I'm home now, and we're just going to... rest."

"You won't do it again?" Remy looked up at him with eyes that were far too serious for a seven-year-old. "No more blood?"

The room went so quiet he could hear the kitchen clock ticking. Robert felt something tighten inside him — not from the cancer, but from the unbearable weight of lying. He remembered Dr. Miller's words: four to six months. The tumor could rupture again anytime.

"I'll try, Remy. I promise I'll try."

"Alright," Allison cut in, her voice sharp. "Time for a snack. Mark, get off your dad — he needs to stretch his legs. Remy, help me set the table."

She busied herself, creating noise, a shield of normalcy. But Robert saw her glancing at the yellow envelope still sitting on the coffee table, right next to the bills. It was a symbol now — something more serious than overdue payments. Inside it was a truth that couldn't be turned into a fairy tale about a wolf.

Robert leaned back into the couch. He looked at his children and felt something he hadn't felt in days: not fear, but rage. Rage that he'd have to leave them. Rage that Christmas would come without him.

From the kitchen came the clatter of pots — Allison making noise on purpose, drowning out the silence. Soon, she called them to the table.

Robert forced himself up. Every inch of him resisted. His stomach, once just an organ, now felt like a hot, heavy stone pulling everything downward. He walked to the dining room, one hand against the wall, trying to hide his weakness.

On the table sat a bowl of clear, almost colorless chicken broth. Next to it, a glass of murky liquid — vegetable juice. He recognized it with dread.

"Here," Allison said, setting it before him like a holy grail. "The doctor said nothing heavy. I skimmed all the fat off. And the juice — celery, spinach, a little apple. For your liver, Robert. I read about it in Reader's Digest while I was waiting for you."

Robert looked at the glass. The smell alone made him nauseous.

"Allison, I don't think I can—"

"Please, Robert." Her voice was high, tight. "Just try. We need to build your strength."

He picked up the spoon. His hand shook. He swallowed a bit of the warm broth. He'd always loved Allison's homemade broth, but now it tasted metallic, wrong. The tumor inside him seemed to recoil.

"Dad, why aren't you eating meat?" Mark asked, chewing a ham sandwich.

"Dad's on a special diet," Allison answered quickly. "Like an astronaut. Eat, Robert. Just a little more."

He looked at her. No sympathy there — just feverish determination. She believed that if he finished the juice and the broth, the black spots on the X-rays would vanish. It was her private war, and Robert was her only soldier, being sent into battle without ammunition.

"I can't," he said quietly, pushing the bowl away.

"Two more bites. Please. For the kids."

It was a low blow. Robert glanced at Remy. She wasn't eating. She was watching his face, trying to read him. She saw right through him.

"Enough, Allison." He stood up slowly. "I'm going to lie down."

"But you barely ate anything! Your body will start consuming itself! Robert!"

He didn't answer. He walked toward the bedroom, feeling her desperate, angry stare on the back of his neck. Passing the coffee table, he paused. The yellow envelope was still there, overshadowing the electric bills.

In the bedroom, he didn't turn on the light. He sat on the edge of the bed and stared at his hands. In the half-dark, they looked foreign — too thin, veins showing through. These were the hands that had built a porch, changed the oil in the Cherokee, tossed his son up to the ceiling. Now they could barely hold a spoon.

From the living room came Allison's muffled voice—explaining something to the kids—then the sound of water running. The world was still turning. Insurance companies expected payments. The backyard grass needed mowing. And in his gut, in the silence, the adenocarcinoma was doing its slow, steady work.

He lay down on top of the covers, still in his clothes. Stared at the ceiling. Listened to the house breathe. A floorboard creaked in the kids' room. Water ran in the bathroom. Then silence, broken only by birdsong outside.

He slipped into a heavy, sticky sleep. But hours later, he was pulled back to the surface by a strange sound—not crying, not screaming. A ghostly, painfully familiar screech: a dial-up modem. A series of short beeps. The anthem of the digital age.

Allison was in the study.

Robert got up, muscles stiff, stomach pulsing with dull resentment. He made his way to the half-open door and stopped.

The room was bathed in the sickly, phosphorescent glow of a bulky monitor. Allison sat in the desk chair, knees tucked under her, looking tiny against the massive desk. On the screen, slowly loading line by line, was a Yahoo! search page. She waited, listening to the modem choke on the data.

"Allison?" he said softly.

She flinched so hard she knocked over a cold cup of tea. Quickly turning, she tried to block the screen with her body. But Robert had already seen the blue links.

"Robert... you shouldn't be up. You need rest. Cells regenerate during sleep—I read that..."

"What are you looking for?" He walked over to the desk and peered at the monitor.

In the search bar, in uneven letters: *Miracle cures for stage 4 stomach adenocarcinoma.*

"Look at this," she said, grabbing the mouse and scrolling frantically. The hourglass cursor froze as grainy images loaded. "There's a clinic in Tijuana—they use laetrile and vitamin B17. People write that doctors gave them weeks, and they've lived three years! And there's a center in Texas—antineoplastons. Robert, medicine is business. Miller doesn't have the right to keep this from us!"

Robert stared at the flickering screen. Banner ads promised salvation to anyone desperate enough to have a credit card.

"Allison, this is Mexico," he said quietly.

"It's hope!" she shot back.

She turned back to the screen, clicking a link: "Eastern Secrets: Reishi Mushrooms vs. Tumors." The modem screeched again, connecting to a server on the other side of the country.

Robert watched her—the back of her head, stray hairs escaping her ponytail. Something inside him gave way. Not fear of death. Exhaustion from her fight. She was building barricades of juice and internet links, trying to ignore the fact that death had already walked in and was simply waiting.

"Allison," he said, touching her shoulder.

"Go to bed, Robert. I'll find something. I will. Tomorrow we'll go to New York for a second opinion. And if they say the same thing... we'll go to Mexico. I already printed the address."

He said nothing. He walked out, leaving her with her flickering digital god. Back in bed, he lay down again. The modem's buzz through the wall sounded like a mosquito.

He understood now: denial wasn't just refusing to believe. It was work. Hard, exhausting work to create a fake world where he still had a future. And Allison was going to keep building it—even if it destroyed whatever they had left.

Robert closed his eyes. In the dark, the blue letters from the screen still danced before him, promising miracles he could no longer afford to believe in.

Chapter 3. Summer of 1992

Eight Years Before Death.

Allison never knew her parents. Her mother died when she was three—cirrhosis of the liver, found too late. Her father couldn't handle it and withdrew into himself. A year later, he was hit by a car late at night, crossing the road. She didn't even remember his face. Only his smell—tobacco and cheap cologne—which sometimes came back in dreams and made her wake up in tears.

Allison grew up in a children's home. There, she learned not to cry in front of others and not to ask for what she knew she wouldn't get. Then came a boarding school, where she learned to lie. Not out of malice—to survive. So no one would hurt her, no one would scold her, so the other kids would accept her, so she could sneak out after curfew.

By eighteen, she had learned to be different people. To teachers—a diligent straight-A student who would pass her exams and get into college. To peers—a fun friend who always kept the conversation going and never pried. To herself—no one. No one knew who she really was when she was alone.

After college, she rented a tiny room in the house of an elderly couple who kept to themselves. Mr. and Mrs. Harrison were old, quiet, and barely left their half of the house. Sometimes Mrs. Harrison would leave a plate of cookies or a jar of homemade jam outside Allison's door, but she never tried to talk. It was the best thing that had happened to her in a long time. No one controlled her, no one asked questions, no one demanded explanations. Just silence and freedom.

But freedom turned out to be as empty as a cage. Just more space to be alone.

She worked at a small bookstore downtown. The pay was laughable, but Allison loved the smell of the place—old paper, dust, and coffee from the vending machine by the entrance. She sorted books, shelved them, sometimes read in the evenings when there were no customers. Life flowed evenly and quietly, page after page.

Life goes on in its usual rhythm, settling into routine. Time feels like rubber, and the thought creeps in that this is your permanent state. This is how it will always be. Until one day, life flips completely. And within moments after a pivotal event, you're hit with the realization that nothing is in your control—something can happen without your involvement, and the old life will never return. That's how Allison met him.

He worked at a small diner across the street from her bookstore. Allison stopped by for pastries in the mornings—one poppy seed, one chocolate. The guy was always at the counter—quiet, focused, his hands moving with the precision of a samurai wielding a katana.

For a whole week, she came there for lunch. For the first time, she felt this kind of pull toward the opposite sex. She hesitated for a long time. She liked everything about him—the way he adjusted his apron before stepping out to customers, the way he stared out the window when the diner emptied. In his eyes, there was no boredom, no sadness—only a calm, deep emptiness.

One day, during her reconnaissance, she gathered her courage and decided she would finally approach him and talk about something other than pastries. She finished her pastries, finished her latte, and was about to walk over when a line formed at the counter. First three people, then two more. She waited thirty minutes, but the crowd didn't thin out. Meanwhile, her lunch break ended, and she had to return to her post at the bookstore.

Her mood soured for the rest of the day. Near closing time, as she was shelving books, her attention was caught by a bright red cover—Stephen King's *Carrie*. She set it aside to read until the end of her shift.

In *Carrie*, she saw herself—lonely, misunderstood, desperate to belong, to be normal. Carrie's mother reminded her of the caretakers at the children's home. They too were obsessed with Christ and instilled the fear of hellfire in their charges.

Only ten minutes remained until closing. Allison was right in the middle of the book's bloody climax when someone knocked on the wooden counter. She looked up and saw him. In that instant, she flushed—embarrassed and startled. So absorbed in her reading, she hadn't even noticed him walk in.

"Hi," he smiled.

"Hi," she replied, feeling her face turn red.

"My name is..." he started.

"I know," she interrupted. "You forgot to take off your name tag."

He laughed, and the sound seemed the most genuine thing in the world.

"So you're Allie?" he nodded at her tag.

"Yeah, Allie."

"Nice to meet you. I see you in the diner a lot."

"I like your pastries."

"Chocolate and poppy," he finished for her.

"Yeah," she laughed again.

He looked at her with warm, chocolate-brown eyes, as if he could see right through her. Allison felt something tighten inside—not fear, but something else she couldn't name. That look. As if she were sitting before him completely naked.

"How's *Carrie*?" he asked, nodding toward the book in her hands.

Allison looked at it as if she'd forgotten what she was reading.

"Lots of blood. I like it so far. Have you read it?"

"Yeah, but I don't like Stephen King. Too dark for me." He paused for a moment. Allison didn't know what to say, lost in his deep brown eyes.

"There's a cheese festival this Sunday. Want to go together?"

Allison couldn't hide her joy. Her mouth stretched into an unnaturally wide smile. "Yes, I love cheese!" she answered.

"So should I call you?" he asked cautiously.

"Yes, of course!" she blurted.

Silence hung in the store, broken a moment later by him: "Are you going to give me your number?"

They both laughed. Allison quickly scanned the counter for a scrap of paper to write her number on, but found nothing. She shuffled things from the center to the edges—coffee mug, books, folders, stationery—and stumbled upon a receipt left by a customer. Writing her number on the back, she handed it to him. As he reached for it, he accidentally knocked over the half-drunk coffee mug she'd left on the edge. It crashed, and shards scattered across the wooden floor.

"Oh, sorry. I didn't see it," he said, immediately crouching to clean up.

"No, it's my fault! I'll clean it," Allison exclaimed and rushed to the back room for a broom and dustpan. When she returned, he was still on his knees, picking up pieces. Odd how a simple mug, falling from such a small height, had managed to shatter across the entire floor. While he collected the larger pieces near the counter, Allison swept the smaller fragments from the edges. She worked backward from the corner toward the center, focused on the task, and accidentally whacked him on the head with the broom.

From that day, everything began.

He was a man of few words; Allison couldn't stop talking. She constantly told him things, often about her childhood, and for some reason, often referred to herself in the third person. Their conversations were exactly what conversations should be, as if God designed them—one spoke, the other listened.

He rented a modest apartment above a laundromat, about an hour's drive from the diner where he worked. Allison loved visiting him. The old wooden floorboards in the hallway creaked underfoot,

and so did the front door. It locked with four bolts, but that wouldn't have helped much—the door looked like it was made of cardboard. Anyone who wanted to get into that old one-bedroom apartment could have cut a hole through it with a utility knife. Despite the decrepit state of the place, he had managed to create a cozy refuge. Minimal furniture. In the center of the room stood a round dining table with two chairs. In the corner lay a mattress directly on the floor, but neatly made. Beside the mattress stood a floor lamp with a warm, pleasant glow. Above it, shelves lined the wall, packed with books—mostly cookbooks and classic literature.

When she visited, he cooked her dinners and breakfasts. New dishes every time. He was practicing, and she was his only critic. Occasionally, he taught her to cook—it was a wonderful, romantic time.

He was poor. His clothes fit into one small suitcase by the entrance. But his poverty wasn't pitiful—it was inspiring to Allison. They were on the same social level, but his confidence made him seem infinitely richer than her. She admired that he never pretended to be what he wasn't. And he never lied. He preferred the potential discomfort of truth to the weight of a lie. This sometimes caused friction between them.

It drew Allison in and frightened her at the same time. He wasn't like her. She was used to lying, pretending, adapting.

They rarely talked about the future. Allison saw him sometimes writing in a worn notebook, calculating something in his head, looking at rental ads for commercial spaces. But he never said these plans aloud. Allison was afraid to ask—what if there was no place for her in those plans? What if what felt like the love of her life was just a summer fling for him? It would have destroyed her.

One day, they were walking in the park by the pond, holding hands. He was talking, and Allison was quiet and listening—unusual for them. For several days, a question had been eating at her. She knew it would torment her until she asked it aloud. This moment in the park, while he was so talkative and cheerful, seemed right.

"I want to ask you something," she blurted out, interrupting him mid-sentence.

"Ask away, Allie," he smiled.

"Have you thought about our future?" she asked finally, holding her breath.

"Next week?" he clarified.

It felt like mockery. She was sure he knew exactly what she meant and was trying to dodge the question in the stupidest way possible. But she swallowed her irritation and gave him another chance. "No, I mean us. The future. Are we ever going to live together? Maybe get married?"

"Only when I'm sure about tomorrow," he said, as if his earlier flippant clarification had been just a stalling tactic.

"You know what I mean? When I'm sure we won't get kicked out of our rental, that I can support us. When I have everything I need for that kind of certainty—then I can think about it."

"And when do you think that'll be? A year? Two? Maybe five or ten?"

He turned to her. In his eyes, she saw that the good mood he'd radiated at the start of the walk had vanished completely. Only that calm, heavy seriousness remained—the one that frightened her most.

"As long as it takes. I can't predict the future, but I'm doing everything I can to get that stability and certainty. We're young—why complicate things so soon?"

Allison fell silent, her blue eyes filling with tears.

He realized his answer hadn't satisfied her. She realized it had been foolish to expect fairy tales from him. That was who he was—a straightforward man. And that was who she was—a girl dreaming of the family she'd never had. Walking to the end of the park, having received his cold answers as they were, she felt a strange relief. The human mind hates nothing more than incompleteness. An answer, even if cold and hurtful, still satisfies it.

When they left the park and headed to the bus stop, Allison had already processed everything and felt that familiar warmth for her companion again. She took his warm, soft hand. He took hers.

A few months later, their relationship somehow naturally reached the point where Allison moved in with him. They bought a bigger mattress. Allison started taking extra shifts at the bookstore—she seemed to be modeling herself after him. He set goals and outlined steps; she accepted them and worked toward stability. Evenings, they were too tired and just collapsed into bed. They only managed to be a romantic couple on weekends. To avoid getting bogged down in domesticity, they promised each other not to talk about work on weekends and to spend them only together—whether lying in bed watching Jim Carrey movies, walking in the park, or going on adventures.

When their relationship was almost eight months old, Allison noticed changes in her body and mood. Women pay much more attention to such things than men. Men won't go to a doctor until someone has to drag them there in an ambulance. Women, on the other hand, listen to every whisper their body makes.

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