



Chapter 21. Part One. Inside.

“How are you feeling?” a woman in an expensive sari wakes me up.

“Thank you, doctor. I no longer have a fever, and I want to go back to jail. I feel more comfortable there.”

“You will get back to your cell only in the evening,” one of my guards says. “The jail bus broke down,” he adds.

“I don’t want to stay here any longer. I’m ready to pay for a taxi, just to get out of here quickly.”

In the cell, I have more chances of staying alive and healthy.

“If you’re ready to pay thirty rupees for a rickshaw, then get dressed, we’re going home,” my guard proposes happily, as he also has no desire to hang around here until evening.

My appearance in the jail is accompanied by my friends’ applause.

“How is your health?” everyone asks me, shaking my hand one by one.

“Well, I’ll probably live.”

“How did you like the Azilo hospital?” Viktor asks, dragging a bucket of water out into the exercise yard. “Welcome to the prison beach!” he yells across the jail, inviting everyone to pour cold water over themselves.

“You know, Vitya, our jail seems like paradise after that hospital. This morning, after the hospital, I even enjoyed watching an Indian TV show in my cell. It is much more interesting than watching a rusty fan spinning overhead. And what’s new in the jail?”

“Pramud’s AIDS test came back positive. And he has a wife and a little son. He says that he was probably infected in the hospital where he was treated for some illness. Look at him, he hasn’t talked to anyone for two days, he just stares at one spot.”

“Now I understand why he was yelling that he wanted to kill that nurse. I really thought he’d gone completely nuts.”

“Hello, David, how are you?”

“Still alive,” the toothless Iranian says with a smile and extends his strong hand to me.

“Tell me, David, what passport do you have? Iranian or Indian?”

“I am a citizen of India and I have an Indian passport,” he says proudly, sitting down on the steps nearby. “All my relatives live in Iran. Forty years ago, when there was a military conflict with Iraq, I was sent to the frontline to die for my country; at that time, a lot of my friends were killed. Being young, I did not want to die at all. I took my weapon and ran away with some of my comrades. In Afghanistan, I sold my gun and came to India through Pakistan on foot. I started learning Hindi and English. At first I worked as a rickshaw driver and slept on the street. Then I married a Chinese student, she gave birth to my two children. Having saved a little money, I bought some land and built a restaurant. Now I have two restaurants in Hyderabad, my wife works in an expensive salon as a hairdresser. My children go to school.”

“Then how did you end up in Goa, David? You could have lived happily with your family.”

“Like anyone else who gets stuck here. Seven years ago, I came here on vacation for a couple of weeks and I liked it so much that I decided to stay. I began selling drugs. I thought I had found my paradise. Everything was fine until some Russian guy showed up. The police would never have caught me if he hadn’t given information to the cops.”

“Who is this Russian?” I ask urgently, hardly believing in such a coincidence.

Rising from the steps, David takes a piece of paper folded four times out of his pocket and hands it to me. As I unfold it, my jaw drops in astonishment. A painfully familiar character looks at me from the printed black-and-white photo.

“Do you know him?” David asks in surprise, apparently feeling the same thing as I do.

“I’m here because of that bastard, too.”

Chapter 21. Part Two. Outside.

If after the bustle of Rashka, calm Goa seems like a place of deep Shanti¹, then after Goa, Pokhara is like a magical place where there is no time. No one needs time. Pokhara is a city where no one is in a hurry. Why rush if you are in paradise? Fifteen years ago, Pokhara was a developed tourist destination, visited by thousands of tourists. Foreign and local investors put money into it and tourists also brought cash. Everyone was happy. But then, suddenly, the revolution came. Dissatisfied Maoists sponsored by the Chinese started to demand the king’s abdication. The tourist flow plummeted, leaving hundreds of empty hotels, restaurants and bars. The main street that runs along the beautiful mountain lake is empty. Most of the tourists left, leaving Pokhara looking like an abandoned Swiss resort. Having visited the surrounding areas, I realize that this city is the best place to spend the five months of the rainy season. The rains here are not so frequent as in India, and the guerrillas only make themselves known by occasional forays into the administrative part of the city. But the most important thing is that housing, food and charas are two or even three times cheaper here than in Goa. Compared to Russia, these prices seem ridiculous. Now I understood that it is possible to not return to Russia at all. I had a plan and proceeded towards its realization.

I bought an old, non-operational laptop from a second-hand electronics store for fifty dollars, and remodeled it into a wonderful container for smuggling charas. I had very little money, but a great desire to stay in Asia. I was ready for anything. Having neatly packed a kilo of sweet, black Himalayan ‘gold’ into the empty laptop, I headed back to Goa. I had my remaining five hundred dollars in my pocket and a plan for a happy and carefree future in my head. I just had to quickly get together some initial capital. And initial capital, as I was taught in college, always had criminal beginnings. I crossed the border easily. No one searched my stuff. Not only had the customs officers at the Nepal-India border never seen a laptop in their life, but they had never even seen a computer. And it really seemed like a white tourist was untouchable for them. This was an unwritten rule and I liked it.

Having crossed the border with a kilo of charas, for the first time in my life I really felt like someone. Back in Goa, I rented fifty square meters of beach for the whole season for five hundred bucks, and began to build a restaurant. Selling charas little by little, I used the money to buy bamboo, boards, plywood and tools. Hiring two assistants for the hard work, I toiled with them from dawn till dusk. Periodically rolling joints with my charas, I sawed, dug, and hammered nails. Working on the beach was fun and not really taxing. In a couple of weeks, the first restaurant in my life was finished – the first Russian restaurant on Arambol beach. Of course, it is difficult to call it a restaurant, as it was just a small construction with seven low tables, where one

1 *Shanti* – peace, tranquility. It’s a very deep word. One may only understand it having visited India.

sat on soft mattresses that covered the entire surface of the wooden floor. It was more of a small chill-out zone serving food. But still, I proudly called it MY RESTAURANT. My restaurant resembled a large bird's nest made out of a long bamboo sticks attached to a palm tree at a height of three meters. Along with the piece of beach, I got a coconut palm tree growing in the middle and tilting towards the sea. Having dug in high bamboo poles around its perimeter, I covered them with a plywood platform that served as the floor of my place. The palm tree was left to grow in the middle, making a living roof with its huge leaves. So I got a two-story construction, where the ground floor was a shop and the first floor was a restaurant, which could be reached by climbing the almost vertical ladder from the back of the store. Everything was ready for the arrival of my girls. I hired a staff of five people to work in the restaurant and prepared a menu of Russian and Indian dishes. You could buy everything except alcohol. Alcohol was taboo; in my place, no one was allowed to drink any alcohol. You could smoke, take soft drugs, and eat hash cakes, but not drink.

Finally, the long-awaited day of my Lena's arrival comes. Clean-shaven with a nice-smelling aftershave, I stand at the airport an hour before her arrival with two garlands made of orange blossoms, traditionally worn by Indians around the neck on very festive occasions.

"Daddy, Daddy!" I hear the familiar voice of my little princess, who runs out of the crowd towards me with her arms spread wide.

"Hello, my beauty, I've missed you."

My four-year-old daughter promptly climbs onto my shoulders while I kiss my Lena.

"Dad, Dad, will you show me the monkeys?" Vasilinka shouts from above, pulling my ears.

"Of course I will, I have so much to show you."

Tearing myself away from a greedy kiss with Lena, I stand and look at my beauties.

"By the way, Vasya, I haven't come alone. This is Denis and Ilka. They are our first tourists."

Denis, a blond guy with a typical Russian face, extends his strong hand to greet me.

"I've heard about your adventures in India. And we decided to see everything with our own eyes. I'll be a tourist for about three months, and if everything is as wonderful as Lena told us, I am ready to work with you. To be honest, I don't want to spend winter in Russia, and I will do my best to stay here."

"And my name is Ilka, that's what everyone calls me," says a young girl of about twenty years with a naive, even somewhat childish face, giving me her plump hand.

"I also want to stay, but I don't know what I'll do. I've also heard a lot about Goa from Lena."

"We'll think of something. Get into the jeep. On the way, I'll give you the 'newly arrived tourist' lecture and then and we'll talk about business."

Having stacked the suitcases on the roof of the rented Indian jeep, we set off in the direction of North Goa.

"First of all, you need to change your European clothes. Secondly, you need a bit of a tan. More precisely, firstly you should get tanned and then buy clothes, otherwise with your skin color you will be sold clothes at three times the price. Locals treat a white, untanned person like a walking wallet. Ilka, what did you do in Russia?"

"I was a manager at Coca-Cola."

“And what happened, don’t they pay enough? What drew you to Goa?” I ask with a smile, already guessing her response.

“They paid well. I even had a good company car. The only thing I did not have was a personal life with such a job. From morning till night I ran around doing business and in the evening I only had the energy to watch TV. And I’m young, I need to find a husband. And frankly, I’m disappointed in Russian men. In our country, there are more women than men, and all the men are spoiled. Russian men are not capable of elegantly courting a Russian woman, or they simply do not want to. Maybe here in Goa I’ll meet a foreigner.”

“Sure, you’ll meet one. Goa is a magical place, where all wishes come true; the main thing is to have a clear idea of what you want. If you were a manager in Russia, maybe you could manage our branch of Hemp here? I’ve built a small store on the beach. The work is not difficult; you can swim and sunbathe, and at the same time sell things to tourists. And on Thursdays and Saturdays we’ll need to organize a trip to the market. I rented two places there. It’s not very hard work and in the meantime you will find a husband.”

“By the way, Lena,” I ask my beloved, “how’s our Hemp in Russia? How did Dymkov react to my plan to open a branch in Goa?”

“To be honest, Dymkov was not very happy that I had found a new manager. In my opinion, he thinks that we want to slowly slip away from the project.”

“He can think whatever he wants, we will continue our revolution and that’s what matters. Everything will be ok. Now we’ll sell all the remnants of the hemp summer collection that you brought here, we’ll send him Indo-Nepalese hemp clothes, and he’ll calm down. He’ll even thank us for saving the Russian Hemp.

“Well, and you dear,” I say to my wife, “what do you want to do here?”

“I don’t know yet; I need to take care of our child. I am ready to do any work with a flexible schedule. I can deal with renting out our house. You wrote that you had rented a two-story house with eight rooms. We’ll leave the second floor for ourselves, and I’ll rent the first floor to tourists.”

“And for you, Den, I have a separate proposal. I need help with drugs. But first, I need to take you to a party. If you like it, you’ll earn well.”

“I also want to work,” my little daughter adds, hugging me tightly around the neck.

“Well, what will you do?” my Lena asks our little beauty with a smile.

“I’ll walk, swim, play. You were young yourself once, you played and walked. It will be my job.”

“Well, there’s nothing you can say to that: the logic is solid,” we agree, laughing.