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CARMEN'S PRAYERS

Short Novel

Chapter One

As soon as Nick had finished first grade and started vacation, his family went to spend the summer at Sea Gate. They'd supposedly taken only the most necessary items with them, but they took so much stuff they could hardly fit it all in the back of the rented van. Nick clutched his stuffed leopard and boogie board to his chest while Michelle carried a purse with documents in it and Roy sat behind the wheel.

They rolled up to the booth where a gray-haired gatekeeper requested their documents. Roy showed him his driver's license and explained why they were going to Sea Gate. The striped barrier went up and the van drove into Sea Gate—a kind of residential resort area in Brooklyn, right on the shore of the bay.

This small area, surrounded by a fence and protected by its own police force, contrasted sharply with the world on the other side of the fence. The city side had dirt and crumbled pavement; there wasn't one tree or bush. Moreover, the so-called underdeveloped neighborhood was full of high rises with subsidized housing for the poor, which meant lots of fighting, swearing, wild teenagers, drugs, and empty vodka and whiskey bottles strewn everywhere. The swelter and heat in the summer so cooked the asphalt that it seemed it might crumble into pieces.

But behind the fence, in Sea Gate, was a small slice of heaven. Sycamores and cedar trees threw shadows on the clean roads; there were rose bushes and lilacs, and the breeze rustled through the orchids. All was unhurried and relaxed—the strolls, the conversations. Women wore sandals, straw hats, and bathing suits with long, light skirts or towels wrapped around their waists. The men were tanned and dapper; no matter their age, they all resembled tireless, white-toothed bucks. The ocean breezes, the roar of the waves. Security.

The area at one time belonged to a community of Orthodox Jews, serving as their rustic retreat, a resort during the summer season where they might escape the noisy, exhausting life of the city to quietly pray, take a stroll, or just spend time on the beach in Orthodox fashion—fully clothed. It isn't fitting for strangers to look at the naked body of a Jewish man or woman; references to Adam and Eve, who wore only fig leaves instead, are irrelevant. A Jew must be dressed even at the beach. Such is the will of G-d! So it is stated in the Talmud!

In time, the area had been made suitable for living year-round. And the Italians and Russians encroached onto the territory of the Hasidic Jews. Architecture there spoke to these demographic changes, too: new luxury villas with rows of marble lions and grandiose fountains joined the ordinary, often neglected homes of the Hasidim.

Sea Gate, where Roy and his family moved to in the summertime, was located approximately a half hour drive from their home in Brooklyn, in Dyker Heights. So, they could always drop by the house if need be.

They unpacked and settled into their new house quickly. They had rented an apartment in a two-story home from an Orthodox Jew until September. The residence had numerous

amenities: it was a stone's throw from the beach, and had a large green backyard with old trees, a table beneath a canopy, and a swinging bench. Like in the country.

Dressed in shorts, Roy reclined in the chaise longue and sipped whiskey with tomato juice.

He was thirty-seven. He was slender, of medium height; he had a large forehead, and wore his long soft hair combed back. He had a straight nose and his chin was narrow. He gave the impression of someone deadly tired and detached from the outside hustle and bustle. But at the same time, he continued to keep a curious eye on everything around him.

He drank small sips of the fiery whiskey and looked first at the cardinal on the wires, then at Nick, who was making the acquaintance of a peer who was wearing a formerly white, but now grey, shirt and yarmulke. Michelle, meanwhile, was finishing setting up the new nest.

How to explain the effect of rapid mood swings? Or rather, not moods but a condition of the soul where you experience extreme exhaustion, near spiritual collapse, and then a change of venue and any kind of accidental little thing—say, the scent of newly mown grass, or the sight of a flock of geese in the air—all of a sudden lifts your spirit, infusing you with new vigor and hope.

Roy was experiencing similar feelings at that moment: he felt a magnetic force pulling him to the land of Sea Gate; something kindred filled the air. The hot smoky asphalt that was filled with cracks and holes—that was spat upon and poisoned one's lungs—was over there, on the other side of the fence.

Roy grew tipsy from the whiskey, from memories, from the fatigue of the move, and from his night duty at the Mandarin Hotel.

A few months prior, his film “The Wise Adult Children” had been shown at the New York Independent Film Festival! And that’s not all: the jury had awarded the picture a special prize.

How much time, money, and energy he had spent on it! Writing a script, the search for a sponsor, agreeing upon all the legal aspects of filming, nearly a year of filming, the sleepless nights in the editing room, fits of anger, despair, and the exhausting wait after the submission of each application to participate in the festival.

The film was dedicated to the children suffering from last stages of cancer. When asked in an interview how he had succeeded in capturing such a sensitive topic so well, Roy answered, "I initially encountered this phenomenon many years ago when I was still studying at the medical institute to be a psychiatrist and completing my first residency in one of the hospices. I then got acquainted with several of these children and their families. The children still did not comprehend what death was, but incredibly they treasured every moment of their lives. Still, this film isn't just about sick kids. It is a lesson for us, the adults. We, Americans, are very active people. We are not afraid of new discoveries, which is our great virtue. At the same time, we are subject to great weaknesses; first and foremost, we are focused solely on success and pleasure and are not ready for suffering. While filming this movie, I understood that if suffering is inevitable then we need to know how to accept it, and accept with dignity, find a meaning in it, the same meaning as we find in our work. In my movie, the children teach us, the adults, how to accept and value life.”

An undisputed find in the film was the young and extraordinarily talented actor Jack Chad. It was Jack (the only paid member of the crew, by the way) who breathed amazing spirit

into the picture. Jack played the role of a kind of thinker, who not only interviewed different people, but also expressed his opinions, and asked difficult questions to himself from the screen, but in such a way as if asking each viewer about it. That allowed him to keep the audience in suspense. Jack's rare acting gift was a unique combination of the comedic and the tragic, thanks to which he was able to bring to this complex film not only tragic, but also good-natured humorous notes.

Of course, the New York Independent Film Festival isn't the Oscars or the Grammys. But it's a serious bid that holds promise for creative opportunities and prospects.

After a brief stellar period of rave reviews in the press and a tiny golden statuette, it was time for Roy to rest, rejuvenate, reflect, and decide in which direction to move next.

Yes, Roy was as happy as any artist is when he's created work that others recognize.

The apparel design company where Michelle worked as a manager closed for the summer due to slowing demand. In short, everything pointed toward spending a summer in Sea Gate. And it was hard to imagine a better place for Nick's vacation than that.

Chapter 2

Six-year-old Nick slept uneasily—twisting, turning and stirring awake often. He woke up, yet again, and sat up in bed. He stared ahead, a puzzled expression on his face.

The light of the outside lantern came through the small window of his room, where plastic action figures, little cars, and the stuffed leopard were strewn about. Mom was against the leopard from the start. She said she didn't like the leopard because it collected dust, and she warned that "he can't go to the beach with us, he's afraid of water, and there's nothing for him to

do there.” But Nick hadn’t even thought of taking the leopard to the beach; Nick was already big enough to know what you could and couldn’t do. Tomorrow, when they would go to the beach, he’d only take what was most necessary: fins, a mask, Pokémon cards, a flying snake, an inflatable shark, a ball, and... the leopard, if mom didn’t notice. It would be good to bring the laptop, too, but Nick was a realist and wouldn’t even dream of it.

Nick looked around, noticed the familiar shape of his stuffed leopard on the floor, and grabbed its tail. In a moment, the leopard lay next to his head on the pillow.

Nick thought about his mother: she is strict, constantly requiring him to write his alphabet nicely, and to study his math. She checked over all his homework. Mom also likes to listen to classical music and flip through fashion magazines. She is always peaceful and thoughtfully nice while she was engaged in these activities. And sometimes she would take up a little leather-bound book embossed with a golden cross, bless herself, and start to pray in a quiet voice. She would sometimes wipe the tears from her eyes, and then Nick would feel sorry for her.

Dad doesn’t pray, doesn’t wear a cross, and doesn’t read boring books. Dad always has a camera or a video camera. He often goes out for a long while, or stays in his room for a time—where even mom isn’t allowed to go without permission. Unfortunately, dad’s film, which Nick’s parents talked much about and which many guests noisily discussed, was completely uninteresting: no dinosaurs or Spiderman at all. Children of the same age as him, or slightly older, most of them bald and very thin, talk about their dreams, their aspirations, and their pains. All this is very boring for Nick, and honestly even a bit scary.

Dad sometimes, very rarely though, goes with them to church, which Nick finds a total yawn. There is no entertainment at all. Nick waits until the mournful singing is finished and he can take communion from the priest’s hand. Then afterwards: to the pizzeria or McDonalds!

Nick closed his eyes and imagined the next day how the whole family would go to the beach, how he would make a running jump into the waves and swim, chasing away the sharks. How good that school is out!

He bent his legs at the knees, pressing them into his belly, and fell asleep.

It was nighttime on the streets of Sea Gate. Quiet, with only the chirping of the cicadas and the roaring of the ocean. The bright moon illuminated the deserted streets. Roy walked up to the metal mesh covered fence that ran along the coast. The gate to the beach was closed at night. However, the fence was pulled back from its posts in various places. Roy slipped through one of these openings, jumped from the low sandy cliff, and went down to the water.

“Di-ing...di-ing...” sounded the old beacon. The beacon itself wasn’t visible in the darkness, only its red lantern swinging on the waves, and there was the clanging of the iron clapper from inside its rusty caging. “Di-ing...di-ing...”

The beach where they’d swim during the day was far away. Here was a desolate abandoned shore: blackened moss-covered logs lay about, and shapeless heaps of boulders loomed, appearing as the wreckage of schooners. White flakes melted on the churning, waving surface of the water. And, off in the distance, the Verrazano Bridge and the skyscrapers of Manhattan were bathed in light. It was an uncommon alloy of the eternal and the momentary.

Roy sat on a log at the water’s edge. The cool air refreshed his face. He peered into the darkness and it was as if he saw there his deceased grandfather Victor, an image of him from an old photograph. The face of this intelligent man, who was a good psychiatrist. “Well, film director, did you get what you want? A new life is beginning for you now. Just be careful not to

lose your head: don't suffer from stardom!" admonished his grandfather. He winked at his grandson, and taking a pocket watch on a chain out of his vest, added, "Uh-oh, time flies."

"Hi, amigo. Are you also here?" a female's voice sounded on his back.

Roy turned around startled.

"Yes, as you see." He answered.

"What, can't you sleep, either? Many people have trouble sleeping. I tried valerian root and chamomile tea. Nothing helps. They say the best way to get a good night's sleep is a stroll by the ocean and washing your hands and feet in the water. Let's try it." An evident Spanish accent sounded in her English.

Roy's eyes had already adjusted to the darkness, to the moonlight. He saw how she went into the water, having rolled her sweatpants up to her knees. After another step or two, her outline grew vaguer. It looked like she was bending over, lowering her hands into the water.

"Well, I took a bath in the ocean. Let's see if it has a curative effect." She sat next to him on the log and took a cigarette out of the pack.

"Do you mind if I smoke?" she asked.

"Sure."

The flare of the lighter flame brightly illuminated her even nose, her lips holding the clenched cigarette, and the squint of her left eye with its long lashes.

"What's your name?" She asked.

"Roy. And yours?"

"Carmen. Why are you here alone? Where is your wife? Sleeping?"

"Yes, she is a deep sleeper, even without valerian root."

“You have a good wife, faithful.” Carmen let out a puff of smoke and Roy caught a whiff of the menthol cigarette.

“How do you know she’s faithful? Maybe she’s just the opposite,” he joked.

This unexpected quick turn in their conversation about Michelle and his family life surprised him a little—he only knew this woman in passing: yesterday once he’d exchanged a few words with her about the weather, the water temperature, about jelly fish in the water—the things that people usually talked about after a swim on the beach.

Roy had taken notice of this brunette the very day, the very minute that he saw her on the beach. She’d gone into the water, with a tattoo of a red flower on her leg, swishing her hips expressively, and the red triangle of her bikini bottom moved smoothly and temptingly until it disappeared in the surging waves. She swam so far beyond the buoys that the lifeguard in his tower began to blow his whistle urgently and wave his arms energetically, saying, “Come back! Back!” She then changed course obediently and swam along the coast.

Roy had lain under an umbrella, following her dark head as it disappeared into and rose from the water. He waited until she came out to make sure that the fantastic image before his eyes corresponded to reality. And Carmen did not disappoint! She emerged from the ocean like a goddess: water streaming down her full shoulders and hips, she was completely radiant with life and fire, carefree and confident. And if not for the old man nearby—a man with drooping belly folds, who was leaning down and splashing water on his armpits—then the entire scene would have been amazing, like on the big screen. From that minute on, Roy was unable to take his eyes off this woman. And it seemed she knew this.

“Your wife cannot be trusted? You’re funny. She’d follow you to hell and back. I know what I am talking about. I know women. And she is a caring mama, too.”

“You`re right. That is why I love her.”

Carmen brought the fingers together, lifted her arms over her head, and arched her back.

“Oh, well. Why do all good things come to an end so quickly? A night like this should last a hundred years. The moon is so clear, like we have in Puebla. Have you ever heard of this province in Mexico? I grew up there.”

“No, I never heard”.

“Okay, amigo. It`s nice to talk with you, but I have to go to work tomorrow early in the morning. Sorry.”

She stood up and walked away. Roy followed her.

“Is it true you`re a famous filmmaker?”

“Yes, I`m a director. But I`m not sure how famous I am. Anyhow, I`m no Kubrick or Scorsese yet. How did you know I make films?”

“In Sea Gate everyone knows everything about everybody and gossips constantly. If you hear something about me, don`t be surprised.”

“But I know without hearing any rumors that your favorite actress is Salma Hayek. You remind me of her in some ways. You have the same temperament and a similar style. Am I right?”

“No, you`re not!” Carmen answered sharply, clearly ruffled by the fact that some stranger was trying to intrude on her inner sanctum.

“Di-ing... di-ing...” the iron clinger in the beacon casing knocked dully and pitifully.

“And what about your films? They`re all about the mafia, I suppose?”

“No, they`re about children.”

“Children? I saw you yesterday with your son at the beach. You`re a caring papa.”

Carmen said this and for some reason went silent.

They`d already reached the bluff. Roy climbed up and extended his hand down to Carmen. But it seemed she didn`t notice his offer of help: she deftly placed her foot on an exposed root, grabbed the iron post, and, in a flash, sprung up like a strong cat. She brushed the sand off her pants. They both slipped through the hole in the fence and walk up the path.

“Here we are.”

The windows of her house were dark, and a sconce on the wall near the outside door was lit. Near the porch steps was a jasmine bush. The air suddenly felt stuffy to Roy. The farrago of the scent of ocean, flowers, cigarette smoke, and engine oil from the basement now rushes through his nostrils to his head.

“Well, thanks, director, for the company. Gracias. See ya on the beach! Buenos noches.” She tossed her cigarette away and playfully wiggled her fingers goodbye.

Roy returned home. He went into Nick`s room first. He quietly took the stuffed leopard from the child`s arms, pulled the sheet up to his son`s small shoulders, and stroked his hair. And... he caught himself thinking this sentimental mise en scene of fatherly love so banal. It`s an eternal stock image: a child sleeps sweetly in his bed while his loving father strokes his head.

The fan blades buzzed in the windows. Roy went into the bedroom. Michelle was there, dressed in black panties, her small breasts exposed. The desk lamp was on. Roy sat next to his wife.

“Did you have a nice walk?” Michelle put down her fashion magazine and held out her slightly tanned hand to her husband. “Jack called, by the way. He wants to know how it`s going

and asked you to return his call. Maybe he has an interesting offer for you. After all, you're a star in great demand now."

Roy stroked his wife's hips and looked pensively at the empty wall in front of him.

"Call in to work and take a week off," she continued. "It's worth thinking about a change in environment. Don't you think it's time to leave this foolish hotel security job; you're a film director." Michelle moved closer to the wall, making room for him next to her on the bed.

"I'm going home to get my video equipment tomorrow," he said, his voice soft but decisive.

Chapter 3

Their new neighbors were Jeffrey, Esther, and five-year-old Moshe.

The head of the family was forty years old. He was thin and a little taller than average. He always wore a stale white shirt with crumpled trousers. It seemed he was balding, though it's impossible to say for sure because he was always in a yarmulke or hat. Jeff's long, bearded face broke out in unhealthy red spots. In general, he was a typical middle-aged Hassidic man.

Though, if you looked closely, there was something atypical, "non-Hassidic," beneath his straight posture and his fluid movements.

His wife Esther was thirty-five. She had a round face and wore an old-fashioned style hat. White sneakers were visible beneath her long skirt, and a tightly buttoned blouse emphasized her broad shoulders and wide waist. Her favorite activities were to drink beer, play soccer in the yard with the kids, and put on shows for Jeff.

They had married a year earlier, when Esther left her alcoholic husband and fifteen-year-old daughter in Denver, taking her five-year-old son Moshe with her to New York. She had been far from a strict follower of Hasidism when she lived in Denver—on the contrary, she loved bars, casinos, and drinks. In summary, she liked everything that a strict Lord cannot tolerate. But in New York, when she joined up with Jeffrey, she was forced to enter into the bosom of Orthodox Judaism, to bathe in the waters of the mikvah, to exchange her shorts for long skirts, to put on a wig and hat, and to attend synagogue on the prescribed days.

Her son Moshe had transformed quickly as well: he grew side-locks and put on a yarmulke. He had eyes as black as coal, and his skin was a dark color, too. Esther said her son took after his grandfather, who was half-Jewish and half-Native American.

Moshe was stunned by the events and tribulations of his childhood fate, such as drunken fights between his parents in Denver, the separation from his father and sister, the move to an unfamiliar city, his living with Uncle Jeff—who like dad was often drunk and smelled unpleasantly of cigarettes, but who unlike dad didn't beat mom or bring home drunken women. Uncle Jeff attended synagogue. In short, poor Moshe became disoriented and lost his connection with the outside world due to all these changes. By nature a good boy, he was unresponsive and looked around him with surprised, sad eyes unlike those of a child, as though he wanted to ask, “Why is it so? Is it really impossible for it to be otherwise?”

Moshe had very few toys, and they had no TV at home, either. It was school vacation now for the Jewish elementary school he would attend in the fall. Poor Moshe had no friends or acquaintances here. His favorite dog Hunter had been left with his father and sister.

Needless to say, the appearance of Nicholas on the scene represented such happiness for Moshe! On the green lawn, where yesterday there had been only a black watering hose, now lay

inflatable swimming rings, pirate ships, and dinosaurs. On the table there is often a laptop connected to the internet where you can play computer games. The refrigerator in Nicholas's apartment is always stocked with different flavors of ice cream: chocolate, strawberry, or with nuts.

When Nick invites Moshe over, he busily pushes the chair next to the refrigerator, climbs up, opens the freezer and immediately pulls out all the cartons. Sometimes, of course, they get into trouble, say, when the heavy cartons fall on the floor, or Esther suddenly notices that her son isn't in the yard and starts to search for him. Then Moshe fills his mouth with spoonfuls of cold ice cream, and, nearly swallowing it whole, runs back into the yard. When his mother asks him what he was doing at the neighbor's, Moshe, smeared with chocolate and cream, answers truthfully that he was eating a lot of ice cream.

"I never thought I'd become a drug addict. My dream was to become a famous singer; I once had a rare soprano voice. We lived in Bardstown, in Kentucky. My parents put me in a special music school and paid a ridiculous amount of money for my studies. And then my voice started to break." Jeffrey took a long drag on his cigarette, as if to worsen the condition of his vocal cords. "My musical career ended there. And everything fucked up."

They sat under a canopy in the courtyard. On the table was an open bottle of Grey Goose vodka; a saucer held olives and slices of cheese.

It was near evening, but it was quite hot out.

Jeffrey poured himself a shot.

“Ten damn years of addiction! Dope, coke, pills. Overdoses, hospitals, life on the street...” He spoke softly so Esther, who was playing soccer in the yard with the kids, and Michelle, who was reclining in a chaise longue, book in hand, wouldn’t hear.

“My family has rejected me because of my drug use,” continued Jeff.

“A Jewish family was rejecting their son? That doesn’t happen very often,” Roy said.

“Yes, my parents are college professors, respected in the community; one can understand it’s a stain on their reputation. If I had stayed there, I surely would have died. But it’s pleased God to save me and bring me here to New York. Thank God, Baruch Hashem!” Jeffrey knocked back the glass of vodka in an instant and ate an olive.

Roy also took a drink and grimaced. He seldom drank vodka, preferring whiskey or brandy. But as Jeffrey explained, his favorite drink is vodka, so in order to spend a nice evening with this neighbor, Roy bought a bottle of vodka.

Roy listened to Jeffrey’s “junkie” confession, and at some point Jeffrey’s religious attributes—side locks, beard, yarmulke—suddenly vanished into thin air. Roy saw before him a weak and broken man. Even Jeffrey’s facial expression seemed furtive, like that of a drug addict.

“I am okay now. The Hasidic community of Sea Gate is doing God’s work—they’ve given me a job as a cook at the yeshiva. I’m ashamed to admit that I’m forty years old and I’m not sure how to do anything. But life is gradually improving, Baruch Hashem!” Jeffrey poured himself another drink, and the vodka line dipped below the painted goose on the bottle. “I got married and adopted Moshe. I don’t shoot up anymore. Of course, the Talmud doesn’t come easy to me; my family was never religious, and my father didn’t believe in God at all. I’m almost like a tourist when it comes to Judaism. You know, I sometimes have a split of self. I pray in the synagogue, and out of nowhere it seems like it’s not me praying at all, but my double. I think to

myself, 'Let my twin stay here with the Torah, let him pray and I...I can take off for Kentucky. There is such good dope there, you can't imagine, man, clean, uncut fucking dope.'" Jeffrey suddenly fell silent, as if afraid of his own words.

"It might not be easy for you," Roy said. He was surprised by the openness of his neighbor. Who was Roy to him? Someone he'd just met. But sometimes it's easier to open up to someone you don't know well than to a close relative. "When I was studying in medical school, I learned something about drug addiction."

"Have you studied in medical school? Wo-ow."

"Yeah, I'll tell you about it someday, later on."

Roy looked at his watch, and then he glanced over at Michelle, who'd already closed her book and was starting to get up. In that moment, his wife for some reason didn't appear as attractive to him as usual.

He thought he should wrap up the get-together with Jeff. It's time to take the video camera and go to the beach, where he'd arranged to meet with Carmen. And then he still has to go to work in Manhattan for a night shift at the Hotel Mandarin.

Chapter 4

Not everything yields to logical explanation upon first look. However, it's worth trying to understand why Roy needed this uninteresting, essentially dead-end job in the Security Operations Center at the Hotel Mandarin.

The job itself was low paying. As an atelier manager, Michelle made three times the salary, even during the economic downturn. Of course, any income is beneficial. But was it

worth the loss of time, sitting for hours in front of monitors in the Security Operations Center? To watch dumbly as faceless guests move through the corridors, as they enter the spas and beauty salons, the hotel bars and restaurants, as the maids push containers with piles of dirty linen into the freight elevators, and, near the entrance, bellboys in their red uniforms and caps open the doors for tourists who are excited by the New York ambience? Hidden security cameras throughout the building are directed at all the stairwells, fire exits, garages, unloading zones, and ventilation shafts. No, it's definitely not worth it to spend one's precious time staring at all of this on screens.

Michelle attributed her husband's change to working in security as another quirk, a fad—another thing she'd gotten used to after twelve years of living together.

Having married this medical school student twelve years ago, she secretly hoped that Roy would someday have a future as a great psychiatrist. He will have a private practice, or work in some major psychiatric center, publish his articles in professional medical journals, even host his own show on some TV channel, since he was always "drawn to television." She imagined herself on the sidelines, while her husband provided fame, social respect, and an interesting life; she would merely put her delicate shoulder under this sweet burden. Without question! Michelle believed more in Roy's lucky star than even herself. Moreover, Roy came from a family of psychiatrists; both his grandfather and his father were psychiatrists. Fate itself determined the continuation of this familial tradition.

And indeed, he followed in the family footsteps, after Stony Brook University enrolling in medical school for psychiatry.

But in the middle of his studies, Roy (as he himself phrased it) "jumped off the cliff." He quit medical school to study at the New York Film Academy.

As he explained to Michelle, he finally realized that psychiatry was not his calling. "Yes, psychiatric abnormalities are interesting for me, from a learning point of view, how unpredictable the human psyche is. But I am not drawn to treating mental patients. I want to, and I will, make movies. And I absolutely don't care that my family is against this decision. It's enough that you understand and support me."

It must be said, for the sake of objectivity, that Michelle also saw that the more time and effort med school required, the more resistance Roy developed. He was constantly irritated, gloomy, depression-prone, and spoke more often about the fact that he is not doing what he was supposed to do and not fulfilling his calling.

"It's a pity he dropped out. But a talented man will always find his way in life. The cinema? Well, maybe this is even better," Michelle decided. "He's going to make films and will become a famous director. Our life is going to be a hell of a lot of fun."

Oh, the naïve notions of wives who have linked their fate to artists! Ladies, don't have expectations of what you see in beautiful films or what you read in glossy magazines. They lie about everything! They lie. And if you happen to meet a pale young man with a burning gaze who seems to you a genius—run away! Run away without turning back, lest you turn into a pillar of salty tears!

Having graduated from the Film Academy, Roy participated in the filming of a few documentaries and feature films, in the latter case even once getting the position of a second assistant director. The salary was honestly meager. Nick was born by that time and, to help his

family, Roy got a job at Mandarin Hotel operating the security surveillance system during the night shift.

The film was still in progress, but another "jump off the cliff" wasn't far off. Roy suddenly quit this job. "They don't understand a damn thing in movies! I want to shoot it myself as I see fit. I have an interesting idea for my future film and I will definitely make it a reality. For now, I will work more shifts as a security operator in the hotel. I hope that some jobs in commercials will come along as well." He explained his actions to Michelle and also his plan for the future.

Michelle, who had not so long before dreamed of ascending alongside the heights of her husband's fame, began to vaguely surmise that she had better prepare for "jumping off cliffs." She noticed instead a certain strangeness in him that she previously took to be a sign of genius. Her faith in her husband's talent was noticeably shaken, and Michelle began to believe that she'd married a good but unfortunate man.

What upset Michelle most of all was her husband's indifference to their son. Yes, he spent time with Nick, but in her opinion it was just to check off the box saying he'd fulfilled his fatherly duties, and he'd constantly have his eye on his watch when he was with his son. He sometimes even forgot Nick's birthday! And if he shoots videos or photographs of Nicholas, he cares exclusively from the aesthetic point of view.

Their son often asked, "Mom, where's dad? When is he coming home?" and Michelle would have to answer, a smile on her face, "Dad's at work; he is busy. He loves you very much."

Dad promises that when Nicholas grows up he'll take him to the pirate ship. That's why Nicholas is in a hurry to grow up. He does whatever he can to make this happen as quickly as possible: he jumps off the couch, pees directly into the toilet (lifting the lid first), and sometimes puts all his monsters neatly back in the toy box at night.

Nick spends many evenings in anticipation of his father's arrival, when dad comes and tells him a story. After all, no one could make up a story like dad could. Because the heroes of these stories—the pirates, the travelers, even animals and birds—are all dad's friends.

But dad isn't home often. "Dad's busy," mom says, and, for some reason, Nick feels sorry for her when she says this.

Sometimes, when Nick has almost fallen asleep, he has the vague sensation, through the colored circles he sees when he closes his eyes, of dad entering the room, covering him with a blanket, and stroking his hair. Nick wants to wake up and give dad a hug, but his eyelids are so heavy he can't lift them. He feels about for dad's hairy arm and, clutching it, presses it to his chest.

Yet Michelle was mistaken, having penned her husband as a loser! Roy had not wasted time while working this damn boring job as a security surveillance operator. He found a sponsor who agreed to give money for the film and enlisted the support of a children's cancer center. He attracted to the film a talented actor, cameraman, and set-designer, whom he met once during filming and with whom he maintained a relationship.

He spent all his nights sitting in the Security Operations Center of the hotel editing the film by connecting his laptop to the hotel's surveillance system. The supersensitive equipment there, and most importantly the large screens, turned out to be invaluable to him.

His partner, the officer-on-duty Walter, a former policeman in charge of a quick response to any emergency incident, was dozing with his feet on the table, in accordance with an old cop habit. Despite their differences, he and Roy felt a mutual sympathy for each other.

Walter soon found himself a girlfriend who lived near the hotel. He would mop his smooth, fleshy face and neck with a pre-moistened scented towelette, and then be gone for several hours, sometimes until morning. He knew that Roy wouldn't get off to anywhere because he was busy with his film. Walter had little interest in the film about "sick wise children." However, he respected Roy for his conscientiousness and considered him an eccentric who—you never know—could get rich some day.

When Walter found out that Roy's film won a prize at the festival, he was genuinely happy for his friend and brought his nightly girlfriend to the Security Operations Center to introduce her to his friend, the famous director, and after the shift they took Roy out to the pub.

Walter even began to think about whether or not he should go into the film industry himself. He may bring up his ties to the police—the NYPD homicide unit, his former job. He offered to help Roy arrange to shoot night raids, arrests for drug trafficking, weapons seizures, prostitutes who have been shot, and things in the same vein, which have always thrilled viewers. Walter saw himself in the role of consultant on the movie. And he was very upset when Roy expressed no enthusiasm for his offer. What an oddball! Who would refuse such an offer?

However, the answer soon became clear. Walter's respect for Roy increased when on the one screen disconnected from the hotel cameras appeared an amazingly beautiful woman in a burgundy swimsuit.

“Who is she? What's her name?” asked Walter, lightly shifting his left foot to the side of the table. He lowered the sound on his radio and placed it on the table next to his black shoe. His jacket was unbuttoned, revealing paunch under his light shirt and a strap that crossed his mighty chest to support a gun holster.

The room was quiet; from time to time the radios, set on their recharging dock, would chirp. The screens showed the life of the Mandarin: guests walked past the doormen to enter the building. VIPs came in surrounded by bodyguards. Celebrities and journalists arrived also. During the day and evening, life was in full swing, both in the hotel and around it. The screens became empty near midnight, when the commotion in and around hotel died down. Only an occasional drunken tourist may walk unsteadily down the corridor to his room, or a restaurant kitchen employee climb down the fire escape to drink a stolen bottle of expensive beer.

“Anyway, what's the name of this beauty?” asked Walter again.

“Carmen. She is my new neighbor in Sea Gate, my beach mate.”

Chapter 5

It's morning. The beach at Sea Gate is made gently golden by the sun. The first beachgoers, young mothers dragging beach bags and umbrellas, push their way through the fence gate. Kids run toward the water. Lifeguards in bright red shorts and distinguishing jackets sit in

their towers already. Whistles hang on the chests of the rescuers; though they haven't yet sounded, these unassuming whistles will very soon turn into trumpets of Jericho.

The sand is soft and rippled; a machine the night before has cleared the debris and evened the shore. The waves of the ocean completed the task, having smoothed yesterday's sandcastles, ramparts, and bridges of twigs from the gently sloping bank.

The ocean breathes lazily, the glare on its surface flickering. Seagulls and albatrosses stand on dark boulders, and if not for the faint tremor of their grey feathers and their occasional peeps, the birds could be mistaken for stuffed museum pieces placed there many years ago.

Loading cranes at Red Hook port, where dry cargo ships are moored and from where ocean liners depart, are visible on the far away cape. Magnificent floating cities stretch out in a line, leaving behind the skyscrapers of Manhattan, the Verrazano Bridge, the port, and the bay, heading to some terrifying great expanse.

This view reminded Roy for some reason of the far northern natural landscapes he had never been to but liked to watch on TV often since he was young. Michelle said she was simply fascinated by this view of the ocean liners and the statue-like gulls on the rocks.

As for Nick, when mom and dad stretched their hand into the distance—telling him, “Look, what a beautiful ship!”—he thought little of beauty, but instead tried to look at things from a practical point of view. First, he asked his parents if they could buy him a ship like that. Nick wasn't too upset when his request was firmly denied, and dad had even laughed. Nick wasn't so little anymore, and could understand that such a ship would be too big for the bathtub in their apartment. Then he wished that he could take a perilous journey on a ship like that the next summer. He agreed to take his mother with him, even though she would prohibit him from playing on the computer.

After talking with his parents about ships, Nick grabbed a giant inflatable shark and ran into the water.

A shark needs to be thrown into the water belly down, and then you have to climb on top of its soft, supple back and grab hold of the fin. You have to wrap your legs close to the tail, pressing your knees into its sides. It's very important to keep your mouth closed, too, because bitter salty water will get in. But your mouth opens by itself anyway, and there's nothing you can do about it. The most important technical aspect of swimming on a shark is not to fall under a wave. You just need to go straight ahead, toward those far away giant ships.

The shark, which was so compliant on the shore, becomes uncontrollable in the water. In the beginning, it seems submissive under the pressure of Nick's knees, but then gradually it starts to jerk violently, striving to break free. The fin slips from his hands now and then. Nick must expend incredible effort to maintain control over this big restless shark.

He swims on shark-back for some time and then loses control and slips off the shark after all. The dark wall of a wave hangs over Nick, the world turns over, the sun falls from the sky, and... Daddy's hand grabs the agitated shark by the nose; dad's other hand reaches under his son's arm, providing support for Nick, who is falling into the abyss.

Dad puts Nick back on the shark. Nick, trembling from excitement or pleasure, but in no way from fear, is ready for new adventures. But he shouts, "Ahhh!" because, to tell the truth, he is very frightened and they have already gone so far from shore! The water is already above dad's belly button! And if dad now would suddenly leave him? Shouting continuously, Nick clasps his dad's neck with one hand. Whatever you say, a shark is still less reliable than your father. And like a trembling frog, Nick jumps on his dad's chest.

“Well, then hold onto me tightly!” Transferring his son to his back, Nick’s dad enters deeper into the water and floats.

Dad is definitely not a shark; it’s easier with him, even though he doesn’t have fins. Dad is calm, doesn’t spin, and floats evenly. He isn’t slippery. He is solid and it’s convenient to hold him by the hair or the neck.

“Don’t squeeze so hard. You’re choking me,” requested Roy.

Nick let up slightly on the ring of his arms around dad’s neck. His teeth chattered constantly and his keyed-up little heart rapidly knocked.

Roy heard the light chatter of his son’s teeth in his ear; deep in his chest, his own heart echoed the frequent and strong beats of his son’s heart. Their percussion merged. Roy was somehow frightened by this closeness. A simple and clear thought—that this fragile little life depends on him—was difficult to comprehend in just one moment.

“Get out! He’s blue already!” Michelle called from the shore, though her shout can be guessed rather from the waving of her hands.

Mom doesn’t understand, and, it seems, will never understand, what pirates are. She lives in a world of constantly changing temperatures, the sharp conversion of cold to hot. And she’s busy with nonsense: she lathers on disgustingly sticky sunscreen, sprays on insect repellent, and then checks her arms and shoulders to see if she has an even tan. At the beach, she drinks water and makes Nicholas drink it, too. She speaks boring words: dehydration, sunstroke, Vitamin C.

But mom is beautiful, and her butt is also pretty—not as fat as that of Thomas’s mom. Nick is proud of this; he sees mom not only in her bathing suit at the beach and in the swimming

pool, but at home when she gets out of the shower in a tank top and panties. He was at Moshe's house not long before, and Moshe's mom, Mrs. Esther, also took a shower and he and Moshe crept up to the door to peep in the crack of the door until Mr. Jeffrey noticed and shoed them away.

Nick is frozen to the bone, and a warm soft towel is wrapped around him. The cold penetrates throughout his belly, chest, fingers, and teeth. Nick lies on the beach blanket. A little one in a towel, curled up like a snail, lying down, quivering; his pale heels tremble, too.

Nick is in an icy desert—in a box made of ice! He'll need one hundred years, no less, to get warmed up. His teeth chatter. He is over-chilled and dehydrated.

But after five minutes Nick suddenly smiled, jumped up from the beach blanket, and ran to play with his friends.

Chapter 6

Sea Gate Beach is a display of swimsuits, straw hats, beach wraps, sunglasses, pedicures, and manicures. It's a theater of gestures: self-examination of one's tan on outstretched arms, a check of the thighs with respect to their elasticity, a stroking of the belly and a palpation of the muscles beneath a thin layer of fat, a massaging the shoulders in hopes of attracting the attention of the several tanned young lifeguards in their towers. There are practically no other men weekday mornings on the beach. Husbands and boyfriends work.

Sea Gate Beach is a woman's realm, a harem on the ocean shore. Women are chatty friends, well-wishing companions, and friendly neighbors—and at the same time they are fierce

competitors fighting a bloodless war that will never have winners, but only a constantly growing number of dead and wounded.

Only seagulls circle the shore, dropping shrill cries that seem to say: “You’re number wuh-wuh-one! You’re a b-b-beauty! You’re simply f-f-fascinating!”

“I can only imagine how many swimsuits these ladies have! Lots of them probably have a special closet just for bathing suits,” said Roy, watching one beachgoer saunter back and forth along the shore for a solid hour. “They probably don’t have much in terms of a winter wardrobe: a couple of warm jackets or a sheepskin coat, maybe. I’m sure it’s very windy and cold here in the winter—it’s still on the ocean. In the winter, they all sit at home around their electric fireplaces and radiators, keeping warm. Who sees you? Who needs you? But in summer, you’re on stage; it’s time for the show.”

“Within every woman lives an actress in need of an audience. You men don’t understand the high that comes when dozens of eyes devour you. We women literally feel it on our skin the moment they look at us,” said Carmen.

“Yes, that’s difficult to understand,” Roy agreed half-jokingly.

They stood in the sand at the water’s edge. The incoming waves barely touched their feet.

“And in every woman there lives a prostitute as well. There is not a woman, no matter how proper, who in the depths of her heart has not dreamt at least for a moment of being the lowliest whore.” Carmen fell silent. “Okay, that’s all for you. I’ve given away too many of our female secrets. By the way, is it okay that we’re standing here so openly and that everyone sees us together? Your wife, you see, will soon strain her neck by walking around and looking at us all the time.”

“It’s ok. She trusts me. She isn’t jealous,” answered Roy, amazed at the ease with which he mentally distanced himself from Michelle.

“Watch out, amigo, so you don’t have any problems. Oh!” Carmen suddenly exclaimed, lifting her foot while resting her arm on Roy’s shoulder. “Looks like I stepped on a shell.” She pulled a tiny black sliver out of her foot. “When are you finally going to show me the last video you took?” she asked, a whimsical note in her voice, and took her hand from his shoulder.

“In a few days. I still have some work to do on it.”

“At least tell me how I turned out in it.”

“The same as always—stunning.”

Roy mentally played the unfinished trailer he’d shot: Carmen in a negligee creeping from the roof of his Buick into the car. The car starts to move and rushes to the cliff’s edge. Aha! That’s what’s missing, what he needs to add. The final scene: it has to have the car flying off the cliff into the ocean, and then Carmen appears in the water, enveloped by the flames.

“By the way, have you ever done car advertisements? Just recently a couple of Lincoln limos were brought into the lobby of the hotel where I work. Several long-legged girls stand by the car to do a commercial. Though the girls know nothing about the technical features of the cars, we call them Lincoln girls. Would you like me to ask management if they’re looking for someone and if there’s a job available for you?”

“Lincoln commercials at a hotel are definitely better than earning pennies cleaning houses. But, alas, you forgot that I’m illegal. Without papers there’s no hope for me to get a good job in the States.” Carmen held her hands out in front of her and moved them in semicircles, as if she was driving a car. “I’m a Lincoln girl...oh oh oh,” she said and burst out laughing.

Roy cast a sideways glance at her. There he saw an excellent shot: a deserted shore, cliffs with only a few shrubs growing here and there. “Narcotrafficker! And the guileful half-closed glance of Carmen’s fiery eyes! She is wearing a long skirt and long-sleeved black shirt. Enough of filming her half-naked. I will turn her into Carmen from the novel and the opera.

“To be honest, you’re not quite the right candidate for roles that are subtler. Don’t be offended, but you’re too sensual and adventurous. Just like your beloved Salma Hayek. This isn’t the type of woman I’m attracted to at all. I prefer type of actresses, let’s say, like Julia Roberts. Do you remember how Julia Roberts played a prostitute in “Pretty Woman”? Millions of moviegoers cried. My security partner Walter, a former cop who worked in the homicide unit, once confessed to me that he cried only twice in his life: at his mother’s funeral, and when he watched this film. That’s the power of art as I see it!”

“That film is total crap. Because prostitutes never sleep with men they’re in love with. Love is too much of an ordeal for them.”

“Hmm. That’s interesting,” he paused, trying to discern the meaning of what he just heard. “You know, I came up with another role for you, which fits perfectly for you.”

“What is it?”

“Do you know the story of Carmen from the novel?”

“Of course.”

“Good. Do you have a long dark skirt and black t-shirt in your wardrobe? I guarantee you we’re gonna make a fucking mind-blowing video: “Carmen”—music from Bizet, plus a little Rolling Stones. What do you think, huh?” He gave thumbs up, anticipating the filming. “How about tonight, at eight?”

“Yeah, tonight at eight!” Carmen suddenly clasped his head and, pulling him close to her, kissed his hair. She’d thought somehow that the filming was over, that Roy had had enough of monkeying around. No way! The shooting would continue! Three, two, one...action!

And, without saying a word, she quickly walked away. Whether accidentally or not, she caught up to Michelle, who was walking along the water’s edge, no longer looking over at her husband after so many attempts to distract him from this beach beauty. When Carmen came alongside Michelle, she suddenly began waving her arms; clearly, she was saying something to Michelle. Roy couldn’t catch a word of it.

He watched these two receding women and could not help but compare them. Carmen walked in the style of a professional stripper. Roy already knew from Carmen that not too long ago she danced in strip clubs and worked as an escort; in short, she was involved in the sex-business. He didn’t doubt that every last stitch of her was woven from falsehood—falsehood and make-believe.

But Michelle, his Michelle, strict and pure, seemed wan and featureless next to Carmen. Even Michelle’s neck, her swan-like neck, which gave her stature an air of flexibility and uncommon grace, did not look like this anymore.

Roy sensed how strongly and often his heart began to beat when his gaze now fell on Carmen.

His fingers moved automatically, as if searching for the shutter release on a camera. For some reason he wanted to immortalize this scene.

“Eh, none of it’s a big deal! I’ll dilly dally with Carmen a little longer and then get to work for the new film.” He ran to the oncoming waves, and when the water was up to his chest, he dove in.

Chapter 7

That summer was a sunny one. Let's use this phrase as a springboard to hoist us into the next chapter, where we find Carmen emerging from the doorway of her modest first-floor studio apartment in Sea Gate. There is a low porch with a lantern attached to the wall near the exterior door.

Carmen can turn the lantern on and off at any time she wants. With a generosity unusual for homeowners, the landlord allows Carmen to use the light for no extra fee. This lantern brings not only practical, but also psychological benefit. It provides the illusion for Carmen that she is not alone, that someone is in the apartment, that someone awaits her. That's why the light burns in any weather at any time, and Carmen is grateful for this small gift in her life.

Carmen hadn't always felt fearful of returning to an empty apartment. When she worked for the sex-business, she and two other working girls, Amy and Gladys, rented an apartment together. The place was an absolute mess: clothing strewn about, make-up, dishes, empty vodka and beer bottles everywhere. No matter how hard Carmen tried to keep things orderly, it all inevitably fell apart, just as she fell into forgetfulness after nights out with clients.

At that time, she didn't yet fear an empty house. But her life changed when she got close to Sam, a man she picked up in a bar.

Sam was an overgrown child of 45 years of age. His parents resided in Florida, and he lived on their dime in New York. He assured his parents that he was busy promoting a web design project. But in reality the shithead didn't do a damn thing. He hung out at bars and

restaurants, dropped money once a month in an Atlantic City casino, and spent all his days sitting in computer chat rooms.

Carmen's feminine charms overwhelmed this guy so much that he started to pursue her, made reservations at expensive restaurants, and brought her to his house in Sea Gate, where he'd rented a luxury apartment and insisted Carmen should come live with him.

Carmen didn't know—or better yet couldn't know, from the perspective of her plagued existence as a working girl—actual loneliness, sadness, and other feelings. Yes, she'd undergone all types of troubles, such as being beaten by perverted customers, having limo drivers treat her rudely, receiving insults from pimps, being arrested and defrauded. But all of these were, suffice to say, side effects, the inescapable troubles that must accompany the life of prostitutes in New York. These troubles barely touched Carmen's soul, especially because she was consistently under the influence of drugs and alcohol.

Ultimately, she gave in to Sam's demands that she leave the sex-business, informing her boss in the escort service, the equally charming and heartless Roberto, about her decision. Roberto the Charmer looked at her understandingly. He put his hand on her shoulder. This favorite gesture of his always catapulted Carmen for some reason into a great confusion and a total paralysis of her will.

“Don't you want to whore for me anymore, bitch? Are you sure?” Roberto reached into his pocket, where there was always a thick bundle of hundred-dollar bills to offer her money.

However, Carmen found the strength at this moment do not give in to him and she refused the money. She considered that life with Sam would be more peaceful, stable, and carefree. There was also the prospect of financial prosperity—insurance policies, investments, stocks and money in the bank accounts of Sam's parents, who were old and couldn't live forever

and had their own home in Florida. Her instincts and experience suggested to Carmen that Sam was firmly on the hook; she'd caught him so deep in the gills and he couldn't escape.

To continue the fish comparison, the perch Sam (he indeed had some perch-like characteristics, such as sharp facial features and wide mouth) turned out to be a simpleton. He confessed to his parents that he'd "entered into a relationship with a charming Mexican lady and had very serious intentions toward her."

His parents hurried to New York. Although the senior citizens wore glasses, they weren't blind. Try as she might to ingratiate herself to them, modestly batting her eyelashes, often fixing up her neatly coiffed hair, and keeping her hands in her lap during the family lunch, Carmen couldn't make any headway. These served rather to achieve the opposite result. Later on, trying to figure out the reasons for her failure, she understood that she had been too unnatural. "Not Salma Hayek."

Fear of exposure held her back. If she forgot for a minute the purpose of this reunion, assuming her recent role of a high-end escort, where she used her socialite manners to service the likes of magazine editors, top managers, Wall Street stock brokers—clients compared to whom these Florida gentlemen and their son were small potatoes—everything would have gone well. It was unusual for her to be seen as a bride, which disoriented her.

The good-natured senior citizens took off, offering Carmen a bunch of compliments as they left, but the following month not a cent was deposited to Sam's bank account. At first, he called his parents on the phone and begged them to send money. But they demanded "You have to leave that spic with her cheap cocktail waitress mannerisms. She's keeping you from finishing your design project and she's draining all your money." They knew their son, and they were implacable.

Sam cancelled his trip to Atlantic City and even fell into a light—though, from his perspective, severe—depression. In the end, he had to go to Florida to engage in a “serious discussion with parents,” threatening not to “put up with such interference in my personal life from anybody.”

Sam never returned to Sea Gate. When Carmen attempted to get in contact with him, he replied that his plans changed and he asked her not to bother him. Soon, two persons who looked like moving men came to their apartment in Sea Gate. Having shown their IDs and the papers, they packed up Sam’s things and furniture (with Carmen’s help), stowed them into the truck, and, having handed Carmen a list of the removed items, left.

After yet another wrenching turn of fate, Carmen didn’t want to leave Sea Gate. Moreover, having extricated herself from her life as a prostitute, she didn’t want to go back to the sex business and instead wished to start a new life.

After she left the luxurious apartment in the villa where she’d been living with Sam, she rented a little cheap studio in a shabby private house. With no substantial occupation, and no documents or connections from good circles, she found a minimum wage job working as a house cleaner through the employment agency for illegal Mexican immigrants.

This was her life baggage: deceit, a nine year-old daughter left in Mexico under the care of her parents, prostitution, arrests, and drug addiction. With this baggage the cheerful Carmen encountered the dawn of a new day at Sea Gate and met Roy.

Chapter 8

It's quiet in the Security Operations Center of the Mandarin Hotel. From time to time the walkie-talkies emit beeps in the charging dock panel as they recharge. The monotonous drone of fluorescent ceiling lights brings on a yawn. A long table, upon which sits a huge control panel with buttons and levers, spans the room.

Nothing of any interest lies behind the security operators—only several black uniform jackets, ties, and a bunch of empty hangers in a row on a coat pole.

In one corner is a chrome-plated safe containing weapons. The safe is locked. In order to avoid any possibility of weapons getting into the wrong “dirty” hands, there is a lock with a code on the door and an electronic pass swiper. These are, of course, understandable and correct safety precautions.

Anyway, the chances of even one pistol or cartridge falling into the wrong hands are absolutely—I repeat—absolutely nil. Only the head of security, his deputy, officers on duty, and the security surveillance operators are allowed entrance into that holiest-of-holies inner sanctum of security. Even ordinary guards can't come in; they are rarely allowed entrance there, and only in special occasions. Of course, everything there is also protected with codes, with magnetic strips, secret locks, and so forth.

Enough about the technology in the Security Operations Center. That isn't of interest, at least in any case not to Roy, who sits with his back to the coat pole, to the safe with the weapons in it, and to the doors.

In front of him there is a panorama of screens. Five big screens, disconnected from the internal and external video surveillance of the hotel, are dedicated to one single woman, a

woman without the slightest relation to the Hotel Mandarin. Each of the five screens can be divided into four, eight, or sixteen parts, thereby multiplying Carmen eighty times.

Carmen at times grew, then shrunk, and then turned almost transparent on these screens. A series of metamorphoses occurred with her face as well: it first became enlarged to the point that the pink spots of barely visible pimples were discernible on her cheeks, then it exploded like a firecracker scattering fiery fragments in the forms of pieces of her nose, eyes, and ears.

Roy pressed the buttons on the laptop he brought from home, editing previously recorded video material.

Why did he shoot this footage? For what reason did he bring video cameras with him to walk around on the empty beach at Sea Gate, and to go all around New York with her? What did he intend to do with these videos? It would be impossible to present something so trifling at a festival. Even to offer it to a reliable entertainment company was also doubtful. Who needs these masterfully shot and arranged scenes that show a beautiful and very charming—but completely unknown—woman?

Roy put forth the following argument as a sort of self-justification and some form of rationalization at the very least: “I’m on hiatus to pursue creative work. I need some break. As for Carmen, well, flirtation is commonplace in the artistic sphere. But that doesn’t mean you have to cross the line.”

Carmen was wonderfully photogenic. All her slight proportional imperfections, discernable only by the most exacting aesthete—say, her wide hips or the slightly overdrawn outline of her lips—became virtues on the screen.

Smoking a cigarette, standing beside Roy in real life, Carmen appeared an ordinary—even slightly vulgar—woman. But this vulgarity completely vanished when she was on the

screen. On the screen, she was not a woman coming out of a strip club, but a lady full of passionate languor, on the brink of tragic collapse.

It's necessary to give credit not only to the screen and to the technical properties of the camera lenses, which were, by the way, awfully expensive. We should pay tribute, too, to Carmen, the evil sorceress. When she saw Roy's fingers pressed on the shutter release, the camera lens pointed at her, Carmen transformed instantly. The grim and dirty former life full of deceitfulness, cruelty, and humiliation fell at her feet like a corpse. And a different Carmen came into the lens, clean and bright, as she had been many, many years before, in adolescence and her early youth in Mexico, when she had dreamed of becoming an actress.

She watched in dog-like fashion, her face drawing faithfully forward to catch her owner's intention with his slightest movement, the tiniest gesture of his eyebrow. "Heel! Sit! Get 'em!" And Carmen took it. In the absence of any specialized training, she reached the heights afforded by her innate talent as an actress, her excitement, and her beauty.

She made a quick study of Roy, aiming the lens of her woman's intuition and experience at him. She knew already the meaning of his half-closed eyes or pursed lips either before or after shooting. When Roy was very nervous and dissatisfied with his work, Carmen would come up to him and playfully put her hand over his mouth, telling him to shut up for a bit and calm down. This gesture awoke a wave of tenderness and powerful desire in him.

Very soon Roy was so overcome and taken with her that he had already conceded in his mind to fuck Carmen. She would, of course, give herself to him quite easily, he thought, especially since she had been so very uninhibited and approachable with him. Yes, marital fidelity would be destroyed. But he would never enter into a serious relationship with her. It wouldn't affect his family life.

He hugged her, placing his hands around her waist, trying to pull her to him, to press the swollen cock in his pants against her thighs under her skirt or, depending on the scene, her panties. But each time Carmen somehow slipped from his grasp like a snake, leaving him with the discarded scales of unsatisfied desire. And both the flirting and the filming continued, intertwined, and entangled, increasingly captivating and dragging them both into the unknown.

At first he took her to Sea Gate, to the deserted evening beach. Here is Carmen in shallow water, in a bikini, splashing around like a mermaid—the usual commercial shown on the TV screen for viewers to subscribe to a porn channel. Here she is on the lifeguard chair in an orange vest, topless, with a whistle and a cap—well, that's what's on the cover of Maxim or Sports Illustrated.

Here's something more interesting: the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens, the blooming of roses and orchids. Carmen in a light sundress. Crimson and black roses hang from the decorative arches of the entrance, like a castle in a fairy tale. Water sprays all around from the fountains, and Carmen, a flower fairy, flies through the rows of roses.

Watch out! On the screen animals appear—wild cats, grizzly bears, and the tigers of the Bronx zoo! Carmen teases the monkeys in their open nursery. Raising her arms in the air, she growls at the tiger that emerges from the thick bushes. He makes it to the barrier glass in one bound.

Here both Carmen and Roy sit down in a car of the park's cable railway. Carmen walks forward and gets in. After giving the tickets to the ticket-taker, who is exhausted from the heat, Roy, too, enters the car, and closes the door.

Swaying gently, the cabin floats above the earth. It rises higher and higher over the treetops. Below, the wide roads shrink, becoming thin streaks in the surging sea of green.

“Look! Look!”

A tiger is hiding in the bushes, and over there is a lake with a flock of ducks. Roy holds the camera, trying not to lose the shot and to keep Carmen in the viewfinder, which isn't easy. The cabin swings from the buffeting wind and Carmen's stomping. She's overcome by childlike delight! Things haven't been this good for her in so long, not even from cocaine.

“Look! Look! Wow!” she points somewhere and opens the door to the car.

Roy is somewhat puzzled—they might get fined. In the car ahead of them is a woman with children; she stares at this disgraceful behavior. Roy points his camera at her to make her turn away.

“Look, you blockhead! My God, it is fucking crazy.” Carmen pokes her head out of the car. “Hoo-hoo-hoo!” She flutters her palm over her mouth and yells like a savage.

Roy points the lens downwards, where the orangutans are running around in the tall, thick grass. Their dark hairy backs shimmer. Roy shoots a panorama and then captures the details: grass, hands, shaggy heads.

“Hoo-hoo-hoo!” Carmen won't stop. She stands facing away from him, her back arched. The corner of a pack of cigarettes peeks out from the pocket of her khaki shorts.

Roy lowers the camera. He looks at his hands. Before his eyes his hands are growing dense hair and his nails are turning into large curved claws. He had turned into the orangutan! He leaps onto the grass. Pushing the earth away with his powerful paws, he runs after her with the other males. There are several females ahead, but he takes after her, her alone. Her firm pink behind framed by fur flashes in the grass. Her head is pressed to her body. She looks back and

continues to run. She senses rustling in the grass close behind her, and the broken branches crackle beneath the weight of his body and his footfall. She hears his frequent hot panting. That's all; she surrenders. She bounds aside a few times to where the grass is softer.

“Have you gone completely nuts?!” Carmen pushed Roy away and straightened out her shorts, which he had attempted to unbutton. “This isn't the place for that. There are animals all around!”

“Yes, including ourselves,” Roy added jokingly, placing the cap back on the lens.

And they both laughed.

Chapter 9

“What can you do? It happens sometimes.” Walter took a deep breath and assumed his favorite pose—with his feet on the table.

He threw a worried glance at his shoes. Not so great: the leather edging is worn off, the toe is crushed, and the shape of the shoe, designed to give men's footwear a certain impression of youthfulness and freshness, is lost. And worn out shoes always brought forth a pessimistic mood in Walter the optimist. In short, it is time to buy new ones. He loosened his tie and undid the top buttons on the shirt that fit tightly around his neck.

The room was cool; the AC blasted cool air. But it was hot outside, where the asphalt rose to 100 F during the day and slowly cooled at night, releasing all of its heat into the air. The air rose with the clouds along the walls of the skyscrapers, also still warm, almost hot.

And so, an hour earlier, Walter had had to run through this scorcher, squeezing past limousines, police cars, and thousands of tourists.

Walter ran to his post in the Security Operations Center, running out of his girlfriend Lisa's apartment, because his colleague, the great filmmaker Roy, called his cell phone and told him that a fight had broken out in the famous hotel bar named the "French Laundry": several drunken men had grappled over some woman, breaking dishes and turning over tables. Roy called the police, of course. The cops were going to arrive at any minute, but still, it was better if Walter was at work. Torn from Lisa's bed, Walter hurriedly put on his shirt and trousers, fastened his belt with its gun and holster, and threw his jacket on as he ran out.

There was nothing for Walter to do at the scene when he got there; the policemen and undercover officers removed the violators—three drunken men—from the bar. Two of them kept quiet, didn't throw a fit, and so were released. The third was either drunker or dumber, and he swore mightily at the cops and waved his arms, wanting to continue his bash, and got it: he soon found himself handcuffed in the back of a police car.

Walter, who arrived toward the end, helped slam shut the door of the police car in which the ruffian sat, and he chit-chatted briefly with his former colleagues about all sorts of things. He also didn't forget to jot down their names and badge numbers. He wore a stern yet good-natured look on his face, rejoicing in the fact that nothing serious had happened and that his absence from his post had gone unnoticed. Though he was a little annoyed at being pulled away from Lisa.

When he got up to the Security Operations Center, he thanked Roy for signaling him. Then he energetically sat down at the table and wrote a short report in the ledger about the incident, which would have taken a dramatic writer at least ten long pages, though Walter wrote

it in only three succinct lines. It wasn't clear what, or more accurately who, was the cause of the fight at the "French Laundry": the mysterious woman washed away in a murky stream to an unknown location. Walter therefore identified her in his report as "alleged Prostitute Number One."

Now that the incident was played out and everything at the Mandarin was now operating smoothly and quietly again, with the bar now reopened for evening customers, Walter could relax. However, he first sent an additional security guard to the bar and asked that an additional screen be attached to the video from the French Laundry. Roy executed his instructions right away.

It should be noted that the Mandarin was guarded by two separate security services: one official, and one secret. The official one included, in addition to the chief, a group of officers on duty along with operators and illiterate, lazy security guards, designed to give the impression of a vigilant protection force. Only one third of this team remained for the night shift.

Of course, such a simple team wasn't able to provide proper security for the complex operations of a hotel. Actual security was provided by the internal armed security service, which few people knew about. This included about a dozen former police and military officers: they looked like undercover cops in dark suits, broad-shouldered and short-necked. They appeared in the hot spots of the hotel—always unexpectedly, and always on time.

This, and only this, explained Walter's carelessness of constantly moving back and forth from his girlfriend's boudoir to the surveillance room at work during the night shift. Walter knew well indeed that the role he played in this security system was only secondary, and almost insignificant.

It was three o'clock in the morning, and there were still six hours left on duty. Six long hours of gazing dumbly at the screens.

“Man, I’ve got an interesting proposition for you,” said Walter, wiping his neck with a scented hand wipe. He tossed the crumpled napkin into the trashcan and, pleased he had the shot, continued, “My former boss bought himself a house in New Jersey. It’s a villa with terraces, a garden, and a pool. It cost him a million and a half dollars, but he was able to get a mortgage at a good rate.”

“And what does your former boss’s villa have to do with me?” Roy slipped his hand into the pocket of his pants and removed a small plastic bottle with a thin white nozzle.

His eyes burned after watching the screens for a long time. Like hot sand poured into his corneas. And his vision seemed to be getting worse—he had to squint one eye then another constantly. It made sense to stop editing clips of Carmen for a while—they have too many patches, he thought.

Roy lifted the bottle above his upturned head, pulled his eyelid down, and gently squeezed the plastic bottle with his fingers. A drop of salvation fell from the bottle to his eye.

“How does it concern you? I’ll tell you, man: my boss wants you to shoot his villa and, of course, him. The swimming pool. The garden surrounding the villa. There’s a golf course and a lake with fucking swans. He’ll pay you well,” continued Walter, unbuttoning the holster on his chest and taking out his gun. “And besides the money, you’ll be able to make the useful acquaintance of the chief of the NYPD homicide unit. Don’t squander this networking opportunity, my friend; don’t get your nose in the air—be realistic!” Walter concluded with his

favorite quote, an expression of his own life credo. He stood up and went to the safe to put away his gun.

Roy sat squeezing his eyes shut while thin drops of water trickled down his cheeks.

“Okay, I’ll think about it,” he answered.

“Or maybe you’re waiting for a proposal from Hollywood? Do you know, my friend, how many oddballs like you dream about fucking Hollywood?” continued Walter, who, it should be noted, didn’t have the least understanding of the life of artists or directors, aside from what he’d read between the covers of tabloids. “So, you shot a film, huh? Made some money and a golden statue, correct? And what next? Well, you put the statue on the shelf, made a couple of TV appearances, right, and they wrote up something in the newspaper. So what’s fucking next?” asked Walter, trying to raise the heavy curtain for him and reveal the real artistic life backstage.

“Fucking nothing comes next.” Roy quietly shrugged his shoulders. He wasn’t mad at Walter; he knew that it wasn’t a good idea, and maybe even indecent, to talk about art with some people.

And really, what had changed in his life since his success at the film festival? It seemed it happened yesterday: while they were screening his movie, he anxiously counted the number of spectators leaving the hall. He expected that half of the viewers in the theatre would walk out. But only four people did! Then he gave a short speech on the stage and answered questions from the audience. When they called his name on the list of winners, Roy was somehow not even surprised. Only after he received his prize and was in the car on the way home did he suddenly slow down and wipe the tears running down his cheeks.

The phone rang nonstop those days; he didn’t even want to check his voicemail and email because they were filled with so many congratulatory messages. On his Facebook and Twitter

were endless congratulations from people he never knew. He was already prepared to wake up famous. But he'd not had any concrete offers or profitable contracts yet. A couple of times some small agencies had asked him to shoot 15-minute commercials, but they didn't set aside the time or the money for it.

Despite a pack of glowing reviews, no one bought his film for distribution. The producer held meetings with distributors about the limited sale of the movie in the U.S. and Canada. It seemed there was going to be an invitation to a film festival in London. And that was all.

The film "The Wise Adult Children," which had seemed to Roy a masterpiece during its filming, had by now faded and lost some of its prize-worthy golden sheen; it had gaping flaws. He saw it as an ordinary film that would soon be forgotten by those viewers who watched it. And it was already obvious that one successful debut wasn't enough to become a star.

By the way, here's an important question: What will his next film be about? What does he want to shoot? For a long time Roy nurtured the creative thought that he would shoot a film about suicidal teenagers. When he was studying at medical school, he read a lot about teenage suicide, trying to understand the roots of this terrible phenomenon. But until now he did nothing for this film; he didn't even lift a finger. Right now, for him, Carmen was the only desirable subject to shoot.

"Look, two whores again return to that old geezer in room 218. Let's zoom in," Walter directed, pointing to one of the screens.

A click, and the elongated figures of the girls appeared at their full height. The girls walked very shakily, like they were on stilts. The girls knock at the door of one room, and after a minute disappear into the room.

“What do you think is in the bags those lovely ladies are carrying, huh? Do you think they have condoms, whips, and handcuffs? No, they have the purest, freshest cocaine. Probably...” Walter narrowed his eye, as he was looking through the bags of these ladies. “Five grams, no less. I wonder how much money they’ll get out of that old fart today.”

Whatever you say, Walter is a pro: he sits around and chats about all kinds of nonsense, but he notices every little thing.

Walter kept talking, but Roy had stopped listening to him. He sniffled for some reason and fiddled with the buttons. Walter looked over at his colleague. Then he glanced at the screens, and the brief glance was sufficient to reassure him that everything in the hotel was in order.

“I’m sorry, I have to step out for a bit,” Roy got up and headed for the door. Within moments Roy was already on his way up in the elevator, clutching the radio in his palm. He rushed out of the elevator and ran down the hall. Realizing he’d gotten off at the wrong floor, he headed for the fire exit door.

A young man in a security guard’s uniform was sleeping on the steps of the stairwell, leaning his back against the wall. A newspaper lay on the floor near him. The guard opened his eyes, muttering an apology, and started to get up—he’d decided that this was a new boss standing in front of him. But the strange gentleman with a walkie-talkie in his hand didn’t utter a word and raced suddenly down the stairs.

In a long, light dress, throwing one leg over the other, she sat in a spacious and soft leather armchair, as if she was waiting for someone. Her arms freely lay on the wide arm rests and her fingers with brightly colored red nails lightly tapped on the leather.

Seeing Roy before her, she shuddered from surprise, but for some reason, at the same time, she also smiled and her eyes shone happily. Her face was tastefully made-up and her hair was neatly coiffed. In short, she gave off the impression of a respectable lady, who is waiting for her millionaire husband who was delayed in the hotel room.

Roy stood in front of her, clutching a walkie-talkie in his hand, not knowing what to say. "Did she come here to the hotel, to service some john? How can that be? Maybe an hour ago a fight erupted at the bar because of her? Didn't she convince me that she was out of the sex business? So, she had lied; all this time she was lying to me."

"How did you get here?" He asked coolly.

"How did I get here? Like all whores, I gave the doorman twenty bucks," She replied innocently while rising from the armchair.

Then she looked at him more closely, as if trying to guess the course of his thoughts and the reason why he now had such a sullen, angry face.

"Amigo, throw everything you are thinking about me now out of your head. I simply conducted an experiment; I wanted to be sure that you can really spot me in any corner of this huge hotel." She grimaced and shrugged guiltily.

Then she approached him and suddenly wrapped her hands around his neck and kissed him so passionately like she had never kissed any man before.

Roy returned to the Security Operations Center easy and carefree, as if after a refreshing stroll. His face was beaming.

"Can you imagine, I come out of the men's room just now and there on the floor is someone's wallet. I brought it to the check-in desk," Roy lied.

"Good job," said Walter.

Walter was already sleepy. He bent his head of thick, combed-back black hair forward so his chin rested on his chest. Walter, always the professional, could sleep anywhere, and no noise, not even the firing of a cannonball, could awaken him. He never snored; the air passed quietly and evenly through the nostrils of his wide flat nose, entered his mighty lungs, and returned in clear streams. Broad chested, slumbering, with a bowed head and swelling shoulders, he was reminiscent of mythic heroes from ancient times.

His sleep however, didn't last long that summer night. Awakened by a strange force, Walter opened his eyes and didn't at first believe he was awake. First, he pinched himself in the thigh, and then he tugged superstitiously on his ear.

"Oh, oh, ma-an!" Walter groaned. He undid two more buttons on his shirt and began to scratch his chest. "Jee-sus Christ!"

Shots of a charming, beautiful, tanned woman in white lacy panties and matching dazzling white bra, with a tattoo of a red flower on her leg, flickered on the huge screens on the wall. The woman lay on a wide bed, sliding like a snake, kneeling, and thrusting out her lower jaw and bloodied mouth. She slid forward. Next, exhausted, she fell on her back, languidly extending her beckoning arms.

Roy continued to press the buttons of his laptop, never taking his eyes from the screen. And on the screen, this enchanting brunette metamorphosed into the red flower, which suddenly burst into flame. The flame flared up, raging, then was extinguished; a half-naked Carmen again appeared through the thin stream of smoke.

"Oh, man, this is better than any porn movie! It's even better than a strip club!" Walter didn't skimp on the praise. Beads of sweat covered his forehead, and his neck shone dully as well. "Such a hot Latina! No, she's not a cheap stripper. This one's from an expensive escort

service, five-thousand bucks a night, and no less.” Walter thus expressed his final conclusion as an expert when the “film” was over. He took a deep breath, as if he’d just come from a dangerous nighttime raid. He looked at his watch. “Well, we killed an hour. Thank God for sending me such a shift partner!”

Chapter 10

The next day Roy brought her to his apartment in Dyker Heights.

They were sitting in the large living-room, eating sushi and drinking hot tequila. Carmen was telling Roy of her childhood, how not far from the house where they lived there was a grove where old trees grew amidst many rocks, birds, and snakes. This was her favorite spot for childhood games and adventures.

She said that after graduating from high school, she had once studied business administration at the University of Mexico City because she was too cowardly to apply to the Theater Academy to become an actress. Then she dropped out of the university, left her family, and went to the United States on a visitor visa.

"You don't tell me anything about your daughter," Roy noticed.

Carmen was confused for a moment; a shadow ran over her face.

"About my daughter?? Gloria is the apple of my eye. She lives with my parents. I miss her very much." She took her phone, which lay next on the desk, and zoomed in on the photo on screen. "Look, what a beauty. She'll soon turn ten years old." She showed Roy a photo of a dark-haired girl, and he could vaguely spot her mom's facial features on her. Then she silently poured herself a full cup of sake and chugged it in one gulp, twisting her face afterwards.

Roy realized that she doesn't want to talk with him about her daughter, and it was a "sore subject" for her.

Soon all the sake had been drunk, and Roy took out a bottle of wine from the bar. It became clear for him that he would not go to work for the night shift, and he sent the boss a text message, reporting that he was not feeling well and was taking the day off.

They drank wine. Carmen opened up to him and started telling him about "her idol" Salma Hayek, that she watched all her films many times and remembers many episodes in great detail.

"Do you wanna see something?" On her phone, she found a song from the movie "Dusk till Dawn." Getting up from the table, she came up to the mirror hanging on the wall. Standing before the mirror, Carmen arched her back and pushed her shoulders forward a little. She let her tense arms with clutched fingers fall back. And then she started to perform the "Snake Dance," imitating Salma Hayek's performance from the movie. A wonderful, unforgettable performance. Instead of a live snake, Carmen used her black T-shirt, which she took off.

Smiling and holding his breath, Roy watched her dance. "Bravo, Señora!" He clapped his hands when the dance was over. Then he placed the glass of wine on the table, got up and approached Carmen, taking off his T-shirt on the way. He decided that finally—that day—she would give herself to him. For all her seeming accessibility, up until now Carmen refused intimacy, as if wanting to tease him even more, to ignite his passion.

Yes, he realized it would happen right here, and right now—in his apartment, on the bed he'd shared with Michelle, and only Michelle, for twelve years.

Michelle and Nick, of course, didn't exist in that moment. They were at Sea Gate.

But their photographs hung on each wall of the apartment.

At that moment, Roy got a murky but intense premonition that his encounter with Carmen was not accidental, and that they would not be able part just like that.

He pressed her tenderly to himself, and he drowned in the delightful fragrance of her perfume and her body. Then he led her to the bed.

“Ah!” He suddenly cried out in sharp pain.

Pushing Carmen away from himself, he put his hand to his right cheek. Then he pulled away his palm from his cheek and saw droplets of blood on it.

"Why did you do that?" What's wrong with you?" Roy asked, not understanding why Carmen now deeply scratched his face with her sharp fingernail.

She stood a few steps in front of him, staring at him at point-blank range, and her eyes sparkled with some wild gleam. Then smiling, without speaking a word, she put her finger, with a brightly colored fingernail, with which she scratched Roy, in her mouth, and then began to lick it from all sides with desire.

"What movie is this scene from?" he asked, stroking his scratched cheek.

Carmen to him now resembled a wild cat, a beautiful wild cat, which with equal ease can either scratch someone's cheek or claw their eyes out.

"I wanted to cause you pain," she said. "I also wanted to see if you could forgive me this. I came to the hotel yesterday for the same reason, to purposefully get on your nerves, and I succeeded. Silly and harsh, aren't I?"

"I'll forgive you for anything, including any of your stupidity and harshness," he said.

"Really? You're not joking?"

“No, I'm absolutely serious.”

"Are you sure you won't regret it, forgiving me for everything?"

It was obvious that this conversation was of great importance to both him and to her.

“Yes, I’m sure.”

She stayed quiet for a bit. Then, keeping her eyes on Roy and slowly swinging her hips, she unbuttoned and unzipped her shorts, slipping out of them till she remained only in her panties. Then, coming up to him, she hugged his neck, clutched her fingers from behind, and, pulling herself up, wrapped her feet around his torso above his waist. Comfortably settling in this position, feeling his palms under her buttocks, she closed her eyes.

“I am yours, amigo. You can do whatever you want with me.”

THIS IS THE END OF THE SECTION