

AN ANGEL IN HUMAN FORM

I left the room. Something had happened in there that was unprecedented not only in this hotel, but in any hotel in the world. (...) When I was already in the corridor, the psychological pain disappeared, and in its place, before the next sensation, came a frightening interim silence. All I could hear in it was the accelerated beating of my heart. It seemed to be whispering: Enough! I knew this silence well. It augured a powerful storm. In this short pause, I sensed that my emotional spring, which had been stretching for a week, had now reached its limit. That's why I was expecting the energy to be released in the form of a serious crisis.

I looked at my hand. There was blood on the knuckles. I wiped the sticky red fluid on my jeans, realizing that I was erasing the last evidence that connected me with Nicole. But I did it anyway. Then I lifted my head. I lifted it as much as a person who has just endured a heavy defeat can. And I left. In the distance, Igor had stood up.

I strode down the long corridor, but I had the feeling that I wasn't covering any distance, that I was just walking in place. The space around me stretched out like the tube of a telescopic. After a mere moment I could no longer see its end.

I continued walking down my seemingly endless path to the elevators. The sensation was like swimming in deep and calm water. Out of nowhere, a distant, muted roaring started up. As I got swept along with the current, it got louder with every passing second. Soon, before my eyes appeared that thing you'll inevitably see when you're traveling down a river and you hear a roaring sound nearby – a waterfall. The thundering of thousands of cubic meters of water crashing down could be heard louder and louder.

The edge grew menacingly closer. I began swimming in the opposite direction, but the mass of water was dragging me mercilessly towards my fatal end. I couldn't save myself. Shortly before reaching the brink, I closed my eyes. Who wants to watch the last moments of their life before death? No one. Then I took flight. I started tumbling down. In the last moment, more from expectation, I hit with a thud – not the water, though, but the ground. I felt the pain, as well as the hard surface, with my back. I was aware of my thoughts. This meant I was alive. Then I timidly opened my eyes. I found myself once more in the corridor of the hotel. As I stared at the ceiling, a blurry human silhouette jumped over me and passed me. (...)

“Zhoro, are you okay?” I heard Igor's voice saying. “Hold onto me!”

The bodyguard shoved himself under my right arm so I could lean on him and lifted me up. Then he dragged me down the corridor, past the elevators, into the restroom on the left. At the sink he turned the cold water tap all the way and stuck his hand under the stream.

“Hang on, kid!” he said as was waiting for it to get cold enough. “You'll be okay.”

“My wallet!” I said. “Take it out! Right now!”

“Oh, no, no wallets. You're not gonna do anything stupid. I'll fix you up fast now, my way.”

“Give me my wallet!”

“When I was in the army, we would wake up people who’d fainted with a bucket of cold water and a few kicks,” he went on, pretending he hadn’t heard me. “Do you know how effective that is?”

Before I could say anything, Igor sent the first handful of water towards my face. He brought it down so that his fingers hit my cheeks. A clean slap. At the same time, he was holding me forward firmly with his left arm so I wouldn’t fall or get away from him in my attempt to get at my cocaine.

The splashing and the slaps, concealed in handfuls of water, began. And they continued this way until I was soaked to the waist.

Even though much of the water gushing from the tap ended up on me, the strong stream gradually managed to fill the sink I was leaning over. A whirlpool formed in the middle and my eyes were drawn to the tiny miracle of physics. It slowly absorbed my mind into its hypnotizing whirling dance. It wasn’t long before I was imagining I had fallen into that vortex and was now being sucked to the bottom of the pool. There was a gap at the bottom with a blinding light shining through. *Hell!* I thought in fright. In a sudden movement I jumped back with all the strength I had left and ended up a foot away from the sink. With my horrified stare focused on it, I was still in the firm grip of the Russian and couldn’t get any further away.

“What happened, kid?” Igor asked. He was gripping me by the neck and getting right up close to me, peering deep into my eyes. “Are you better?”

At that same moment, a figure entered my peripheral vision and stopped directly behind Igor. I tried to warn him, but the stranger was too quick. Before I could understand what was happening, he had grabbed my bodyguard by the arm, above the elbow, and with no particular effort, he yanked him back, apparently to get him out of the path to me.

Kidnappers! I thought – for this second time this evening.

A COWBOY IN AN ARMORED LIMO

“I’m sure that’s what you’d do,” said Christian as he pulled on his seatbelt. You’re a real cowboy VIP.” He swallowed dryly and squeezed the door handle.

“And you’re the first person who’s put on a seatbelt in this car,” I laughed. “Hit the gas, boys!”

“We’re heading out!” Igor gave an instruction over the radio.

The escort SUV behind us made a sharp left turn into the driving lane and got in the way of the cars coming from Evlogi Georgiev Blvd. It was their bad luck to have the green

light just then. The purpose of the vehicle's surprising maneuver was to ensure a clear corridor for the main car in the procession to pull out – mine. This cause unprecedented chaos at the intersection, which was generally one of the city's busiest even when it wasn't rush hour. Making it even more painful for the drivers along the canal, one of the boulevard's lanes was closed for repairs. Distant horns sounded from angry drivers who couldn't see what was blocking the column's path. The rest, in the closer cars, didn't dare protest. Only their moving lips showed that the single masculine reaction they allowed themselves was heavy swearing. They didn't have the courage for anything else. Awe was like an invisible silencer of horns, and its range reached as far as the visibility of the drivers.

When the limo driver was sure the road was safe, he also came out with a full left turn onto the now free lane, and as he went around the old SUV, he pulled away with a ceremonious slowness. After the escort cars also joined us, Alex pressed the pedal hard and Christian and I were gripped to the seats. The powerful engines of the three cars left a deafening reverberation, further intensified by the acoustics under the Lovers' Bridge. Our fellow citizens again shot us indignant stares, while we let them breathe the street dust we kicked up.

The procession quickly picked up speed on Bulgaria Boulevard and strictly followed the rules of this type of traffic. Car One, the limousine, set the speed and direction. Car Two, the escort SUV, followed Car One constantly, about three feet behind its rear bumper. The escort car was spilling over into the next lane so as not to allow anyone to pass the retinue, on the off chance anyone faster showed up. But this was unlikely, since I knew everyone in Sofia with a sports car fast enough to do that, and they wouldn't dare. Car Three, the old BMW, moved behind Car Two, following the same traffic rules.

“Step on it!” I ordered the driver, firmly resolved to impress the booker.

But frozen and still gripping the door handle, Christian gave no signs of his fear giving way to any stronger emotions any time soon.

“Step on it!” I called out again.

When the arrow reached 100 miles an hour, Igor looked at his colleague in the driver's seat as a hint not to follow my instructions so closely.

“Speed up, man!” I shouted, because I saw that the head of security was having an influence on the driver. “I'm telling you to go faster!”

The speedometer was already showing over 120 miles an hour. I could feel the acceleration and the valiant vibration created by the BMW's V12 engine. The first to surrender to the high speed was the X5. It wasn't as powerful as its newer counterparts and couldn't keep up the same pace. And it had been relentlessly pushed over the years, which had further depreciated its engine. Kind of like an aging 100-meter sprint champion. The other one who looked like he was also about to surrender was my assistant, who was white as sheet. For a person not used to these speeds, the feeling of 125 miles an hour in a populated area is very different from that on the highway. In the city, where the road is surrounded by buildings and all kinds of other infrastructure, things happen much more dynamically. The

BMW's custom stereo system was an additional incentive for high speeds. At that moment, my favorite Black Devil song was playing – “Mobbin’ with the Devil.” I reached for the screen in front of me and cranked the music all the way up. The speakers erupted. The booker let go of the handle and clapped his hands over his ears.

Entering the bus lane, we flew through the first intersection. At the second one, the one at Gotse Delchev Boulevard, things promised to become more complicated. Even from this distance, the traffic jam was visible. I figured only an accident could block traffic so heavily at this hour. As we approached, the flashing police lights in the distance confirmed this. I immediately turned the music down.

“Igor!” I called out to my bodyguard. “Get out the flashing light!” (...)

In key places in the intersection you could also see several cop cars in place with their police lights on. Officers in uniform were directing traffic with their billy clubs, letting only a few cars pass by slowly on each side. If I had listened to Igor and we had waited, we’d get home at midnight at this rate. And time, in addition to money, is also an investment in the future.

When one of the cops noticed us, he nervously readjusted his cap and jogged towards us. He looked embarrassed that he hadn’t seen us earlier. With energetic movements of his baton, the deluded policeman stopped all the other cars and starting clearing the way for us. As we were passing through the intersection, we drove slowly around the accident site. Christian lifted up in his seat and looked at the crashed cars in horror. You could see on his face that he was imagining himself in the twisted metal as the end result of driving at 125 miles an hour in the city. Then he turned to me with a reproachful glance. With the conviction that bad things always happen to other people, mainly those in cheap, flimsy cars, I called to the driver, “Step on it. So they don’t get too good a look at us.”

Alex put the pedal to the metal and the BMW’s engine roared as it condescendingly flew past the traffic cops. The car shot ahead, dragging its tail of two escorts. This performance drew everyone’s eyes. The more observant of them quickly realized that the cars were not governmental. One of them was the very cop who had helped us pass.

“The police are about to spring into action,” Alex informed us, following the situation behind us. “He’s already talking on his radio.”

“He’s reporting the offender to his colleagues,” Igor added with a note of blame directed at me.

“Big deal,” I said.

Thanks to our special traffic mode, we also went through the third and final intersection on the red light. Then we continued uphill at a furious speed.

“They’re following us!” Alex said at one point, turning around with an anxious expression.

We all looked behind us. In the distance you could see a cop car with its lights on, straining to keep up with us. I started to laugh at this pathetic image.

“It’s not funny!” Igor interrupted me. “You realize, don’t you, that soon there’ll be more. This was completely unnecessary.”

There was no way for me not to react at his second attempt to make me look bad in front of Christian.

“And so what if they do?” I snapped at him. “Stop complaining! We’ll lose them soon.”

I turned around to see how far our pursuer had gotten. The cop car was obviously out of breath and didn’t look capable of catching up with us. (...)

“Christian, what’s going on, man? You’re not scared, are you?”

“Well, no,” he began stammering. “I, you know. It’s the first time I’ve been in that kind of action. Like a film.”

“Take it easy, dude,” I smiled at him encouragingly. “Everything’ll be fine. Igor’s just tensing up.”

“Cop cars!” Alex and Igor called out in unison.

Two patrol cars popped out of Kuma Street towards the Cinema Center. A second later they were already in the oncoming lane to block our way.