

K R Y M I N A Ł

CZARNE MORZE

MICHAŁ ŚMIELAK

NAJLEPSZA KSIĄŻKA AUTORA
ŚNIEG PRZYKRYJE I OSADY

CZARNA OWCA

Michał Śmielak

The Black Sea

Synopsis, Bio & Excerpts



for: O. Wojcik

Michał Śmielak

About the author

Michał Śmielak is one of the most exciting voices in contemporary Polish crime fiction. A bestselling author of crime novels and thrillers, he is known for combining gripping mysteries with elements of local history, folklore and dark legends. His stories are often set in isolated communities where long-buried secrets resurface with deadly consequences.

His novel *Osada* (The Settlement) **was nominated for the prestigious Grand Calibre Award and won the Vivaldi Book Award as well as the Kryminalny Magiel Award.** Śmielak lives in Sandomierz, a historic town that frequently inspires the atmospheric settings of his novels.

The Black Sea

Michał Śmielak

Crime



In the Black Sea, the past never sinks...

A year after failing to capture the notorious serial killer known as the Beast of Zagłębie, Detective Paweł Hardy is given one last chance at redemption when a series of brutal murders shakes the post-industrial district of Sosnowiec known as the Black Sea. The killer's methods are disturbingly familiar, forcing Hardy into a deadly game where every clue leads not only to the murderer, but also to his own haunted past.

Set against the raw, atmospheric backdrop of Poland's former mining heartland, Black Sea is a dark, emotionally charged police thriller that blends a relentless investigation with psychological depth. Michał Śmielak delivers a gripping novel about guilt, trauma and the monsters people carry within themselves, proving that the most terrifying evil is often the one hidden beneath the surface.

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432 pages



4.4/ 341 ratings/ 49 reviews

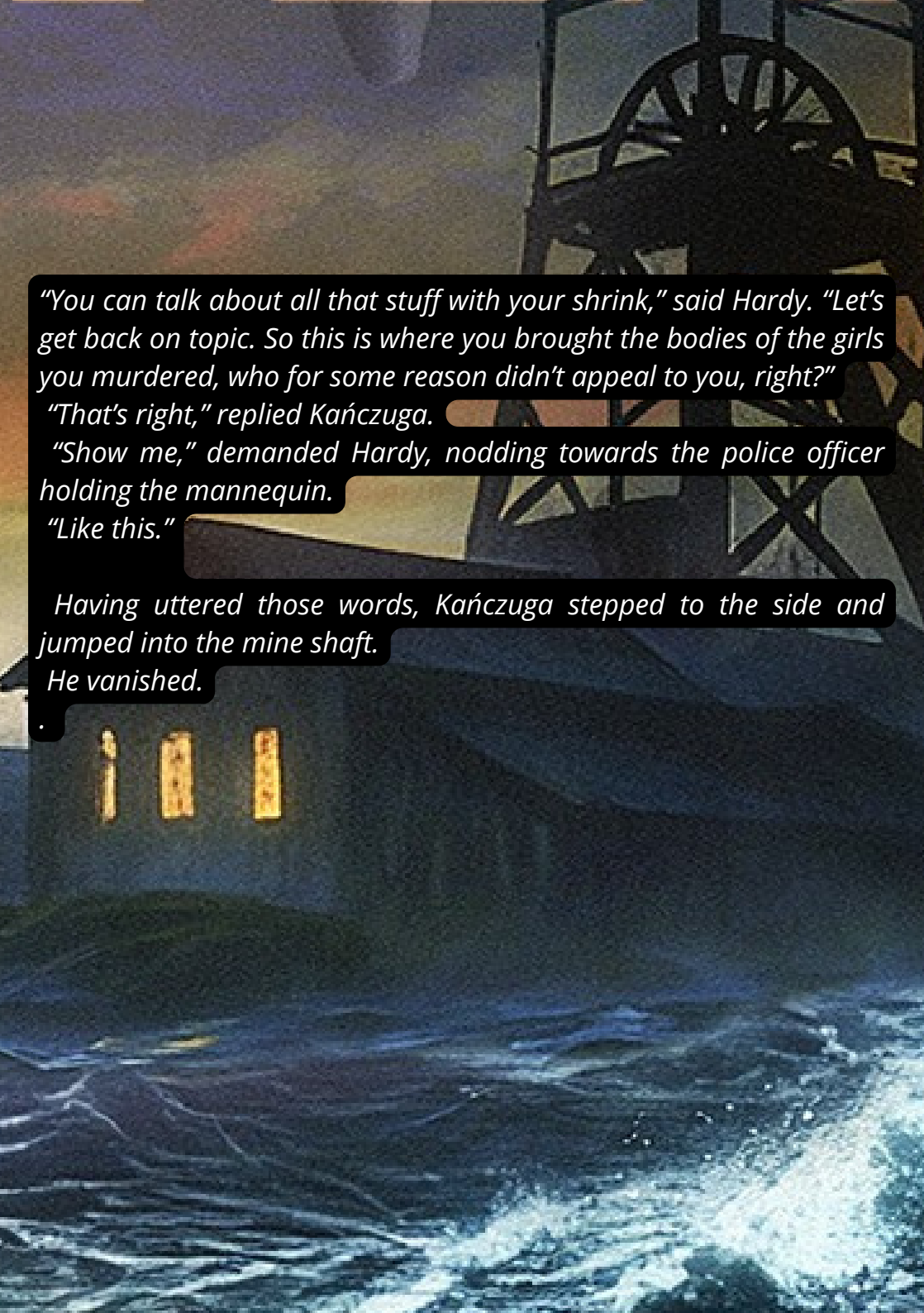


8.1/ 1 342 ratings/ 330 reviews

Set in the present day, Black Sea channels the energy of a 1990s action thriller, featuring relentless action, unforgettable characters who play by their own rules, and a generous dose of razor-sharp sarcasm.

Jakub Demiańczuk, Polityka

- A fast-paced, dark and atmospheric crime novel set in post-industrial rural Poland.
- Vivid, multi-dimensional characters who battle not only evil, but also one another.
- A gripping, expertly crafted crime novel with a healthy dose of sharp, sarcastic humour.



"You can talk about all that stuff with your shrink," said Hardy. "Let's get back on topic. So this is where you brought the bodies of the girls you murdered, who for some reason didn't appeal to you, right?"

"That's right," replied Kańczuga.

"Show me," demanded Hardy, nodding towards the police officer holding the mannequin.

"Like this."

Having uttered those words, Kańczuga stepped to the side and jumped into the mine shaft.

He vanished.

The Black Sea
Synopsis by Michał Śmielak.
Translated by Kate Webster.

The Black Sea is a dark crime novel set in Kazimierz Górniczy, a district of Sosnowiec located somewhat on the outskirts of the city. The area is steeped in a post-mining past and marked by the difficult history of the region.

The protagonist is Detective Paweł Hardy, whom we first meet during a crime scene reconstruction conducted with Poland's most notorious contemporary serial killer, Jan Kańczuga, known as "the Beast of Zagłębie". In a spectacular turn of events, however, the murderer escapes, jumping into a disused mine shaft that he had prepared in advance and using a network of underground tunnels to flee. Hardy is held solely responsible for the failure.

The disaster shatters Hardy's life and sends him spiralling to rock bottom. He descends into alcoholism, cuts himself off from the world, and lives burdened by overwhelming guilt. His chief adversary becomes prosecutor Justyna Potomna, who was also present during the reconstruction. Determined to destroy Hardy's career, she makes him her personal target.

A year after the fateful events, thanks to the efforts of his friends, Hardy is given a second chance. He quits drinking and joins the armed enforcement branch of the Customs and Revenue Service, colloquially known as the "Piggy Banks". There he is partnered with Anna Glińska, a civil servant blindly devoted to rules and regulations. Yet the job leaves him unfulfilled. It is far removed from police work, lacks the intensity and excitement he once knew, and soon the emptiness and sense of frustration return to his life. Then, suddenly, the past reaches out and pulls him onto a new path.

In Sosnowiec, a young woman is found dead in one of the district's post-mining tenement buildings. The crime scene has been staged in a way that unmistakably links it to Kańczuga's case. The victim turns out to be one of the women Kańczuga attacked years earlier but who managed to survive. Everything points to the return of the Beast.

Hardy realises this is his last chance at redemption, the only way he can atone for his failures. Besides, he knows more about the killer than anyone else. After all, he was the one who captured him in the first place. If anyone should lead the investigation, it's Hardy.

Prosecutor Justyna Potomna is also drawn into the case. Kańczuga blackmails her by threatening to kill her daughter unless she arranges for Hardy to be reinstated to the police force. Faced with no other choice, she agrees. After confirming that Hardy has overcome his addiction, she proposes an uneasy truce. The Beast wants a final confrontation with the detective.

As the investigation deepens, Hardy begins to realise that the new murders are connected to his own past, specifically to events from his early childhood. The story leads back to his family home and a tragedy that shaped his entire life. When Hardy was six years old, his mother attempted a murder-suicide. She killed his two sisters, but Hardy survived thanks to the eldest, who told him to hide as part of a game of hide-and-seek.

More victims appear, and under the pressure of Kańczuga's blackmail, Potomna succeeds in having Hardy reinstated to the police force. He officially takes charge of the investigation and assembles a task force dedicated to capturing the Beast.

The inquiry appears to be unfolding according to Kańczuga's carefully designed plan until Hardy crosses paths with a local gangster known as Johnny and his partner, Klara. The pair are involved in pimping and prostitution, and one of the murdered women had been working for them. Convinced that it is his only chance of catching the killer, Hardy reluctantly enters into cooperation with the criminal underworld.

At the same time, the investigators begin focusing on the blackmail campaign directed at Prosecutor Potomna. The police set a trap for Kańczuga in Kuroń Park in Sosnowiec. During the ensuing chase, the suspect is shot, but the operation ends in a shocking revelation. The man is not the escaped serial killer but Hardy's neighbour, Maciej. The young man had looked after Hardy during his darkest period of alcoholism and gained access to the Kańczuga case files. Believing that reinstatement to the police force was Hardy's only chance of salvation, he impersonated the Beast and fabricated the threat against Potomna's daughter. His scheme achieved its goal: Hardy was restored to active duty, but the real Kańczuga has returned as well.

Realising that the killer is deliberately targeting the wounds of his past, Hardy begins investigating his family history. He visits his mother, who is confined to a secure psychiatric institution. There he learns of a mysterious man named Kajetan who once entered her life. Evidence suggests that this man may have been responsible for the tragedy that destroyed Hardy's family. His mother had been undergoing psychiatric

treatment, and Kajetan allegedly manipulated her into murdering her daughters. The plan ultimately failed: she survived, and Hardy escaped by hiding. The detective begins to suspect that Kańczuga may in fact be his biological father. Determined to uncover the truth, he orders genetic testing.

Through an unlikely alliance between Hardy, Potomna and Klara, the investigative team gradually closes in on Kańczuga. Hardy feels that he is finally approaching a breakthrough. Meanwhile, he becomes romantically involved with Klara, and what begins as an affair slowly develops into something far more serious.

When Hardy finally tracks down Kańczuga, he discovers that the killer has been hiding in the home of his former Customs and Revenue Service partner, Anna Glińska. Upon arriving at the scene, the investigators find her decapitated and mutilated body. They immediately launch a pursuit and, after a daring chase, manage to capture the murderer. The case appears to be over; Jan Kańczuga, the Beast of Zagłębie, is finally behind bars.

Exhausted after the arrest, Hardy returns home with Potomna. There, inside his refrigerator, he finds Klara's severed head. He realises that Kańczuga has claimed more victims than anyone suspected and that the entire campaign of murder and terror was deeply personal.

During Kańczuga's interrogation, investigators conclude that another crime scene reconstruction will be necessary – this time at Hardy's childhood home, located in an area known as the Black Sea. One of the victims' bodies was discovered there, and Hardy hopes the visit will finally shed light on the mysteries of his past.

As Kańczuga is brought to the site, local residents learn that the serial killer who has terrorised the neighbourhood for weeks is present in their community. A crowd quickly gathers and attempts to carry out vigilante justice. The investigative team, pursued by an increasingly violent mob, is forced to evacuate the scene. Hardy and Potomna secure Kańczuga in their vehicle and, hoping to evade the crowd, take a remote route suggested by the killer himself, who knows the area intimately.

The road leads them to a pond where a masked man is already waiting. It turns out to be Johnny, Klara's partner. He takes custody of Kańczuga and, seeking revenge for Klara's murder, drowns him in the water. Johnny, Hardy and Potomna then stage the scene to make it look as though the serial killer escaped and accidentally drowned.

Hardy leaves the final decision to Potomna's conscience: she can either reveal what truly happened or accept the official version of events – that Kańczuga died while attempting to escape police custody.

It is later revealed that the apparent vigilante uprising was itself orchestrated by Hardy and Johnny as part of a carefully constructed plan designed to bring about exactly this outcome.

The novel concludes with Hardy visiting Maciej, who has been left confined to a wheelchair after being shot during the incident in Kuroń Park. The detective must also confront the results of the genetic tests concerning the possibility of Kańczuga's paternity. However, the truth is never revealed to the reader.

In the final chapter, Detective Paweł Hardy receives an offer to join an elite unit of the Central Bureau of Investigation known as the “Monster Hunters”, a task force dedicated to tracking down Poland's most dangerous criminals. He accepts the offer, recognising that his ties to Sosnowiec's criminal underworld have become too deep for him to continue working there. Leaving the city behind, Hardy embarks on a new chapter of his life, carrying with him the unresolved questions of his past.

Kate Webster is a professional Polish-to-English literary translator, editor, and subtitler. Her literary translations have been nominated for prestigious awards, including the International Booker Prize and the Oxford-Weidenfeld Prize. She lives in London.

The Black Sea
Sample translation by Kate Webster

PROLOGUE

It was cold here, wet, deathly somehow. The dense bushes, soaked from the previous night's downpour, stretched drenched arms towards them in an effort to siphon even an ounce of warmth. Their shoes slipped on the sodden path; water dripped from the trees and ran down their necks. The only sounds were the splashing of soles in the slimy mud, the slapping of wet branches against clothes, exhausted panting, and every now and then, a short but juicy curse. When the domed bushes opened up to the sky for a moment, they revealed low-hanging clouds, beastly and leaden; it was almost certain that it would piss it down again at any moment and the entire venture would be screwed.

"I told you to call this shit off," snapped the guy with the camera, some newbie.

Detective Paweł Hardy didn't recognise him. The cameraman was wearing a brand new jacket and shoes, which had probably cost him more than a police officer earns in a month. The new gear wasn't helping him at all – he was sliding along the uneven path just like the others.

"Shut it," snapped someone from the back.

"Is it much further?" asked Hardy, tugging at the handcuffs that bound him to the detainee.

The man stopped and looked Hardy in the eye. The other members of the group stopped too. They had a uniformed policeman up front, as well as several other officers, a prosecutor, and that bloody cameraman behind.

The man on the other end of the handcuffs said nothing, as was his habit: he first looked the other person in the eye, as if he wanted to convey everything with the power of his mind, and only then did he speak. During one of the interrogations, Hardy had watched him through a one-way mirror and measured the length of these excruciating pauses. Each one lasted a minute. It was as if the guy had a stopwatch in his head and could only say something after sixty seconds had expired somewhere behind those watery eyes. Now, too, an unbearable minute of forced silence passed, with the rest of the party panting and water dripping from the leaves around them.

“We’re almost there,” he said finally, making no effort to hide his satisfaction at having taken them on a walk they would never forget.

“No wonder no one found these victims,” commented the guy with the camera. Evidently, he was quite the chatterbox, and Hardy no longer liked him.

Those who have the least to say talk the most, that was his rule. Hardy set off again, tugging at the handcuffs, which restarted the chorus of splats, shuffles and gasps. The wet branches slapped them as if patting them on the back to assure them that they were doing a good job, that it was close, they’d make it.

They finally emerged into a clearing the size of two volleyball

courts, tightly surrounded by a green wall of wet bushes, three or four metres high. In the centre of the clearing lay a pile of old planks and pieces of wood, up to the height of an adult man's chest. The pile both fit and didn't fit in this place simultaneously. On the one hand, it seemed to be in the right place, because the clearing itself was like a hidden spot that had been created solely so that no one would ever have to look there. On the other hand, who had collected these old planks here, and why? Maybe they'd wanted to build something?

"Is it here?" asked the cameraman.

Hardy tugged at the chain of the handcuffs. The man attached to him first looked at Hardy in that annoying way of his, and then at the questioner, holding his gaze for his trademark sixty seconds. At first it seemed as if the cameraman would hold out, but no, there was something in the other man's eyes that an ordinary person couldn't bear; the duel was doomed to failure. Hardy had once defined it as a feeling similar to that experienced while watching a horror film, when the victim climbs the dark stairs to the upper floor, fully aware that the killer is waiting there and that they won't live to see the film's final scene. Nonetheless, they climb. And the viewer is filled with these very emotions – the tension just before the sudden change in action becomes so unbearable that the viewer closes their eyes or turns their head away, sometimes hides it under a blanket, sometimes even pauses the film. Yes, staring into the eyes of this man was like watching a brutal and unbearably grimy horror film.

"Yes, it's here," the man replied after a minute.

“Where?” asked Hardy.

“Under the planks. There’s a hole in the ground. A mine shaft. Deep.”

“And you removed all those planks every time you wanted to throw a body inside?” said Hardy in disbelief.

“Decoration,” said the man.

“What?”

“It’s just decoration, like a shop window that draws people in, or puts people off. This was supposed to put people off.”

“Put them off what?”

“Digging around.”

“In this stack of wood?”

The man just spread his hands slightly, as if to say, “What is it you don’t get? Everything’s clear.”

“Shall we start?” the cameraman asked urgently, his voice betraying his boredom, like a child who’s fed up with a journey five minutes after setting off.

Hardy sighed. He could have passed on the large vodka after breakfast, but he was feeling so bad, he couldn’t hold his cup of coffee. He told himself that it was all over; he had caught Jan Kańczuga – dubbed the Beast of Zagłębie by the media – put him behind bars, and sacrificed hundreds of hours’ in interrogations, evidence gathering and analysis of his murders. All that remained was to survive the crime scene reconstruction and that would be it, he’d get his act together, stop drinking, ask to be moved to a desk-based role. He’d start running, go to the gym. He’d been through too much these past two years. He’d become too much like this maniac,

and he'd paid for it with alcoholism. Fast, violent, like a storm. He used to refuse vodka, hated its taste; then one day, out of the blue, he'd been drawn to it. He was fully aware of this and keen to get out of his alcohol-fuelled stagnation. Just this last reconstruction.

“Detective Hardy?” The cameraman looked in his direction.

“Prosecutor?” Hardy passed the question on to Justyna Potomna.

He didn't like her, no one from the police force did. She was principled, she adhered to the codes without a shred of understanding for the people who had to ensure their observance. Hardy wondered if there was anyone in the world who liked her. Those tight, thin lips; those perpetually narrowed, darting eyes, as if she were searching for an unprotected spot on your body into which she could plunge a needle. She was a beautiful woman and this confused many a defendant, and many a police officer too. A blonde “with everything in the right place”, as the guys at the station used to say – except, of course, for a touch of kindness, warmth and understanding, which someone had probably deprived her of at birth. Maybe those qualities were hanging further down the umbilical cord and the doctor, not knowing what he was dealing with, decided simply to cut it off. You don't become a person like that – you have to be born that way.

“Fine,” she replied with a grimace, tucking the handle of her umbrella between her cheek and her shoulder, then taking a thin cigarette from her handbag. “Please begin.”

They set up in the clearing without a word. This was the third crime scene reconstruction with Jan Kańczuga, another of his

locations where he'd hidden bodies. So far, he'd shown them where he'd kidnapped the girls from, and the clearing where he'd buried them. They'd found precisely thirteen bodies. All young women; all, without exception, beautiful before their deaths, brutally mutilated immediately afterwards.

The team were surprised when, after completing the last planned reconstruction, Kańczuga had announced that it wasn't over, that he still had something for them. Were there more than thirteen victims? They were concerned that if this information was leaked to the media, several of their jobs could be at risk.

"Are we shooting?" the cameraman asked in a tone that had the same effect on Hardy as an involuntary muscle contraction, making his fist clench.

This guy was with them for the first time, and Hardy had no interest in what had happened to the last one. All that mattered now was what Kańczuga was about to show them, and then the 10cl bottle of mint vodka waiting in the car. After that, the case was over and he had two weeks off. No more alcohol, and no more Potomna. Apparently, she was due to be promoted to some ministerial position. Fucking good for her.

The six uniformed officers positioned themselves around the clearing, which both created a protective buffer against any external threats and prevented Kańczuga from escaping. While they were recording, his handcuffs were removed so that he could properly illustrate what he'd done with the bodies and how he'd hidden them, in order to confirm his testimony and eliminate any doubts. Kańczuga was perfectly happy to tell them and show them

everything, which pleased the prosecutor no end as it meant she'd have it easier in court.

Hardy stood closest to Kańczuga, while another officer held a mannequin for him to demonstrate what he'd done. Then there was the cameraman, the photographer, the prosecutor and two colleagues from the criminal department who were supporting the operation, plus a few uniformed riot police officers. Many of the victims' fathers wanted to take justice into their own hands; the security detail was necessary, though apparently slight overkill on this occasion. Why the hell would anyone venture out here?

Hardy removed the handcuff from Kańczuga's wrist and took a few steps back so he wouldn't be in the frame. The prosecutor recited the spiel about the location, the accused, and the purpose of the reconstruction in a detached tone, hiding her lit cigarette behind her back.

The murderer gently rubbed his wrist, then lifted his head and looked at the sky as if he sensed that it was about to rain. He was a slim man of about fifty with the face of a weary construction worker, sloppily shaven and suntanned. He looked much older, which made him seem completely harmless. His physique was deceptive, because although he was thin, he had strong arms and hard muscles acquired through years of physical labour. Or maybe he worked out? No one knew, because Kańczuga himself was a complete mystery. Neither his true identity nor his date of birth could be established. It was fantastic media fodder. He had simply introduced himself to them at the first interrogation as Jan Kańczuga. His face was also a decoy – it could represent a farmer on

strike, a miner just finishing a shift, a man of the people, and thus perfectly masked his above-average intelligence.

“Get on with it, Jan.” Deputy Detective Edward Kostecki was keen to crack on. “We’re freezing our arses off here.”

He was a skilled officer with many years of experience in the Sosnowiec criminal department. He knew that Kańczuga hated being called by his first name. Kostecki enjoyed getting on his nerves.

Kańczuga stood motionless for a moment, as if the cold air had frozen him. He looked at Kostecki, then raised his head again and looked at the cloud-covered sky. He was probably aware that these were his last moments outside the prison walls.

Watery eyes. Yes, his bulging eyes seemed to be constantly seeking contact with the rain. They somehow appeared to give him peripheral vision as well.

He started talking.

“It’s decoration,” he said. “So that hikers and kids don’t become interested in this place.”

“The bodies are under the planks?” asked Hardy.

“Yes,” replied Kańczuga, looking Hardy straight in the eye. He avoided looking into the camera lens with the skill of a professional actor.

“Show us what you did with the bodies,” Potomna demanded.

“I dragged them here on a military cart, the kind that people once used to transport the wounded on stretchers. I bought it from the army surplus stall at the market. A very handy piece of

equipment. It's got large, spoked wheels – even loaded with a dead body, it can go through the mud. It works perfectly on any battlefield, according to the manufacturer. The cart's hidden in there.” He gestured to the heap of wood.

Pawel cursed inwardly. What a pompous clown. This was the first serial killer he'd ever encountered, and he sincerely hoped it would be the last.

“You brought the bodies along this path?” asked Potomna.

“Yes, that's right. It's perfect for narrow spaces. The girls were dead, so they didn't toss and turn in the cart.”

“Then what?” asked Potomna.

“Can I go over there?” Kańczuga asked, pointing to the pile.

“Yes.” Potomna nodded.

Kańczuga approached the planks of wood and looked around for a moment, as if counting the rusty nails that were sticking out here and there. He took two steps to the right. Hardy knew Kańczuga was enjoying this; he was probably reminded of those wonderful moments right after the murder, when he achieved the highest state of fulfilment – “total satisfaction”, as he'd put it in his testimony.

“I brought these planks myself and assembled them into this pile,” Kańczuga said. “It comes apart. You have to pull the yellow bits.”

He bent down and grasped one of the planks hidden at the bottom that was painted yellow. He pulled it, and a third of the haphazard pile of junk shifted smoothly to one side. Only now did it become clear that everything was arranged on a pallet with wheels attached.

“Well, well,” said Kostecki. “We’d better call you Bob the Builder from now on.”

“Please don’t comment,” Potomna said in a reprimanding tone. Meanwhile, Kańczuga approached the pile again and grabbed another yellow piece, moving first the planks on the left, then the right. In the centre there was a black hole, surrounded by the three piles of wood mounted on movable pallets with small rubber wheels.

“Crafty bugger,” said Kostecki quietly.

“The cart’s here.” Kańczuga pointed at one of the moving piles of wood. “Can I take it out?”

Potomna nodded. Kańczuga slowly walked up to the cart, grabbed its handle, and dragged it a few metres closer to the police and the cameraman. He got down on one knee and began his presentation.

“This is how it folds out,” he said, showing how to prepare the equipment for transport.

After a few expert pulls and clicks of the latches, a tarpaulin stretcher with two bicycle wheels on the sides, somewhat resembling a hand-pulled rickshaw, stood before them.

“Secure it.” Hardy gave the order, which was immediately carried out by one of the officers.

“I’d go into the clearing to check no one was there,” Kańczuga continued. “If it was clear, I’d get the cart and go back to the car, load the girl onto the stretcher, strap her in, cover her with a tarp, and come back here. I’d dump the carcass into the hole, fold the cart, put my decorations back in place, and go back to the car. Quick, efficient, an hour of work with a break for food.”

Hardy shuddered. “Carcass”? Who the hell used that word? And food breaks – almost in line with the labour code. Never mind the Beast of Zagłębie, he was a total animal.

“What is that hole?” asked Potomna. “How did you know about it?”

“It’s an old drift,” Kańczuga said. “An unauthorised coal mining shaft from before the war. It was used after the war too. After the Russians came, people who were hostile to the people’s government were shot here. You just toss the carcass in, problem solved. I’ve got a friend from the mine, he works in mining damages, securing illegal excavations. He once pointed out a dozen or so of these places in the area. You know, this district of Sosnowiec was named the Black Sea because of the marshes and peat bogs, but also because of the coal. There were tons of unauthorised shafts here. They’ve all been secured now, except this one. It seemed like the perfect place: quiet, peaceful, charming, secluded. When the sun shines, it’s really very beautiful here.”

Kostecki approached the hole and shone his torch inside, but the light was swallowed up in the pitch blackness. He looked around, noticed an old nail hanging from one of the planks, pulled it out, then threw it into the hole and listened.

“Deep,” he said after a moment.

“Very,” replied Kańczuga.

“I didn’t hear a thing,” added one of the police officers.

“Maybe it fell on a soft surface, who knows,” said Kańczuga, shrugging and smiling ironically. Something wasn’t right, Hardy could tell. He just couldn’t picture it: Kańczuga bringing those girls

and throwing them in the hole, then sitting down on one of the planks, unwrapping a sandwich, drinking tea from a flask. This was a bad sign, because he could always visualise these things. He had a very vivid imagination; at school, people had joked that he'd be a crime writer when he grew up, because he was constantly telling his friends tall tales, which he always replayed in his head as if they were on a film screen. In Kuroń Park, he'd been able to see the murderer hunting for his victims, roaming through the blackness of the night, dragging the girls into the boot of his car. In the meadow, he had heard the rasping of the shovel being driven into the green grass, Kańczuga's exhausted panting, the sound of a falling corpse being lowered into a deep ditch. But here, nothing. A blank screen.

"I think you're talking bollocks, Kańczuga," Hardy said after a moment's thought.

"Detective, we're recording here," said Potomna.

Kańczuga looked at Hardy with those wet eyes that were reminiscent of light bulbs burning with their last flicker of energy, as if only the final vestiges of life were left smouldering behind his pupils. What did those eyes look like when he found a new victim? Did his pupils dilate as he strangled her? Did the light behind them intensify, the life accumulate behind the bloodshot whites? Did raping and murdering women give him strength, did he suck out their vitality?

"I'm telling the truth," Kańczuga muttered, but Hardy thought he noticed the shadow of a smile somewhere in the corners of his mouth.

"You're bullshitting," snapped Hardy.

“Detective!” This time Potomna shouted, but Hardy paid her no attention.

“Jan,” Hardy continued. “I thought you liked looking at the bodies. You went back to where you’d buried the girls, you jerked off over their graves. Why would you throw some of your victims into this hole when you buried the others all neat and tidy in the meadow by the forest?”

Kańczuga glanced at Potomna, then turned back to Hardy and regarded him calmly, patiently, narrowing his eyes slightly. The silence lasted for a full minute, but no one rushed him; they were used to his style of speaking. Finally he smiled, and when he spoke his voice was almost joyful.

“This is where I put the girls I didn’t find attractive.”

“How many?”

“Half. I’m picky.”

“Half of how many?” asked Potomna.

“Of all of them.”

“Manners, Kańczuga, or the prosecutor will pull out of the deal and you’ll end up with nothing,” Kostecki warned him.

Kańczuga kept his eyes on Hardy. He was looking at him with that smile that made Hardy want to just punch that prick in the face, beat him until he was unconscious, maybe even to death.

“So another eight victims?” asked Potomna.

“Thirteen,” Kańczuga corrected her. “Half of all of them.”

“What didn’t you like about them?” said Hardy, taking a bottle of water from the nearest police officer.

He needed a drink. Maybe if he closed his eyes for a moment

he could visualise the water as something stronger.

“It was just a feeling,” said Kańczuga with a sigh.

“Jan.” Kostecki raised a finger in warning. “Stop messing around.”

“It’s like a first date, a blind date. You meet a beautiful girl, you have plans for her, but during dinner you notice that you have nothing in common, she laughs too loudly, smacks her lips while eating, picks her nose, sneezes funny, maybe she has some kind of tic, or she’s too ditzy and won’t stop talking rubbish. It can be anything. You part, your first meeting turns out to be your last. It happens, Detective.”

“You’re not a serial dater, you’re a serial killer,” said Hardy.

“My passion might have gone a step too far, but it was sincere. I know that to the rest of society, I’m a degenerate, a murderer, a pervert. I’m sure they say all kinds of things about me. But from my perspective, I’m a regular guy who just got caught up in passion.”

“You can talk about all that stuff with your shrink,” said Hardy. “Let’s get back on topic. So this is where you brought the bodies of the girls you murdered, who for some reason didn’t appeal to you, right?”

“That’s right,” replied Kańczuga.

“Show me,” demanded Hardy, nodding towards the police officer holding the mannequin.

“Like this.”

Having uttered those words, Kańczuga stepped to the side and jumped into the mine shaft.

He vanished.

For a moment, Hardy couldn’t comprehend what had just happened. How was it possible?

But it was.

Hardy leapt towards the shaft, fell to his knees and listened closely. A few seconds later, he heard a thud, but it was extremely distant, as if the body had fallen to the very centre of the earth. How deep could the shaft be?

“Torch!” he shouted in the direction of the officers.

Almost immediately, two beams of light pierced the gaping black hole, to little effect.

“That won’t work,” he heard the cameraman say, somewhere near his ear. “You use reflected sunlight to look into a well, from a mirror or something.”

Hardy’s first instinct was to throw this guy into the hole so he could check for himself if there was anything there, but he restrained himself. His second idea, equally senseless, was to shoot into the blackness with his gun. After all, Kańczuga was most likely lying at the bottom; perhaps he had fallen onto the pile of his victims’ corpses, or he was drowning in the dirty water that had accumulated there over the years.

“We have to get down there,” Hardy said, standing up.

He met the gazes of the police officers and the prosecutor. All of them were looking at him reproachfully, and the cameraman glanced at the handcuffs hanging from Hardy’s wrist. Hardy was the one who was responsible for the reconstruction. Kańczuga was his responsibility.

“I’ll call the fire department,” said Kostecki. “They probably have the equipment for this kind of thing.”

“Tell them to get here quickly,” said Potomna. “Call for an

ambulance too, he might still be alive.”

“Sure,” Kostecki said and walked a few metres away, phone in hand.

“You.” Potomna pointed at one of the uniformed officers. “Go to the car.”

“What for?” said the officer, surprised.

The prosecutor took him by the elbow and walked him a few steps away from the hole. The officer listened to what she had to say, nodded, and then he and his patrol colleague set off towards the path.

Hardy was still staring into the dark entrance to the shaft, trying to calm his thoughts. A small bottle of forty percent ABV would certainly help, preferably something with a classic flavour: bitter, tart and refreshing. Oh yes, that would help him a lot.

What Kańczuga had done made no sense. Suicide wasn't his style, it wasn't something he was planning – Hardy was certain of that. He recalled one of the long interrogations that had tormented him and his colleagues, but never seemed to bother Kańczuga, who loved to talk about his accomplishments, describing the smallest details of his crimes with a smile on his face, sparing them nothing. The psychiatrists and psychologists said it was normal – he was reliving the rapes and murders, arousing the emotions he'd felt at the time. It was classic behaviour. It was the same reason that murderers return to the scene of the crime, to get at least a little taste of how they felt in the moment. Hardy remembered how, at the end of the day, Kańczuga had looked him in the eye and after the usual sixty seconds, spoken with his cynical smile.

“I’ll escape from you.”

“I doubt it, Jan, I doubt it,” Hardy had replied.

“The justice system isn’t ready for me,” Kańczuga had continued. “The death penalty has been abolished, and that’s the only punishment I deserve. A society that is unable to eliminate threats will die out, there’s no other option. And I am a colossal threat, Detective. Huge. I should be crushed like a cockroach with a heavy boot stuffed full of legal articles, not nursed in prison for the rest of my days.”

“So you admit you’re a cockroach?”

“And is that a bad thing? We see them as hideous creatures, but how do they see us? In their eyes, they are probably God’s creatures and we are the monsters.”

“Okay, I’m not getting into philosophical discussions, I’m not smart enough,” Hardy had replied. “You won’t escape, I can assure you of that.”

“I will escape, because my being here is pointless,” Kańczuga had explained. “But I’ll return the very day the death penalty is reinstated. I promise.”

“No one’s going to bring back the death penalty just for you. Get real. You think you’re some kind of philosopher, but you’re talking like a madman.”

“They will, Detective. Just leave it to me. I’ll escape, and then I’ll start working to see that justice is done.”

Hardy was roused from his thoughts and the replaying of scenes in his head by the roar of an engine, still muffled by the bushes, indicating that help was near. He glanced at his watch;

twenty minutes had passed. The prosecutor was making one phone call after another, standing at a distance from the mine shaft. The other officers were smoking cigarettes or looking at their phones; the cameraman and the photographer were deep in conversation, letting out quiet chuckles every now and then.

The roar of the engine intensified and a moment later, accompanied by the crackle of breaking branches, a fire department quad with two firefighters and a trailer entered the clearing. One of the men jumped down and started removing equipment from the trailer, and the uniformed police officers rushed to help him. A moment later, the empty vehicle was ready to head back to the road.

Hardy recognised the fireman in command of the operation – it was Michał Szklarski, whom he had met several times before on other cases.

“What have we got?” asked Szklarski, shaking Hardy’s hand.

“Here’s the thing,” Hardy said, pointing to the hole. “Our detainee took off down that hole, and we have no way of ascertaining what’s happened to him.”

“Yeah, Edward mentioned over the phone. Hang on, I have to tell the guys what to bring.”

He took the radio from his pocket and gave brief instructions, listing the equipment they would need. It took no more than fifteen seconds, and when he’d received confirmation, he put the radio away and stood over the hole.

“We’ll call in divers, just in case,” he announced. “God knows what’s down there.”

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” said Hardy.

“You think it was a suicide?” asked Szklarski.

“A hundred percent,” the cameraman cut in.

“No,” Hardy replied firmly, then turned towards the guy with the camera. “What’s your actual name?”

“Patryk.”

“Fuck off, Patryk.”

Patryk’s eyes widened. He turned around and said something under his breath that sounded like “arsehole”. Hardy launched towards him, but Szklarski grabbed his arm and held him back, then shook his head.

“It’s not worth it,” Szklarski said. “Ignore the little shit. What about the detainee?”

“He’s not the type,” said Hardy with a sigh. “He’d never take his own life. No chance.”

The quad entered the clearing again, loaded with equipment, followed by four more firefighters. The two uniformed policemen whom Potomna had sent away earlier also reappeared.

“Detective?” said Potomna, approaching Hardy. “Can I have a moment of your time?”

“I think we have more important matters, Prosecutor...” Hardy began, but Potomna simply turned around and walked a few metres off to the side. Hardy followed.

“What’s up?” he asked when she stopped.

“Have you consumed alcohol today?” she asked.

Hardy said nothing. Potomna’s eyes were piercing, her lips pursed; her left hand was balled into a fist, her right hand on her phone.

“Prosecutor,” he began calmly. “I know this was...”

“Quiet,” she said through clenched teeth, cutting him off.

One of the police officers approached them, the stripes on his epaulette indicating his rank: sergeant. He was holding a yellow breathalyser, and his face was a picture, appropriate to the task assigned to him.

“Blow, please,” said Potomna.

“This is neither the time nor the place, Prosecutor,” Hardy objected.

“If you don’t do it, you can say goodbye to your job with immediate effect.”

“But...”

“Fucking blow!” she snapped.

“Fuck off!” he replied, and lurched away towards the shaft and the group of firefighters preparing the equipment.

He didn’t turn back; he had no interest in what she’d do or how she’d respond. He watched the firefighters as they set up a frame with a pulley and passed a rope through it. Then one of them attached a small bracket with a camera mounted on it and they began lowering the structure into the black maw of the shaft. The rope unwound with a soft hum, and one of the firefighters kept his eyes on the monitor transmitting the camera image, simultaneously controlling the equipment with his thumbs resting on the joysticks of a remote control. “Stop,” he announced, nodding in the direction of Szklarski, who immediately approached and looked at the screen.

“There’s a climbing net strung across the tunnel, five metres down,” said the man with the controls. “It’s black and matte, doesn’t

show up with a torch. It's new as well, there are no stalactites or signs of corrosion on the hooks."

"What is it?" asked Hardy.

"A net, the kind that's sometimes set up in caves to protect against a fall or to prevent equipment from getting lost. A bit like a spider's web. When your guy jumped, he had a soft landing. You can see for yourself, Detective."

Hardy went over to the firefighters and looked at the monitor. As the man had said, there was a net stretched across the hole in such a way that anyone who fell in would land on it.

"Oh, and that's how he got out," the fireman announced. He moved the joystick and a hole carved into the side wall of the shaft appeared on the screen.

"We need to get in there. Immediately," ordered Hardy.

"That's not us," replied Szklarski. "This requires a team with the right equipment and protection. We need the rescue team from Bytom, from the mine rescue service. It's not our department."

"The guy jumped in there just like that and crawled into that hole, and you need equipment?" Hardy said, raising his voice.

"We don't know what's in there," replied Szklarski. "He could be lying in wait. If he had this whole escape planned, he could have a weapon down there. He's a murderer, Hardy. He had this thing thought out, so he probably also had a plan for what to do in case someone followed him. I can't risk it. It's our job to save lives, not chase criminals. And anyway, these old mines simply aren't within our scope of duties. If you've got an operation in a mine, call in the miners."

"Put me down there," said Hardy.

“No.” Potomna’s voice came from somewhere at the back. “Detective Hardy has just been suspended from duty. He’s here unlawfully. He can’t participate in the operation.”

“Leave it, Paweł,” said Kostecki.

“We have to go after him, Ed.”

“Not you, okay?” Hardy’s friend was coming towards him. “Don’t get too worked up. Go with the guys, they’ll take you for a checkup. If you resist, it won’t change anything, you know. It’ll only be worse.”

Hardy knew. He closed his eyes, slowed his breathing. The silence in the clearing was heavy and oppressive. Maybe it was good that the vodka had faded from his mind. He could calmly consider his next course of action and not succumb to drunken emotions.

“Do you want to have a chance of catching him?” asked Edward.

Hardy knew what his friend was trying to say. Potomna was known to be a careerist and a real taskmaster. She would gladly give herself a leg up by detecting a drunk policeman on duty, especially one whose detainee had escaped. If he rebelled now, he would eliminate any chance of sweeping this matter under the rug. He had plenty of connections and favours to call in; still, there were some things you couldn’t come back from.

“Yes.”

“We’ll call in a special unit, they have hole-crawling experts.”

“Catch him,” said Hardy, and set off towards the path. It had started to rain.

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