

***The Murderer's Club* by Pavel Renčín**

Translated by Lucie Mikolajková

Prologue

The girl doesn't notice the gloom that has already begun clotting into clumps of dense darkness. Her white, stick-thin legs pump rapidly, and sharp pain pierces her still-childlike chest. She is running through the woods, oblivious to the cold sweat covering her body, to the goose bumps chafing against the fabric of her pants. It's not the joy of running but sheer terror that propels her to move even faster, like a crazed horse galloping across the night sky. The woods, which are in fact a small park just outside the neighborhood, have become a dark, terrifying place.

The girl is running for her life, afraid to look back. Blood is running down her temple. The wind has smeared it into a lovely shape, blooming like a fern leaf on her cheek.

She stumbles, and sharp pain shoots up her knee. The girl whimpers but scrambles on, now on all fours, manages to pull herself back up, and then goes down again as her toe catches against a particularly malevolent root. The girl falls, clutching her head to protect herself, and ends her clumsy somersault in a hole filled with dead leaves.

She freezes for a moment, listening intently. Is the thudding sound behind her the heavy footsteps of her pursuer, or is it her own heart, beating too loud? She is so frightened she can't even cry. She sets off running again. Darkness surrounds her like a heavy blanket. Her breath is tearing out of her lungs in gasping sobs.

She's now nearing a more familiar area. Nearing salvation.

She dashes by an abandoned well. Just a couple dozen feet more, just to the tall wall over there. An old wall with the plaster nearly fallen off – and a small gate in the middle. And beyond that, a busy street, full of people.

She allows herself to slow down a little, to ease the stabbing pain in her ribcage, so sharp she can hardly breathe. This close to the wall, the darkness is nearly impenetrable, but she does not falter; she knows where the gate is. Relief floods her as she grabs the rusty bars and tries to open the gate, like she has done so many times before.

Then her eyes widen, and the girl freezes. Surprise spreads through her veins like a snake's venom. She rattles the bars but the gate remains closed. Someone has secured it with a heavy chain and a padlock.

The girl glances back over her shoulder. Running back into the woods is not an option. She is trapped. She throws herself at the wall and tries to scramble up, like a mouse caught in a glass jar. She tries again, and this time she manages to wedge her toe into a crack in the plaster. She fumbles blindly, trying to find a handhold. Finally, her hand reaches the top edge.

She rallies all her strength to pull herself up. One, two... and then something grasps her ankle in an iron grip and pulls her down. She's falling, falling and screaming, and then comes a blow to her head, and she screams no more.

Under cover of darkness, her lifeless body is being dragged across the needle-covered ground. Time passes.

The girl comes to as icy water fills her mouth. She tries to spit it out, chokes on it, starts drowning. Flapping her arms frantically, she can no longer tell up from down. The water is cold, so cold. She tries to cough it out and feels as if she's coughing up darkness itself; foul, dirty and rotten. She's kicking about hysterically, seeing nothing but impenetrable blackness. She tries to stay on the surface, her fingers raking through the slimy scum delineating the boundaries of her new world. And then she raises her eyes and sees a circle of light high up above, with countless glittering dots: the stars. And then a terrifying outline, marring that starry perfection.

She suddenly realizes where she is, and starts screaming. Her frantic shrieks carry up the dank hole: no words, just a terrible, painful wail as she finally understands.

High above her, she hears the scrape of the concrete cover. The circle of light starts shrinking, until only a tiny crescent remains. The girl screams even louder. The cover snaps into place, and blackness descends.

Chapter 1

It started with an autumn come too soon.

A cold wind blew in late in September, trying as hard as it could to rip leaves off tree branches. Every morning, windows were covered with a thin layer of frost, and a thick fog descended over the world. Like a stifling, ever-present shroud of icy drizzle, the ghostly haze pervaded everything, leaving damp, freezing footprints wherever it went. The fog seemed alive, swelling up every day, feeding on the smog and people's dark, exhausted, irritated thoughts, the summer long forgotten. Winter was still a long way off, and yet you could hardly tell whether it was day or night, in all that fog.

Adam was walking home from work, wading through the smoke and smog of Prague traffic like a wild river. He stumbled on, trying to avoid puddles, staring at the toes of his

damp shoes, his battered briefcase clutched firmly under his arm. The drizzle tasted faintly of smoke, like a good scotch does, but infinitely more disgusting. The smoke made him cough, as if a strange mushroom made of fog had sprouted in his throat, constricting his airways.

He ran down the escalator onto the subway platform, just as a train pulled in. The doors sliced open like vertical guillotines, spewing out pieces of human flesh. Adam ran along the train all the way to the last car, dashed in and pressed his back against the wall so that he had a view of the entire carriage. The stony faces of his fellow passengers reminded him of statues in a museum, illuminated by the pale light of smartphones and tablets. They all seemed to have fallen prey to the strange malaise that had seized the city in its foggy grip.

His eyes wandered round in case a ticket inspector was lurking somewhere. He was well-trained in noticing even the seemingly unimportant details, while still managing to avoid any direct looks from his fellow passengers, which always made him feel uncomfortable and embarrassed. No one paid him the slightest attention, however; people stared with unseeing eyes, lost in their own private hells.

And then he saw *her*.

Looking at her was almost painful. The feeling nearly threatened to burst his chest open. His ribs cracked and tried to pierce his skin in an effort to come out. This was not a mere metaphor; the pain felt real and physical, as if someone had just slapped him in the face, but the sting felt so beautiful it made his head spin. He felt his cheeks burning, melting the gray mask of indifference off his face. The world seemed to have shrunk into two tiny pinpricks: her eyes, like two black holes, distorting the space around them. Supernovas may actually have exploded somewhere nearby; but who cared if all the force lines led right to those two tiny points?

And yet, just a few hours ago, his day promised to unfold quite differently...

(...)

The night was silent, but there was definitely nothing holy about it. The fog seemed to have briefly retreated, which was actually a shame; its protective cover would have come in handy now. The thought made him angry.

Adam had no idea where they were headed. The girl steered the scooter through narrow side streets, avoiding all the thoroughfares. It was clear she had not chosen the shortest possible route – they wouldn't have gone through Jahodnice and Kyje otherwise. When she asked him to hop on, back at Háje, he felt mildly apprehensive, but she did not seem like a reckless driver, always staying a few kilometers below the speed limit. Still, he could not stop trembling; not from fear, but from the sensation of holding her waist, his body pressed to hers, breathing in the scent of her hair.

When was the last time he'd felt this way? And then he remembered. He was twelve, she was sixteen. Her name was Denisa and she was utterly gorgeous. They slow-danced together on a school trip; her mother was their class teacher and she'd come along as an intern. Nearly all the boys from their class were in love with her. Unrequited love was pretty much a given at that age, Adam realized. Nobody minded. Some things tend to change over time. Some don't.

"Are you all right?" she asked, interrupting his musings. They had stopped at Černý Most. She eased the matt-black scooter into the bike stand and took off her helmet. Her hair spilled over her shoulders. She glanced at him.

"I'm fine," Adam reassured her.

"Okay then. Here's your first task. And don't forget what you promised."

He hadn't forgotten.

"Got any IDs on you? Health insurance card, driver's license, business card? Anything that could be used to identify you?"

What has it got in its pocketses? Adam thought immediately, but managed to restrain himself from saying it out loud. Instead, he handed Diana his wallet.

"I'll keep it safe for you."

"Where are we going?"

"Where are *you* going, actually. You're going on your own. I'll wait here."

He looked around. They were standing just outside the housing estate. The darkness behind them hid meadows interlaced with a mesh of paved footpaths and bike trails, with a pond in the middle; and still further beyond, the vague outline of the Dolní Počernice district. Before them, the boxy high-rise concrete buildings loomed like black monoliths, with only a few lights still shining out. It was two-thirty in the morning.

This is a test, Adam realized. "Okay. What do you want me to do?"

"Take that street over there. About three hundred meters in, you'll see a large mound of soil. The IKEA store is right behind it. You'll find a black car parked down there, a new Beemer 6. The license plate is 1AA-66-61. You need to remember that."

"1AA-66-61. Easy," Adam said.

"Here. This is an awl. It's the best tool for puncturing tires. I want you to do all four of them. Then smash both wing mirrors and all of the windows. You'll need a hammer for that. Do the tires first, then the windows. And finally, you need to stuff this down the tailpipe." Diana handed him a crumpled-up piece of paper, about the size of a golf ball.

Adam put the paper ball in his pocket. Awl in his left hand, hammer in the right, he looked at Diana. The light from a nearby streetlamp glittered in her jasmine eyes. She looked at him solemnly.

"We can still call it off. You only need to say so," she said. "We can turn back right now, and I'll take you home."

"No. I can do it."

"I'll wait here for half an hour, not a second longer," she said. "Then I'm out of here."

Adam set off, listening to the night-time sounds of the housing development. A few cars passed by. He heard the drunken shouts of youngsters, drifting from one night bar to another. A man walking his dog emerged from the darkness, like an insomniac specter. Adam stuffed his left hand holding the awl in the pocket of his sweatshirt, and hid the hammer behind his back. He walked slowly past the parked cars, staying just outside the pools of light cast by the streetlamps. The buildings towered around him like the Great Wall of China.

It only took a few minutes to find the BMW. There were just a few parked outside the high-rise, and only one of them was black. Adam clutched the hammer tightly. It was so cold his breath floated in misty clouds before him. He realized he was actually *freezing*. He stood next to the glossy car with its dark-tinted windows. It looked more like a dangerous missile than a vehicle. It was beautiful.

She's like my own Nefernefernefer, he thought suddenly. I am beginning to understand you, Sinuhe the Egyptian.

He started with the tires, working as silently as possible. He crouched as low as he could, but if anyone happened to look out a window they'd be able to see him easily. He leaned against the awl, twisting it this way and that, and finally heard the sharp hiss of air whooshing out of the tire. He repeated the process three more times, grunting and sweating. He could feel a callus forming in his palm. Once he spotted flashing blue lights beyond the field, and forced himself to stop and listen intently for a few minutes. Tense and on edge, he had no idea whether the blue lights belonged to a police car or an ambulance. Thankfully, they went past IKEA and disappeared in the distance. Darkness descended again.

Time for the hammer now.

Adam forced himself not to look up, frightened of the windows with the lights still on, but even more of the darkened ones. All of the building's residents could be watching him right now for all he knew. His palms were sweating so badly he could hardly keep his grip on the hammer. He clutched the handle tighter and swung his arm over the shiny wing mirror, but pulled his blow in the last moment so he only managed to give the mirror a light tap. Still, it left a hairline crack in the middle, like a crooked smile that was now mocking him. Adam stared at it in despair. Smashing up someone's car was not as easy as it seemed.

He tried to give himself a mental pep-talk.

This is not just some car; it's the Ferat Vampire! he thought desperately. *A vampire car that feeds on its drivers,* he went on, remembering the short story by Josef Nesvadba made

into a cult Czech horror movie. *It's the goddamn Ferat Vampire! A fucking vampire car!* The hammer swung again, and the mirror burst into a rain of shards. Adam let his fear and suppressed aggression loose. Bang! Cracks bloomed on the car's side window. Adam stopped thinking. He gave the window another blow, as hard as he could. The glass exploded. Adam moved around the car in a frenzy of destruction. He worked quickly and methodically. Only the windshield still remained intact. Adam vaguely realized that more and more lights were coming on in the building above him. He swung the hammer with all his strength. And then he did it again. And again.

Suddenly he could hear and feel again. Someone was shouting from one of the windows.

Adam took off in a burst of adrenaline, getting lost in the darkness outside the reach of the streetlamps. He ran through the tall grass at breakneck speed, back to the place where Diana was waiting. He stumbled a few times, and once he actually rolled over.

At last he made it, drenched in sweat and shaking like a leaf. The girl looked at him with amusement and some other emotion he couldn't quite define.

"All done? Both the tires and windows? And the paper ball?"

Adam froze on the spot. "Oh God. I forgot. People started screaming, it seemed like half the building was up..."

"Then it was all for nothing," said Diana, her anger and disappointment almost palpable.

Adam turned back without a word. He ran through the middle of the street, not bothering to hide. He fumbled for the paper ball in his pocket and hid it in his hand. His shoes hit the tarmac in an irregular staccato beat. He made it back to the car in record time. The lights were on in the nearby doorway, and Adam saw a portly man in his pajamas running down the stairs. Adam bent over and rammed the paper ball up the car's tailpipe. As he straightened up, the building's front door burst open. All he could see in the bright light was a vague outline. In a fraction of a second, the figure in the doorway raised its arm and pointed it at him. A short flame seemed to have burst from the man's hand. With a deafening bang, something metallic whistled just past him. Adam stared at the man in the door in astonishment. The gun fired again.

Adam finally recovered enough to make a dash for it. He ran zigzag down the street, propelled by sheer terror. He fell, and dragged himself back up; he crawled on all fours across the stubble field, scraping his knees and palms in the process. Later, he could hardly recall his frantic escape, as if his body had worked on autopilot. From a distance he could hear police sirens. He ran blindly into the wild, through the tall grass and across the field, vaguely noticing a narrow paved path on one side. And then a light appeared, hurtling toward him. The sight of the black scooter pulled him back to reality. The tires squealed as Diana braked sharply, and the bike swayed when she leaned over the front wheel.

"Get on!" she yelled at him. "Move, dammit!"

Adam pressed himself to her back and held on to her as tight as he could. The scooter roared to life and sprang forward, suddenly a completely different beast than the gentle steed they'd arrived on. This was a growling, roaring panther. They shot through the darkness, the headlights casting a narrow beam of light ahead of them. They stayed away from the main roads, keeping to narrow cycling trails instead. The world became a blur around them, like a dark, fuzzy warp tunnel. Thoughts of warp drive and Star Trek helped Adam rally a bit.

"Someone shot at me."

"What?" Diana yelled. She couldn't hear him very well from underneath her helmet. "Are you all right?"

Only now did Adam realize the danger he'd been in. He tried to figure out whether he'd actually been hit. Perhaps the adrenaline rush had masked the pain. "I guess," he said hesitantly, but Diana didn't hear him anyway. It was only later that Adam was able to appreciate how well thought out Diana's plan had been. No car would have been able to chase them on this route.

"You're such an idiot!" she yelled.

They swerved around houses in the Dolní Počernice district. Diana slowed down, the scooter purring gently again. They continued along narrow trails amidst trees, and squeezed through a tiny pass underneath the railroad track. They swerved and dodged and changed directions, like a fox using its tail to wipe its tracks.

Adam fell into a strange trance. Diana half-turned back to him. "Quit holding me so tight, I can hardly breathe," she shouted. "And move your hands eight inches down or I'll stop right now and smack you."

Adam burst out laughing, like a fountain that suddenly starts spouting water. He felt amazing; relaxed, and a little bit hysterical. And he just couldn't stop. Soon Diana was laughing with him.

"You're such an idiot!" she sputtered. "You should never have gone back there!" she added, trying and failing to suppress her chuckles in between each word.

The rest of their ride was uneventful and perfectly law-abiding. Twenty minutes later, the scooter stopped at Opatov.

"When something goes wrong, you abort the mission. Always. Remember that," Diana told him. "No exceptions. No second tries. You could have been caught, or ended up dead!"

He nodded.

"You're about two kilometers away from home. It will be safer for you to go home alone."

"You're all about safety, I see."

"Yeah, unlike you, you moron. We'll talk about that later."

"So, did I pass?" he asked. Then he pulled out his cell phone. "Can I have your number now?"

“Are you serious?! You had it on you the whole time?”

“When will I see you again?”

“I’ll call,” she said. She might have winked at him, but he wasn’t entirely sure. Then she pulled down the visor of her helmet and took off.

Dirty and sweaty, Adam set off for home. The housing estate around him was slowly waking. He was hungry and exhausted. *Dear diary*, he thought, *today was the first time I got shot at*. It was a strange feeling. *I could have died*, some distant part of him realized.

“But I didn’t,” he said out loud.

And that, after all, was what really counted. When he finally made it home, he plonked himself in his armchair, buoyed up by a strange sense of euphoria. He felt as if tomorrow didn’t matter at all. *Today, actually*, he realized. He had to be at work in less than three hours, and he couldn’t imagine ever going to sleep again.

(...)

They parked just underneath the first trees of the Kunratice Wood. They still had about seven hundred meters to walk. They were both wearing black, close-fitting outfits. They walked slowly and steadily, side by side, frozen gravel crunching beneath their feet. Before they set out, Diana took off her backpack and pulled out a strange weapon. To his bafflement, Adam realized it was a toy gun, painted black.

“I’d like you to meet Super Soaker SC400, specially camouflaged for nighttime operations. You’ll need to put on this belt. It has an extra cartridge on it. The mixture is one part paint, one part water. If you’re good you can hit a target four or five meters away. It’s for hacking cameras. Got it?”

“Are you serious? I never realized committing crimes could be such fun!” he quipped.

Diana sighed.

“Sorry. Couldn’t resist.”

“We could also use a strong laser pointer. They can damage a CCTV, or even temporarily disable it. It would be easier, but we need to be sure. So we’ll stick to the good old analog way.”

“Okay. What next?”

They were nearing the first houses, illuminated by street lamps.

“Taking care of the cameras is your primary task. If you have enough time left, you’re going to help me by the pool.”

Diana stopped, still within the shade of the trees. “There are streetlights round the corner. We’ll wait here for a bit. Try to look into the blackest, darkest spot you can find. Let your eyes get used to the dark, for five minutes at least. The darker it is, the longer you need to adapt. Sometimes it can take half an hour. Japanese ninjas used to do it this way. Whenever they

had to look into the light, they always kept one eye closed to maintain night vision. You could also wear an eye patch but we don't need that today."

"Anything else I need to know?"

"Trust your ears. They will help you a lot more than your sight. Whenever you can, stop and listen, for a few minutes at least. And finally –"

"The surprise? You promised me a surprise."

"So I did. We're going to wear masks tonight. But we'll only put them on right before we start," she said, handing him a black ski mask. She put the squirt gun back in her rucksack. It was now half past one. They walked on, quietly and steadily, toward their destination. They stopped by the fence of a house standing right next to a huge concrete residence. Adam soon realized why: the fence was lined by bushes, and a tall spruce on the other side spread its branches far into the street. Diana pulled Adam closer, and they both disappeared beneath its shade.

"The camera above the front door has a view of the entire front gate and driveway," she whispered. "We need to avoid it completely."

"So we won't need to blind it?"

"Not really, but we will. Just in case we have to make a run for it."

They both put on their ski masks.

"We'll go through the neighbors' garden," Diana whispered. "The fence is lower and we won't be as conspicuous. Don't worry, they don't have a dog. I think."

Covered by the shade of the big spruce, Diana swung herself over the fence. Adam admired her lighthness and agility. He tried to wedge his toes into the mesh wire but the holes were too small. He had to try and pull himself up by his hands. With much huffing and puffing, he finally managed. The frozen grass on the other side muffled his landing to a dull thud.

Diana crept slowly by the tall, heavy iron fence separating the two gardens, trying to pick the best angle for a clear shot of the front door camera.

"Want to try?"

Adam crouched down and pumped the Super Soaker like a shotgun. He pushed through the arborvitaes to find the best view. He realized that the ski mask was not really necessary, but it made him feel cool, like special forces. Or maybe a sniper. He held his breath. He could hear his own heartbeat and the whooshing of blood in his ears. He took aim.

"Go on," Diana whispered.

He pulled the trigger and held it down. The plastic toy gun shot out a long, thin stream of liquid, and painted a dark red splotch on the house's white wall. Adam watched the curving beam intently. He started moving the gun slowly until it hit its target. The red paint splashed against the camera lens. And again, just to make sure.

“Okay. Let’s go.”

They moved a few more meters, over to the next shrub, and listened for a minute. Adam looked at the three-meter-tall, iron fence with barbed wire on top. He had no idea how they could scale *that*. The bars were too thick to snip with the wire cutter, and the hacksaw was a definite no-go. The fence had a single connecting bar about twenty centimeters above ground, and another almost at the top. There was nothing to hold on to. He half expected Diana to produce some ominously fuming chemical, but her solution was much more simple. She reached into her backpack and pulled out a knotted rope with a hook on one end: most likely home-made but perfectly functional.

The rope ladder had loops on it, some forty centimeters apart. Diana threw the unhooked end over the fence – not very precisely, but it was enough. She lowered the rope all the way down, pulled the end back through the bars and attached the hook to the bottom of the fence.

“I’ll go first,” she said, and started scaling the fence before he could say a word, the rucksack on her back. She climbed swiftly and quietly. Once she reached the top, she pulled out a piece of thick cloth and used it to cover the barbed wire. She swung over to the other side, and climbed down in no time. Adam followed. Apart from a slight tear in his pants as he brushed against the barbs, he managed quite well. Diana reached through the iron bars, unhooked the rope and pulled it down gracefully.

Adam crept close by the house to find the next camera. It was supposed to be somewhere beneath the north terrace, watching over the rear right-hand section of the grounds. The east wall of the house had no windows and offered no cover apart from a long bed of roses, now bare and ghostly, like bony fingers protruding from the ground. Adam moved as carefully as he could, listening intently. His heart beat like a drum, and blood raced through his veins.

He peered round the corner and caught sight of the CCTV camera. He pumped it with the red paint well and good, hitting his target on the first try. Diana stood right behind him.

“Feels good, doesn’t it? Give it to me for a second.” She took the squirt gun from him and pumped it up a few times. Then she stood back and started spraying over the entire wall. Adam cringed. The huge, clumsy letters reached all the way to the top floor, screaming their message to the whole street.

GUILTY.

The paint oozed down the wall, like blood. The letters were crude but easily legible. Diana gave the gun back to Adam. In return, he showed her the back of his gloved hand. She had no idea what he was trying to tell her. Then she looked closer, and saw it: a snowflake, large, white and crystalline. The first snowflake of this winter. She did not smile

but her eyes sparkled. Adam looked up and realized that more and more snowflakes were falling, floating down like tiny angels.

Adam peered round the house. Only now did he realize how huge it was. The two-storey building was flanked by two vast terraces, spilling around it like wings. The wall overlooking the garden was made entirely of tall French windows. A double garage was attached to the west side of the house, and a silver Range Rover was parked outside. Right in the middle of the garden was a large pool with a retractable roof, perhaps fifteen meters long. Behind it stood a pavilion and a garden shed that could easily double as a summer house. There was an ornamental Japanese garden with a creek. And a miniature golf course. And a badminton court.

Adam crept a bit closer, to have a better view of the third CCTV camera. He pointed his gun at it, but then he froze. "Wait, Diana," he whispered. "Doesn't it look kind of weird?"

The camera was destroyed, hanging down on a few faintly sparking wires, as if someone had knocked it off with a baseball bat. Adam and Diana listened intently. They both thought they could hear a TV playing, quite clearly. They crouched down and crept along the glazed side of the house to the terrace doors.

"I don't like this," Diana whispered.

The door was ajar, and Adam thought the doormat just outside it looked somehow wrong.

"What are you actually trying to do here?" he hissed. "Can we just do it real quick and get out of here?"

"No, wait..."

Diana seemed to be in some kind of a trance. Snow was falling all around them. It was only a week until Christmas.

She crept toward the half-open door. A faint light was falling out, and the air shimmered on the edge of darkness and light, as warmth from the inside met with the cold outside. Diana peered in. The room was in a shambles: chairs fallen, shelves torn down, curtains hanging askew. The glass table was smashed to pieces, with the remains of Christmas cookies trodden into the ground underneath. The large leather couch lay overturned like a beached whale. The flat-screen television, so huge the figures on it seemed nearly life-sized, was showing a tennis match, illuminating the space with a reddish light.

A woman sat tied to a chair at the back of the room, eyes covered with tape, mouth gagged, both hands and feet bound. She had no idea she was being watched, and yet she trembled like a leaf, tears streaming down her cheeks, as people with their eyes covered with tape and mouths gagged are wont to do.

"Oh shit," whispered Diana. Or was it Adam? It really didn't matter. As they looked closer, they realized someone had been bleeding here, quite heavily. The orange flashes of light

from the television revealed dark splotches covering the furniture and the fabulously tall and soft white carpet.

Oh shit indeed.

They both moved as one, pulling back as fast as they could. Now that they knew what to look for, they noticed a trail of blood leading out and away from the house. White snowflakes fell on the paved footpaths and the lawn trimmed so short you could easily play golf on it, and when they landed on the fresh blood it started seeping through, like invisible ink popping up on warmed-up paper.

They followed the trail of blood, as if they had no choice. Just a little further...

Adam was seized by a terrible hunch.

They followed the trail. As they passed the pool, they must have triggered a light sensor. An outdoor lantern came on, flooding the place with its yellow light, illuminating the carnage below. There was yet more blood by the edge of the pool; not a few spatters here and there, but a whole river of blood, as if some horrible beast had torn someone apart with giant claws and dragged the body back to its lair. The wide strip of blood leading to the north wall of the garden seemed to corroborate this theory.

The lights startled them. The blood terrified them.

And yet they followed the trail. Just a little bit further. They had to.

Would they have time to run?

They followed the bloody trail. Adam was shaking violently. It all came back to him: Viktor Kvasil, the bloody dash through the woods. His own failure: the human sacrifice made to an unknown god.

They made it all the way to the edge of the grounds. Another camera dangled broken there, and the lock on the small gate in the barred fence was broken. The trail of blood led out of the door and continued all the way to the woods.

"We're..." Adam began. Diana said nothing. "... in deep shit," he finished.

Diana still said nothing. Then she tore off her mask, bent over, and threw up.

This was bad.