

***Carlsbad* by Miloš Urban**

Translated by Mike Baugh

(P. 11)

After all these years Julian was finally back. Not for long, but still. All because of a letter.

When he stepped off the bus he realized his hatred for his hometown had vanished. Off in the distance he could smell the hot springs, the minerals, that salty subterranean scent.

What bullshit. No he couldn't. Who knows what he smelled. He just didn't want to feel indifferent. That's not why he'd come. Immediately he began questioning his decision.

Where was the swell of emotions?

Nowhere. He would have even been fine with negative feelings, but... nothing. It was just some town in western Bohemia. He may as well have come to Plzen or Stříbro or Cheb.

He sat down on a bench, rested his suitcase next to it, and took a phone and some reading glasses from his leather messenger bag. He placed the glasses on the bridge of his nose, and on his phone he opened a photo of a letter. Not an email, not a text message, a real letter. Sure, it was written on a computer, but it was still a letter. Pretty rare these days. Printed on office paper and sent to the magazine. Addressed to him. Folded into one of those old, white 4 x 3 envelopes, no info about the sender. Ordinary paper, ordinary envelope, ordinary delivery, no signature. Conspicuously anonymous. If Czech Post hadn't delivered it, it would be lost forever. No one would ever know its contents.

What was inside concerned a case, well two actually, about which much has been reported. It made the international papers, especially in Germany and Russia. But in the end the picturesque Czech spa town of Karlovy Vary – better known by its old German name, Carlsbad – is just too small to hold the world's attention. It's not like Spaniards or Scandinavians would care about it. So the bizarre case of the Carlsbad Cannibal received less media coverage than it deserved. But that makes the two books on the subject – this (subjective) novel and a work of (objective) non-fiction by an author who appears several times throughout this book – all the more valuable.

In his later years, Julian would ask himself how people could lose interest and just move on from something like this.

But here and now, Julian knew the answer – he just refused to admit it: Karlovy Vary is a dying town. Dying is easy for a man who knows the best is behind him – and not just the

best but whatever was worth hanging on for. Some towns are the same way. They just want to shut down. Get euthanized.

Julian never intended to come back, but here was the reason for it in black-and-white on his phone. Between his fingers – at least one thing hadn't slipped through them over the years.

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How are you, Julian?

I bet you haven't gotten a love letter like this in a while. So much more romantic and old fashioned on paper. Better than instant messaging with all those smiley faces, hearts, and other emoticons. I won't sign this, but if you read the whole thing, I imagine you'll figure out who I am. If there aren't too many typos – I'm not dictating this one to my secretary. I'm using a laptop that won't exist by the time you get this. Same for the old printer. (This is where I'd put a smiley face, if the subject wasn't so damn serious. You probably know about it off the internet or from your magazine, but I could tell you more if you'd like. I'm betting you will, so here goes.)

I read that book of yours. Then two more. What is it with you and murder? I always thought you were a psychopath. Always. Yes, I'm familiar with some of your stories. It's hard to believe, but here in the little town you couldn't wait to leave we do actually read, you know?

And now we're fucked because it's happening here in Carlsbad. Just the way you write it, like you're exacting revenge. Look, I know you hated me, but we're past that, I hope. I really do. You knew me, I knew you, the girls knew us, and we knew them. Water under the bridge. Now our kids are doing the same shit, but they have to worry about worse STDs than we did. Do you have kids? I do – fucking teenagers! Two beautiful girls. I'm divorced. You finally got one too, right? That's standard, who isn't these days? Actually, twice divorced is the real standard. I'm dating a girl who's half my age, but nobody really knows about it – except you now – because the gossip at work is fucking deadly. So we have to sneak around (me and the girl)... my second divorce hasn't actually been finalized.

I'm telling you this to add a little human element to the letter – you're a famous author, you understand. I'll tell it as I see it, just the way you did with that time bomb before you went off to college in Prague. So, Julian, you old latent murderer...

It started, and should have ended, on March 5th when that woman chewed some guy up and committed suicide. You may have read about it, but you couldn't have seen the video feed. Then it happened again recently. The second murder was on a golf course, and the killer threw himself in front of a car.

If there's something about it all that reminds me of your books, it's this. As far as I know, aside from the similar MOs, the detectives haven't been able to find any connection between the two cases. If it happens again – and I suspect it will – we won't be able to keep a lid on it. But I'd prefer to talk to you about that in person.

This isn't some story – it's reality here in the Bad. I'm worried for the girl I'm seeing and, of course, for my daughters.

If you're interested in our little murder and show up here, you'll get something out of it. I read in some interview that you have writer's block. Well, there's good material here for you.

Sincerely,

Your Secret Admirer

P.S. "The victim is the only victor in a perfect murder." Were you quoting somebody in that book? Well, you understand why Vary needs you and why I'm asking on behalf of the town. Sorry I can't sign my name.

Reading it for the twelfth time, he still had to smile in spite of himself. He raised his eyes from the phone, closed the file, lit up a cigarette and looked around the bus station. Night was beginning to fall and the air was sterile. No trace of gasoline, no crowds waiting for buses.

He looked west and glimpsed some red clouds on the horizon. They were still far off.

He inhaled the smoke and glared at the town of dead children – this new development wasn't doing any favors to his relationship with his hometown. This town without even a real university. This town in dire need of crowns, of dollars, of euros, even those damn rubles. In dire need of any cash someone might manage to bring in. Poverty, misery, and filth were everywhere he looked. Ugly. The tacky billboards, the faded posters from the 90s – it all looked so third world. No class, not taste, no unifying stylistic principle that would leave a unique impression on a tourist dying to be charmed. All the signs in Czech

and Russian regardless of what they say could be translated as *I'm over a barrel, I need investment. Rubles? Да – no questions asked.* It's not like Prague is much better – but it is better.

He felt sick. As much as he hated them, he needed cigarettes. Maybe it was the pictures of stomas and black lungs they put on the boxes. As a smoker, he let the pictures scare him, but at the same time that wasn't going to be him. Someone else, sure, but not him, so why bother him with it? The threat was pushed somewhere to the back of his mind, left in the landscape of suppressed fear. But when he lit up his first, second, or third of the morning he still wanted to throw up.

He got off the bench, pulled out the handle of his roll-on and headed to the first taxi in line. He had booked a room at Hotel Burian with its complimentary spa.

Your faith has healed you, he thought. Easy to say, but usually it's the opposite. He had returned to the sleazy fairy-tale-town of his youth and adolescence, of the formative years he wished he could forget.

He had held Carlsbad in contempt ever since he went off to university, realizing that he'd already hated it for a while, certainly for the last two years of his time in the pedagogical facility for the mentally disabled – prep school. The humiliations, those Ds and Fs in incomprehensible subjects (he still couldn't understand them). As a boy he was ashamed of his tears; the girls would just bawl after every test (except the ones that were geniuses, but the way they acted ruined everything). He never understood how he managed to graduate. If only he'd been kicked out the first year and gone to some art school, anywhere that would have taken him. His imagination and creativity back then were limitless (in stark opposition to today), but nobody there was interested in that type of student. And in return he never forgave the school.

The ice-cold hatred for this terrible town warmed his heart. At least now he was feeling something, and that was a hell of a lot better than indifference.

In the end, the uncertainty of being a writer was better than the certainty of Karlovy Vary, a town stuck in history, indecisive on where to turn and whom to serve. The town is a city-state, it should provide security and opportunity. And hospitality. First it was for the Germans, then the Russians. Still the Russians. At first poor and comical – boorish and arrogant in that specific Russian way. Later they showed up rich, in Mercedes. The Americans came and went in the beginning of the 90s. Germans too, retreating towards reunification. Leaving Carlsbad to the Russians.

But what are Russians good for if they aren't bringing in any money.

It was different back then. As if the Soviet Union crumbled and dispersed into this small spa town in the west of Bohemia, the Czech Monte Carlo or Cannes. A postcard-perfect silhouette of a town with healing springs and a Russian church with golden domes,

beacons to those who are set to buy up Karlovy Vary, buy it off, and bankrupt it as soon as the economic sanctions against Russia are called off.

Right now we're in the interlude. Our story is unfolding right now. It doesn't matter that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe used to stay here – which we know thanks to the carefully recorded spa records – to meet prominent men and beautiful women. The town witnessed Czechoslovakia's independence, the shooting of that famous movie starring Vlasta Burian, the excesses of the Nazis, and of the Communists afterwards. Not that the Slovaks, who started coming after 1948, minded much. Meanwhile, the Czechs went off to the spas in Slovakia – Teplice, Starý Smokovec, and Tatranská Lomnice. Julian's grandma was from Prešov in Slovakia, but she moved to the Czech town of Sokolov. Every other year she would go to a spa in Slovakia, but she was happiest when the authorities gave her a voucher to Karlovy Vary, just a few kilometers away from Sokolov. How strange. The Sanssouci Spa. As a boy he went to see her there and he couldn't understand why she didn't just stay in his parent's apartment across from Hotel Thermal – that way she could take him to the pool every day. Perhaps grandmothers need vacations too.

Every city has its glory days, Spas do too. Karlovy Vary did. They're still going on, actually, enjoyed by those coming to drink and bathe in the local waters. With every drop of the hot springs, faith in health and recovery slid down their throats, washed over their skin. They had time for themselves because of minerals in the water, the sustainer of this transient existence.

Hotel Burian was nice, ordinary and overpriced. Julian checked in, and since it wasn't late, he headed out to meet the one who had invited him here. Not because of any liquid faith but because of the murders. He came to the building where he was supposed to find him. It was a few steps from the brutalist skyscraper that was Hotel Thermal, which even after all these years managed to cast a shadow over his address in Prague at I. P. Pavlova 36. Right over there he used to go to the library once a week. The police headquarters were a stone's throw, just opposite the back facade. But he saw that everything was different now – only the local police department remained.

He put his glasses on and opened an app on his phone. He stopped a taxi and let it take him to the outskirts of town, to Dvory where, when he was a boy, there used to only be barracks, garages, tire shops and brownfields. He got out and looked in amazement at the new, unfamiliar surroundings: a civic center, a new regional library – where did they get all the concrete? He lit a cigarette, smoked it, then, to be on the safe side, lit up another.

The police station wasn't completely inaccessible, although it gave off that impression. He gave his name to the duty officer and showed his ID. To the question of whether he was expected, he answered with a shrug and a nod. "I'm here for Weber," he

said. The policeman made a phone call upstairs and then nodded too. Julian passed through the metal detector, free of baggage. The grate opened, he got patted down and sent through. A cop made him turn his cell phone off. Then another grate and stairs. He shuddered. He wanted to leave, but went inexorably forward. He felt even worse than he had in school, when he would wake up and pray for it to be Friday afternoon already, for two days without school. On Sunday nights, the sheer terror of Monday kept him from sleeping. That was thirty years ago. What a horrible time. What horrible years.

Another guard took him to a door in the middle of the corridor upstairs. Julian said he needed to use the bathroom. The cop pointed at a door and asked for his cell phone. He'd give it back afterwards. Julian replied that he didn't need to go anymore, and with amusement he watched the guy's expression that said: I'll be telling my boss – you wanted to turn your phone back on. And the recorder.

So tell him, Julian's cold eyes conveyed before landing on the plaque on the door.

Lieutenant-Colonel Michal Weber: Deputy Commissioner, Criminal Investigation Division, Karlovy Vary Region

The cop knocked and waited. They both waited. The door opened, another cop was standing inside. He beckoned them to enter. Julian walked in, nodded at the secretary and was taken through a smaller office to a larger one. He was impressed they were still at work.

He saw him. He looked pretty much the same, because of the gym or jogging, or genetics, essential oils, chemistry – probably all of them together – but his shaggy crewcut revealed a receding hairline.

Weber squeezed out from behind the desk, big as always – no, bulkier and squarer now, so older, but with the same confident and toothy grin. "I knew you wouldn't disappoint. Welcome. Just give me one moment," he said with a careless laugh. He looked amused and successful, like a man pleased with himself as he sees his fifties off on the distant horizon. They shook hands, and there was no posturing, no finger-crushing, just a decent shake. White shirt, black tie, loose, on the coat-rack a hat and jacket. The cologne made Julian's stomach churn. Too much musk. A trendy second-rate cologne that Julian himself used to wear twenty years ago. Or something like it.

Weber motioned to a chair in front of the faux-oak desk. On that were three laptops, open, all the same brand but with different size screens: the nineteen-incher in the middle; sventeen and fifteen on either side.

He looked at them for a while. Maybe no more than two minutes, but long enough. Right when Julian was ready to say he didn't have time to spare, the policeman stared at him over the monitor. "Your name's pretty popular. I mean your first name. There used to be

maybe ten guys in all of Czechoslovakia named Julian, and I'm counting kids and old men. Now there are a hundred of you. You played the long game."

"You think?"

"I do."

"Back then I thought the name was ridiculous, these days it's all the rage, like Tadeáš, Tobiáš or Ignác," Weber laughed. "Who could have imagined? It's as unlikely as a guy with marks as miserable as yours becoming a writer."

"Maybe that's just it – I couldn't do anything else," Julian said. "And I wouldn't have expected someone with straight As to become a cop."

"I studied law. Hotel management before that."

"I know. And your dad was a cop, so it runs in the family. He once gave me a ticket for riding a bike in the colonnade."

"My old man? You're kidding."

"It was him. You guys looked so similar I had to ask him about you."

"Well, don't hold it against him. He died last year."

"I'm sorry."

Silence. Weber's eyes wandered to the laptops, clearly shaken that the conversation had turned to his father. Then he flipped down the screen of the middle one so they could see each other.

Julian glanced at his watch. "So your letter..."

He didn't finish, Weber raised his hand to stop him. "I don't know anything about a letter." His steely expression told Julian to drop the subject. "So, what do you know about these murders of ours?"

"Just what I read in the newspaper and what..." he paused and Weber smiled. "What more could I know?"

"Sum it up for me. Just give me the bullet-points. Want some coffee?"

"No, and I'm not summing anything up." He was trying not to lose his composure, but he was running out of patience. "You sum it up for me, Michal, if you'd be so kind. That's your job. You're the one who dragged me out here, so make some effort."

"We've misunderstood each other," the cop said, grinning. "You came home to walk down memory lane. And since you're here, you came to see an old classmate."

"Aha." He just concentrated on breathing, forcing himself to keep cool. He crossed his legs. "Fine, I'm here strolling down memory lane."

"Exactly. Touring the bads – Marienbad, Franzenbad. Then you'll probably head over to Loket and Kladská. Hike through Soos and climb up Komorní hůrka. But since you dropped by, I would be curious to find out what you think of this tricky case of ours. Maybe

you see something I don't, something the boys and I missed. Or maybe you just want to chat about serial killers. After all, you're the Czech Hannibal Lecter."

"Yeah, the 'Hannibal Lecter of Czech Literature.' I can't believe some idiot wrote that about me ten years ago." Thinking about it made Julian stiffen. He felt a pinch between his shoulder blades that began to radiate pain across his back. He could barely move his neck. He tried to calm down.

"You have killed over fifty people," Weber continued. "Some clever grad student went through all your books and tallied it up. She posted her thesis on the net. Surely you've read it. Some of her points: a.) the literary caliber of your oeuvre is uneven and on the decline; b.) you're not pulp, but you're commercial and have no business being on a syllabus – neither in high school nor university; c.) you're not quite commercial enough to live off your novels – you intrude on the narrative. Now, this one is mine: Learn to write like one of those American women, Julian. Write a bestseller that Hollywood will make a movie out of in two years. Stop making books about you. You're not that interesting. Nobody gives a shit."

Julian nodded, he couldn't help but agree. For a moment he was quiet, contemplating his own limits. Then he said, "Spicy stuff for a thesis. Back in our days it wouldn't have gone over well."

"Yeah, well today's youth is fucked," Weber laughed. "She wants to be a critic, how else should she prove herself than by slitting the throat of a star. She'll feed on your blood. I really like where she says that, purely on the basis of your writing, it's reasonable to question your sanity and relationship towards women. Look, I have to deal with shit on the job too, but this – no thanks."

"I'd have failed her for a thesis like that." Julian was angry that this could kill his mood. At his age. After so many books.

"So how is your sanity and relationship towards women?" Weber's eyebrows were raised. "All those perverts, the gore, women impaled on lightning rods..."

"I leave my dead bodies on the page."

The phone rang. "I'm in a meeting," Weber snarled into the receiver. "Consider me off duty today. Tell Matlach to fill in for me. Over." He put down the receiver and looked at his guest. "How about a shot?" Without waiting for an answer he opened a cupboard and took out an unlabeled bottle, filled three quarters of the way with a clear liquid, and two glasses.

They clinked glasses and drank. Slivovitz.

For a moment Julian couldn't speak. He cleared his throat. "Spill it, I don't have all day," he said as he exhaled. It was meant to sound tough and show who had the upper-hand, but that's not the effect it had.

With the glass still under his nose, Weber watched him pensively, as if considering whether it was worth it to argue. With a sigh, he said, "So you won't tell me what you know,

fine, allow me to expound. Now pay attention. It happened in the beginning of March, spa season hadn't really kicked off yet. Imagine Karlovy Vary at its sleepiest, deserted, maybe a couple people around. Completely different from the town we knew back in school."

"I remember what it was like."

"Well, then Russians bought up two-thirds of Vary. And then NATO and the EU hit them with economic sanctions for invading the Ukraine. So Russia gets Crimea and Carlsbad, but now nobody really goes there or comes here. Sometimes people show up, but not enough to keep the town afloat. There's just no money anymore."

"I know all of that – get to the point."

"So, March 5th, up at the pool. It's been closed for a while, and only gotten worse since they drained it. Junkies used to set up on the terraces – thank God, otherwise we would have gotten rid of the last two security cameras there. The footage we got from them has helped us put together what happened." Weber hit some keys on the laptop, turned it towards Julian, got up and took a seat beside him.

Julian scooted over and put his glasses on. Weber played the footage. The screen showed a big exposed terrace above the pool. Not a soul in sight. Medium shot. Eight-meters-wide, based on the numbers at the corner of the screen, high depth of field, sharpness reduced by pixelization. March 5, 5:57 a.m. Seconds running.

Someone enters the shot. A man in black pants and a heavy beige coat. He is holding the side of his neck. The hand looks dirty, black, the fabric of the coat too, as if somebody poured some dark liquid on him. He is clutching a cell phone in his other hand; he constantly looks back to the right. He stumbles on the bench and examines his stained hand. He lifts his shoulder and leans his head into it, both hands are shaking. He wipes the dirty one on his jacket and types something into his phone. He puts it to his ear, talks, his head still cramped to the side.

From the other side, where he isn't looking, a smaller figure runs towards him. A woman. Dressed too lightly – a white blouse, a grey unbuttoned sweater, tight pants unzipped yet clinging to her body. No shoes, just dirty socks. A scarf covers the lower part of her face. No, not a scarf, but just something black, the same shade as the blouse under her neck and breasts. She stops, watches him. He shouts something into the phone and then he notices her. He jumps off the bench like it was hit with electricity and runs away. Suddenly she's on him. It's impossible to tell how or exactly the moment when, but she's on his back. He bends down like he wants to throw down a sack of potatoes, but she's stuck like a leech. It looks like she's whispering in his ear, but the clean side of his neck immediately turns black. With the hand clutching the phone, he starts punching her in the face. Driving his fist into her nose. Her head snaps back. But then it's back where it was. He carries her outside the frame.

Julian and Weber watch the scene unfold through the lens of the other camera, capturing what happened a moment later. This video longer than the first. From this angle the man and woman have their backs to the camera. He runs with her to a street lamp, turns towards the camera and with all his strength rams backwards into the lamp. The lamp shakes visibly and the woman finally falls. She lies under the lamp, breathing. Her chest shakes. It looks like she's laughing at something. The man stands over her like a wounded bear. He touches the left side of his neck and then the right side. He looks at his hand. It's even blacker now. The other one, still holding the phone, is covered with black blotches.

"The color's bad," Weber remarked. "It was twilight, and these old cameras pixelate the darker hues."

It doesn't matter, Julian thought. It was clear to him that the black was really dark red.

The man stumbled for three steps and then falls on all four. Black pours from his neck. The woman doesn't even bother to get up. She lifts her arms above her head, rolls over to him, like a kid rolling down a hill, and when he puts his arm out to stop her, she starts gnawing on it with her black jaws. He quickly pulls his arm back, in doing so he draws the woman up to him. She has no intention of letting go. Like lovers they're entwined. Then she straddles him and her mouth is on his. The gruesome kiss lasts for ten seconds as the man rips most of her hair out, then hits her between her shoulder blades. It doesn't help much. Finally he somehow staggers to his feet and runs off, her behind him like a cape. She won't let go. They leave the frame.

"Ughhh," Julian felt like he might throw up. "Is it OK if I smoke?"

"Just because it's you. Now let me zoom in and play. It'll be even blurrier, but it's clear that she starts with his neck before latching onto his face like that thing in *Alien*."

Julian managed to hold it together. Cigarettes usually made him feel sick, especially in the morning, but this one was downright curative.

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With a blunt crack, the child landed two meters away from him. His head jerked and he saw the body bounce, throwing up a cloud of dust. The child flew back up, flipped with bravado, like a little acrobat having fun on a trampoline. If only. Then it thudded back to the ground again. The ground shook. *Cirque de l'éclipse*.

Julian ran over. Tears in his eyes, chaos in his mind – if children are involved I'm out, I should never have come back. But if kids are involved, I can't leave. He bent down to the body and even now (as some Scandinavian-looking guy in a red down-jacket, who had been

taking selfies a moment before, started to scream his head off) he couldn't quite figure out its gender. The child had hair down to its shoulders, but the delicate face had the look of a handsome boy entering puberty, arrogant from the attention girls paid his long hair.

The child groaned, wanted to say something, even turned his head to him. The man in the red jacket was there now, wailing in Scandinavian. Then through all the hair and dust, a wound opened up, and right then blood streamed from his little nose and ears and out of his mouth between broken teeth. His eyes rolled back in his head as if he were tired of looking at the world. Now, Julian thought, now he's dead.

The woman selling tickets to the tower, ran over to them, cell phone to her ear and a useless first aid kit in her hand. More tourists were approaching, an elderly married couple, and in the distance he spotted a group of old tourists with trekking poles who'd just made it up the slope from Linhart Forest. They were screaming in either Danish or Dutch, Julian couldn't tell. He just raised himself up from the dead boy and calmly asked the ticket-seller who else was up in the observation tower. She was doing chest compressions, trying to resuscitate a heart that probably ruptured into a million pieces on impact or was now located in some other part of his body. With a voice of pure concentration, she answered that a Russian woman with two kids – no, one kid – was up there. Julian remembered a little kid waving to him from the observation deck a moment before. Not this teenager here.

He entered the tower; it was deadly silent. There was no way on Earth he'd take the elevator, so he ran up the spiral staircase. He could smell a familiar, slightly musty smell, similar to that old apartment he'd been in. The stage was perfectly set. As if somebody had prepared it all night.

How many steps does the Diana Tower have? As a boy he knew the number, yet he would recount it with each visit. He ran up the stairs panting, but had to stop when something blocked his way. It was a woman, about thirty-five years old, lying on her back, head-first. Her forehead was torn up and her mascara smeared. Her bloodshot eyes gaped at him. She opened her mouth, coughed and gurgled, pleaded, tried to tell him something while spitting saliva everywhere. Although he had to learn it in school, his Russian wasn't good, but still he understood her when she asked if he was a doctor. God knows why he said he was. He kneeled down and grabbed her hand. She wore a necklace of black pearls. Unbroken. Julian prayed that a real doctor and paramedics were already clomping their way up, but there was a deathly stillness inside the tower. Even those who saw the boy fall hadn't come inside.

He grabbed her under the shoulders, but as he tried to lift her up she hissed in pain and protested. "No, no, no." Then she said something about getting it out of her. Only then did he catch sight of some shiny worm lying on her stomach. It was maybe 8-10 centimeters long, with a glossy head and tail, just like its spine, pearly blue. A brooch to go with her pearl necklace.

Julian lifted the woman's head, at least, resting it on his lap. He settled onto the step for support, so that one of them – or more likely both of them – wouldn't slide down the steps. He pulled his sleeve over his palm and touched the blue thing through the fabric.

Metal, pearl encrusted. A pocket knife, but unfortunately just the handle. Its blade, at 90 degrees to the handle, disappeared into her stomach somewhere. Her coat lay spread open, and the knife was all the way in; her dark green sweater hadn't offered much protection, but in the dim light Julian couldn't see any blood on it.

"No getting it out," he said. He propped himself on the lower step with his right foot and put his left knee three steps above. He tightened his stomach muscles, turned the woman around in his arms and lifted her up. He worried his back would give out, but the Russian woman wasn't heavy. He carried her up and laid her into the center of a high alcove. A morning wind blew in through the open windows, and it was light enough there for Julian to notice the woman's right thigh.

Through the thick black fabric of her pants gaped a crimson hole, in the rough shape of a star. God knows where the skin was – all that was left were torn muscles, veins, ligaments. He could even see the blue-white bone. Blood soaked the denim, but the artery was ok – the blood was flowing, not spurting. He started to gag, but fought through the nausea.

"Who did this?" he asked in Czech.

"My children," she answered in Russian, exasperatedly and tenderly at the same time. "Somebody poisoned them on me."

Julian shivered. "With what?" Before he made the final sound of the short pronoun, he could smell the vomit. And it wasn't his.

"Evil spirit someone cast."

"You mean hypnotized."

"Maybe hypnotized. Yesterday in church they were fine. We lit a candle for grandfather, father of my husband. Дедушка died in May.

"Who hypnotized them? Who did you talk to?"

"To no one. Rasputin knew hypnosis. Someone like him, someone who hates Russians. Many are like that here."

He looked around and saw the vomit a little further up, yellow-pink bits of digested breakfast, blood, more blood, a shred of black fabric and undigested flesh with white skin – it looked like it hadn't even been swallowed. Traces of blood and spatters of vomit led all the way up to the door of the observation deck. In a pool of blood by the door lay a spongy grey mass. A wad of raw meat, enough to fit into a child's mouth. Julian got sick again. As he was trying to keep from vomiting himself, he was struck with a violent headache. "Just lie down here," he told the woman when he was able to speak, "the ambulance will be here any

second.” He eased her head down to the floor and went to the door. Then he stomped through onto the deck; he didn’t see anyone. He ran clockwise as fast as the narrow circular space would allow. He didn’t see anybody in front him. As he circled back to the door he’d just come from, he heard something scurrying. Somewhere on the other side. He turned and ran back. Then he stopped abruptly. Something dark lurked behind the turn; he saw the edge of a jacket. He made two more steps, then a third one, just like he had in the woods when he snuck around the giant beech tree.

Someone was standing there. Waiting for him. A little girl with a bloody mouth. As if someone had busted her mouth. As if her jaws were broken.

He stood opposite her, feeling bad. Here he was, a grown man, and she was, what, ten, eleven? But he shivered when the tiny girl smiled coyly at him, blood on her cheeks and an animal glint in her eyes. They might have stood there for half a minute. He took a deep breath and she started to slowly back away. “Как тебя зовут?” he asked. “What’s your name?”

For a moment she stared at him, and then frowned as if she were trying to remember. Then her little face lit up. “Less,” she peeped, and when she realized how odd it sounded she laughed, exposing bloody teeth in her black mouth. “Olesya,” Julian heard from behind, “don’t hurt her.” He looked and saw the woman had crawled up the stairs, her head lying on the threshold of the door.

“They are hypnotized, both of them. Where’s Shuran? He meant no harm. Bring him to me.”

He suddenly felt nothing, just a cold sense of self-preservation. Maybe he could prevent another bloodbath. Or not. He had nothing in common with these people.

Children are people too.

At the last second he looked back at the girl. Her eyes were fixed on her mother’s head behind him, and of course she didn’t remember anything. “What did you do?” she screamed in Russian and leapt at him with her mouth open, like some fanged macaque. He didn’t mean to hurt her, he didn’t hit her, out of instinct he put his arms out and took the force of her jump. He fell backwards, directly onto the mother’s head. He felt the back of his skull drive into her nose, the crack of the cartilage, then came the pain and her screams. It felt like slow-motion. He was heavy, clumsy, and old, and he knew it. The little girl ran over him like a rug and flung herself at the railing; she looked back at them and hoisted herself over with all her strength. But Julian was back on his feet, jumped over the woman and pushed every bone and tendon to the limit, past what he’d demanded of them at the Svatoš Rocks. With his left hand he clutched the railing and with his right he lashed out at the vanishing legs of the little Russian girl, the little murderer, the victim of Rasputin’s spell.”

He grabbed her right ankle and braced for her to slam into the base of the railing. She did, but he held on. She was writhing in his grasp, snapping her teeth, but she wasn't strong enough to get to him. He could feel her strength dissipating. Then she whipped up and bit the edge of his palm, but still he held on. She squirmed momentarily then froze like some caught prey. He had to save her. That way he could save himself. He just gripped her leg and waited. Only now did he hear shouts coming up the stairs. Suddenly two big EMTs rushed over. One climbed over the railing, grabbed the little girl and handed her to the other. They took the insane responsibility upon themselves.

Exhausted, Julian fell to the deck and lay there. They covered him with a blue blanket. When he raised his head, the woman and the little girl were gone. A doctor knelt beside him, taking his pulse. She reassured him that everything was going to be ok.

He said that it wouldn't, that it happened because of him.

He knew how guilty he was. If he told the police all the mixed-up information, this might not have happened. He was responsible for that boy's death. The sister's insanity. The mother's injuries. He'd received a postcard of Diana Towers; he came here.

On the other hand, if he hadn't come here, it would have happened anyway and it could have been even worse. He felt terrible for the boy. For all three of them. He didn't want to know what the father would think when he heard.

As the detectives took him in for questioning, he caught sight of a man in a hunting cap behind the police tape. He was jotting down notes and paid no attention to Julian, yet Julian felt he was seeing himself.