

***Hear the Stags Singing* by František Šmehlík**

summary

The crime novel is set in the small village of Halešná in Beskyd Mountains and partly in Slovakia as well.

The novel begins with a prologue in which an eight-year-old boy sneaks out of his grandmother's house at night to go to the woods and try shooting his bow and arrow, which he was gifted by his father. He hits a deer, but it runs away. On his way back, the boy sees a man carrying a sack over his shoulder. He is scared and decides not to tell anyone about his little adventure.

The novel's opening chapter takes us to a press conference in Ostrava dedicated to a recently solved case. We meet two police officers from the Regional Directorate, Colonel Josef Lada and Major David Krejčí, and later other Ostrava sleuths, Major Václav Pesta, Captain Aleš Černý, Captain Petr Mráček and a new addition to the homicide unit, Captain Roman Nitka.

The following day, the homicide detectives are called to a new case, a murder in the settlement of Halešná. Local virtuoso Julius Ludwig has reported the murder of a young woman, Iva Hulová, whom he discovered when he was walking his dogs in the morning. The woman was strangled to death and her breasts were chopped off by the killer. The investigators argue about the motive of the crime. A search of the victim's house reveals two empty glasses, an empty vodka bottle, and a stash of drugs hidden away in the couch. The victim's boyfriend, soccer player Ondřej Jasný, is among the suspects. The investigators explore several possible scenarios and conclude that the murder must have been committed by a local. The evidence eventually leads them to a local Roma man, Marek Gomboč, the victim's childhood friend. Their suspicions grow when a drug dealer who knew the suspect is murdered. On top of that, they find what looks like a shrine dedicated to Iva in Marek's house, and forensic evidence collected inside the house proves that Marek was with Iva prior to her death. Marek eventually confesses to having spent time with her that day, saying they celebrated his birthday and ended up in bed together. However, he denies responsibility for her murder, claiming he loved her. When little Honza finally plucks up the courage to testify, Marek's future starts looking even bleaker. Encouraged by Captain Černý, little Honza picks Marek out of a lineup, identifying him as the man he saw and believed to be the powerful Guardian of the Forest that fateful night.

The case seems to be solved. However, Major Cesta is not satisfied with the outcome. He believes that Marek is innocent, so he decides to defy his superiors and investigate further. He

enlists the help of rookie investigator Roman Nitka, who is on board not because he has high hopes for Nitka's theory, but because he has the hots for one of the witnesses, Iva's friend Sára. Step by step, they uncover clues that reveal Nitka might be on the right track. At the same time, they learn that the neighborly relationships in the village are far from what they first appeared to be. The pair discovers that there is a link between those connected to the case and a woman who has gone missing in Slovakia. When the investigators double-check the alibi of one of the victim's neighbors, the seemingly proper young widower Mr. Zapletal, they discover that the CCTV footage that placed him at a hotel in Katowice at the time of the murder has been manipulated. They uncover that Zapletal is a drug mule, smuggling in drugs from Poland and reselling them here as well as providing them to his lover.

The climax of the novel has a thriller-esque feel. Sofia, the missing Slovak girl, has been held captive by Zapletal, who now takes another hostage—Sára, who regularly watches his little son. When the noose begins to tighten around his neck, he murders the Slovak girl and flees into the woods with Sára as his hostage. Roman Nitka wants to rescue Sára, so he convinces Aleš Černý to join him in pursuit of Zapletal without waiting for reinforcement. Aleš, who is an avid runner and is in better shape than Roman, runs ahead but ends up falling into Zapletal's deadly trap. Roman gets wounded, but eventually saves Sára and shoots Zapletal dead.

The novel's epilogue depicts the funeral of Captain Aleš Černý, at which his pregnant widow Barbora meets Sára, whom the captain rescued. Barbora considers getting an abortion, one of the reasons being the high likelihood of giving birth to a mentally disabled child. Sára manages to convince Barbora to keep the baby. She herself wants to take care of Zapletal's orphaned son.