



WINNER OF THE TOP CZECH LITERARY AWARD

(2023)

(BEST CRIME STORY OF THE YEAR)

The Beast

Political murder-for-hire or a serial killer has risen from the dead?

by **František Šmehlík**

October 2022, 520 pages

RIGHTS SOLD TO: Poland (Afera)

"František Šmehlík has crafted a Nordic-style detective story with elements of a political thriller that never loses its pace and keeps you guessing until the very end. The novel is distinguished by the intriguing character of the Olomouc investigator Laura Ara and the realistic portrayal of the police."

– *jury of the Magnesia Litera Prize*

The chief investigator Laura Ara's first part series

The minister of the interior verbally assaults a young journalist who has been writing about his alleged connection to the underworld. The threat-filled conflict is caught on camera, sparking a major media scandal. A few days later, the journalist and his girlfriend are murdered. All signs point to a contract killing, but the execution of the latter's murder carries a resemblance to a series of unsolved murders committed in the Šumperk region seven years earlier. Chief investigator Laura Ara and her colleagues (including Václav Cesta, whom readers will know from the crime novel *Hear the Stags Singing*) wade through a morass of political mafia, godfathers, and lobbyists with links to foreign criminal gangs. Was the killer's motive as simple as to silence an inconvenient journalist?

František Šmehlík (b. 1995) is a native of Ostrava. He dedicated his formative years to sports, mainly judo, in which he is a three-time national champion. He is now finishing his Czech Language and Literature studies in Olomouc. A lifelong lover of books, his favorite authors include Milan Kundera, Bohumil Hrabal and Ladislav Fuks. His crime novel debut *Hear the Stags Singing* draws readers with a well-developed plot and a unique ability to capture the complicated social bonds in a small community,

where anyone could be the murderer. *The Beast* (2022) is a first story of a tree-part series with the chief investigator Laura Ara.

English summary of the book

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.

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