

Irena Svetek
WHITE WOLF

Canis lupus

The wolf is the largest member of the dog family, spread throughout the wildernesses of Europe, Asia and North America.

To facilitate their well-organised group hunting methods, wolves form packs, usually of around seven members with a strict hierarchy. Within a pack, only the leaders, the alpha male and alpha female mate. Wolves are exceptionally intelligent predators and can also attack animals that are larger and heavier than themselves.

Chapter One

Kočevje, Rudnik Lake

1973

She stopped outside the butcher's on Rog Road right in the middle of the town's riverbend peninsula, surrounded by the River Rinža on both sides. Her fingers reached towards the colourful plastic strips of the door curtain separating the interior from the world outside. She was tired and out of breath. She would just buy some meat and go home.

Good day, comrade Uršula, she was greeted by sixty-five-year-old Jože Majes, the butcher where her mother also used to buy their meat and she used to come here with her as a child. What will it be today? A piece of shoulder clod for soup, perhaps?

She lowered her gaze to the glass display case, and across the laid out pieces of meat. She could not be bothered with beef soup, it would mean standing on her feet for another hour, which would cause her extreme tiredness in the afternoon, pain settling in her lower back, giving her great discomfort.

I'll have the chops. Four, please.

Jože Majes nodded and reached for the meat in the display case. He tossed it onto the counter and used his large knife to cut four pieces right next to the bone and wrapped them in paper. Suddenly something sneaked into the shop, a familiar voice slipped through the plastic ribbons in the doorway, lingering around her ears. She went to the coloured plastic, moved the strips out of the way with her hand and looked out onto the street. A few feet from the entrance was a man with

his hand round the waist of a young woman who was laughing. The man was also laughing and their laughter drifted through the air, carried to the skies with the wind. Uršula watched her husband's back as he walked away with the woman, crossed the road and disappeared on the other side. She turned round and went back to the counter, found her wallet and looked up at the butcher who had already put the meat into a plastic bag and was holding it up towards her.

Here, comrade, that'll be eight hundred dinars.

She pulled out a few notes and handed them over.

Stepping out into the street, she leaned against the façade of the house next to the pavement. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and could feel her heart pounding. Looking left and right, she ran clumsily across the road. She thought she was about to be run over when a man in a yellow Zastava 750 honked his horn. She was breathing rapidly, tried to see where he had gone. There were lots of people walking across the centre of town on this sunny April day. A few youths were sitting on a low wall licking fresh ice cream. Suddenly she spotted him. He and the woman were crossing the bridge, walking down the main road, and Uršula knew where they were going.

The Sajovic Villa was the only example of secessionist architecture in town, built in the style of historical nineteenth century villas, and the architect had also looked to the Swedish royal hunting lodge for inspiration. Zlata Nosan, the villa's owner, rented out rooms in the attic by the hour. With a lump in her throat, Uršula watched her husband and the young woman walk up the stairs to the door leading to the top floor.

She sat in her car in the parking lot behind the bank, staring through the windshield at people strolling around town. Then she lowered her head and started to cry. Her large belly pressed against the steering wheel.

Walking through the kitchen door, she put the bag of food onto the table and thanked twelve-year-old Bojana Dimitrovski, the kind girl from across the road who often did some babysitting for her. She gave her some money and waited for her to leave. Then she went across to the sideboard and opened the top drawer. Finding the packet of cigarettes, she pulled one out, lit it, drew deeply and sat down at the table. She smoked and stared at the two boys playing on the floor. Circled on the calendar on the wall was May the seventh, the date she was due to give birth. He said he wanted a girl this time.

In the sports news: The fortieth Ice-Hockey World Championship has drawn to a close. The Yugoslav team ended in ninth place, gold goes to the Soviet Union, their twelfth overall win.

She stood up from the chair, walked across to the radio and switched it off. Her six-year-old son raised his head and looked at her.

Get up, she told him.

He put down the toy lorry and stood up. Extinguishing her half-finished cigarette, she bent over taking his three-year-old brother's hand.

Where are we going, mummy? her youngest son asked.

Uršula didn't answer him. Parked outside was a white Zastava 750. She opened the door and sat the six-year-old on the back seat. Then she sat in the driver's seat, put the three-year-old on her lap, turned the key and drove off.

He sat in the back, watching the houses go by through the window. He turned to see how tall the two stone spires were as they drove past. Mummy had told him this was the church of Saint Bartholomew, the largest in town. He liked the air blowing against his face through the open window, mummy had never taken them with her like this, and he was happy that she had changed her mind today. Before them he saw the lake and forests, they were leaving town. Mummy stopped the car on a dirt track and turned towards him. She smiled and stroked his hair.

Mummy, where are we going? asked his brother who was sitting in her lap.

She kissed him on the forehead, tears rolling down her cheeks. Then she hit the accelerator, the car sped towards the lake and he suddenly realised what was happening. Water instantly came gushing through the open windows, the vehicle bounced off a rock below and began to sink. The current pulled the six-year-old out of the window, wrapping him in a powerful whirlpool of bubbles so he could not breathe or scream, crushing his chest, his eyes painful as if being squeezed out of his head. He saw huge caves that were part of the disused mine which had been flooded to create the lake. His body twisted and below him he spotted the car sinking fast into the depths. Inside it was his mother, her hair floating upwards. She was holding tightly onto his younger brother who was staring at him wide-eyed, his mouth opening, as if wanting to free himself from his mother's grip. But mummy was holding him firmly and a few minutes later the weight of the car dragged them towards the bottom, the dark water swallowing their faces.

He climbed onto the shore, wet and cold. All was still around him, the crackling of branches the only sound coming from the forest. He was scared. His lungs hurt, his chest felt crushed, his head was thumping. He did not know where he was or what he should do. He looked at the lake. The

surface was entirely smooth, not a single bubble on it, as if all that had happened had not happened at all. Tears ran down his cheeks. He began walking towards the trees. He walked and walked, hoping he might meet someone he could tell that his mummy and brother down at the bottom of the lake needed help... His wet trousers wrapped around his feet. He did not know how long he walked or where he was going. Suddenly a chilling sound echoed through the trees and settled in his ear. A growl cut through the air. His heart pumped wildly, he could feel its throbbing in his neck. Slowly he turned and looked up. In front of him was a moonlit rocky outcrop. Standing on it was a white wolf, its wild eyes looking straight at him. His heart thumped so fiercely he thought he would explode. The growling became louder and in the beast's eyes he saw readiness for attack. He automatically took a step backwards and felt something rub against his skin. Goosebumps ran down his neck. He looked down. Playing in the grass in front of him were a pair of wolf pups.

Chapter Two

Kočevski Rog Forest, Kočevje

The patches of snow on the cold ground were melting under the warm rays of the morning sun. A pack of wolves, eight of them, attacked a herd of deer running across the snow-covered forest glade. A pair of them chased the slowest doe, snow spraying through the winter air, the struggle for survival exceeding speeds of twenty-five miles per hour. The other six surrounded their prey from the other side, closing in on it. The doe helplessly watched the rest of the herd disappear towards the trees at the far end of the clearing. The two wolves in pursuit jumped towards her, their brains sending the attack command, their jaws opening wide and biting into flesh, blood spurting violently through the air. The wounded deer's knees gave in, the predators buried their teeth deeper, ripping the doe's hide. Weighed down by the two attackers, the large animal fell to the ground, the pair of wolves delivering their final fatal bite. The doe's eyes glazed over, blood soaking into the snow. The first to claim their share of the dead prey were the alpha male and alpha female, the rest of the pack waiting a few feet away for their turn.

Sharp teeth ripped the meat from the carcass, the growling of wolves cut into the silence above the forest. A bullet whistled through the air and hit the alpha male in the neck. With a brief whine the animal collapsed onto the blood-covered snow next to its slaughtered prey. The other wolves

surrounded their wounded leader from the rear. He managed to get himself back onto his feet and ran off into the forest with his pack, leaving behind him a trail of blood on the snow. A second and third shot from the Merkel B3 over-and-under rifle were not as precise as the first. They missed, and the leader of the pack fled.

The grey Cherokee Trailhawk jeep turned off the asphalted road onto a track leading through the forest. Lying on some plastic tarp in the boot were a number of dead rabbits, next to them a hunting rifle. The Cherokee continued down the track for a while, then, just before the forest clearing that appeared on the left, turned towards the lookout. The driver, an elderly man with grey hair, stopped the vehicle and got out. Despite approaching sixty, he appeared strong and fit. Only as he walked towards the back of the car did the slight limp in his right foot become apparent.

He opened the back door and lifted the rabbits strung onto a piece of rope. Hanging them across his shoulder, he picked up the rifle. The howling of wolves could be heard from afar. He turned his head, gazing across the glade towards the forest.

Patches of hardened snow crunched under his boots. He stopped at the tall oak tree with a marker on it and laid down the rabbits on the mossy forest floor. He looked up into the tree. The camera was still fixed on the branch, he stretched out his hand, opened the casing, took out the memory card and put it into his jacket pocket. He set the rabbit carcasses, detached the rope, rolled it up and slung it over his shoulder. Making his way back to the car, he noticed wolf footprints on the ground and next to them a bloody trail. To the side he also saw shoeprints in the snow. The wolves in this forest were protected. At the Society for the Protection of the Kočevje Wolf, of which he had been president for a number of years, they tracked the movement of the animals via GPS trackers placed on the collars of the eight wolves in the pack they had been monitoring for quite a while. Poachers. Trophy hunters. This was not an area where farmers lived, complaining about wolves attacking their flocks of sheep. Here it was a case of killing, illegal hunting of a wild animal that had in the past been brought to the brink of extinction. Anger filled Herman Veles's lungs, his breath forming a shimmering white cloud as he sighed loudly into the cold February morning air. He reached his vehicle under the lookout tower, opened the door, sat inside and drove off. A morning fog had settled across the dirt track, all around him was white, and before he managed to switch on his fog lights, the jeep hit something lying on the ground. There was a hard thump, as if something bulky bounced off the bumper. He switched off the engine and stepped out onto the road. He could still

not see anything, the fog was thick, engulfing him like a sticky cloud. There was a quiet whining noise coming from the ground. The fog suddenly cleared, rising abruptly and dispersing into the cold air a metre or so above the road. Lying on the frozen ground was a wounded wolf. Blood was running from its head, drenching its grey-brown fur. Herman Veles leaned towards the animal. He could see its red collar and recognised the alpha male lying before him. Its body twitched, its pupils dilating. He watched it, sensing that life was slipping out of the body of this mighty animal that he had been looking after and following for a number of years. Slowly he reached out and touched the wolf's coat. It was now lying motionless on the ground, blood trickling from its mouth. Its eyes staring straight at Veles, their orange-yellow tint slowly losing its shine. Veles noticed that Mars – that was the name they had given the wolf at the Society years ago – had a bullet wound in his neck.

Who did this to you? He whispered, feeling a crushing pain in his chest.

He was breathing heavily, the hot air turning to mist in front of his face. Mars gazed at him for a few further moments and then his eyes slowly closed. The alpha male, who would this year have mated and ensured the continuation of the wolf family, was dead. Behind him he heard crushing snow, he turned around and saw branches move. Out of the forest stepped a man wearing a sports cap with an eagle on it, a rifle in his right hand. He stopped by the road and stared at Veles. They peered at each other in silence for a long time.

Is it dead? The man asked, lowering his gaze to the wolf lying on the ground.

Yes, said Veles, *he's dead. Did you shoot him?*

The man stayed silent.

Then he uttered, *Yes. It was me.*

Why do you shoot wolves?

The man's gaze was ice-cold.

Why did you kill my son?

Veles could feel the cold seeping through his clothes, trying to find a way to reach his heart.

What are you talking about?

The wolves killed him, and all these years you have worked to prevent them from being hunted.

Snow fell from the nearby spruce, spraying through the air.

Wolves don't attack people. It is people who kill them.

The man's jaw muscles tensed.

Your wolves killed my child.

Veles noticed his eyes were filled with ancient hatred.

And you really believe that?

No, I don't believe it, I know.

The sun illuminated the surface of the snow, ice crystals twinkling in the light.

And that is why you come here to kill them?

I will continue doing so for as long as I live.

Veles moved his hand from the wolf's fur, stood up and limped to the back of his car. He opened the boot and took out a blanket. Wrapping the wolf in it, he pulled it towards the car. The man, standing by the road, watched him lift the fifty-kilo wolf into the boot. Then he picked up his double barrel shotgun. When the man turned away, Herman Veles pointed his gun at his back. The fingers of his right hand clutched the trigger, he could feel his heart thumping loudly inside his jacket.

Stop!

The man who had taken a few steps along the frozen path into the snow-covered forest turned round. Their gazes locked in the cold February air, clouds covered the sun. Veles rubbed his finger against the trigger, the man closed his eyes. A single shot rang through the air, scaring the birds from the treetops into the lead-grey sky.

Chapter Three

Kočevski Rog Forest, Kočevje

Mists were rising above the dirt road dispersing like a smoke screen among the tall trees. It was cold, floral ice patterns had formed on the windscreen overnight. Jurij Dimitrovski was sitting at the wheel of his lorry which had a bunk in the back where he had often tried to get some sleep at some roadside resting area before continuing his journey to Dimitrovgrad, a town on Serbia's border with Bulgaria, at that moment thousands of kilometres away. He could feel the cold pressing against his body, streaks of sweat trickling stickily from his forehead, his soaked vest glued to his chest, he knew that the pain would soon consume him, seizing his muscles and gripping his heart and that in such a state he would not be able to drive a single mile further. He pulled the lorry over

to the side of the road and switched off the engine. The temperature dial on the dashboard showed minus three, he looked out of the window, gazing at the overgrown ancient forest, its treetops jutting more than twenty metres towards the winter greyness of the sky. Kočevski Rog was a forest he would not like to walk through. When he was a child, Kasandra, his maternal grandmother, told him stories about bodies lying underground, wrapping anyone who stepped on them with an eerie curse. He was more scared of these bodies than of his violent mother who would beat him with a belt, its metal buckle tearing away at Jurij Dimitrovski's skin with such resentment that he more than once fainted and collapsed onto the floor. The wounds on his body blossomed like bloody flowers, leaving behind scars that would never be erased, his mother towering over him, screaming, *Don't you dare piss your bed ever again!*

Today he could not avoid the forest. He had to take his lorry to a body shop close by, where the mechanic had cut out a secret compartment at the bottom side of his seat where he would hide forbidden goods to carry across the Schengen border into Slovenia, then to travel onwards to Western Europe. He pressed the button and the window slid downwards. The icy breeze crept into the cab, he opened his mouth and took a deep breath. His vision blurred. He thought he would have been able to hold out until he reached Dimitrovgrad and get his shot there, but now he would have to take it here and risk being stopped. A single glance at his pupils would be enough for his lorry to be seized and get him stuck in a cell until sober. He did not even dare think about the consequences of anything like that happening.

He felt as if he was shaking from within. It came like a huge wave from above, engulfing him with a shudder, his skin soon to shrink, followed by painful cramps. He found the bag he kept under the lining on the ceiling and brought out his tools. He took off his jacket, rolled up his sleeve. Tying the rubber tube around his arm, he tightened it with his teeth. Out of the blue, a shot rang from the forest. He flinched and looked out of the window. On the snowy patch of frozen ground, he saw an older man with a shotgun approaching, on his head a cap with an eagle. Their gazes met and lingered in the air for a few moments. The rubber tube slipped from Jurij Dimitrovski's arm and fell to the floor. He swiftly unglued his gaze from the man and looked towards his feet. He bent over to pick up the rubber tubing. When he turned back to the window, the man with the gun was gone. Once again he tied the lacing round his arm and poured some brown powder from a small bag onto a spoon. He added a little citric acid, lit his lighter and melted the powder into liquid.

Through a piece of cotton wool, he drew the brown slush into the syringe and tried to inject it into his vein but was, after four attempts, still unable to do so.

Shit, fuck this! He shouted, trails of sweat running across his face, his body shaking in unpleasant jitters.

He lifted up his shirt and jabbed the needle into his armpit. Suddenly he was jolted into a warm softness, the sharp edges of his internal organs smoothed out, muscles relaxed and the cramp completely released its grip. With the fingers of his swollen arm, Jurij Dimitrovski pressed the button on the door, closing the window. His eyelids slipped across his eyes, his head fell onto his chest, and the universe was once again endless.

Chapter Four

Kočevski Rog Forest, Kočevje

Herman Veles had lived alone all his life. Solitude was something he did not concern himself with. It was part of who he was and he accepted it as such. He did occasionally think that it would be nice to share this world with someone but the mere idea seemed so unreal that he quickly suppressed it. He had been alone for too long for such an idea to even be feasible, and solitude does not mean loneliness. Herman Veles never really felt lonely. He believed that people should spend at least part of their life alone, and in this way come to realise many things about their soul, for solitude opens up awareness and, though it might initially be hard for many people, they would come out of such an experience far more amenable – towards the world and themselves. He was aware, however, that people were social beings and that solitude is not for everyone. He was one of the few who were born or pushed by circumstances into being able to live alone and he believed this was right for him and therefore never attempted to change anything.

Over three decades before he had moved to the Kočevje forest from Bela Krajina, building himself a log cabin in which he still lived. He often went into town where the offices of the Society for the Protection of the Kočevje Wolf were located. He had been a member of the Society since its foundation in eighty-nine, and for the last twenty years also its president. He liked looking after wolves, they seemed much more sincere than most people he had dealings with. That they occasionally attacked the flocks of nearby farmers was inevitable, after all, it was man who was

using the forest and thus interfering with their natural habitat. That his fight to ban the hunting of these animals brought him into conflict with many people was also to be expected. Over the years he had made quite a few enemies, and some of them made it clear to him what would happen if he did not stop *his campaigning*. Because Herman Veles ignored these threats, there had been stones through the office window a number of times, once there was even attempted arson on his cabin, the Molotov smashed against the garage door and the police, with whom he never wanted to have dealings with, arrived with the fire brigade that somebody had called. They set in motion an investigation, asked for his statement, even questioned a few people, but that was as far as it went. Nobody was charged, nobody punished.

When Herman Veles opened the door to his jeep that morning and was about to sit into it, he noticed on the passenger seat a bloody handkerchief tied with a rubber band, apparently with something wrapped inside. He removed the rubber band and opened up the handkerchief. The blood was from something that looked like a piece of shrivelled flesh. Veles stared at the tissue, then sighed deeply when he realised what he was looking at.

Chapter Five

Kočevski Rog Forest, Kočevje

She was soaking in sweat. The forest was dark, the soil damp, pushing into her mouth. She heard the hooting of an owl and a screeching hitting the ancient tree trunks, and could not recall what bird it was that made such an atrocious noise. The scent of the once familiar forest hit her nostrils, a scent she liked to breathe in, a scent that was part of her, the scent of conifers and leafy trees, the scent of budding spruce, the scent of the green undergrowth, moss, roots, earthworms that stretched their segmented bodies out of the soil whenever it rained and she would worry she might not accidentally tread on one of them.

Come on, don't be so sensitive, her mother was always telling her. Death is part of the natural circle of things, you don't need to be afraid if it, we are connected, just like the roots below ground are connected, organisms on land and in water, animals and people, we are all part of the same ecosystem, all linked in a cycle, you see?

When she was six, she had once gone looking for her mother and got lost in the vast underground caverns. They were huge abysses, and she was stepping into their darkness, which drew her deeper and deeper inside, and that was where she saw him. After that he began to appear in her nightmares, instilling into her an anxiety that crept into her body and never really left it.

She could hear her mother's voice, gently floating around her, telling her, *Let go and connect to the dead, we are all linked in a cycle...*

She feels no connection with the dead, all she feels is her heart thumping in her chest, she feels fear creeping into her nostrils with the dampness, slithering into her muscles, trying to flex them into moving, so she might lift herself from the ground. But they do not respond, and the forest no longer smells of life but of death, patiently watching the blood from her body dripping onto the damp forest floor, her cells seeping through the soil, turning into food for microorganisms below ground. Just a little longer, a little longer and the circle will be complete.

She can no longer smell the breath of her murderer, no longer see before her the wolf mask behind which he hid his face, a different scent is passing through her, gentle and familiar... this was how her lover's skin smells... she stretches out her hands to reach him, and he smiles at her as he smiled on the first day she met him. Her hand falls to the ground and his face vanishes in the morning mist. Crawling from the soil are earthworms that burrow their way under her skin. Her breath is escaping her body, her heart drumming, she can feel its beat in her throat. Her wounded heart, that until not long ago beat only for him. Did she ever love anyone else as much as she loved him? Suddenly the piercing screeches stop, the forest falls silent. As if everything that is alive in it is wondering how come she doesn't know that it was always just about him and her, that they were one? A burning pain cuts across her chest, she can feel the damp soil invading her flesh, finding its way through her wounds, subduing her, fusing with her blood, sucking her in like a greedy spider attacking its prey. Fear creeps into her bones.

All will be fine, Mara... Floating before her eyes is the face of the man she loved more than anything she ever knew. *It is the two of us, you see – even if we lie in the dark and are dead, we fly together, glow...* His words gently ripple through the air. *Do not be afraid. I am also here, waiting for you to come.*

Now she is calm. Now she is ready.

A bird of prey circles across the sky. Beams of faint light begin drifting through the forest, rays of the morning sun infiltrate through the treetops, illuminating the body of a woman lying on the forest floor. Staring from her face are a pair of wolf eyes, grinning in her mouth a row of wolf teeth.

Chapter Fourteen

Kočevski Rog Forest, Kočevje

Sitting in the back of the police car were Aleš Vidmar, the Head of the Department for Homicide and Sexual Offences Section, and his colleague Jaka Videmšek, criminal investigator, age around thirty-five, who was staring out of the window.

I never understood how Kočevje falls under the jurisdiction of Ljubljana and not Novo Mesto... Vidmar stayed silent. He had not come to the Kočevje area in a while. There used to be quite a few murders here but recently the situation seemed to have calmed down a little and most of the murder investigations were done by their Styrian colleagues who covered the area further east between the Drava and the Mura rivers. *A few years ago, when I was buying a car, Videmšek continued, I found an ad for a Renault Clio at a great price, parked in a garage, very low mileage... thought I could get it for my wife, to use in town... So I asked a friend to drive me down here to collect the car. It was being sold by someone around here, from some village very close to here... It was winter and when we arrived at the house it was already dark. A dirt track, and at the end of it an old unplastered house, forest all around it. Like some thriller. I walked up to the house to arrange everything and Boštjan, my friend who had come with me, stayed in the car and locked the doors, he was so scared...*

Vidmar looked at Videmšek and smiled.

What was he scared of, being attacked by a bear? Or, how could I have forgotten, perhaps he was afraid of the local gypsies...

It's alright for you to make fun. Just imagine the horrible feeling, coming to an unfamiliar place like this... Darkness, no lights outside at all, just forest in every direction you look.

Videmšek looked out of the window. They were driving past tall spruce trees either side of the road, beyond them an endless forest.

Everything was heavily overgrown. Gigantic trees with thick treetops, conifers and deciduous trees growing together, the ground covered in thick undergrowth. There was little light, the rays of the sun barely managing to make their way through the branches, and despite the good weather, the forest was humid. With no paths through the forest, Vidmar and Videmšek had difficulty making their way through the various kinds of ferns growing below the trees, their feet entangling in the fronds. They could hear the screeching of some bird and Vidmar wondered what bird it was that made such a racket. He looked up from concentrating on where to step, and a few metres in front of them noticed the yellow police tape tied around the tree trunks. He could hear the voices of his colleagues already on the scene. They spoke quietly, as if trying with their low voices not to desecrate the body lying in the damp grass. Vidmar approached them and stood next to Aurelli who was staring at the woman on the ground. She was lying on her back, the white T-shirt she was wearing torn and soaked in blood, her jeans and underwear pulled down below her knees, one foot bare, the other still wearing a sneaker. The grass around the body was trampled, a few of the branches on the surrounding bushes broken, a patch of fabric from her T-shirt hanging from one of them.

It seems she was murdered right here, said Vidmar.

Aurelli looked around and noticed the numbered yellow plastic rectangle a few metres away from him with which the forensic experts marked the evidence that was usually scattered across the scene of a crime. The other sneaker was next to the yellow marker. The woman had long reddish wavy hair. One of the technicians bent down and placed two paper bags over the palms of the victim's hands. The forensic investigator was taking photographs of the body from various angles, the sound of each new shot flashing through the air. Standing next to Aurelli was Matjaž Sinčič, also known as Kiddo, the investigating magistrate with whom he was often on duty.

Someone must have really lost it, said Kiddo looking at the victim's blood-soaked T-shirt which had some kind of logo on it but the writing was not visible.

Vidmar stuck a piece of chewing gum into his mouth and looked at Aurelli.

Have you ever seen anything like this?

Aurelli continued to look at the murdered woman.

I think the murderer is trying to pass a message. It could be intended for the victim, but it might also be a present for us.

Vidmar turned to the forensic technician.

Take this off her face.

The man bent over and carefully pulled the mask from the victim. It was made of wood, painted white. The hole cut out for the mouth had a number of vertical thin metal rods across it. Aurelli thought of the metal bars on the mask worn by Hannibal Lecter. Two cut out triangles at the top looked like ears.

Hang on... said Aurelli and once again looked at the mask that the technician was just putting away into a plastic bag. He held it and lifted it up a little. *What does this remind you of?*

Everyone looked up. There was a sudden flash of recognition on the criminal investigator's face.

This must be a wolf's head...

But why is it painted white, why is the wolf not brown or grey? Videmšek was curious.

A white wolf? Vidmar finally spoke.

Perhaps it means something to the murderer, said Aurelli. He looked across the faces of everyone present. *Only we know about the mask, and please, let it stay that way.*

excerpts from the novel translated by Gregor Timothy Čeh