



Praise for

# DAVID YOUNG

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David Young is a bit of a genius’

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‘A well observed and exciting crime novel that reads with such  
fluidity and expertise it was a surprise to find out this was  
Young’s debut novel’

**BIBLIOMANIAC**

‘*Stasi Child* is a great read, perfect for fans of historical crime fiction’

**CRIME THRILLER GIRL**



# A DARKER STATE

**David Young** was born near Hull and – after dropping out of a Bristol University science degree – studied Humanities at Bristol Polytechnic. Temporary jobs cleaning ferry toilets and driving a butcher’s van were followed by a career in journalism with provincial newspapers, a London news agency, and international radio and TV newsrooms. He now writes in his garden shed and in his spare time supports Hull City AFC. You can follow him on Twitter @djy\_writer.

Also by David Young

*Stasi Child*

*Stasi Wolf*

**A  
DARKER  
STATE  
DAVID YOUNG**

**ZAFFRE**



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*For Oliver Berlau*





## PROLOGUE

*December 1976*  
*Western Poland*

The dog pulled him through the undergrowth of Wyspa Teatralna – the brittle, frozen branches snapping and crackling as the pair advanced. An early winter freeze. Already the river surrounding Theatre Island was thick with ice, from bank to bank, on every side. Kazimierz Wójcik wondered how strong it was. Strong enough to hold a man? A car? A tank? He'd seen it this way before, many times, but not usually until the depths of winter – late January, or early February.

'Śnieżka! Śnieżka!' he shouted, as he tried to hold the animal back on its lead. But in this bitter cold the dog was in its element. A Siberian sledding dog, its instinct for pulling things had kicked in, and Kazimierz, with his one good arm, didn't have the strength to fight. Instead he concentrated on holding on and not falling. He didn't want Śnieżka running down the bank and out onto the ice itself.

He didn't want to lose her.



He'd already lost too much in his life.

The Germans on the other bank had made sure of that; his withered left arm had been their souvenir gift. Our socialist *friends*.

But Kazimierz and other men and women of his age – those that were left – knew differently. They were no friends of Kazimierz or anyone of his generation. The German *Szkopy* – the castrated rams, as Poles of his vintage liked to call them – had much to answer for.

The dog stopped suddenly at the top of the riverbank, ears pricked, its white fur puffed out, matching the colour of Kazimierz's moustache and beard. The old man and his dog, for a moment, were as statuesque as the stone remains of the theatre that gave this area its name. The low hum of machinery from the wool factory on the German side of the river was all that punctured the silence – that and the sound of Kazimierz's own laboured breathing. Clouds of condensation immediately turned to ice as they hit the tips of his facial hair.

Śnieżka had seen something. Where the frozen river melded to the gravel shore.

Kazimierz's eyes followed the dog's gaze, past his own frost-coated moustache, to something that was dark, matted. His eyes weren't as good as they used to be, when he'd worked as a watchmaker in Leszno before the war, right on the old border. Before he'd been resettled here on the new border, more than a hundred kilometres further west. By that time, with his withered left arm, watchmaking was a thing of the past.



The object looked almost like a fur coat. *Perhaps I could dry it and sell it*, thought Kazimierz. But it was piled in a lump, and the man felt nausea sweep over him as it dawned on him what – in all probability – lay under the coat.

A body.

An unmoving, dead body.

Kazimierz tried to pull Śnieżka back. He didn't want any trouble. They'd just forget what they'd seen. It was safer that way.

Keep your head down; keep out of trouble. That's how Kazimierz had survived all these years, and he wasn't about to change.

But the dog had different ideas.

She started dragging her master down the bank, giving him no option but to follow, stumbling as he went, frantically trying to keep hold of the lead.

Kazimierz finally had to let go to avoid falling, and he started shouting the dog's name again.

But Śnieżka stopped dead as soon as she reached the bundle of fur.

Stopped dead and began howling.

A terrible keening wail of terror or lament. And Kazimierz knew his hopes of keeping this quiet had evaporated in an instant.

Finally, the old man's eyes and brain registered what the bundle was.

It wasn't a body, it was several bodies. Rats.

Contorted, fused together in a mass of brown hair, tipped with hoar frost. And what really made Kazimierz shudder were the tails.

Tens, scores of lifeless tails, each attached to its own bundle of fur.

# 1

*September 1976*

*Strausberger Platz, East Berlin*

The cool September breeze fanned People's Police *Oberleutnant* Karin Müller's lightly tanned face, and she had to fight to keep her blond hair from flying into her eyes as she looked down at her watch for the third time that minute. Already five past the hour and no sign of her boss, *Oberst* Reiniger, despite his exhortations that she should arrive on time.

She didn't feel much like an '*Oberleutnant*' at the moment. In fact, though it had been a few short months since the end of her last case, down in Halle-Neustadt rather than here in the Hauptstadt, she'd almost forgotten what it was like being a police officer, never mind the head of a murder squad. For several weeks now she'd been playing the part of a full-time, stay-at-home mother – something that was rare in their small republic, where babies were despatched to crèches almost as soon as they were born, with mothers quickly back in the workplace.

Now, standing here, at the northern exit to Strausberger Platz U-bahn station, she felt a terrible longing for the twin babies



she'd left behind. An almost physical tugging at her heart. She had a horrible feeling, too, that whatever Reiniger wanted, it wasn't going to turn out well for her new-found family life. Her little miracles – Jannika and Johannes. The babies she'd been told – year after year, by doctor after doctor – that she'd never be able to have.

Swallowing, she held her hand up to her brow and peered eastwards along Karl-Marx-Allee, marvelling at its grandeur. Yes, the Republic wasn't perfect. The methods of the Ministry for State Security that she'd encountered in her previous investigation into the reform school teenagers, and then the search in Halle-Neustadt for the missing children, had left her feeling uneasy about being so aligned to the state. But this magnificent avenue – with its beautifully tiled, wedding-cake-style buildings lining each side – was testament to all that was good about the socialist system. In Paris, to live in apartments like these would cost a king's ransom. Here, those higher up in the Party might get priority, but there were ordinary workers too. The rubble women, for example. Those who had heroically cleared tonnes and tonnes of debris from the ruins of Berlin after the war to help build a new Hauptstadt, they had been given priority to get these apartments. Tenement palaces, they were called, and Müller could see why.

She swivelled on her heels to look the other way, back towards central Berlin and the TV tower, and beyond that the Anti-Fascist Protection Barrier. Past the glorious fountain in the centre of Strausberger Platz, the wind whipping up the





water and dispersing it into a fine mist across the square. She breathed in the damp air and let the microscopic spray settle on her face. Where the sun hit the water you could see miniature rainbows forming. Never quite a complete arch, coming and going as the flow pulsed from the pumps.

Now, through one of the rainbows, she saw an overweight, middle-aged man approaching. Head down, walking a bit like a penguin. Every now and then brushing water droplets from his epaulettes, as much – no doubt – to draw attention to his rank as to actually wipe them. That was always her deputy Werner Tilsner's theory about Reiniger anyway. Unterleutnant Werner Tilsner found the People's Police colonel pompous and dull. Müller on the other hand rather liked him, and as he drew close her face widened into a broad smile.

'Karin, you're looking well,' he said, smiling equally broadly as he pumped her outstretched hand. 'Clearly motherhood suits you.'

'I'm not so sure about that, Comrade *Oberst*,' laughed Müller. 'You heard on the phone last night. It's a bit chaotic in the apartment at the moment.' Reiniger had rung her apartment police hotline in the midst of domestic chaos, a crying fit from both babies. The one-bedroom flat was overcrowded too: Müller, her hospital doctor boyfriend Emil Wollenburg, the twins themselves and, there to look after them, her newly discovered grandmother, Helga.

Reiniger waved his arm, as though by doing so it would magic her problems away. 'We'll have to see what we can do





about your living conditions. I may have a possible solution. And sorry I was a little late. You know how it is. I had a meeting at the Café Moskau and thought I may as well walk after that. Actually, the person I was meeting asked after you.'

'Oh yes?' Müller was pleased she hadn't been totally forgotten by her People's Police colleagues during her maternity leave. 'Who was that?'

'Someone who – if you accept my little proposal – you may be seeing a lot more of again.'

There was something in Reiniger's smirking face that immediately made Müller wary. *Seeing a lot more of again.* The implication being it would happen, whether she wanted it to or not.

Müller was aware that her face must have fallen, even though she'd tried to keep a neutral expression. But the next words from Reiniger's mouth came as no surprise.

'It was your old Ministry for State Security contact, *Oberst Jäger.*'

Jäger. The Stasi colonel with the suave good looks of a West German TV presenter.

A manipulator. A string-puller. A man to fear.

Reiniger seemed in no hurry to get down to business. Instead, lunch – sitting outside the restaurant on the northern semi-circle of the Platz – was spent discussing the children, with Reiniger swapping tales about his first taste of fatherhood years earlier, and his recent reacquaintance after becoming a grandfather just the previous year.





In fact, the conversation was so convivial Müller had almost forgotten the sense of dread she'd felt earlier, when she heard Jäger's name again. Not that the Stasi officer was someone she hated. She was ambivalent. Some of his methods, and those of the agency he worked for, were ruthless, cruel, underhand. But it was Jäger who had traced her grandmother, Helga – allowing Müller to feel a sense of belonging, at last, after years of feeling like the odd one out in her adoptive family back in the forested, low mountains of Thuringia. And perhaps if Jäger were to re-enter her working life again, she might, this time, persuade him to try to find information about her natural father, who – as far as she knew – had been a victorious Soviet soldier who had got her teenage mother pregnant with her in the dying days of the war, or very shortly after.

Finally Reiniger belched, sending the fumes of his meal and accompanying smell of wheat beer across the table into Müller's face. She pretended not to notice. Then he wiped the linen napkin across his mouth, spat on it, and then repeated the action, examining the resulting red-brown sauce deposits with a curious look of satisfaction.

'So, I hope you enjoyed that as much as I did, Karin?'

'Certainly, Comrade *Oberst*. It's not often I get the chance to eat at a restaurant as fine as this.'

'Good. Good. On to the next part of our little outing, then. You don't have to rush back, do you?'

'Not at all.' Müller recalled Jannika and Johannes's whining from the previous night, and the way Helga had managed to calm them. Her grandmother was more than capable of looking after them on her own.



‘All right, then. Let’s get our coats. We’re going to see something that I think you’ll like.’

Reiniger used a key to enter the lobby of an apartment block just to the side of one of the four high towers that dominated each corner of Strausberger Platz. Everything was bright, white, clean – it had nothing in common with her crumbling block on Schönhauser Allee.

The lift accelerated them upwards in a smooth glide to the floor – the sixth – that Reiniger selected from the bank of brass buttons surrounded by glowing green neon. When they exited, the floor and architectural detailing had the same feeling of opulence. If it was polished concrete rather than actual marble or white stone, the designers had done an excellent job of camouflage. Müller suspected that at least *some* of this was the real thing, even though she knew the stone-effect exterior along the whole of the Allee was achieved by the clever use of ceramic tiles.

Reiniger’s key ring jangled like a child’s percussion triangle as he pulled it from his pocket and fitted one of the keys into a heavy oak door. He opened it and beckoned Müller to follow, still not revealing what the purpose of his little tour actually was.

Once inside, he gave another of his sweeping arm gestures around the expansive hallway – big enough, Müller noted, to have a dining table. The one here looked like it was antique. The apartment probably belonged to some high-up Party apparatchik. But if so, why was Müller being given a guided tour?





‘What do you think? Impressive, isn’t it?’

‘It certainly is, Comrade *Oberst*.’ Müller would usually have dropped the repetitive honorifics by now, even with a senior officer, but she knew Reiniger appreciated being reminded of his high rank as often as possible. She wasn’t going to disappoint him.

‘Take a look around. This is a three-bedroomed apartment. Highly unusual. And, of course, very much sought after. I think perhaps they knocked two together.’

Müller entered the lounge first. The furnishings here were ultra-modern: curved wooden table, an unusual all-white, leather-look sofa with a shiny chrome frame. Most impressive of all were the high windows, flooding light into every corner of the room. Müller ambled over to one of them. If you wanted to be picky, you could say that the view was only a side-on of Strausberger Platz – you couldn’t see the whole square from here. But you could see enough: the fountain with its fine mist of blown spray, which a couple of children were running in and out of; the two imposing towers on the eastern side of the square; the start of the long, majestic Karl-Marx-Allee, leading past the U-bahn station entrance for kilometre after kilometre until it became the road that would take you to the very east of the Republic, and beyond that, to Poland.

She felt overwhelmed by all the luxury. Slightly guilty too, because it highlighted some of the inequalities of what was supposed to be an equal society. Had the *Trümmerfrauen* – the rubble women – really acquired the leases on apartments like these?

Müller made her way back to the hall, off which all the apartment’s rooms led. She could see the corner of the kitchen, with



its ultra-modern fitted cupboards. The bathroom, too, had its door open and looked to be of the highest specification.

At the dining table, Reiniger had sat down, and for once was in shirt sleeves, his jacket with its epaulettes of shiny stars hung over the back of his chair. In front of him, various papers were spread out on the table itself, with a pen alongside.

‘Come,’ he said, pointing to the chair opposite his. ‘Sit yourself down, and I’ll take you through everything.’

Müller frowned. ‘Take me through everything?’

Reiniger was smiling broadly, his teeth unusually white for a man of his age. Müller knew that, like her, he didn’t smoke, and was always casting disapproving glances towards Tilsner when he lit up. But as well as that, he must spend a lot of time polishing his teeth, just as he did the stars on his shoulders. That, or he’d found a very good dentist. He picked up the pen.

‘Yes. The lease. There’s a few things I need to explain.’

Müller felt the colour drain from her face, and a rapid trembling begin somewhere deep in her belly. ‘I . . . well, even we . . . couldn’t possibly afford something like this, Comrade *Oberst*. Not on the salary of a police first lieutenant nor a hospital doctor, and not even if we combined those with my grandmother’s pension.’

‘I think you’d be surprised, Karin. This is hardly more expensive than any other flat in the Republic. Cheaper than some, in fact. Less than one hundred marks a month. Surely you could manage that?’

Müller felt her heart racing. Of course they could afford that. It was virtually no more than the Schönhauser Allee

apartment. *There has to be a catch. There's always a catch.* She started looking round the room furtively, up into each corner. Reiniger eyed her with suspicion.

'If you're doing what I think you're doing, Karin, don't worry. This is a police apartment. It's been thoroughly checked for surveillance devices. It's clean.'

Reiniger was turning one of the documents round, pushing it in front of her. She could see it had her name on the rental agreement, as yet unsigned. Immediately, however, she spotted a mistake in what had been typed, awaiting her signature. She traced the rank before her name.

'There's an error here, I'm afraid, Comrade *Oberst*. They've called me *Major*. I'm not a major. I'm a first lieutenant.'

'Hmm. Yes, that could be a problem. But have a look at the counter-signature.'

She recognised Reiniger's angled scrawl above his printed name.

'You don't think I would have signed a document and not noticed a mistake like that, Karin, do you? If so, you underestimate me.'

'I . . . I d-don't understand,' Müller said.

'There *is* a problem. Or rather there *was*. An apartment such as this can only be rented to a police officer of the rank of major and above.'

'So . . .'

'So usually, as a mere *Oberleutnant*, albeit a much-valued one, you would be disqualified. However, things have changed in your absence on maternity leave. A lot of talking's been going



on. We realise it might be difficult for you to return to work and look after twins at the same time, although I gather from your personal circumstances that your grandmother should be able to help a great deal, and in effect be the twins' full-time carer?'

Müller nodded, but said nothing, too shocked to speak.

'At the same time, we in the People's Police want to use you to your full abilities, while realising you can't go gallivanting all over the place as the head of a murder squad.'

Müller had a sudden feeling of dread. Their answer would be pen-pushing. Not just pen-pushing, but pen-pushing as a major, in charge of a team of pen-pushers. If that was it she was going to say 'no', without question. But for now, she allowed Reiniger to continue without interruption.

'So there's been a bit of a reorganisation. Not solely to accommodate you, although that's part of it. We've been worried for some time about discrete murder squads in the various regions working in their own sweet, but perhaps idiosyncratic, ways. For the highest-profile cases we can't allow that to continue, so we're creating an overall Serious Crimes Department. Based in Keibelstrasse. Liaising at the highest levels with other agencies and ministries. I probably don't need to spell that out. You've done plenty of it in your last two cases.'

Liaising with the Stasi. That was what Reiniger meant. And that was where Jäger came into the equation.

Reiniger was still in mid-flow, though he now lowered his voice, despite what he'd said about the apartment being 'clean'.

'You'll be aware that the Ministry for State Security took a very close interest in your last two major cases. What you may



not have been aware of at your previous rank is that, in some similar circumstances, inquiries have been taken away from the People's Police, by what are known as the *MfS*'s – the Stasi's – Special Commissions.'

Müller frowned. The conversation had taken an ominous turn. Reiniger's joviality had been replaced with an icy seriousness.

'It has tended to be cases with political overtones, or cases where the Ministry feels it is essential that ordinary citizens do not find out more than they need to. That has even included the families of the victims themselves.'

Reiniger glanced at each of his shoulders in turn, as though to admire his star-studded epaulettes – forgetting for a moment his uniform jacket was over the back of his chair. As though to check he really was a police colonel. That he really was in charge. Müller was starting to doubt it.

He cleared his throat. 'Now, you can imagine that if that continues, if it extends to more cases, the *Kripo*'s remit in tackling and solving serious crimes will be severely undermined.'

Müller watched Reiniger wringing his hands. Then he fixed her with a stare.

'So that is why we are creating this new department. To, if you like, get ahead of the game. So that we can make a case for our own specialist team to keep control of the most serious murders, rather than them being taken out of our hands and given straight to the Stasi.'

Müller felt tension taking over her body, constricting her throat. This all felt like she was being set up to fail again, that



she would be in opposition to the Stasi from the word go. If that were the case, there would only be one winner.

‘It will be a small team,’ continued Reiniger, picking up the rental contract and turning it over. ‘But you will have a roving brief across the whole country to oversee such murder investigations. Especially those that could, shall we say, prove embarrassing to the Republic. Werner Tilsner is being promoted to join this team, working as your deputy again. There is a catch, however. You probably knew there would be. You will have to start immediately and end your maternity leave.’

Müller was about to object. The twins were only six months old. She didn’t feel ready, whatever carrots were being dangled in front of her. But before she could say anything, Reiniger was in full flow again.

‘Don’t say anything hasty. Hear me out. Both you and Tilsner will jump a couple of ranks. He’s already working in his new role, although he doesn’t know about yours, should you choose to accept. He will be your *Hauptmann* and you will be *Major Karin Müller* of the People’s Police.’ It was Reiniger’s trump card, and with a flourish, he leant over and traced his finger under her rank on the rental agreement. ‘Look around, Karin. Is it really fair to your family to deny them all this? You’ll never get a chance like this again. It’s not a desk job, if that’s what you were afraid of. This will be real police work, real detective work. And you’re being chosen because of your previous experience in dealing with the Stasi. But you will be the boss, able to ask for any assistance you require. That way, you can be certain, you can still look after your family in the way you want to.’





Reiniger lifted the pen and then stretched his arm out, offering it to Müller.

She lifted her hand as though to take it, then stopped the motion in mid-air.

Was it really what she wanted? Being separated from the children she'd yearned for, at such an early age?

To have the Stasi watching her every move again, as they surely would?