

STASI WINTER

East Yorkshire-born David Young began his East German-set crime series on a creative writing MA at London's City University when *Stasi Child* – his debut – won the course prize. The novel went on to win the 2016 CWA Historical Dagger, and both it and the 2017 follow-up, *Stasi Wolf*, were longlisted for the Theakston Old Peculier Crime Novel of the Year. His novels have been sold in eleven territories round the world. Before becoming a full-time author, David was a senior journalist with the BBC's international radio and TV newsrooms for more than 25 years. He divides his time – and his writing – between Twickenham in the UK and the Cyclades islands in Greece.

Also by David Young

Stasi Child

Stasi Wolf

Stasi State [previously A Darker State]

Stasi 77

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STASI
WINTER

ZAFFRE

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For Stephanie

*For details about the real-life weather conditions in the
winter of 1978/79 please see the author's note
at the end of this book.*

Prologue

The Ostsee north of Rostock, East Germany
January 1979

The figures moved like ghosts blown in by the Siberian wind – ethereal, colourless, camouflaged so well that she couldn't be sure they were there. The bitter north-east wind had transformed the Ostsee into a sea of jagged white and grey, blocks of ice broken by the waves and icebreakers, then refrozen as the thermometer plunged still further, like some collapsed ancient monument whose giant stones lay scattered in random patterns. Only those blocks were in fact made of seawater – frozen so hard you could almost believe it really had petrified.

This was the Republic's 'catastrophe winter'.

A hundred-year winter.

A killer winter.

Major Karin Müller carefully moved forward over the frozen sea, her finger resting on the Makarov's trigger guard. There was no crunch of ice – the layer of new snow softened the fall of her boots, as though she was tiptoeing around in fur-covered slippers. As snowflakes hit her face, she expected them

to melt. They didn't – it was too cold. Instead, they collected on her eyelids and nose, so that every so often she had to wipe them off with her gloved left hand.

She couldn't be sure who was who. Two of the ghosts were her quarry – but one was her deputy, *Hauptmann* Werner Tilsner. Together, Müller and Tilsner made up the major part of the Republic's Serious Crimes Department. But what exactly was *he* up to? Allegedly he had gone on ahead to get closer to the *Republikflüchtlinge* – the escapers – to cut them off. Yet when the mist and snow temporarily cleared, it was as if he'd become one of them, camouflaged in matching white.

Then – as the visibility suddenly improved again – she saw the girl's telltale shock of red hair. 'Wildcat' was her code name, given to her as part of a deal some four years earlier. A deal brokered by her handler in the Ministry for State Security, Klaus Jäger. A deal that Müller herself had wanted no part of. But who was she to defy the Stasi?

She raised the gun. Brought the shock of red hair into her sights.

'Irma Behrendt!' she cried. 'Stop there and raise your hands! Otherwise I won't hesitate to shoot!'

Tilsner seemed to be nearer to the girl, yet he was continuing to move, rather than helping Müller to arrest her.

Her focus returned to the girl. Irma had ignored her warning; she'd tucked her hair back under what looked like a bed sheet covering her head, and had broken into a run.

'This is your last warning, Irma! Don't do this to yourself, to your family! Stop or I'll shoot!'

The girl continued running.

Müller's finger wrapped more tightly around the freezing cold metal of the trigger.

And began to squeeze.

1

Sellin, Island of Rügen, East Germany

The previous month – December 1978

I am still the same girl – the same Irma Behrendt – who made that fateful telephone call almost four years ago. That's what I tell myself. But that phone call still haunts me, now as a twenty-year-old woman, just as it did then as a sixteen-year-old girl, only recently released from the hell that is the Republic's reform school system. Having to force my finger to turn the dial, and then knowing – as soon as I talked to him, the local officer in Bergen from the Ministry for State Security – that there was no turning back. I had made my choice.

You probably wonder why I did it. I know I do. But I wanted, above everything, to keep my mother out of jail this time. I naively thought that by co-operating, by giving them information, by spying on her, that I would be helping. That's what I told myself anyway. That's how I still justify it.

I was barely sixteen. Can you really judge me? Would you have done anything different? You can't say, because you've never been in the position that I'd been put into.

When I followed her and the man she'd met up Wilhelm-Pieck-Straße, past the piles of snow, hunching into my anorak to try to keep out the wind, I knew that I was going to do it. I couldn't face being sent back to *Jugendwerkhof Prora Ost*. My friend had been abused then killed by them. I'd been treated as little more than a slave. Yet – to my shame – I still co-operated when the Stasi officer Jäger asked me to.

So I watched them as they walked out along the *Seebrücke*, the wooden pier that was such a landmark in our little seaside town until the authorities demolished most of it earlier this year. Of course, he wasn't necessarily a dissident. He could have been a secret lover. But my job wasn't to assess the situation, it was simply to report on it. I watched them for a few moments through the telescope – the one the children use in summer to look at boats out on the sea. But there were no boats that day. Just a woman with angular features and red hair – an older version of me, really – standing talking to a man on a pier. Easter had been and gone, not that observance of religious holidays was encouraged in the Republic, but winter still hadn't released its grip on Rügen. Behind them, I could see a lamppost sugar-coated with layer upon layer of sea ice. It was certainly a romantic setting. But in my heart, I knew this rendezvous had nothing to do with romance.

I slowly walked over to the yellow phone box, pulled back the hood of my anorak, and dialled the Bergen-auf-Rügen number that Jäger had given me. When the operator answered, I asked for the person whose name he'd written down – *Hauptmann* Gerd Steiger – and identified myself by my new code name, Wildcat.

What did I think would happen? Jäger had convinced me that reporting on my mother's activities was the best way of keeping her out of jail. That if the Stasi had her under close surveillance through a family member, they could protect her from herself. Protect her from falling into her old ways. Nip anything in the bud before it became too serious.

So I made that phone call.

I gave a description of the man she'd met.

The next day – at the campsite where my grandmother is the manager – they arrested my mother. She was sent back to Hoheneck women's prison. She's been there ever since.

They tricked me, and I'm sure I'm not the first.

I felt so alone then. So awful. I'd condemned my own mother to a life back in jail, so soon after her release.

Yet still they wanted me to spy for them. On relations, on friends and on enemies. I continued to give them information, but I made sure it was useless. Frau Kästner buying some fish was constructed into an elaborate, detailed report. Herr Schlender getting a delivery of coal was made out to be some highly suspicious activity. My old boyfriend Laurenz's love of the cinema was reported on in intricate detail, even though the films we went to see together were 'approved' and on general release in the Republic.

But then I met Dieter.

He was based at the other end of Prora to the *Jugendwerkhof* – the hated reform school I was determined never to be sent back to. He'd refused to do his regular National Service with the People's Army. So he'd been sent to Rügen – to Prora – to join

a construction brigade, working on roads, bridges, and the harbour at Sassnitz.

Dieter's helped the scales fall from my eyes. He's taught me what's right and what's wrong.

Now he has a plan.

A plan to change everything.

And he wants me to be a part of it, alongside him.

2

Play area near Karl-Marx-Allee, East Berlin

December 1978

The meeting hadn't been one Karin Müller had been looking forward to, and now it was over before it had really begun. She and her ex-boyfriend, Emil, were supposed to have been discussing access arrangements for their two-and-a-half-year-old twins, Jannika and Johannes. But this very moment, Emil had stormed off without them getting any closer to resolving their differences. The two children – oblivious to the frostiness between their parents – were happily playing with toys in the sandpit. Johannes was wielding a garish plastic representation of the *Soyuz* craft which had launched East Germany's first cosmonaut into space some four months earlier. He propelled it like a javelin towards his unwitting sister, hitting her square on the side of the head.

'Johannes!' cried Müller, as her daughter started bawling. 'If you don't play nicely, we're going straight home.' She rushed to her daughter, picked her up, and after checking there was no real damage, kissed the side of the girl's head better. 'Now, say

sorry, Johannes, and give your sister a kiss too.’ The boy reluctantly complied, transforming Jannika’s tears into a shy grin, confirming Müller’s suspicions that the tears had mostly been play-acting. The spat would soon be forgotten, unlike the rift between Müller and her ex. She knew the only reason he’d got together with her was because he’d been detailed by his Stasi bosses to keep tabs on her. The result, a few months later and not without a little drama, had been the twins – children that doctors had said Müller would never be able to have because of a sexual attack on her years earlier at her police college. Despite the baggage around their birth, whenever she saw them Müller was filled with joy and unconditional love.

The chilly atmosphere between Müller and Emil reflected the way the temperature had suddenly dropped here in Berlin: a relatively mild Christmas cut short by Siberian temperatures. The leaden skies overhead were the embodiment of what the Republic’s weather forecasters had been predicting. Snow was imminent – and the fall could be heavy, especially from Berlin northwards to the Ostsee coast.

Despite the weather, Müller relished the chance to spend the Christmas and New Year period with the twins and her maternal grandmother, Helga. She was the twins’ great-grandmother, but still a sprightly woman in her sixties who’d been their full-time carer until Müller’s decision to quit her career as a detective in the Republic’s People’s Police more than a year previously. It wasn’t something she regretted, but as Helga had pointed out, their savings were now pretty much used up. Müller was in that grey area of employment that officially didn’t exist in the Republic: not

working, but not unemployed. No one was unemployed here. No one was homeless. That was the official line, and one that Müller respected. She'd seen with her own eyes, and from her own experience, that it only told half the truth. Nevertheless, the industrial strife, strikes and general discontent that had seemed ever present in the West – judging by the Western TV news she watched with the illegally aligned aerial in the Strausberger Platz apartment – were indeed absent. Or at least, absent in public. She had no doubt that behind closed doors, in the privacy of the family, grumblings went on. The lack of ability to travel to the western part of Germany, to the BRD – especially for families that had been split up when the Anti-Fascist Protection Barrier had been erected – that was a source of constant grievance. But everyone – from the cradle to the grave – was given constant reminders of its necessity. How else could the counter-revolutionaries, the fascists, and – yes – even the Nazis, be kept at bay? Yet she knew that was again a half-truth. Nazis still existed this side of the Wall. Her last case before she handed her resignation to the police had been evidence enough of that.

And those Nazis – at least in the present day – hadn't even been law-breakers. They were supposed to be upholders of the law, defenders of the Republic. Yet their past deeds had come back to haunt them, and Müller had decided she could no longer work with them. In the case of one of them, she hadn't been entirely surprised. A Stasi colonel with an all too smooth mien that seemed to have been cultivated by aping one of the well-known presenters of the BRD's nightly news programme. But the other? That had been a shock, and had prompted her

resignation decision. None other than her own deputy in the short-lived Serious Crimes Department of the People's Police, *Hauptmann* Werner Tilsner. Tilsner, who she'd long suspected was an unofficial informant for the Ministry for State Security, the *MfS*, aka the Stasi. That much had been true. But the last case had revealed he had been something far worse. A member of the Hitler Youth who had stood alongside the boy who would later become that Stasi colonel, gun poised, as a 1,000-strong group of slave labourers were massacred. An utterly senseless, disgusting crime perpetrated just hours before the Nazis surrendered.

She hadn't spoken to him since.

She didn't intend to ever again.

Müller's musings about her past career were made possible by the fact the twins had begun playing sweetly together. Johannes – clearly taking his mother's chastisement to heart – was allowing Jannika to play with the rocket, and she in turn had offered him her doll. Müller allowed a smile to broaden across her face, and as a first snowflake landed on her nose, it transformed into a small laugh. A laugh that died in her throat when she saw a man approaching from the direction Emil had so recently departed towards.

His silhouette, his confident gait, were horribly familiar.

So too, as he drew closer, was the sandy, shoulder-length hair, and smarmy expression.

The spitting image of that West German newsreader she'd just been thinking about.

Klaus Jäger.

Oberst Klaus Jäger of the Ministry for State Security. His appearance sent a sudden chill through her bones. The bitter cold which in the company of the twins she'd been able to ignore, now set her teeth chattering, her back and shoulders shivering.

'It's been a long time, Karin.' The use of her first name, the faux friendliness, wasn't going to disarm her. She knew what he was.

'*Oberst* Jäger,' she nodded. 'What brings you here? I wish I could believe it was something good, but in my experience that tends not to be the case.' She was no longer in the police – why should she kowtow to him? But what she said was only partly true. Her last dealing with the Stasi colonel had brought her unbridled and surprising happiness. He'd arranged travel warrants and visas for a visit to her father. A father she'd never seen before, conceived as she was as the result of a brief relationship between a victorious Red Army soldier and a teenage German girl at the very end of the Second World War. But that had been the exception and had only come about – Müller knew full well – because she had a hold on him: her knowledge of Jäger's part in the slave labourer massacre, and a threat to expose them to the Western press.

She noticed he was carrying a shopping bag. He arranged his winter overcoat, sat down next to her on the bench, and delved into it.

'I've bought some Christmas presents – for the children.'

Müller tried to hide the shock from her face. Surely there had to be something more to his visit than playing an avuncular

Weihnachtsmann? But she couldn't think of anything she'd done that would arouse the interest of the Stasi. The only change to her life since quitting the *Kriminalpolizei* had been a gradual erosion of her and Helga's funds. Her grandmother had saved a little money from her pension by living with her in Berlin rather than in her own flat in Leipzig. But Müller had reached the point where she needed an income again – she'd recently applied for a job teaching at the People's Police university in Potsdam. It seemed the logical option if she wasn't going to return to the force – and she was determined that would not happen.

'That's kind of you. They'll be thrilled – although they've probably received too many already.'

'They're only this young once, Karin. Enjoy it while you can. Mine are already heading towards becoming bratty teenagers. Always answering their father back.' He raised a sandy-coloured eyebrow wryly.

The presents, she could see, were neatly wrapped – one for each twin, with name tags on the wrapping.

'Something for you too,' he said, his face colouring as though he was embarrassed. Müller couldn't believe that. Stasi colonel Klaus Jäger did not do embarrassment. 'It's a little thank you for keeping your side of the bargain.'

Now it was Müller who found her face reddening.

'Open it,' he prompted in a half-whisper.

Müller wasn't sure whether it would be better to save the moment for later. She didn't want either joy or disappointment to register on her face – she didn't want Jäger to have anything on her. Thanks to what she'd found out about his past, their

relationship had performed a *volte face*, with her – for once – holding the trump cards. That was how she wanted to keep it. Curiosity got the better of her, however, and she started to tear at the paper with her gloved hands. The noise alerted the twins. They rushed over and Jäger handed each of them their own carefully wrapped gift.

‘Who’s this man, Mutti?’ demanded Jannika. Johannes, meanwhile, had already torn into his package: a soft Sandmännchen doll, dressed as a cosmonaut, presumably in honour of the Republic’s own real-life space hero, Sigmund Jähn.

‘I’m a friend,’ said Jäger.

Müller wasn’t prepared to let that assertion pass without being corrected. ‘He’s someone I used to work with, darling.’

‘Where?’ asked Jannika.

‘Never you mind, Miss Nosey-Parker,’ said Müller, tweaking her daughter’s nose. But one thing she was sure of, Jäger was no friend of hers – Christmas presents or not. ‘Why don’t you open the present he’s brought you? Johannes is already playing with his.’ Her son had wrapped the Sandmännchen’s legs round his rocket and was attempting to launch him onto another planet – the sandpit. The toy doll predictably fell off midflight.

Müller turned her attention to her own gift. From the shape and obviously liquid contents she guessed it was some sort of perfume. It was. Chanel No. 5. The exact brand Jäger had instructed her to buy from the Kaufhaus des Westens in West Berlin on her cross-border mission nearly four years earlier. In fact, Müller wouldn’t put it past him to be recycling the same bottle. It looked identical.

‘I know what you’re thinking, Karin, but even I wouldn’t stoop that low. I purchased it myself this side of the Anti-Fascist Protection Barrier – in an Intershop.’

Müller sprayed a little on the back of her wrist. She half-wondered if it would immediately turn to ice, given the bitter cold. But even with her rudimentary knowledge of physics, she knew the alcohol within the mixture would prevent that – never mind her own skin temperature. She briefly inhaled the scent and its telltale melange of flowers, citrus fruits and soap.

‘Thank you,’ she said. She meant it, but it didn’t mean she wouldn’t hesitate to use her knowledge about Jäger’s past to her own advantage should she need to. She knew that. He knew that. It didn’t need to be spelled out.

There seemed little more to say. Jäger hitched up his trouser legs, and started to get up.

As he did so, he mentioned one more thing. Müller sensed this was his real message.

‘I heard you’d applied for a job at the People’s Police college,’ he said in a flat tone.

It wasn’t a surprise that the Stasi knew her every movement. An agent would probably vet all applications. In any case, there had been plenty of evidence of surveillance of her – covert and ostentatiously overt. The Barkas camper van parked outside the Strausberger Platz apartment block for months on end with its twitching curtains and all too obvious cameras. The listening device she’d discovered stitched into the apartment wall after Johannes had unwittingly thrown a toy at just the right spot in a fit of temper.

But Jäger's next utterance still had the power to make her blood run cold. On the surface it was so benign. Underneath, there flowed rivers of meaning.

They were his parting words, delivered with his trademark supercilious smirk.

'I wish you the best of luck with it.'

3

People's Police HQ, Keibelstraße, East Berlin

Müller felt a fluttering inside her chest as she entered her old place of work near Alexanderplatz. She knew the austere brick-built building had the ability to evoke even stronger feelings amongst many who entered its walls. It wasn't simply an administrative headquarters for the police. Its reputation as a fearsome remand centre almost rivalled that of the Stasi prisons at Hohenschönhausen and Bautzen. But Müller's own sense of nervousness was irrational. She no longer worked here. Unless she broke the law, the agency within had no power over her. Her former boss, *Oberst* Reiniger, had simply called her in to discuss her application to put her old policing skills to work, teaching at the People's Police university.

Before she went up to his offices, she diverted to the ground floor women's toilets to check her make-up. The face that looked back at her would – in most people's eyes – still be judged an attractive one. The prominent cheekbones she now knew were probably inherited from her father's Russian side of the family. But it was a face that looked older, more careworn, than when she

and Tilsner had started out in the Mitte Murder Commission, in that temporary office under Marx-Engels-Platz S-Bahn station. The dark circles round her eyes were more obvious these days. She used a dab of concealer to blend them in with the lighter skin tone on the rest of her face. As she did, she noticed her finger tremble slightly. Why? Was it Jäger's *Weihnachtsmann* visit to bring those presents that had unnerved her? Probably not so much the visit, as his mentioning her job application. She needed the money. She didn't want her old adversary putting any spokes in the wheel. As she looked at the image of her face, framed by dirty blond hair, she told herself she had nothing to fear. She could harm Jäger more than he could harm her, thanks to her intimate knowledge of his past history. With a couple of deep breaths, she almost literally pulled herself together – shaking her shoulders and stretching to try to ease the tension – and set off to see Reiniger.

'Ah, Karin, so pleased you could make it.' Her portly former boss was dressed in full uniform, as was his custom. Tilsner and Müller always felt it was to show off the three gold stars and entwined silver braid on his shoulder epaulettes, should anyone not realise he was a full colonel. Plenty of other officers of the same rank would be in plain clothes. 'Coffee?' he asked from his desk, sitting under the ubiquitous photograph of Erich Honecker, complete with his trademark horn-rimmed spectacles.

'That would be lovely, Comrade *Oberst*.' As a civilian, Müller had no need to use the 'Comrade, this . . . Comrade, that' style

of honorifics that lent official meetings in the Republic such a stilted air. She did it all the same, out of force of habit.

Reiniger turned to his secretary. 'Truda – could you fetch us two coffees, please? I'm sure you remember how Karin takes hers.'

'Of course, Comrade *Oberst*.' The matronly woman shuffled off to do her boss's bidding. Müller briefly thought how incongruous it was that the People's Police had gone out of its way to promote her a few years earlier – making her the first ever female head of a murder squad, the youngest of either gender too – yet the role of secretary was without exception filled by females. Equality in the Republic only went so far. Women were expected to work, just like their male counterparts. They fulfilled what in the West might be considered 'manly' jobs: she'd even seen a recent documentary about female crane operators in Rostock's docks. But once they got home, they were still expected to do the housework and cooking while their menfolk put their feet up or went out drinking in the nearest bar.

'So,' said Reiniger, shuffling a few papers on his desk. 'You made a formal request for me to provide a reference about your work with the *Kriminalpolizei* in connection with this application for a job at the police college.'

'That's right, Comrade *Oberst*.'

'Hmm.' Reiniger leant his arms on his desk, clasping his hands together. 'And you're applying as a civilian, rather than as a serving police officer.'

'Yes, of course.' She wasn't sure what Reiniger's point was.

'There is unfortunately, Karin, a slight problem.'

Müller gave no response other than a frown.

‘You see, you still *are* a serving police officer.’

Müller creased her face in confusion. ‘With respect, Comrade *Oberst*, I’m not. I resigned more than a year ago.’

Reiniger turned down the corners of his mouth, and shrugged his shoulders.

‘Well, yes . . . and no. It’s true that you handed me a letter of resignation.’

‘Exactly.’

‘It’s also true that that is indeed the first step towards your leaving the People’s Police.’ Reiniger had leant back in his chair, and was rocking to and fro, his clasped hands around his ample stomach.

‘The first step?’ Müller couldn’t understand what her former boss was driving at.

‘Yes. It needs to be followed by your superior officer accepting that resignation. And . . .’ Reiniger seemed to have paused for effect. Müller knew what he was about to say, but prompted him nonetheless.

‘And what?’

‘And I didn’t. I couldn’t be sure that you were in the right frame of mind to make that decision. You had just completed a particularly stressful case – found out some uncomfortable truths about those you were working with, and – in particular – some of their superiors. It was understandable that you were disillusioned with your job.’

Müller glanced at the portrait of Comrade Honecker above Reiniger’s head. The Republic he presided over had plenty of

faults – she’d gradually had her eyes opened to those, and that last case had been the biggest eye-opener. But she still believed in Socialism – she still believed in the greater good for the greater number. To achieve that, you needed systems, you needed some form of control, of policing. For her, the Stasi’s methods were often too underhand and deceptive to say the least. But – by and large – the People’s Police was an institution she looked up to and had been proud to be a part of. Until that last case tipped her over the edge. Nonetheless, she wanted to give something back – which was why she’d applied for the teaching job.

‘I wasn’t just disillusioned. I made a decision to leave, and I expect you to respect that.’

‘Well, you know I respect you, Karin. You wouldn’t have risen so far if I didn’t.’ Müller was well aware that wasn’t the full story. Jäger had had a hand in choosing her for some of her cases, possibly even in deciding on her promotions. He’d already admitted that had been a deliberate tactic by the Stasi – to over-promote someone green and malleable. ‘But I genuinely believe your decision was made in the heat of the moment, and that you were not in the right state of mind to make it. I therefore chose not to accept your resignation, as is my right, and instead placed you on extended leave. Paid leave.’

Müller knitted her brow. ‘*Paid* leave? I haven’t been paid.’

‘You have. You just haven’t been receiving it. It’s been accruing pending your return to work. However, should you choose not to return to work here, and instead continue with this application to teach at the college, I would have to rescind my original decision and backdate the acceptance of your resignation. The money

that has been accrued would simply go back into People's Police funds. Do you want to know how much you stand to gain . . . or to lose? It's your choice.'

Müller drew in a long breath, then exhaled equally slowly. 'This sounds horribly like blackmail, Comrade *Oberst*.'

'Then, of course, there's the question of that very lovely apartment I secured for you on Strausberger Platz. As you know, that is reserved for People's Police officers of the rank of major and above. You, your children, and your grandmother have been living there for the past year or so *because* of my decision. Should I have to rescind it, you would have to find new accommodation immediately.'

She liked Reiniger overall. He'd generally been supportive of her, like a kindly uncle – though Tilsner had found him pompous and bumbling. His deviousness here, though, seemed to come straight out of the Ministry for State Security handbook.

When Müller didn't say anything for a few moments, Reiniger continued. 'You haven't said whether you want to know the amount involved, but I'm going to tell you anyway. It's a little over thirty thousand marks.'

Thirty thousand marks? It seemed scarcely believable. Though if she did the maths, it made sense. It was simply her former monthly salary, multiplied by the number of months she'd been away from the job. She should be racing round the other side of the desk and hugging Reiniger. But the corollary would be almost too much to bear.

'So you're saying for me to get this money, I would have to come back to my old job?'

‘Exactly.’ Reiniger’s face was plastered with a satisfied smile.

‘The same role.’

‘Yes. As head of the Serious Crimes Department.’

‘Who would I be assigned to work with? Could I choose my own team?’ Even by asking the questions, Müller knew that Reiniger would realise he was on the point of winning this little battle.

‘No. You will be working with *Kriminaltechniker* Jonas Schmidt again, of course.’

‘And who would be my police captain?’

‘*Hauptmann* Werner Tilsner. Who else?’

‘I already told you more than a year ago, Comrade *Oberst*. I absolutely refuse to work with former Nazis.’

Reiniger sighed. ‘For God’s sake, Karin! That was more than thirty years ago. He was just a boy during the war. Virtually all boys of his age were members of the Hitler Youth.’

‘But . . .’

‘No buts, Karin. Those are my terms. I need a decision by the end of today. If you agree, you have an assignment beginning tomorrow – all three of you. You can have a few hours to think it over. You need the money, we both know that, otherwise you wouldn’t be applying for a teaching job. But you know the old adage, and it still holds true for you. Those who can, do. Those who can’t, teach. As for Nazis, why not talk to your grandmother about your own family history? You might get a few surprises.’

‘What do you mean by that?’ Müller could feel her anger stirring. It felt like a personal attack. But Reiniger was already rising from his desk, then ushering her out of the office, just as

Truda returned with the coffees. Hers, it seemed, would remain undrunk.

‘Do as I say, Comrade *Major*.’ The sudden use of her rank and the *Genossin* honorific, accompanied by a more serious tone, felt like a threat. ‘Talk to your grandmother and give me your decision by 5 p.m. today. Bear in mind, that should you decide to continue with the teaching application, you may not be successful however glowing my reference. A little friendly warning – others may be taking an interest in your future. But I think you know that already.’

Müller knew what her decision would be, even before she had the suggested chat with Helga. They needed the money, and the larger apartment. If they had to move, there was no guarantee Helga would be able to live with them – which would immediately present childcare problems even if she succeeded with the teaching application. She would never fully trust or respect Tilsner again, but what Reiniger said about almost *all* boys of a certain age being part of the Hitler Youth had the ring of truth.

When she finally did confront Helga, her grandmother had a revelation of her own.

‘I was never a Party member, but your grandfather was. I told you he died fighting for the Wehrmacht on the Eastern front in the Soviet Union. That was true. But like a lot of his fellow soldiers, he was a Nazi Party member. It didn’t mean he believed in everything they did. He absolutely didn’t. More than once he told me – in private of course – that he thought Hitler was a fantasist who’d lead us all to ruination. Which he did in the end.

But at one time, everyone got caught up in things. You had to live through it to understand it. Members of the Hitler Youth? They share some of the guilt of course. But they were just boys. Boys whose minds had been perverted.'

Müller didn't necessarily accept all that. In the case of Tilsner, it wasn't just his membership of the Hitler Youth which was the problem – it was what he'd actually taken part in as a member of that organisation. But she realised she would be letting her grandmother and the twins down if she didn't take a pragmatic approach. That meant returning to work, and collecting all that money she hadn't earned. It might buy them a new washing machine, or one of the new fridge-freezers she'd seen advertised. Once it was safely deposited, once this new case – whatever it was they were being assigned to – was out of the way, then she could reconsider her position and insist on her resignation if that was what she still wanted.

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*East German nightly television news
29 December 1978*

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen.

A battle has begun in the north of the Republic against plunging temperatures, ice and snow, in what's being called the DDR's 'catastrophe winter' – the worst conditions since the severe winter of 1962/63.

The island of Rügen has been completely cut off from the rest of the country and most homes there are without power.

Brave troops from the People's Army – including paratroops stationed in Prora on the Ostsee coast – are helping to deliver supplies of food.

These pictures taken from an army helicopter show troops on skis trying to reach a passenger train stuck in snow drifts of up to six metres high between Bergen auf Rügen and Binz. To give you some idea of what that means, it's as high as a two-storey house.

The weather changed dramatically and catastrophically on the evening of 28 December when – after a relatively mild Christmas period – the mercury in thermometers plunged by up to fifteen degrees Celsius.

The government of the workers' and peasants' state has been meeting in emergency session. The head of the State Council, Comrade Erich Honecker, has announced a state of emergency, saying that all resources possible will be directed towards rescue and relief efforts.

The situation is also severe in other parts of Europe, including the northern BRD, Denmark and Scotland.

A government spokesman has urged citizens throughout the Ostsee coast region and Bezirk Rostock to stay indoors wherever possible.

A middle-aged female citizen who ignored this advice and ventured out alone in unsuitable clothing has unfortunately been found dead through exposure to the cold near Binz.

More on this story as we get it including a special report by our correspondent in Bezirk Rostock.

Meanwhile in other news . . .

Miners in the Upper Lausitz region have been congratulated for breaking their targets for the sixth month in a row . . .

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The helicopter banked violently as Müller, Tilsner and Schmidt set off from the People's Army base near Greifswald. Müller found herself clutching her stomach, fighting the waves of nausea – and the traumatic memories of the last time she'd been in a similar aircraft, near her home town of Oberhof in Thuringia. The blanket of snow beneath them – with the odd farmhouse roof breaking up the pristine whiteness – was similar too. That time, she and Tilsner had been on a life and death chase to find her own abducted baby. Now, death was again the order of the day. The death of the woman found under the snowdrift in Rügen – apparently overcome by the cold snap while out shopping for supplies. Yet Müller knew if the explanation really was that mundane, there would be no way that Reiniger would have despatched the three of them – the small team that formed the rather grandly titled Serious Crimes Department. Their mission was to intervene over the heads of regional murder squads when the People's Police deemed it necessary: an attempt to avoid embarrassing and sensitive unexplained deaths being handed to the Stasi's own Special Commissions. In Müller's experience so far, anywhere they were sent, the Ministry for State Security would not be far behind.

She and Tilsner had hardly spoken since the three of them had begun the trip. On the car journey between Berlin and Greifswald, it had been left to Jonas Schmidt – their forensic scientist – to try to lighten the mood. His overlong explanations of the weather phenomena which had resulted in Arctic conditions being transplanted into the Republic had had more of a soporific effect on Müller. Tilsner had switched off and concentrated on making sure they didn't slide off the slushy motorways.

Now, though, it looked like it was Schmidt who needed some support. His pasty face had turned whiter than usual. Müller could tell he wasn't enjoying the ride. She edged closer to him along the bench seat, and cupped her hands over his ear to try to make herself heard above the roar of the engine and whooshing of the rotor blades above their heads.

'You don't look like this is your ideal form of transport, Jonas!' she shouted.

Schmidt shrugged, and brought his mouth up to the side of her head. As he shouted back, she could feel the flecks of spittle on her cheek, and smell the pungent flavour of whatever variety of sausage he'd been consuming on the car journey.

'Perhaps it's because I'm a scientist, Comrade *Major*! I know too much about how these things work – how much can go wrong!'

Müller was more of a fatalist. They were committed to the trip now. She didn't want to crash, but preferred not to think about it. 'Just relax and enjoy the view, Jonas. In the West, people would pay thousands of Deutschmarks for a tourist trip like this. We're getting it for free.' She tried to sound more enthusiastic than she felt. In reality, she shared many of his misgivings.

Tilsner was avoiding her gaze. They hadn't thrashed out their differences, but now wasn't the time. Müller had resolved to treat him in a professional manner until the end of this case, then let events take their own course.

As the helicopter banked again, through the flurries of snow, Müller could make out the Strelasund far below – the sea channel between the mainland of the Republic and the island of Rügen, their destination. Yet rather than open water, it looked to be completely frozen over. Ice and snow as far as the eye could see – like a giant cake perfectly coated with square kilometre after square kilometre of white icing. She wasn't unaccustomed to winter conditions like these. Having grown up in a winter sports resort – the East German answer to St Moritz – snow and ice were in her blood, and as a schoolgirl she'd been an expert ski jumper, thwarted from progressing further by the lack of national and international competitions for women. But the amount of snow and ice covering the sea and countryside here was unnatural. Instead of her usual sense of excitement at the winter conditions, they seemed to represent something more malevolent. As though a white blanket of evil had been thrown over the world.

After a few minutes, the whine of the engine changed and they began to descend. As they did, Müller spotted the unmistakable shape of Prora – the giant monolith built by Hitler as a holiday camp for Nazi workers. A huge structure – set a few metres back from the forested coast – extending into the distance. So big, she knew, it could be seen by cosmonauts in outer space, such as the real-life version of Johannes's spaceman toy.

Tilsner had seen it too. 'I wish I could say I'm delighted to be back on Rügen. But I'm not. The weather was foul last time we were here – but that out there looks like hell on earth.'

As the helicopter came in to land, Müller could see the rotor blades churning up huge flurries from drifts and piles of snow that the troops had cleared from the landing area. Soldiers still seemed to be busily clearing a path – the vortex from the aircraft almost blowing them off their feet. She could see others on skis pulling sleds loaded with supplies.

Finally, the craft settled and the whine of the blades changed into more of a gentle chugging. The cargo door was opened, and a blast of icy air – complete with isolated snowflakes – enveloped them.

Their new assignment was about to begin.