

## PROLOGUE

*July 1945*

*Halle-Bruckdorf, occupied Germany*

Your leg stings as you shuffle along the ledge to try to get comfortable. Frau Sultemeier has fallen against you during the never-ending night. Being squashed together with the others down in the disused mine gives a little warmth, a perhaps misplaced sense of safety in numbers. So you feel slightly disloyal as you move sideways to get some space – feeling your way in the blackness, where the sun's rays never penetrate, even during the day. You daren't put your foot down because you know your boot will be filled again by the cold, coal-stained water and the pain will be unbearable. You can hear it, sloshing around – the water that seeps in everywhere, into every sore and wound. You can't see it, but you know it's there.

Sultemeier snorts but doesn't wake. You almost wish she did. You want someone to talk to. Someone to calm your fears. Dagna could do that. Your younger sister was never afraid. The drone of the bombers, the explosions of the bombs, the fire in the sky, the dust clouds and rubble. Dagna just used to say: 'We're here.



We're still alive. Be thankful and wait for it to get better.' But Dagna's gone now. With the others. She heard – we all heard – the stories they told in the League of German Girls. About how the Red Army soldiers are worse than wild animals, how they will rape you again and again, tear you limb from limb. The others didn't want to find out if it was true. So they've gone to try to reach the American zone.

Another snort from Sultemeier. She wraps her arm round you, as though you're her lover. Frau Sultemeier, the miserable old shopkeeper who before the war would never let more than two children into her shop at once. Always quick to spot if you tried to pocket a sweet while you thought her eyes were elsewhere. She, like most of the others here, was too old to run. And you, with your injured foot from the last British bombing raid, you *can't* run. So you had to come down here with them. To the old lignite mine. Most of the brown coal round here they just tear from the ground, huge machines taking big bites directly from the earth, feeding what had seemed like a never-ending war. The war that was once so glorious. Then so dirty, so hateful, so exhausting. But you *Kinder des Krieges* knew about the disused underground mine – the cave, you used to call it – when you played down here before the war, you and your sister Dagna astonishing Mutti with how dirty you used to get. 'Black as little negroes,' she used to laugh, playfully patting you on your bums as you ran to the bathtub. Mutti's gone now, of course. Died . . . when was it? A year ago, two? And you've still never seen a black person. Well, apart from in books. You wonder if you'll ever see a real, living one. You wonder if you'll ever get out of here alive.





You see the flash of the torches first, then hear the foreign shouts, the splashing of boots in the waterlogged mine. Frau Sultemeier is awake immediately, gripping your shoulders with her bony hands. To protect you, you think. You hope. You feel the quiver of fear transfer from her body into yours through her fingers.

Then the torch beam dazzling in your eyes, playing along the line of grandmothers, spinsters and widows. Women who've seen too many summers. Too many winters. All except you. Just thirteen winters for you, and this is your fourteenth summer.

'*Frauen! Herkommen!*' The Slavic tongue mangles the pronunciation of the German words, but the message is clear.

Suddenly Sultemeier, the old witch, is pushing you forward. You realise her grip on you was not protectiveness at all. She just wanted to stop you running.

'Here! Here!' she shouts. The torch beam is back, trained on you. 'Take this girl. She's young, pretty – look!' She forces your chin upwards, wrenches your arm away as you try to shield your eyes.

'No,' you say. 'No. I won't go. I don't want to.' But the Soviet soldier is pulling you towards him. In the harsh uplift of the torch, you see his face for the first time. His wild Slavic features. Just as the *Führer* described in his warnings. There is hunger there. Need. A hunger and a need for you.

He shouts at you again, this time in Russian. '*Prikhodite!*'

'I don't understand,' you say. 'I'm only thirteen.'

'*Komm mit mir!*' But he doesn't have to order you, because he just drags you with him, through the waterlogged mine, your





undernourished teenage body almost no weight to him at all, each of his strides sending darts of pain through your injured foot. You hear the laughs of his colleagues. 'Pretty girl,' they taunt. 'Pretty girl.'

Outside, even though it's barely after dawn, the light is blinding. Soldiers. Soldiers. Everywhere. Laughing. Whistling. Blowing imaginary kisses. You're trying to walk now, but each stride is more a stumble, and he has your arm locked in his like a vice. You feel the dampness where you've wet yourself.

He's taking you to the hut. The rusting corrugated-metal mine hut where you used to play with Dagna before the war, before all this hell. You were the pretend mother of the house, she your naughty daughter, always playing tricks to try to get you to scold her. He opens the door, throws you inside onto the floor, and then kicks the door closed again behind him.

'Pretty girl,' he says, just staring at you for a moment, echoing the animalistic approval of his fellow soldiers. 'Pretty girl.'

You edge backwards along the floor to the corner of the hut, across the dirt and debris. You see him undoing his belt, lurching towards you as his battledress puddles round his feet. And then he's on you. Ripping your clothes, pinning your arms down as you try to scratch his eyes, thrusting his foul-smelling face towards you for a kiss.

Then you give up. You just flop back and let him do what he wants. Whatever he wants.

Almost as soon as he's finished, he's ready to start again. And then the door opens, and another soldier comes in. With



the same hungry look. You realise, through the fog of pain, the shame, and the smell of unwashed man, that what they told you in the League of German Girls was right.

The *Führer* was right.

The Red Army soldiers *are* worse than wild animals.

# 1

*July 1975*  
*East Berlin*

*Oberleutnant* Karin Müller fixed her gaze on the spotty youth sitting opposite her in the Keibelstrasse interview room. He stared back from under a curtain of shoulder-length, greasy black hair with an insolence which she feared wouldn't serve him well in the remand cells of the People's Police.

Müller didn't say anything for a moment, sniffed, and then looked down at her notes.

'You're Stefan Lauterberg, aged nineteen, of Apartment 3019, Block 431, on Fischerinsel in the Hauptstadt. Is that correct?'

'You know it is.'

'And you're the guitarist in a popular music group called . . .'  
Müller peered down at her notes again, 'Hell Twister. That's correct?' The youth just emitted a careworn sigh. 'Is that correct?' repeated Müller.

'We're a *rock* band,' he said.

'Hmm.' Müller made a point of noting this down, not that she really cared about the youth's pedantry. She had some



sympathy for him though. Just as he felt he shouldn't be here, being questioned by a People's Police officer, she believed jobs like this weren't what she'd signed up for. She was a homicide detective. She'd been the first female head of a *Kripo* murder squad in the whole Republic. She'd done well – at least in her opinion – and now they'd moved her from the Mitte Murder Commission and rewarded her with awful little *Vopo* jobs like this. Jobs which should be being done by some uniformed numbskull. Müller sighed, un-clicked her pen, and laid it down on the interview table.

'Look, Stefan. You can make this easy for me, or you can make it difficult. Easy, and you admit the offence, you're given a warning and you're on your way. Back playing with . . .' she peered down at her notes again. She remembered the name of his group perfectly well, but didn't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing it. ' . . . with Hell Twister, in no time at all. Or you can make it hard. Play the smart-arse. And then we'll shut you in a cell here for just as long as we want. Any hopes of going to university, of getting a decent job, well, that will all be history.'

Lauterberg snorted. 'A decent job, Comrade *Oberleutnant*?' The use of her rank was laced with sarcasm. 'In this shitty little country?' He shook his head and smiled.

Müller sighed again, ran her hands back through her dirty blond hair, heavy and damp from the oppressive summer heat. 'OK. Have it your way. Stefan Lauterberg, on Sunday, June the fifteenth this year you were reported by Comrade Gerda Hutmacher for making an unreasonable amount of noise in



your family's apartment with electrically amplified music. And when she complained to you directly, you made an anti-socialist joke. A joke about Comrade Honecker losing his watch under his bed. Is that correct?'

The youth chuckled. He leaned forward and held Müller's gaze. 'That *is* correct, yes, *Oberleutnant*. He unfortunately loses his watch and thinks it may have been stolen. So he asks the Minister for State Security to investigate.'

Müller placed her elbows on the table and rested her chin on her clasped hands. She hadn't meant for Lauterberg to retell the joke, but clearly he was going to.

'But if I remember correctly,' he continued, 'Comrade Honecker *finds* the watch, and rings the Minister to call off the investigation.' Lauterberg paused for a moment, and stared hard at Müller. 'So, aren't you going to deliver the punch line, *Oberleutnant*?'

Müller gave yet another weary sigh.

'Shall I do it for you? The Minister replies: "Too late, I'm afraid. We've already arrested ten people – and they've all confessed."' Lauterberg rocked back in his chair, laughing.

Müller got to her feet. She'd heard the joke before, didn't think it was particularly funny, and had had quite enough of Stefan Lauterberg for one day. Quite enough of her current job. 'Guards,' she shouted down the corridor. 'Take this one back to his cell.'

Two uniformed police officers entered, one of them cuffing the youth to his arm. Lauterberg looked at Müller in disdain as





they passed her in the doorway. Then he turned his head, and spat at her feet.

Müller decided to walk the couple of kilometres back to her Schönhauser Allee apartment, rather than take the U-bahn or tram. The heavy summer heat – so oppressive in the confines of the Keibelstrasse police headquarters – was tempered by an evening breeze. But despite the more pleasant atmosphere, she couldn't shrug off a sense of loneliness, of detachment. At the Mitte Murder Commission, under the arches of Marx-Engels-Platz S-bahn station, she and Werner Tilsner had been a little team. Lovers, one time only, but mainly good friends. But for the moment, Tilsner was out of the picture – laid up in a hospital bed recovering from a near-fatal shooting, with no news on when or whether he would return to police work. Keibelstrasse had many more officers within its walls, but Müller didn't really know any of them well enough to call them a friend – except, perhaps, *Kriminaltechniker* Jonas Schmidt. The forensic officer had worked with her on the case of the murdered girl in the graveyard earlier in the year.

She crossed Prenzlauer Allee at the Ampelmann pedestrian signal, and kept up a rapid walk towards the apartment. With each stride she wondered whether her police career, at one point so promising, had now reached a dead end. And all because she'd refused *Oberstleutnant* Klaus Jäger's offer to join him in the Ministry for State Security, the Stasi. She should have known it was the sort of offer you couldn't turn down.





Arriving at her apartment block's entrance, she gave a wry smile. The surveillance vehicle that had been there for weeks had finally disappeared. It was almost as though she wasn't important enough anymore. And when she climbed the stairs from the lobby to the first-floor landing, the almost ubiquitous click of her neighbour Frau Ostermann's door was also absent. Even Frau Ostermann could no longer be bothered poking her nose into Müller's life.

She turned the key in the lock, and entered the apartment. Once a happy home for her and her husband Gottfried. *Ex*-husband. He'd been allowed – as an enemy of the state for his supposed anti-revolutionary activities – to defect to the West, where he was no doubt carving out a successful teaching career. She wondered how long it would be before the authorities would force her – a single divorcee – to move to a smaller apartment, perhaps even a police hostel. Müller shuddered. She couldn't bear that. It would be like being back at the police college. She didn't want any reminders of her time spent there.

Müller went straight to the bedroom, kicked off her shoes, and lay on the bed staring at cracks in the ornate plaster ceiling. She had to pull herself together. Make a decision. She could either stick with the police, try to get her career back on track, or she could get out. One or the other. She couldn't face many more days trying to get idiots like Lauterberg, with their faux Western hippy attitudes, to confess to petty crimes against the state. It was more exhausting than a murder inquiry.

She took a deep breath. One of those days. It had just been one of those days – the sort you moan about to your husband or



wife or family when you finally get back home, letting off steam, allowing the frustration to drift away. But Gottfried was in the past now, and that was partly her own decision. For the first time in as long as she could remember she spared a thought for her family. Not that they were any help – they were hundreds of kilometres south, in Oberhof, and if she hadn't felt like going to visit them at Christmas, she certainly wasn't about to now.

She thought back to events in the Harz mountains, towards the end of her last big case. How she'd tried to be the heroine, leading her and Tilsner into a trap that was within a hair's breadth of seeing her deputy shot dead. Going in without back-up. Now Werner Tilsner lay in a bed in the Charité hospital, unable to speak, unable to walk, barely conscious much of the time.

She got to her feet. A shower and then go and visit Tilsner. That would remind her that there were those worse off than she was. Much worse off.

## 2

Even before she'd opened the door to his hospital room, Müller could see through the glass pane that Tilsner's condition had improved appreciably. He was sitting up in bed, reading. It wasn't an activity she would normally have associated with her smooth-talking deputy. As she opened the door, her surprise soon evaporated. Tilsner rapidly hid the book under his bedcovers, trying not to get his various feeding and drug tubes tangled in the process. Not before Müller had seen the cover: an erotic novel. Still acting true to form, then, she thought.

'Ka-rin,' he spluttered, still unable to form words properly, four months after the shooting.

Müller sat by the bed and took his hand in hers, careful to avoid the intravenous tube attached to the back of it. 'It's good to see you looking so much better, Werner. And reading, I see.' She jokingly reached to retrieve the hidden book, but Tilsner pressed down hard on the bedclothes, then winced from the resulting pain.

'Much . . . bet-ter, yes.' He nodded. 'Read-ing.' He winked at her, showing little sign of embarrassment.



‘I wish I could say the same,’ she sighed. ‘Work’s a nightmare – I’d much rather be in bed reading a book.’ She shouldn’t really burden Tilsner with her problems. But she missed the day-to-day relationship with her one-time deputy.

‘How’s . . . things . . . at . . .’ The mangled sentence stopped. She could see the effort on his face, his chiselled jaw starting to reassert itself under the bloating from too many days lying in bed. ‘At . . . the . . . off-ice?’

Müller’s brow creased into a frown for a moment as she tried to make out what he was trying to say. Then it clicked.

She rolled her eyes. ‘I’m not at the Marx-Engels-Platz office anymore. I’ve been moved to Keibelstrasse. Someone else is in charge at the Murder Commission.’ She could hear the emotion and hurt in her voice, could see the empathy in Tilsner’s eyes. ‘They’ve got me doing the mundane jobs that uniform should be sorting out. I’ve been sidelined, Werner.’ She moved forward to whisper in his ear. ‘All because I wouldn’t agree to your friend Jäger’s job offer. Probably not the most sensible thing I’ve done in my life.’

Tilsner smiled and squeezed her hand. ‘You’re . . . better . . . than . . . that.’ Again, it took a moment for Müller to decipher the words that her deputy was struggling so hard to form. Once she’d worked them out, she grinned. ‘Don’t be too free with the compliments. That’s not like you at all.’

The squeal of the double doors to the room opening and closing made them both turn their heads. Tilsner had another visitor. *Oberst* Reiniger. The People’s Police colonel who’d originally recommended Müller for promotion, who’d protected



her in the previous investigation when she'd thrown the rule book out of the window, but who had now rubber-stamped her move to the Keibelstrasse headquarters. Müller wasn't particularly pleased to see him, but he seemed in a jovial mood.

'Good to see you sitting up, Comrade *Unterleutnant*,' he said to Tilsner, drawing up a chair on the opposite side of the bed to Müller, the buttons on his uniform straining as his belly threatened to burst from his trousers. She watched as he performed his usual ritual of brushing imaginary fluff from his epaulettes, drawing attention to the gold stars of his rank. While Reiniger's eyes were admiring his own shoulders, Tilsner tried to mimic the motion, although the tubes prevented him from doing it particularly effectively. The devilment was still there. He *is* recovering, thought Müller. Reiniger looked up, just as Tilsner dropped his hand back down to his lap. 'At this rate,' said the colonel, 'we'll have you back on your next *Kripo* case in no time at all.'

'Not . . . with-out . . . Ka-rin!' Tilsner's face grimaced – whether from actual pain, or the difficulty of emphasising his point, Müller wasn't sure.

Reiniger frowned, and looked quizzically at Müller. 'What's he saying, Karin? Can you make it out?'

'I think he said "Not without Karin", Comrade *Oberst*.'

She watched Reiniger's face redden. 'Yes, well, that won't be happening for the time being. It's out of my hands, I'm afraid.' Then Reiniger held Müller's gaze. 'Actually, Karin, I'm glad I've caught you here. We need to have a word.'

Tilsner seemed to be about to try to utter another sentence, but before he could get it out, Reiniger rose to his feet and



gestured with his eyes to Müller – indicating they should continue the conversation away from her deputy's ears, in the corridor.

He waddled off towards the doors with his peculiar penguin-like, head-down gait, the walk that gave the impression to Müller and whoever else was watching that whatever mission he was on was more important than the last.

As she rose to follow, her eyes met Tilsner's, and they exchanged grins.

Reiniger beckoned Müller over to a row of bench seats along the hospital corridor, sat down, and began to speak in a low voice.

'I might have guessed you'd be here. I came over to Keibelstrasse, but they told me you'd already left for the day.' Müller knew it was an admonishment. But she'd reached the point where she didn't care. 'We've a problem, Karin. I think you might be just the person to help us out. It might be a way of getting you back on a murder inquiry team. I take it you'd like that?'

Müller was immediately suspicious. She'd been left alone in the doghouse of Keibelstrasse for a reason. Why was the colonel now trying to lure her out?

Despite her doubts, she nodded slowly. 'What is it, Comrade *Oberst*?'

'They've got a difficult case down near Leipzig. *Bezirk* Halle. Halle-Neustadt, to be precise. You know it, presumably?'

Müller nodded again. 'Of course, Comrade *Oberst*.' She'd never visited, but she knew it from television programmes and magazines. It was, to some extent, the pride of the Republic.





Eventually almost a hundred thousand citizens would be housed in the brand new town immediately to the west of the city of Halle. A hundred thousand citizens in their own apartments. Row after row of high-rise *Plattenbauten*: concrete slab apartment blocks – with the best community facilities in between. The socialist dream in its living, breathing form. The communist East showing that it could do things better than the corrupt, capitalist West.

‘We’ve had to keep this quite hush-hush,’ said Reiniger, his eyes scanning the hospital corridor to make sure no one else was listening in. ‘But a couple of babies have gone missing. Twins. The Ministry for State Security is involved, trying to keep a lid on things.’ At that, Müller’s heart sank. She didn’t want to be part of another investigation where she was at the beck and call of the Stasi, however much she craved leaving the drudgery of Keibelstrasse interrogations behind. ‘They want a female People’s Police detective to help. Your name was mentioned. It will be a chance to get back on the horse, Karin. You’re a good detective. I know that, you know that. What happened with Jäger . . . well, that was a little unfortunate. But it’s a good sign your name’s getting mentioned again.’

Müller sighed. ‘The thing is, I’ve become a Berlin girl, Comrade *Oberst*. It’s my home now, my city. I’m not sure I want to work outside the Hauptstadt. Isn’t it something best left to the local detectives, rather than bringing in someone from outside?’

Reiniger breathed in slowly, putting even more pressure on his uniform’s straining buttons. ‘Let’s put it this way, Karin. If you ever want to rise above the rank of *Oberleutnant* then you’re





going to have to say yes occasionally. You're going to have to take on jobs you might not particularly want to do, in places you may not particularly want to go. This is an opportunity. But there can be no errors of judgment like last time. Your performance will be monitored closely – and, as you can imagine, not solely by the People's Police.'

'Can I at least think about it?'

'Briefly, yes. But you can't discuss it with Tilsner.' The police colonel rose from his seated position and waited for Müller to join him by the glazed doors of Tilsner's hospital room. He gestured with his eyes towards her deputy, who seemed to be surreptitiously trying to read his book again. 'I don't want him getting all excited, thinking he's going to be going there with you, and discharging himself. He's getting better, as you've seen – the physical wounds are almost healed. But he's nowhere near ready to return to work. He lost so much blood so rapidly the doctors say it led to a minor stroke. In time, he may still recover completely. And obviously our hope is that it will be in a relatively short period of time. But for now he needs speech therapy, physiotherapy . . . possibly even psychotherapy . . . It will be a matter of months, at the very least, before we can even start to consider a return to work.'

Müller nodded. Then there was a moment's silence, with the two of them standing, shuffling from foot to foot, as though Reiniger was waiting for something.

'So, have you thought about it, Karin?'

She started. 'I meant think about it properly, get back to you with an answer tomorrow?'



Reiniger sighed. 'I don't have time for that. I said I'd get back to the People's Police in Halle by the end of the day.' He glanced at his watch, then met her eyes again. 'In other words, about now.' Müller gave a short laugh, and shook her head in amazement. 'Oh, and one thing I should tell you, Karin, which may help make up your mind. It's not just a missing persons inquiry. One of the babies has been found. Dead. And not from natural causes. This is a murder hunt. If you agree, we'll appoint a new deputy for you – from outside the local area, like yourself. The important thing for you, Karin, is that you will be back in charge of your own Murder Commission.'

Reiniger eyeballed her. He held all the trump cards, and knew she wouldn't be able to resist. It was what she wanted. What they both knew she wanted. To get back to the job she loved.

'Yes, then,' she sighed. 'You always knew I was going to say yes, anyway. But can you tell me more about the case?'

Reiniger gave a weak smile. Müller knew he'd got what he'd come for. 'You know all you need for now. No point in me muddying the waters. They'll give you a full briefing when you get there.'

Müller frowned. An investigation which her boss wasn't prepared to talk about – except in the sketchiest of details – sounded potentially troublesome. And the need to bring in someone from Berlin, highly suspicious. But in her current situation, even the troublesome and suspicious was more attractive than the boredom of doing little more than pen-pushing at headquarters.

After saying their goodbyes to Tilsner, without revealing what the sudden urgency to leave was all about, Müller and



the colonel made their way through the hospital corridors towards his car. As they turned a corner, Müller suddenly saw a friendly face. Wollenburg – the doctor she'd met earlier that year, across a particularly harrowing autopsy table. They smiled at each other, but kept walking. Müller couldn't resist a glance back – he was as handsome as she remembered. At that exact moment, Wollenburg did the same, and their eyes locked once more. He broke off from the group of doctors and nurses he was with and ran after Müller and Reiniger.

'Do you have a second, Comrade *Oberleutnant*?' Wollenburg asked.

Müller looked questioningly at her superior officer. 'You can have one minute, *Oberleutnant*,' said Reiniger. 'One minute only. I'll wait for you in the lobby.'

'What was it you wanted?' asked Müller, after Reiniger had walked off. 'I'm in a bit of a hurry.'

'Well . . .' The doctor paused, his face reddening. He looks very sweet when he blushes, thought Müller. 'I was just wondering . . . Erm, I saw you no longer wear a wedding ring, *Oberleutnant*.'

Müller was surprised at the comment. But it was surprise tinged with a hint of excitement . . . and embarrassment. She looked down at her ring finger, then met Wollenburg's eyes with a quizzical expression.

'Well . . . this is a little . . . um, *awkward*, I must confess,' he continued, stumbling over his words. 'I was just wondering if you might be available for a drink sometime, or to go to the theatre, or . . .'

Müller's face softened. He was quite cute. She placed her hand on his arm. 'I'd love to. But I'm afraid I'm being transferred to Halle-Neustadt for a period. I don't know when I'll be back.'

The doctor nodded, and gave a broad smile. 'Halle-Neustadt, you say? Hmm. Well, that might still be a possibility.'

'Why, you're not suddenly being sent there too, are you?'

Wollenburg cocked his head. 'Stranger things have happened.' He turned towards where his colleagues were waiting. 'Anyway I've got to rush, but I'll be in touch. Soon, I hope. I expect I will be able to contact you via the Halle-Neustadt People's Police office. Is that right?'

Müller smiled, then walked off in the direction in which Reiniger had disappeared – without giving Wollenburg a definitive answer.

# 3

## *The next day*

Reiniger's one concession to Müller was to accede to her request to take her own forensic officer with her from Berlin, and drive down south in an unmarked *Kripo* Wartburg – similar to the one she and Tilsner had used at Marx-Engels-Platz. *Kriminal-techniker* Jonas Schmidt had, in many ways, saved her neck in her previous murder investigation, not to mention saving the life of at least one young girl. She was glad to have him at her side once more.

The autobahn journey from Berlin was one she knew she should have taken more frequently, to go to visit her family in Thuringian forest. Yet she'd avoided it, time and time again, usually using the excuse of her murder squad work. Even at her lowest, after the split from Gottfried, she hadn't confided in her mother, brother or younger sister. In Halle-Neustadt that visit would be harder to put off, she knew. And why did she *want* to put it off? It was something indefinable. The sense that her home was now Berlin and that in the mountain village of Oberhof – indeed within her family itself – she'd somehow never properly



belonged. Down the years there had been odd incidents which had left Müller yearning for the sort of mothering she knew that some of her friends had received. The warm, smothering love of a mother, wrapping you in a cosy bath towel, rocking you on her knee as she sang a lullaby. It was something Müller had witnessed her mother do with her sister Sara, but never with her. Was that just jealousy – that Sara, as the baby of the family, got better treatment? Or was it just that she and her mother had never got on, and never would? Many of her memories were of arguments, rather than expressions of love. The look her mother had given her when she questioned her about the disappearance of her childhood friend Johannes and his family. The half-remembered visit from a kindly-looking woman who for some reason wanted to see *her* – Karin – provoking something like rage on the part of her mother. Despite all that, Müller knew that sometime during this investigation, however it played out, she would have to continue this journey further south to the family home.

Glancing across now as they entered the outskirts of Halle city itself, Müller watched Schmidt take his nearest hand from the Wartburg's steering wheel and wipe his brow, something he'd done repeatedly on the two-hour journey from the Hauptstadt. The underarm of his white shirt was stained with sweat, with unsightly tidemark rings at the stain's outer edges. She wondered if Schmidt ever felt the same sense of disconnection from his own family. But although they were friends and work colleagues, she didn't – as his superior in rank – feel it was an appropriate topic of conversation. It would simply





undermine her. In any case, Schmidt for the moment seemed more concerned about the summer heat.

‘Even with the window open, being cooped up in this tin box isn’t pleasant,’ he said. ‘I’ll be glad when we get there.’

Müller gave a half-smile in agreement, turned her thoughts away from her family, and remembered the luxury Mercedes she and Tilsner had travelled in through the border crossing point to West Berlin just a few months earlier. It had been winter then, but she wondered if it was equipped with the latest climate control systems she’d seen previewed on Western motoring programmes. Programmes she’d watched with Gottfried. Programmes that, as an officer of the People’s Police, she shouldn’t have been watching. Well, Gottfried was in his beloved West now, so he could try out those luxury vehicles first-hand, if he could afford them on his teacher’s salary. If *anyone* other than rich businessmen could afford them, thought Müller. Here it was a Trabi, a Wartburg if you were lucky, a Czechoslovak Skoda or Soviet Lada if you were *really* lucky – and then only after a wait of several years. None, as far as she knew, had air conditioning. Certainly none she’d ever driven or been driven in.

They were nearing the centre of Halle now. It seemed an unremarkable city to Müller, though she knew it had history: the composer, Handel, had been born here. Now it was more known for the chemical industry that helped to power the Republic’s economy. A pollution haze hanging over the southern skyline above Schmidt’s shoulder was testament to that – and an acrid, sharp smell that assaulted the back of her throat like a series of needle stabs.



‘There it is,’ said Schmidt, pointing straight ahead through the windscreen.

Müller’s head turned to follow the direction of the corpulent forensic officer’s finger. She raised her hand, almost in salute, shielding her eyes from the low, late evening sun and the pink corona surrounding it. They were driving along a raised dual carriageway – a road that seemed to float in the air. Giant, modernistic street lamps as high as blocks of flats were already casting an orange glow through the dusk over the road. And beyond, over the river Saale, block after block of brand new high-rises. The socialist city of the future. Its right-angled shapes, silhouetted in the rosy hue of dusk, like something from a science fiction film. Another world, in outer space.

‘Impressive,’ said Müller. ‘Have you been here before?’

Schmidt shook his head. ‘No, but I’ve relatives in Dresden. Hoyerswerda’s near there. Another new town. This looks very similar. The flats in the new towns are very popular. You get a private bathroom, a private toilet. They even put some Western apartments to shame.’

Schmidt braked sharply to avoid colliding with a truck ahead of them, throwing Müller forward so that she had to brace herself against the dashboard. At the same time, the street map Schmidt had been balancing on his lap to navigate with, fell to the floor.

‘Shall I pick it up and map-read?’ she asked.

‘There’s not much point, Comrade *Oberleutnant*. I think I’ve got my bearings now.’





‘I could at least look out for the relevant street name signs?’ suggested Müller.

‘You’d have a hard job. The road we’re on is the *Magistrale*. Müller could see they were descending now from the elevated section over the Saale river, or rather, rivers, as there seemed to be more than one waterway, but the dual carriageway continued into the distance, flanked by slab apartment blocks – *Plattenbauten* – on each side. ‘And this is really the only street you need to remember.’

‘Why?’ asked Müller.

‘Because none of the others have names, *Oberleutnant*. None of the others have names.’

By the time they’d got to the temporary murder squad office – above the fire station – none of the local police were there. Müller’s brow knitted in frustration. The baby girl was still missing. *Shouldn’t some of them be putting in a night shift? And shouldn’t the local uniform captain be waiting to give her a proper briefing?* If this was the way things were currently being run, then Müller would be having stern words. But at least the reception was manned by a young woman, and an envelope with their accommodation keys and directions had been left for them.

The apartment assigned to Müller and Schmidt was in *Wohnkomplex VI*, on the far western fringe of the new town – divided, Schmidt explained, into eight housing complexes, each made up of several numbered apartment blocks. This was how people found their way round. By memorising ‘codes’, several digits long, that corresponded to an estate, block and





apartment number. But Schmidt wasn't slow in pointing out the illogical nature of the system. As they approached their residential area – designated Complex 6 in Latin numerals – they realised each apartment block – at least those which had their numbers displayed – was in the nine hundreds. The block they were looking for had the number 953.

As Schmidt drove round the nameless road that fringed the *Wohnkomplex*, Müller counted off the numbers, determined not to let this new town and its twilight of nameless streets and near-identical homes defeat her. The apartment blocks here formed a continuous, unbroken curve, one merging into the next. They appeared to be the few in the city not to follow a rigid straight line. The wall of concrete was broken only by occasional openings for pedestrian walkways: forbidding areas of blackness in the fast-fading sunlight.

'I can't see 953 anywhere,' complained Schmidt.

Neither could Müller. What she did see, parked at the side of the road, was a red Lada saloon. Something about it seemed odd. The driver was just sitting there, as though he was watching something, or waiting for someone. As they passed, he turned his head and looked straight into her eyes. His flashed in the fading sun just for an instant, and Müller found herself shivering slightly. Perhaps it was just all the perspiration evaporating, making her body colder. But she felt she'd just been appraised – the same way a fox might stare down a human if suddenly, unexpectedly, it's caught out in the open.

'What do you want to do? Shall we stop and ask someone?'



Müller scanned left and right. The street was deserted. Then she remembered the Lada driver. She turned her head, expecting to see the car in the distance, still parked by the roadside. But it wasn't. The driver had started the car – and now appeared to be following them. If that was the case, and it wasn't just coincidence, she had a good idea who the driver might work for.