

# STEALING THE FUTURE

Book I of the East Berlin Series

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# DAY 1

## Wednesday

### 22<sup>nd</sup> September 1993

13:07

Sunshine and darkness march across my path, the car diving through bands of light and shade. My eyes struggle to adjust to the glare flickering through the trees lining the road, but after a few more kilometres, peering through the dusty windscreen I make out a pair of petrol pumps, a prefab hut. The Trabant rumbles across the concrete slabs and the attendant comes out, wiping his hands on his overalls.

“What have you got?” hoping for anything.

“Don’t know what you call it, thicker than what we use for heating, I suppose,” he rubs his face with an oily rag, looking away, up the road, out of the sandy town. “It works, though. I cut it with grain schnapps—you’ll get home.”

I turn away, gesturing with a cigarette by way of an excuse, and wander over to the other side of the road. Lighting up, I watch him lift the bonnet, then fill the tank from a canister, still talking about the fuel. The radio in the car chatters to itself: ... *protests continue throughout the Soviet Union after President Gorbachev was impeached yesterday. It’s not clear whether or not Gorbachev is under house arrest, but reports indicate that he is negotiating with both the army and the KGB.*

I could go back to the car, turn a knob, silence the newsreader. But turning my own thoughts off will be much harder. I’m tired, *dead tired*.

Not the best turn of phrase.

The image of the body on the rails hangs before me in the

blue-grey haze of the cigarette. The head crushed, the feet crushed. Not crushed, no ... I need a better description. I tap ash off my cigarette.

*Smearred.*

There was nothing left to indicate the shape of the head or feet: bone, flesh, blood and brains smeared along the rails and around the heavy steel wheels. The smell of blood might have been there, merging with sand and hot metal.

Above the torn body a steel lattice work, thirty storeys high, half a kilometre long. So big it had pulled my attention towards it—I hadn't known where to look: the body, or the mining machine. Rusty girders merged with the dusty air over the exposed coal seam. My mind, silted with sand and blood, refusing to take in the impossibility of what my eyes were seeing. Looking from one to the other. Corpse. Machine. Corpse again. Both just too far from everyday life experience: I had no reference points, no context to help me understand them.

I force my mind back to the present, the practicalities of the case. Breathing in smoke, breathing out questions.

Who was the person this body used to be? Local cops were sorting that out—papers pulled from the victim's pockets identified him as the politician Hans Maier. Fingerprints should confirm his identity. Maier had made a big thing about his persecution in the 'eighties by the secret police, the Stasi: there'd be files, prints would be on some record, somewhere.

But why was a politician dead on the tracks? And why had the local West Silesian police called their Saxon colleagues in? Odd, considering the pressure that we were facing from Westgermany over the Silesian question.

Thinking things through, I feel a tension tightening my shoulders and neck. I feel lost. Out of my depth. And above all, bloody scared.

**15:24**

I was back in Berlin by early afternoon, and went straight to the office in Lichtenberg, parking on a patch of wasteland

a couple of streets away.

As I entered the building I could feel how my concentration sharpened: the smells of the staircase—polished lino, *Optal* disinfectant and the warm earthiness of brown coal smoke. Up the stairs, past the discreet sign marked *RS2*, and through the door.

“Hi Bärbel, can you get everyone together—my office?”

The secretary nodded. “Not everyone’s around at the moment, but give me a minute or two.”

Into the toilets, sluicing my face in the rusty water over the cracked sink, then a glance in the mirror. I still looked tired, but at least I was a bit calmer. I’m at home here, I told the stranger in the mirror. He said it right back, so he must have been me.

What I’ve found out, what I fear, perhaps I can pass it on to the rest of the team—let them deal with it. The stranger in the mirror looked furtive, then guilty. That’s not the way we do it any more he seemed to be saying to me. And he was right. Still, once I’d told my colleagues it would become a shared responsibility.

“A problem shared ...” I said to the mirror, and headed back to my office.

We usually met here, it was the biggest room on the floor, but it was dark, the net curtains dusty, hiding more of the light than they needed to. Using the moments before my colleagues arrived, I fished out a piece of paper, only written on one side, and a stub of pencil from the chaos that lived on and around my desk. I made brief notes about what I’d seen.

I’d just finished the short list when Klaus came in, smoking one of his cigars. He said nothing, but went over to the corner, lowering himself on to the most out of the way chair, then putting his feet up on another. Erika followed, grimacing at the smoke already hanging in the air, waving her hands in front of her face, but looking towards me.

“How’s it going? You don’t look so good—”

“I’ll tell you in a moment, let the others get here first.”

“There’s only the three of us here right now: Dieter’s away, and Laura is at the Ministry. But here comes Bärbel.”

The secretary sat down in the corner, a sheet of paper on her knee, pencil poised to take shorthand minutes.

“Klaus? Can you put that cigar out—I can’t think with that stink.”

Klaus shrugged, nipped the cigar and laid it gently in an ashtray. “What’s up?” he asked.

“I didn’t want to wait till tomorrow’s meeting. I want to know what you think of this one. What’s everyone doing at the moment?”

“You’d know if you hadn’t missed our meeting this morning. But I guess this has something to do with it?” Erika, somewhere between disapproving and sympathetic.

“OK, can we get started?”

Erika and Klaus were looking at me now, curious, concerned. Klaus slumped in his chair, Erika sat forward, her hands in her lap, eyes searching my face. I needed to learn to hide my impatience better.

“I’ve been on the road since just after midnight. I’ve been to West Silesia and back,” I said it as though I’d been all the way to Siberia, not West Silesia, just a few hours south of Berlin.

Erika’s eyes widened slightly, her hands moved a fraction on her lap.

“Are we even allowed into West Silesia at the moment?” asked Klaus, studying his fingertips, acting nonchalant. But I could see the tenseness around his mouth.

“Probably not. I got a call from the Ministry of the Interior, so I didn’t ask, just went.

“I don’t know how the Ministry got hold of it, I guess from the Saxon police, trying to pass the buck. It was near Weisswasser. A body: the politician Maier. The big fish in the WSB,” the *Westschlesische Bund*—the West Silesian Union, the party behind the move to split West Silesia from the rest of the GDR, our East German state; wanting to become a Westgerman enclave, like Westberlin, deep in our territory.

“What were the Saxons doing there?” asked Klaus, looking both sceptical and confused at the same time.

“Not sure. I’d like to know that too. I guess the local West

Silesian cops just panicked, and called their ex-colleagues. They haven't got the forensic set up, and all the records are still in Dresden, so they'd need to rely on the Saxons anyway.

"The body was found on the rails that one of those open cast mining machines run along." I didn't say it, but his body hadn't been found until the whole thing had run over him. Dozens of wheels had dragged him along. The head and feet were crushed. "Identity papers were found on the body, and they're checking his prints to confirm. We should find out more in the morning."

Klaus looked tense, exhaling audibly. I felt exactly the same way. If the body is Maier's, then we'd have a problem. The Silesians might accuse the GDR government of doing it, the Westgermans will use that as leverage—and the kind of leverage the Westgermans were after was the kind that would make us give up West Silesia.

"I still don't get why they're so interested in Silesia."

The Westgermans were pumping money and technical support into the Region. They were clearly still annoyed that three years ago we had held a referendum and voted not to be taken over by them. The whole world had expected us to gratefully allow ourselves to be swallowed up, but instead, we decided to remain independent. To remain the German Democratic Republic. To continue the social experiment we'd started the autumn before.

"We may be about to find out what their interest is. The whole thing scares me—the Ministry asked me to go and check it out, which must mean that they suspect foreign interference. And we'd better hope it's the Westgermans, because it isn't going to be the Poles, and that just leaves the Russians."

Erika was picking up on my fear: "Do we even have the experience to deal with this one?" She was watching me, a frown creasing her face. "But there's something else bothering you too, isn't there?"

"I don't know, a gut feeling. But that body. It was awful," I didn't continue, but my thoughts ran on.

That place, barren, empty. Just dust and industrial equipment. Part of the moon, an immense rocket launcher collapsed across a sandy pit that stretched to the horizon. Underneath all of that huge machinery, underneath the rusty steel and the wheels, a dead man: broken, fragile, pitiful. Maybe I was just tired, but it really got to me.

“You’re right, it could have waited till tomorrow morning.” I tailed off, feeling pathetic.

“No,” Klaus sat up. “You’re right to tell us about it. This could be a big one. Or just a coincidence. Why don’t you tell us how far you’ve got, then get back home and catch up on some sleep?”

“Not much to tell, I have some film of the crime scene.” I took the small camera out of my pocket, and tossed it on top of the mess on my desk. “He was probably killed elsewhere and the body laid out on the tracks.” Other than that, just questions: why Maier? Why now? Why were the Saxon cops there? “The senior officer present, *Unterleutnant der Kriminalpolizei* Schadowski made it all sound reasonable. First of all he didn’t want to talk to me, but when I showed him my RS pass he was all ‘Herr comrade *Oberleutnant*’. I guess these silly titles they gave us can be useful.” The other two grinned, glad of a chance to break the tension: even in these times of change official pieces of paper and officer status bought influence.

“There’s so many more questions, but I can’t work it all out. Too tired. Sorry, it’s not much to show for a day’s trip.”

“That’s fine, thanks Martin. If you want you can go home now. I’ll take the film up to the police technical support offices for a quick turn-around. Klaus and I will have a think about what else we need to work out. Let’s look at the photos and sort everything else out at the meeting tomorrow.”

I looked at the other two, wishing I could follow their suggestion. I didn’t feel up to these all night missions any more, they belonged to another time, a younger time. Perhaps a more idealistic time.

“No, I’ve been asked to report directly to the Minister. I

should have gone straight there, but I wanted to talk to you first.”

I got up and went to the door. Bärbel had already left the room, I could see her through the doorway, sitting at her desk. She'd put her notes in front of her and was reaching for the phone. Before I could leave, Klaus had stopped me.

“Before you go, one last question: who sent you down there?”

“You mean at the Ministry? It was the night duty officer.”

Klaus nodded, his eyes unfocussed, far away, deep in thought. Erika and I watched him for a moment before I turned again and left.

### 16:31

I left the Trabant where it was and walked down to the station to get the S-Bahn train. I'd had enough of being cooped up in the small car. I also enjoyed getting the S-Bahn: once you got close to the centre of town the train went along a viaduct, giving a chance to look down on Berlin from on high, peer through first floor windows as you trundled past. My favourite bit was going between the museums—classical buildings between Marx-Engels-Platz and Friedrichstrasse, the pockmarked rendering of the Bode Museum contrasted well with the glimpses of the exhibits that could be seen beyond the windows.

Once past the museum I got up and waited by the doors until we entered the station. Pulling on the handle, I heaved the heavy sliding door open and stepped off the still moving train. Down onto the platform, a slight skip to keep my balance. Moving with the crowd out into the open, I followed the street then crossed Unter den Linden. The Soviet Embassy stood huge before me, red flags hanging limply in the still air. Down the side of the Aeroflot offices, and round the back to where the Mauerstrasse started. The first building on the left was also imposing, but in a more antique style than the monumental Soviet mission behind me. From either side of the door a trio of flags hung: red and black flags flanking the new GDR flag, a black, red and gold German



tricolour sporting the *Swords to Ploughshares* emblem of the opposition. All over the country variations of this flag were to be seen: the round crest often replaced by something else: black stars, red stars, sometimes even a black A in a circle, or a hole where the old communist hammer and compass had simply been cut out.

Next to the main door somebody had chalked on the wall. *Where there is authority there is no freedom*, I smiled, nodding at the sentiment, and went in. Showing my pass to the policeman standing guard on the door I went straight up the wide staircase to the first floor. The smells were the same as in my offices in Lichtenberg—*Sigella*, *Optal* and brown coal—but the lino here wasn't worn into brown patches, and the stairs and banisters were polished stone. I told the secretary that I was here to see the Minister about the body in West Silesia, and without looking up from her typewriter she gestured at the row of chairs against the wall.

Instead of sitting down I took an empty glass from the table in the corner and wandered off to the toilets to get some water. I didn't hurry back, but stood in the corridor, enjoying the majesty of the staircase and the light coming in through the windows. Behind me I heard the door to the Minister's office open. I turned to see him shaking hands with a man carrying a briefcase and wearing a light green suit, well cut from slightly shiny material. The suit obviously came from the West, and so did the wearer.

I made no attempt to be discreet, remaining where I stood, watching as the visitor headed off downstairs. He showed a certain confidence, suggesting he was no stranger here.

"Martin, you'd better come in." The Minister seemed uneasy as he ushered me into his office.

"Have you come to see me?" seated behind his large desk the Minister was more at home, less confused.

"I've just returned from West Silesia. The night duty officer sent me down to have a look at Maier's body, said I should report directly to you on my return."

I couldn't be certain that the Minister already knew about Maier's death but I reasoned that he would have been briefed

by now.

“Mmm ... yes, it was you they sent down,” he seemed to be talking more to himself than me.

“I’m sorry?”

“Do you have a report for me? Perhaps you could just hand it in to the secretary.” He leafed through the pile of papers in front of him, then looked up, slightly irritated that I was still there.

“I came straight here, I haven’t had time to write a report. I thought you might want to know immediately.”

“Yes, that’s very kind of you. Well, you’d better let me have it, I suppose, since you’re here now.”

He hardly seemed excited about what I had to say, just nodded absent mindedly as I told him what I’d seen. I left out my reactions to the size of the mining conveyors and excavators, the helplessness of the broken body. I kept it all businesslike. At the end of the account he nodded once more, and asked me to let him have the written report by the end of the next day.

“And Martin? No need to worry about this, it’s all in hand. What I mean is, there’s no need to prioritise it over your other work. We can handle the liaison with the Saxon police and the Round Table sub-committee.”

Without looking at me, the Minister returned to his papers, and I returned the glass to the secretary.

### 17:38

The Minister’s attitude perplexed me—but right now I was feeling drained, and happy not to have to think about Maier. After all, the Minister himself had told me not to worry.

We went way back, the Minister and I. It’s not like we were close or anything, but still, must be more than ten years. Benno was his name, not that any of us called him that any more. We used to call him Benno or Pastor Hartmann, but nowadays we generally just called him ‘the Minister’. Not sure why that’s the case. He used to be the vicar at one of the churches which gave shelter to opposition groups, a safe place to meet. But he had been more than that—he took

part in some of the demonstrations and events that activists organised. Some said he only took part in those actions when he was guaranteed exposure to Western journalists, and that he'd soon disappear once the cops showed up. There were often snide rumours and jokes circulating about him in opposition circles, usually when he was mentioned in one of the Westberlin papers. I didn't pay much attention at the time, but did notice that when the revolution really got going in November 1989 he very quickly managed to get a place on the Central Round Table that began by advising the government, and soon became a part of the government. Most of us involved in the opposition movements at that time were working flat out, organising demonstrations, creating news sheets and leaflets, helping new people to get involved, showing them how to design and print their leaflets and set up their groups. We didn't have time to sit down and negotiate with the Communist Party about how to run the state. But a few people—some who had been very involved in protest and resistance over the years, others merely on the fringes—started working with the Party. Most of them now occupied leading positions in what central government was left. A lot of power had been devolved down to the local level, but a few state functions remained stubbornly centralised: foreign affairs, customs and border controls, taxation and policing, in which somehow I had become a small cog.

It was the end of the working day, the sun was starting to hang low in the sky, just visible over the top of the buildings opposite. I decided to walk down the Mauerstrasse to get to the underground line that would take me up to Prenzlauer Berg. I hadn't been up there for a while, and I fancied a quick beer in a small bar, something different from the workers' pubs in my native Lichtenberg.

As I went down the steps onto the platform, I could feel the warm air being pushed out of the tunnel by an oncoming train, the same smell of hot metal that had been there this morning in the mine pit. I hopped on, finding a seat on the long bench along the side of the carriage, feeling slightly

nauseous, lost in my thoughts of that sandy, dusty hell.

It took a few stops for me to become aware of my surroundings again. Lots of people got on at Alexanderplatz, and I amused myself by playing Spot The Westerner. The number of Western tourists had increased dramatically in the last couple of years, and it looked like I wasn't the only person heading up to Prenzlauer Berg in search of a cool bar.

The train laboured up a steep ramp out of the underground and onto an elevated section of track, stopping almost immediately at Dimitroffstrasse station. I got off and walked down the steps to the Schönhauser Allee. I crossed the road, and took a few turns at random, pausing at the neighbourhood Round Table's noticeboard. They'd provided a short summary of decisions at the top of the board, with references to the relevant parts of the latest minutes posted below. Sometimes it felt like our whole lives were being taken over by meetings, and even if you weren't at a meeting, the chances were somebody would expect you to know about what had been talked about in it. I liked the way this noticeboard provided a quick overview of the decisions—at the end of a long day at work I didn't usually have the time or patience to read about the proceedings of every relevant meeting.

I turned away from the noticeboard, not bothering to read all the notes, and still wanting a beer. It was a bit too early for the clubs to open, but I should be able to find a drink somewhere not too far away. After a few hundred metres I stopped in front of a tenement block draped in flags and graffiti. Even by the standards of Eastberlin this building was in a bad state. Balconies had fallen off or been untidily removed, and on the pavement lay a pile of bricks and dusty rendering. It looked to be one of the squats that had been opened in abandoned and derelict flats at the start of the revolution. Curious, I went into the entrance, and saw a crowd of punks drinking in the yard. Two of them were setting up a ladder below a broken light, stopping every so often to gulp down a mouthful of beer. When the ladder was in place, one climbed up while the other fed him electric

cable. On the other side of the yard I could see the door to the cellars in the side wing. It had *BAR* crudely painted on it in smeared red paint. A few steps led down into a damp corridor. A bodged rack held leaflets, all jumbled up, and off to the side a door lay across two trestles, with a crate of beer on it. Above the improvised table a slogan was daubed in the same red paint: *People who talk about revolution without understanding what is subversive about love, and what is positive in the refusal of constraints, such people have a corpse in their mouth.* Quite a mouthful, corpse or no: sounded like the Situationists to me. Something to ponder on while I had a drink. Next to the crate of beer was a jam jar with a slit in the lid. I put a Mark in and took a bottle, looking around for a bottle opener. There was none, but a young woman appeared next to me, her head shaved at the sides, the remaining hair forming a wide mohican, drooping over to the side and painted with washed-out red food colouring. She smiled at me, grabbed the beer out of my hand, and took the top off with her teeth.

“Nice trick.”

“You gonna get me one then?”

Another Mark in the jam jar, and the punk took a bottle out of the crate, opening that one too with her teeth, then tapping my beer with her own.

“*Prosit!*” She smiled, looking slightly coy under her ragged hair, poor teeth giving her mouth a lopsided look.

“*Prosit!*”

I tipped my bottle, allowing the beer to trickle down my throat, and let out a sigh.

“Hard day?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe. What’s happening here?”

She mustered me as if she were trying to work out whether I was a cop. I must have passed.

“We’re holding a talk on energy use in the GDR; you know, the energy crisis, pollution, brown coal. For the demo on Saturday. We’re holding more talks on the theme too, every night next week in different squats and bars.” She was enthusiastic, stumbling over her words, keen to impress me.

“Demo?”

The punk moved over to the leaflet rack and pulled out a tatty flier. Badly mimeographed, a line drawing of a power station spewing out clouds of smoke which made up the word DEMO. Underneath that: *For a sensible energy policy—in East and West. Alexanderplatz, Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> September, 14.00.* On the back was a mass of text, originally typewritten, but hardly legible after its journey through the smudgy copier. I read it over while I swilled down my beer.

“Thanks,” I said, screwing the scrap of paper into my pocket.

“You coming on Saturday then?”

“You know, I might just be there.”

Not sure why I said that, maybe it was because of the impression the open cast mine had made on me. Whatever my reasons, it seemed to please the punk. She smiled at me again, and I stuck my hand out.

“I’m Martin.”

“Karo,” she said, shaking my hand.

I’d nearly reached the door when she called out.

“Hey, Martin!”

I turned back.

“Cheers for the beer!”

I gave her my best smile.

# DAY 2

## Thursday

### 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1993

*... at 8 o'clock on Thursday the twenty-third of September, here's the news on Radio DDR I.*

**Moscow:** *The Second Crisis of the Union in the USSR has deepened after President Gorbachev called elections for both Soviet Parliaments. Delegates of the dissolved Soviet of the Republics have refused to leave the parliament building despite water and electricity supplies being cut off.*

**Berlin:** *The Ministry for Foreign Affairs has formally lodged a complaint with the Westgerman mission in Berlin concerning the delivery of military hardware to the breakaway Region of West Silesia. So far there has been no response from the Westgerman Mission nor from the Inner German Ministry in Bonn. A press conference will be held at the Palace of the Republic later today. And now for the water levels and draughts on the inland waterways ...*

**08:07**

I had just got the coffee ready when the others came into my office for the morning meeting. There were only four of us, plus Bärbel, who sat in the corner without a word, pen in hand. We shook hands with each other as we sat down and I turned the radio off.

I looked over to Laura. "Did the others fill you in on what happened yesterday?"

"It sounds quite horrible—are you OK?"

I smiled, nodding towards the package marked with a police stamp that Erika was holding.

"Yes, I caught up on some sleep yesterday. But I'm not looking forward to seeing those photos."

We passed the pictures round. They were gruesome, but

didn't tell us much. They just showed the body of Hans Maier, head and feet crushed, torso and legs ripped and oil-stained.

"I asked Dresden to forward Maier's police and Stasi files," said Erika. "They arrived with the overnight courier."

"Have you had a chance to look through them yet?"

"Not really, just a quick look—but it was enough. See for yourselves."

She put another package on the table, an A4 envelope, and pulled out a few pieces of paper.

"These are the photostats of the files the police have managed to pull so far." Erika looked at the top piece of paper, which had a letterhead reading *LdVP Sachsen*. "We've got copies of his F 16, F 22, a Disciplinary File and his I 210—his written declaration of commitment. That's all they could come up with at short notice—they said they'd carry on looking."

I sifted through the pieces of paper. Apart from the declaration, none of them actually had any markings on them to indicate which was which. I glanced through the handwritten declaration, the usual pompous phrasing: *On the basis of my Marxist-Leninist convictions, I, Johannes Friedrich Maier swear to collaborate with the Ministry for State Security in order to secure and strengthen the GDR ...*

"Of course, we should look in the central archive in the Ruschestrasse, but for the time being, this is what we have: the F 16 file has the person's real name. The reference number is in the top right hand corner," continued Laura.

I looked at the file. Johannes Friedrich Maier, along with various addresses where he was registered during the last twenty years. The reference number began with a Roman numeral.

"What department was HA XVIII?"

"That was the department monitoring heavy industry," said Laura. "It makes sense—Maier always claimed to be a victim of Stasi tactics, but at the time he was a big fish in the *BMK Kohle und Energie*—the combine that did all the building work at power stations. He was in the main offices in



Hoyerswerda for several years.”

The next file card didn't mention Maier by name—it just had his reference number stamped in the corner. His codename: MILCHMÄDCHEN, date of birth, first contact in 1964 by HA I/12. The most interesting entry on this card was the field marked “IM-Category/Offence”. The entry was simply “IM”—*Inoffizieller Mitarbeiter*, informal collaborator. This, along with the written declaration told us that he'd worked as an informant for the Stasi, and it looked like he'd been recruited in 1964.

“What was Maier doing in 1964?” I wondered aloud.

“Looks like he was doing his National Service in the army,” answered Laura. “I put together a summary of his activities yesterday.”

“You have been busy!”

A grunt from the other side of the table was Klaus's first contribution of the morning. I looked up.

“Yeah, these two got excited about doing something interesting for a change,” he gestured towards Erika and Laura.

“Well, it's good to get a head start, you never know what we'll be saddled with next,” slightly defensive, from Erika.

I could understand her irritation—Klaus rarely said very much, so when he did, it felt like he was making an important announcement. Light hearted criticism from him could sometimes feel like a serious accusation.

Klaus fell back into silence, and Erika and Laura busied themselves with flicking through the papers.

The final photostat must be the Disciplinary File. It had Maier's details, including his full name rather than his code-name. The file was dated summer 1988, and scanning through the text I could see that Maier had been reprimanded for having an unsuitable relationship with another asset, and had been told to end the affair. There was no further information than that.

“I've never seen one of these before—why has Maier got one?” I asked.

“It's interesting, I thought they were only used for Stasi

full timers, not for informants. But Maier was just an IM, not a paid officer—looks a bit strange. If we had the VSH card then we could double check, but they didn't send it. Maybe it got lost." The answer came from Laura, who had become something of a Stasi files expert.

"None of this seems to help though, does it? Half the files are missing, and the ones we do have don't really tell us anything." Klaus was studying the cobwebs up in the corners near the ceiling, probably in an attempt to avoid Erika's indignant glare.

"I guess it doesn't really matter anyway. The Minister asked me to write up a report on my trip to Silesia and to leave it at that," I looked around at the others, all staring at me.

"What, he told you to drop it?" asked Laura.

"Yeah, I'm not to worry about it."

"Hang on, wait a moment," Klaus suddenly leaned forward, like he had a point to make. "Did he actually tell you to stop working the Maier case?"

"No ... not in so many words. But he definitely meant it."

"So, what did he say?"

"That I shouldn't worry about it, erm ... and not to prioritise the report, despite the fact that he wants it by the end of today."

"OK," Klaus looked around at us jubilantly. "So, we can carry on working on it. After all he didn't tell Martin to drop it—"

Erika looked troubled, holding up her hand, palm outwards, as if to stop the flow of the conversation.

"But it's clear that he meant we should leave it. Presumably he's got someone else working on it? We shouldn't just go against him like that. And anyway, what's the point?"

Klaus shrugged, sitting back in his chair again and crossing his legs. We all sat looking at each other, slurping coffee from our mugs. All except Bärbel who was still making notes in shorthand.

"Now that I think about it ..." I started, wondering

whether I was saying the right thing. “He seemed sort of, shifty. Like he was unhappy that I was involved, and couldn’t wait to get rid of me.”

“Doesn’t have to mean anything. Probably just a bit stressed or busy. I think it’s safe to assume that the case is being dealt with, no doubt by another department. Klaus—do you really think we should carry on looking into Maier’s death?” Laura asked in a matter of fact way.

She saw herself as the grounded and rational one in the office, and she wasn’t wrong about that. She had a mixture between a bossy character and a need to keep busy, and see others around her being kept busy too—I think this led her to chivvy us along, make sure we were doing our work, that our meetings didn’t go off topic and down sidelines. It could be annoying, but on the whole I think we appreciated having her around—she kept us on our toes.

“No, not really. It just all sounds a bit weird. But no, I think you’re right,” Klaus looked down, concentrating on fiddling with one of his evil cigars.

“OK, so shall we leave it there then?” Still the voice of reason, Laura was looking around at us, checking that each of us was agreeing. “Right, so that’s that. What else have we got on the agenda today?”

After the meeting I decided to write up the report on my trip to Weisswasser, get it out of the way so that I could concentrate on the stuff that I ought to be doing. It didn’t take too long, after all there wasn’t too much to say. I went to West Silesia, I saw a body and a mining machine, the police seemed to be taking care of everything so I came home. I didn’t bother mentioning that we’d had a look at Maier’s Stasi files—it didn’t seem relevant, particularly since we weren’t actually going to do anything with that information.

I finished the last page and pulled it out of the typewriter, putting the top sheet with the others in a file to take to the Ministry. The two carbon copies went in another pair of files, one to keep here, the other for the central RS archives. I sat

back in my chair and peered through the dusty net curtains. It was a nice day out there, the sun was shining, the sky blue. Shame to be cooped up in the office, I thought, much better to be outside.

### 10:23

I handed my report to the secretary, I could have sent it in the internal post, but I had enjoyed the short walk from the S-Bahn station to the Ministry. I was about to leave when she did that thing with her hand again, the disdainful wave at the chairs. I looked at her, and waited while she decided whether she was going to tell me what she wanted.

“If you would take a chair, the *Staatssekretär’s* assistant wishes to speak to you.”

The secretary handed my report back to me, and I took both the file and a chair, like a good little boy. So Gisela Demnitz, the assistant to the senior civil servant at the Ministry, wanted to see me. She was the person I usually dealt with, the one with the responsibility for all the peripheral agencies in the Ministry of the Interior.

She didn’t make me wait long—a buzzer on the secretary’s phone sounded, and she informed me that Frau Demnitz was ready to receive me. I walked along the corridor and went into Frau Demnitz’s office after a polite knock. She was sat behind her desk, a standard woodchip number, with grey steel legs.

“Herr Grobe,” she said, as she stood up to shake my hand. She and I were still on formal terms, perhaps because she’d always worked for the Ministry and valued the traditional protocols of government.

I sat down in the chair opposite her, the desk between us. Frau Demnitz fiddled with some papers, peering through the horn-rimmed glasses perched on the end of her nose. Finally she looked up and addressed me.

“Herr Grobe, I understand that you have been receiving information from the police officer responsible for the Maier investigation in Dresden. I can only assume that you requested this information while you were in personal and

contiguous contact with the comrade *Unterleutnant* yesterday, but I am certain that I need not remind you that the Minister has explicitly stated that there is no need for any further involvement on your part. The Minister has in fact asked me to inform you,” and here she looked at her notes, presumably in an effort to get what she was about to say exactly right, “that the investigation is in hand.” Demnitz paused before starting her next sentence. “Additionally, the Minister wishes to instruct you to take over the liaison between this Ministry and the Four Powers. In its wisdom the Central Round Table,” and here Demnitz broke off to give what I’m sure was a disparaging sniff, “has advised that such a task should be carried out by this Ministry. Your instructions are to provide the formal framework for contact between the German Democratic Republic and the military missions of the Soviet Union, the Republic of France, the United States of America and the United Kingdom. You will begin this afternoon. A meeting has been agreed in principle with Major Sokolovski of the Soviet Army Western Group of Troops in Karlshorst. I would be obliged if you could contact his office to confirm the time and communicate the details of your appointment with this office.”

Frau Demnitz handed a file to me, and I gave her my report in return. She held out her hand, and I took it as I got up, but before I’d made it to the door I was called back.

“Herr Grobe,” and this time it was definitely a sniff, “while I am sure we appreciate the fact that you have prepared this report in a remarkably short frame of time, I would like to ask you to provide us with a more comprehensive account. If you would be so kind?”

### 11:58

Coming through the door to the offices I could see that Bärbel was not there, and that the post had been delivered. It was in a pile on the secretary’s desk. I shuffled through the letters and parcels. There was only one for me: a fat letter from Dresden, *LdVP Sachsen* stamped in the top left corner. It was from the Saxon police. Perhaps this was the information

from Dresden that Demnitz had been getting so excited about? It did make me wonder how she'd known about the letter even before it arrived, but the obvious answer was probably the right one: Schadowski had been on the phone with someone from the Ministry.

I went into my office, tearing open the envelope and poking my hand into it. The cover letter included an inventory identifying the contents of Maier's pockets when his body was found. None of it looked familiar, even though I had probably looked at it all when I was down there. But at the time I must have asked for the list to be sent to me at the office, because otherwise it would have bypassed me and gone straight to the Ministry.

A second sheet informed me that fingerprints had been taken from some scraps of paper (copies enclosed) found in Maier's pockets. These fingerprints had been identified as belonging to Chris Fremdiswalde, DOB: 17.09.1973, place of birth: Löbau. Currently registered as living in Thaerstrasse in Berlin-Friedrichshain. He had been arrested in 1987 for theft at his school in Hoyerswerda, and a photo of Chris at the time of his arrest had been included. There was no explanation of why the police had bothered to compare his fingerprints with those on the papers in Maier's pockets—there must be some close connection with Maier, otherwise they couldn't have come up with the fingerprint match so quickly.

The other items in the envelope didn't look particularly interesting. There was no diary, only a few scraps of paper that looked like shopping lists. Except one, which had a date, the 25<sup>th</sup> September, along with the time 14.00, and a name: Alex. Looking at the note, I pulled out the crumpled leaflet that Karo the punk had given me the night before: *For a sensible energy policy—in East and West. Alexanderplatz, Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> September, 14.00.* I stared at both pieces of paper for a while. Why would Maier be interested in a demo here in Berlin? True, he'd been involved in the mining business, but that was before the revolution, three years ago, before he'd become involved in politics and the business of Silesian devolution.

I shovelled the bits of paper back into the envelope and tossed it on to the pile that I called my in-tray. Time for some proper work. But before that I had an appointment to confirm with the Russians.

### 15:12

Fortunately my meeting with the Russian liaison officer was in Berlin-Karlshorst. It could have been worse—I might have had to go all the way to the Soviet Army headquarters in Wünsdorf, about thirty kilometres south of the city. I'd got here with the office Trabant, parking it near the S-Bahn station, and wandering through Karlshorst to arrive at the grey steel gate sporting a red star. One of the guards posted in front checked my pass and ushered me in, the gate clashing shut behind me. I was in a small paved yard, Soviet soldiers in dress uniform and fatigues hastened between the main building and various side wings. No-one paid any attention to me, and not quite sure where to go I just headed in through the main entrance.

Behind the tall wooden doors the hall was both large and high, with expansive bay windows at the back, and a wide staircase to my right. Soldiers bustled around here too, looking both purposeful and efficient, clacking over the polished parquet. Not even sure who to ask for, I stood just inside the doorway, and flicked through the file Frau Demnitz had given me. It contained nothing but the addresses and telephone numbers of the headquarters for each of the Four Powers, each on a separate sheet. When I looked up I noticed that a soldier, wearing fatigues and a cap, was standing right next to me. He spoke in Russian, and although I tried to work out what he was saying, I really hadn't a clue. He held his hand out, pointing at some chairs just to the side of the stairs, before he too moved purposefully off. I watched him march away, and as he went past an open doorway another soldier caught my attention. It was the eye patch that did it—a very noticeable fashion accessory. And now I looked more closely at this second soldier, I noticed the blue flashes on the collar and the blue

stripe on his shoulder boards: KGB. Now that I was looking at him I could see that he too was mustering me with his only eye. A curt flick of his head, acknowledging my existence, then he moved further back into the room, beyond my line of sight.

I hadn't quite got to the chairs when someone else spoke to me, this time in German.

“Lieutenant Grobe! Very pleased to meet you. I am Major Mikhail Vassilovich Sokolovski. No relation.”

I didn't understand who he might not be related to, and didn't like to ask for fear of causing offence. But the major in front of me had a smooth and clear way of speaking German, which was also a good way to describe his appearance. Dress uniform, red flashes, very neat. Several rows of medals did his chest proud, indeed the medals would have looked cramped on a narrower chest. He held his hand out for me to take, a huge paw of a hand that could easily crush mine, but thankfully didn't. The major pointed the way upstairs, arms gesticulating the whole while, underscoring the small talk he was using to show off his flawless German. I was far too busy looking around me to pay much attention to what he was saying, something about a cultural event at the embassy.

I'd never been in a Russian military base before, and it was not at all how I'd imagined it. Outside rigidly controlled 'cultural events' the population of the GDR had been kept well away from the Russian brothers. To us, the Russians were different, alien, scary—and even after nearly three years of revolution I found it hard to believe that I was standing here in the Soviet Military Berlin HQ. But it all felt rather informal, I could see through open doors how soldiers and uniformed secretaries were shouting down phones, taking down dictation, typing away at noisy old typewriters, and all the while the endless stream of people moving around, carrying papers, boxes, radio sets, furniture—anything you could imagine. Nobody bothered to salute the major as we went past.

We reached an office at the back of the building, overlooking a large parade ground surrounded by flag poles.



The major gestured that I should take a seat while he closed the door. Turning to a filing cabinet he took two glasses and a bottle of vodka from the top drawer. He set the glasses up on his desk and filled them to the brim before handing me one.

“Before we start, a toast. I propose we drink to the architect and inspiration of the colossal historic victories of the Soviet people; the banner, pride, and hope of all progressive humanity. To the great leader and the teacher of my country and yours: *da zdavstvuyet* Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin!”

My glass tipped in shock as I listened to his words, recognising the style from a time not too long past. The major laughed loudly at my reaction.

“No, my friend, times are different now! A small joke is allowed between friends, no? But perhaps you had better make the toast?”

Still not quite sure what to make of this man who looked so formal, yet started our first meeting with a joke about Stalin, I stood up, glass (adequately replenished by the major) in right hand, looked him in the eye, and tried my best:

“In these uncertain times let us drink to continued and fraternal co-operation between our people!”

Again, the loud laugh, and Sokolovski tipped back his glass, swallowing the vodka in one go. I nervously followed his example.

“Good, very good, *tovarishch*,” he said. “My colleagues might at this point recharge the glasses, and make another toast. They find it amusing that you Germans, so very exact and proper in all you do, are unable to get beyond even the tenth toast without falling over. And I? I consider myself open to the civilising influences of your culture, so instead I give you the bottle, and we shall meet again. We shall talk about whatever it is we need to talk about, and have many more toasts.”

He shook my hand, opened the door and ushered me back out into the busy chaos beyond.

This was pretty perplexing, but I considered that I had made contact and that, at least so far, I had neither questions

nor reports for my Russian liaison. All in all, the major was probably right: we were finished for now. At least it meant I could go back to the office and get on with writing up that report.

I wandered out of the building and to the gate, the sentries merely nodding as they let me back out into the street. Arriving back at the car I looked down at the bottle of vodka in my hand. That's enough vodka for one day—I opened up the bonnet, took the cap off the petrol tank and poured the Russian alcohol in.