

STASI VICE

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CHAPTER 1

1983

It was meant to be a simple job. Lean on a few people, get them to shut up. Intimidate neighbours, bribe officials, appeal to the socialist conscience of Party members.

But clearing up after the boss is never a simple job. Not that I'd ever say so in any official way, but this is just between you and me. And I know I can trust you, don't I?

But what are bosses for if not to create work? The boss in question has a fine life—villa in the *Botanik*. Every morning he gets picked up in a company car and brought to work. Every morning he leaves his fine family behind, two kids, one of each. Blonde hair and blue eyes, you know the kind. Every morning, they stand at the garden gate with the blonde-haired-blue-eyed *Mutti* and wave their starched white handkerchiefs. Good-bye *Papi*, as he goes off to secure the socialist future.

Doesn't matter how early I arrive, he'll be behind his desk, checking his watch and flicking specks of nothing off his uniform sleeve.

Prussian bastard.

I hear you, exactly the kind of bloke who's going to play away from home. And not for BFC Dynamo. Play away games and sooner or later things will get messy, you can bet your wages on that.

Which is how I ended up playing cleaning lady for the Boss.

I entered the *Konsum* department store at half-past nine. That was my first mistake, right there. I was busy congratulating myself on my timing, the queue of pensioners looking for rarities that might have been delivered by mistake had cleared off and the store was fairly empty. Instead of being smug I should have used my nouse and hightailed it back to the capital for a quick look in the registry.

First rule of any operation: check the files.

Normally, before any operational measures begin, a file is opened. Then you make cross-references and end up with more lists, keys, indexes and summaries than are in the Berlin telephone book.

Normally.

Problem was, this wasn't normal. This was my boss telling me to sort out his mess on the sly, and *dalli dalli*. If I checked the files back at base my search would be logged, and then all you need is some busybody wondering why a grunt from Main Department VI is looking at the files of nobodies from a sandy town on the edge of Berlin. That would have landed me in the shit, and not just with the Boss.

So I didn't look through the files. Didn't check whether anyone on my list was known to the Ministry in any capacity, shape or form. Or any other ministry for that matter. Any Party members with connections in the right places? Any family members or close acquaintances higher up the pecking order than the Boss? Any cross-links, existing files, references, keys or indexes on any of them?

If I'd had time to go through the registry at my own pace and in my own way, I would have spotted the connections immediately. That would have saved me a good few Marks worth of shoe leather and a truck load of hassle.

Enough with moaning into my beer. I was telling you about this little operational measure on the side. There I was, standing on the ground floor of the *Konsum* in Königs Wusterhausen—to call the three tiny floors of this provincial shop a department store stretched my imagination too far—and demanding an audience with Citizen Dittmann. No need to show them the detective's disc, they made me for a

member of the state organs. I was ushered me into a poky storeroom with no natural light.

And there she was, my first operational target. Petite, greying hair tucked under a dark blue paisley headscarf, fingers bent with rheumatism. But her arthritic fingers weren't enough to stop her from skimming the consumer goods, taking little cartons of sewing supplies out of the packing cases and putting them in a cardboard box to be handed out to friends later. She was so busy she didn't even notice me.

"Needle and thread in short supply again?" I enquired, friendly enough. I find it easier to play good cop, at least until the need arises. Then I'm happy to show my true colours as bastard cop.

Dittmann nearly jumped out of her skin. While she made a show of wringing her hands she was busy nudging the box of illicit wares further under the counter.

I flapped the tin disc at her. Just like her colleagues on the shop floor, there was no real need to get the piece of metal out, she already had me pegged. But a little bit of psychological reinforcement goes a long way.

"Can I help?" She was being polite, wondering whether I'd noticed her little game.

"Paragraph 173, section 2 of the criminal code. Hoarding of goods." I helped her out.

"Is that why you're here?" She sank into a chair. A handkerchief appeared and she mopped her soft face.

Obviously it wasn't why I was here, they'd have sent a bull to lift her for that, if they'd bother at all. But I left her hanging—I'd helped her enough already.

I asked to see her *Ausweis* and in return pulled out a mugshot of the Boss's pretty lady and held it under Dittmann's nose. "Know her?"

Dittmann peered at the picture. It was black and white, but you could see the fine featured woman was a blonde, her eyes blue—just the way the Boss liked them. I watched as Dittmann poked around in the pocket of her pinny until she found her glasses. She perched them on the end of her nose

then tilted her head so they wouldn't get in the way of whatever she was looking at. People do the stupidest things, but I've learnt not to rub their noses in it, not when I want something from them.

"Frau Hofmann!" Dittmann seemed pleased to place the face, maybe she thought if she got full marks I'd let her off.

"See her much?"

"Regular customer, always very polite. Saw her just last week-"

"See her outside of work?"

"Oh." Dittmann slid her glasses up her nose and looked at me. The lens distorted her eyes, making them bulbous and shiny. "Not in any kind of trouble, is she?"

"It is your duty to answer my questions." The cold stare always does it.

"Walking in the Tiergarten park last week, perhaps it was the week before. With a gentleman-"

"This one?" Another mugshot for her to peer at, this time of the Boss. How could he be so sloppy, taking his moll for a hike round the local beauty spot?

"Quite rude, I greeted them as they went past and if looks could kill-"

"This concerns the interests of society." I took the photographs back. "Not to mention your own."

Dittmann took her glasses off and gave me a blank look.

"Citizen Hofmann is of operational interest. Therefore, for political-operational reasons you will not mention to any person that you have seen Citizen Hofmann in the presence of this person, nor that you and I have ever met. Failure to comply would indicate a negative attitude towards our socialist state. Is that clear?"

Dittmann looked unsure, so I gave her another nudge.

"Paragraph 173, section 2," I said.

I got my notebook out as I left the Konsum and crossed Dittmann off the list. One down, three to go. At that moment I was sure I'd have my Boss's mess sorted by the end of tomorrow. Day after at the latest.