



CHAPTER ONE

When I want the west to scream, I squeeze on Berlin.

— *Nikita Khrushchev, Soviet Union premier, 1958–1964*

There was no warning the night the wall went up.

I awoke to sirens screaming throughout my city of East Berlin. Instantly, I flew from my bed. Something must be terribly wrong. Why were there so many?

Although it was a warm morning, that wasn't the reason for my sweaty palms or flushed face. My first thought was that it must be an air raid — my parents had described them to me from the Second World War. I pulled my curtains apart, expecting the worst. But when I looked out, my heart slammed into my throat. Not even the darkest part of my imagination could have prepared me for this.

It was Sunday, August 13, 1961, a day I would remember for the rest of my life. When a prison had been built around us as we slept.

Lines of *Grenzern* — our nickname for the border police, the *Grenztruppen* — stood guard along a fence of thorny

wire, in some places higher than their heads, and for as far as my eyes could see. They stood like iron statues with stern expressions and long rifles in their hands. It was obvious that anyone who tried to cross would get far worse than a rip in their clothes. Because the Grenzers didn't face the westerners on the other side of the fence. They watched us.

It was very clear who they planned to shoot if there was any trouble.

If only I'd looked out earlier. During the night, I'd heard strange noises. Of hammering, heavy footsteps, and hushed conversations from men with sharp voices. But I rolled over and told myself it was only a dream. Or a nightmare perhaps.

If I had looked, I could have warned my family in time, just as our neighbor Herr Krause tried to warn us.

He knew this was coming. Hadn't he said for years that our government was not to be trusted? That we might salute the flag of East Germany, but that it was really Russia we bowed to? And my father had known.

My father!

As if she had heard my thoughts, from out in the kitchen I heard Mama cry, "Aldous!"

That was his name. And with a final glance out the window, I remembered the reason for Mama's screams.

My father wasn't here. Nor was my brother Dominic. They had been in the west for two nights, and were supposed

to have come home later today. With an endless row of guns and soldiers between us, the fence just changed that.

I raced from my room and arrived in the kitchen to see my oldest brother, Fritz, holding my mother in his arms as she sobbed on his shoulder. He eyed me and then cocked his head toward the window in case I hadn't already seen the fence. I only brushed tears from my eyes and wrapped my arms around her back. Maybe she didn't need me, but in that moment I desperately needed her.

She felt me there and put a shaking hand on my arm. "They've done it, Gerta," she said through her tears. "Worse than anyone ever thought."

Mama had been a beautiful woman once, but that was years ago. She had come through too much war and famine and poverty to care about the curl in her hair or neatness of her dress. Her blond hair was already turning gray and her eyes bore early wrinkles in the creases. Sometimes I looked in the mirror and hoped life would not be equally hard on me.

"Why now?" I asked. "Why today?"

I looked up to Fritz for an answer. He was nearly six years older than me and the smartest person I knew, next to my father. If my mother had no answers, then surely he did. But all he could do was shrug and hold her tighter as her sobs grew louder. Besides, I already understood more than I wanted to.

The fence was only the beginning. It had just divided my life in half. And nothing would ever be the same again.