

# **ESCAPE FROM EAST BERLIN**

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## CHAPTER

# 1

DECEMBER 9, 1961

**T**here's been another one."

Marta Dietrich's father sets his Saturday edition of *Neues Deutschland* down on the kitchen table. The apartment goes silent. Marta pauses with a forkful of sliced banana—a rare breakfast treat—halfway to her mouth. Her mother rests a hand on her mug full of *Rostfein*, the coffee that hovers at around 50 percent genuine beans. Nobody moves. Then, slowly, her mother lowers her magazine. Marta's eyes flick to the cover, where a blond model is smiling like the world has just opened up its arms to greet her, over the words *New Styles for Winter*.

Marta glances at her father's hands as he folds them atop the newspaper and bows his head. Scattered words jump out from the page, peeking out from around his wrists—*criminal, spy, guards, duty, East, West, Americans*.

It might as well be that same dreadful article about her brother, Stefan, with the words rearranged. All these *Neues Deutschland* articles about border crossers tell the same story: an evil spy getting the justice he deserves.

The SED—the East German Communist Party—arranges reality the way they see fit. Marta saw the newspaper *Der Spiegel*, published in the West, before the wall went up. That paper sounds like someone laying out basic facts. *Neues Deutschland* sounds like someone desperate to prove a point.

Marta eats banana slices. Her mother sips coffee.

Her father gets up from the table. He goes to a small chalkboard on the wall and adds a line to the ten tally marks he's already made. He presses the chalk so hard, Marta's afraid it will break. Her father stands there, silently contemplating the tally.

"Eleven," he says.

Eleven East Germans killed trying to cross the border since the wall went up on August 13.

Her brother, Stefan, was number eight.

Marta's eyes go to the eighth tally mark. It looks the same as the rest, a white line on a chalkboard. All that's left of her older brother.

Above the tally is a basic grocery list: milk, butter, eggs, potatoes. The list never changes. It's only there to provide cover for the tally, should their apartment be visited by an agent of the Ministry for State Security. The secret police.

The Stasi.

They have paid Marta's family a visit on four separate occasions since Stefan's death. To the Stasi, the Dietrichs have two massive red flags in their file: Stefan's border-crossing attempt, and Marta's mother's former job in West Germany. Anyone who worked in the West before the wall went up is now viewed with suspicion.

Her father puts down the piece of chalk and wanders over to the toaster.

He lays a finger on the spring-loaded switch and presses it down. It pops back up. There's no bread in the toaster. It's not even plugged in. He peers into the empty slots, mutters to himself, then turns to the frost-rimed window. He rolls up his left sleeve, then unrolls it and lets it dangle from his forearm, loose and unbuttoned.

Marta slides the newspaper over to her side of the table and spins it so she can read the article.

"Marta," her mother says. But the warning is halfhearted. The argument could be scripted at this point, they've had it so many times.

"I'm twelve, Mutti. Not seven."

"You're twelve, Marta. Not seventeen."

Seventeen. Stefan's age. As old as he'll ever be.

Marta stabs another stack of banana slices and runs her eyes down the article. She's not really sure what her mother is trying to protect her from. The worst possible thing has already happened.

The scene described in the article paints itself into her mind: A railway goods station, the small hours of the morning. Wisps of fog, flickering street-lights. A wild-eyed man in his twenties, kneeling in a frigid puddle, trying to pry open a hastily made barrier that divides the train tracks. When spotted by the heroic border guards, he attempted to flee back into the East, from where he'd come.

The guards pursued him through the streets and shot him anyway, a few blocks from his home.

The point is clear: Even if you turn back, even if you have second thoughts, we will use lethal force to punish you.

What had they called Stefan? *An enemy of the German people.*

Marta taps a finger against the poorly printed text—some letters are gray, some smudged nearly to black. "They call this guy a 'leech sucking the blood of our healthy body.'"

She imagines a slimy, man-sized grub, writhing and slurping at the heart of East Germany itself, sinking his teeth into the pavement of Unter den Linden.

“It’s a metaphor,” her mother explains. Until August, Alma Dietrich had been a literature teacher in a secondary school in the Moabit neighborhood of West Berlin. She had been one of the thousands of East Berliners whose work took them on a daily commute over the border in the morning, and back home to the East in the evenings.

Now there is no more work in the West for residents of the East.

The education system here has no place for someone accustomed to teaching students Western values. Alma Dietrich has been reassigned by the labor exchange to a washing machine factory.

“Do you know the meaning of the term?” Marta’s mother asks. “Metaphor?”

“I’m not sure if they teach creative thinking here in the East,” her father mutters. His back is to the table. He takes one step closer to the window, tilts his forehead against the cold glass, and worries at the buttons of his cuffs. The windowpane rattles as he fusses.

“I know what a metaphor is,” Marta says. “It’s, like, a thing that doesn’t exist used to describe something that *does* exist.”

“Acceptable,” her mother says.

“I still don’t get how this man who tried to cross the border was sucking blood from the East, even if it is supposed to be a metaphor. Wasn’t he just trying to leave?”

“To the Party,” her mother explains, “we are the blood of East Germany. The citizens. We are the workers, after all, and workers are the engine of everything. Thus, everyone who leaves is another trickle of blood that weakens the body of the state. The wall was supposed to be the bandage to stop the bleeding, but instead it’s becoming a wound—a great slice through the city itself, a gash in the fabric of the East.” She nods at the chalkboard. “And it’s getting infected.”

Marta imagines the wall as an oozing sore. People from the East move like the blood cells she's seen in grainy filmstrips, and the wall bulges and shivers and gets redder and redder until—

“You’re going to be late,” her father says, pointing to the clock on the wall next to the chalkboard. The hands tick around a brightly colored picture of Riga, the Latvian coastal city where they vacationed last summer. Stefan and Marta had spent entire days in the sea, letting the waves knock them down, tumbling underwater, racing from the coastline to the little food stand at the north end of the beach—the hut shaped like a giant bratwurst. “You wouldn’t want to miss a second of your highly educational field trip to”—he turns to Marta—“what is it today, the sock factory?”

“Um . . .” Marta closes one eye while she thinks of what Frau Vandenburg tried to get them excited about this week. “Manhole covers.”

Her father shakes his head. His face is blank, weary—there’s no mischief in his eyes anymore. “The manhole cover factory. Of course.”

Every week, her school takes students on a trip to a factory or a collective farm. Today, she can look forward to spending her Saturday working alongside the employees at the manhole cover factory on the outskirts of the Hellersdorf district.

If the work is too dangerous or specialized for a bunch of kids, her class will help put together boxes for storage and shipping. If they’re really lucky, they’ll help file some old paperwork in the musty basement office.

“Maybe someday you’ll come to visit Modern Washing Units,” her mother says, nudging her shoulder, “and I can give you a biiiiiiig hug in front of all your friends.”

“Mutti!” Marta slides her chair away.

“And smother you in kisses! Oh, my sweet daughter, come see your loving mother! I’ll come running across the factory floor to sweep you up!”

She purses her lips and leans in.

“Eww!” Marta turns her head.

Her father clears his throat. “Go get ready,” he says. Marta meets his eyes. These days, when she looks at her father, he seems to be a copy of a copy of himself. He spends so much time moping around the apartment, staring at familiar, everyday objects as if they hold the key to releasing whatever pain he’s hiding.

He turns back to the empty toaster. His finger hovers above the switch. He doesn’t move.

Marta scarfs the last of the banana slices and excuses herself. She pauses at the living room window and looks out onto Bernauer Strasse, the wide street outside their building. She has peered out every day since August 13, and still the sight of the new wall astonishes her. An endless unfurling of razor wire and steel, buttressed with concrete tank traps like massive spiky knucklebones called “dragon’s teeth,” slicing her street in half.

There’s a soft nuzzling against her leg. She bends over and scoops up Penelope, their Rottweiler puppy. It’s technically her brother’s dog—he was the one who brought her home, unannounced, one Sunday afternoon. In typical Stefan fashion, he’d simply walked in with her, along with a soft doggy bed and a bag of kibble, as if it were something the whole family had been planning for weeks. But nobody had objected.

“How could they say no to you?” Marta says, lifting the squirming pup. Penelope smothers her face with slobbery kisses. Marta loves how her brown and black patches are carefully arranged. She’s not speckled like a Dalmatian; she’s *composed* like a painting.

The phone rings. Penelope barks. Her little eyes dart back and forth and settle on Marta’s face, eager for the comfort of a familiar sight.

Marta sets her down and the dog wanders back over to the bed, a fuzzy lump of gray fabric. Her mother’s voice drifts in from the kitchen. A few curt phrases, a word or two, and then a goodbye. Penelope turns in a circle,



becomes moderately interested in her tail, then plops down and licks a paw. Marta hears the phone click back into its receiver.

Her mother pops into the living room.

“That was Frau Vandenburg,” she says. “There’s been a fire at the manhole cover factory.”

“That’s great!” Marta says. “I mean, was anyone hurt?”

“No. It happened overnight. Marta, there are easier ways to get out of a boring field trip.”

“I didn’t do it!”

Her mother sighs. “I just hope you didn’t leave any fingerprints.”

“Mutti!”

Her father walks out of the kitchen. Marta glances at him, waiting for him to chime in with *This is a very serious matter, think of the manholes* before breaking into a grin, then contagious laughter. But instead he heads for the bedroom without a word and shuts the door. Marta watches her mother gaze after him. She half expects her father to open the door and announce that he was just kidding, that he couldn’t possibly spend a Saturday locked away in his bedroom, but there is only quiet stillness. She gives it another few seconds, hoping that her father—the one she’s always known, not this strange new one—will emerge. Nothing happens.

“Well,” Marta says to break the silence, “I guess I’ve got a free Saturday for once.”

She plops down on the sofa, puts her feet up on the coffee table, and picks up an old issue of *Sibylle* magazine.

“Lucky you,” her mother says. “Now you can bring some leftover pork schnitzel to your cousin Harry and the kids.”

“Okay,” Marta says, turning the page, pretending to read. Penelope hops up next to her and nudges the magazine with her nose.

“And you can bring it over *now*, so they can have it for lunch.”

“I’ve really been looking forward to catching up on this magazine.”

“Marta.”

As if she’s been zapped into slow motion, Marta sets the magazine down and gets robotically to her feet.

Her mother disappears into the kitchen and emerges a moment later with a casserole dish covered in tinfoil.

Behind the closed door, the springs of her parents’ mattress creak. Her father has gone back to bed.