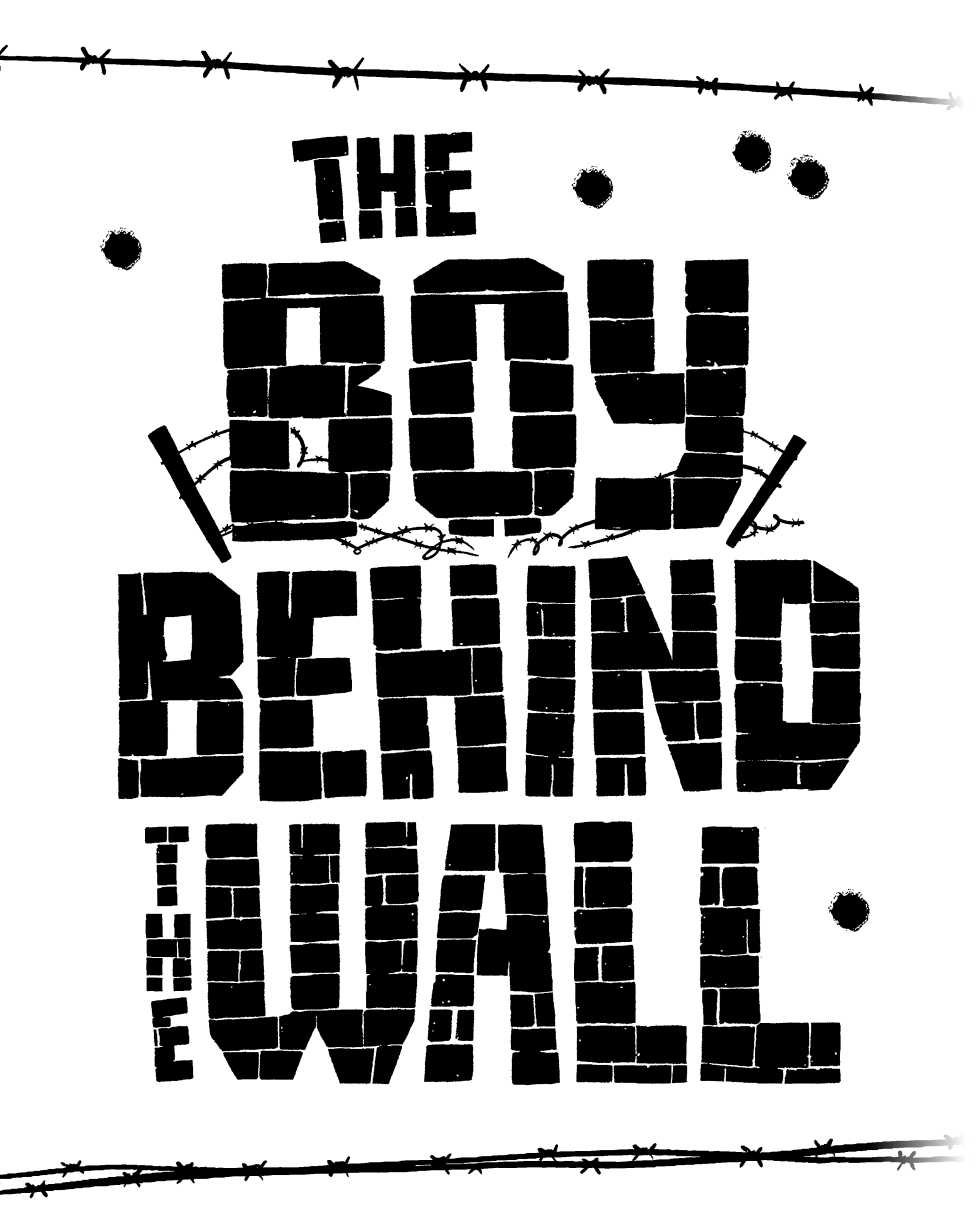

MAXIMILLIAN JONES

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BERLIN, 1967

HARRY

I was swinging through the backstreets of the city on the lookout for trouble. I was new in town, but superheroes don't have to worry about being in strange new places. Some days I was Batman, some days Captain America, but on my way back from school that afternoon I was Spider-Man. I had just sent a gang of Commies scurrying for cover and was getting close to home.

Then the shouting started.

'*Halt! Sonst schießen wir!*' Words in German that I couldn't understand.

Then the gun-shots. Two in quick succession.

I looked up in time to see him slump across the top of the Wall. A slim boy with brown hair and green eyes. He looked a little like me. I saw him trapped eight feet above my head, snared in the barbed wire, blood blooming through his shirt.

He was still moving. I couldn't look away. He raised his head and seemed to look straight at me.

Heavy boots came running past me. An American soldier pushed me out of the way.

'*Verschwinde*,' he shouted in accented German.

This one I knew. 'Get out of here.'

But I couldn't move.

Then came the final shot.

Words were shouted across the Wall. More German words I didn't know.

It was the guards from the East that got to him first. The boy's left arm was caught on the top of the barbed wire and his legs were stuck beneath it. He was suspended above us like a puppet held up by strings. They tugged and tugged at him until finally he came free. I watched his body get dragged back over the Wall, finally disappearing back into the East.

The Americans relaxed, stopped aiming their guns. One of them turned to me and, bringing back his civilian smile, said, '*Wie heißt du?*'

'Harry,' I said, feeling faint. 'Harry Rogers.'

'How old are you?' He asked, switching to English.

'Thirteen.'

He put a hand on my shoulder and said, 'Well, Harry

Rogers, I'm sorry you had to see that. Are you going to be OK getting home?'

'I live just up the street,' I said, feeling stupid as I pointed vaguely in the direction of my apartment building, my hand trembling a little.

'Ok then, why don't you run on home now? Try not to think too much about it.'

It had only been three weeks since we first arrived in Berlin, a divided city in a divided country. We had learnt a bit about Germany at school back in D.C., but I knew very little about the country before Dad accepted a placement here. One thing I did know was that it had been divided up by the Allies after the war. The Soviet Union took charge in the East, and the French, the British, and us Americans controlled various zones in the West. The weird thing is that although Berlin is actually in the East, the Allies split it up too. Supposedly, both East and West Germany are now sovereign states, which means they are in charge of themselves.

The Soviets are Communists. My dad says that means they think the government should run everything. They hate America because *we* believe individuals should be free and not have their lives decided by their leaders. That seems

pretty strange to me, because who would hate freedom? I guess that's why millions of East German citizens started heading across the border. The Communists weren't happy about losing so many people, so, six years ago, in the summer of 1961, their leaders ordered the border be closed. First they put barbed-wire fences up, then they started construction on a huge concrete wall that stretches all the way around West Berlin. The *Vopos*, the East German police, guard it day and night to prevent people crossing illegally. It must have been them who shot the boy I saw.

I was only there that day because I had got lost again. Sometimes, when I'm feeling a bit nervous, I pretend to be one of the superheroes from my comic books. But even Spider-Man can find it tricky to navigate a new city. So I use the Wall as a landmark to help me find my way home from school. It's kind of weird how it just cuts through everything – a series of straight lines that divide streets and parks. There's even a house near our building with its front door in the West and its back door in the East; the family who lived there had to move out.

Our apartment is in the American Sector, where most of us expat Americans live, and is within sight of the Wall. I knew if I kept the Wall on my right it would always lead me back eventually. That's how I was where I was that

afternoon, pretending to be Spider-Man ready to take on the world. Only, I wasn't ready. There was nothing I could do.

I was gasping for breath when I got back to the apartment and told my mom what had happened. She pulled me close to her, gripped me tighter than she had done in years, and we cried there in the kitchen together.

She made me hot chocolate.

'Drink this,' she said, 'it might help you feel better.'

'Mom, I'm not a kid any more,' I said, sounding like a scared child.

It was only when I took the cup that I realised my hands were still shaking. It didn't taste the same as back home, but she was right. It was comforting.

Later, in my bedroom, I tried to get the sight of the dead boy out of my mind. I tried to forget about the look in his eyes. I stared at the posters on my wall. All superheroes, like Iron Man and Hulk, Captain Marvel and The Thing. These characters had meant so much to me that morning, but now they seemed so childish.

I couldn't stop myself from looking out of my window. Our apartment was so close to the Wall that I could actually see into the East from my room. I'd never really thought

about it before. About how strange that was. That these two worlds could be so close physically, but so separate, so different from each other.

Dad was late home from work that night. I was in bed by the time I heard the key scrape in the lock and the front door open and close. I was still awake. I hadn't been able to sleep. But I didn't want to have to face him, to explain everything and go through it all again. I heard muffled voices on the other side of my bedroom wall. Mom filling him in on what had happened. Their voices grew louder before falling quiet again. My door opened and the shaft of light from the hallway fell across my face. I pretended to sleep.

'Look at him. So precious,' said Mom.

Dad said nothing, just shut the door. He wasn't a man that often showed his emotions. Everything about him was closed.

In the morning, the three of us sat and ate breakfast. Bacon and scrambled eggs, with Mom serving up a larger portion than usual.

'How are you, son?' Dad asked.

'I'm fine,' I said, not looking up from my plate.

'He's not fine,' said Mom. 'And neither am I.'

Dad seemed about to reply but stopped himself. Instead, he downed the remains of his coffee and stood up. The door slammed shut as he left for work.

'I'm sorry,' Mom whispered, staring straight ahead, 'you know how stubborn he can get.'

In the days that followed the shooting, I tried my best to get back to normal life – or what was supposed to be normal now that we lived in West Berlin. Back home, I had actually enjoyed going to school. The only subject I was really any good at was maths, but it was worth sitting through boring Geography lessons because I also got to hang out with Mike and Robbie and throw a football around at lunch. I hadn't made many friends at my new school and, although we were all taught in English, I now found I couldn't concentrate in class. In the evenings, I tried to lose myself in listening to music or reading my comic books like I used to, but I kept thinking about the boy. I got goose bumps on my flesh when I thought about what he was running from, what he was prepared to risk his life for.

His face kept coming back to me as well. The sound of that final shot. I woke up in the dead of night, drenched in sweat.

Dad had raved about the American Sector before we came. 'It'll be just like home,' he said. 'They've got hot dogs and Twinkies and there's a Fourth of July parade. We'll fit right in, you'll see.'

Mom was doing her best now that we were here as well, despite taking every opportunity to point out issues to my dad. She was committed to recreating a little piece of D.C. in West Berlin. The rooms decorated to replicate what we were used to: a modern kitchen, a television set and a brand-new stereo. The wallpaper in the living room looked almost identical to what we'd had at home. But nothing was quite the same, and that included my parents.

I don't know if their problems had started before we left home, but they argued more and more these days, mostly when they thought I couldn't hear them. The arguments always started differently but ended with the same thing. Mom wanted to go home. Dad insisted we had to stay.

I didn't tell him I had started to run to and from school, too scared to stop anywhere in between. He didn't notice that at the weekends, I always stayed home.

Mom noticed though. And, although she was still wary about Berlin, she had decided that I shouldn't be afraid of our new home. She came up with excuses to send me out on errands. She'd make me go down to the laundromat.

Or send me out to the grocery store for something she'd forgotten. A couple of weeks after the shooting, she decided she wanted ground beef. She said the stuff from the local store was too lean, so I had to head over to the butchers in Britz, about a 30 minute ride away. I knew the area a little because we had taken a family trip to an old manor house there about a week after we arrived. Still, it was further away from home than anywhere I'd gone alone since the shooting. The Wall loomed as I set out on my mission and I imagined all kinds of horrors playing out on the other side.

I had almost forgotten that the Electric Palace existed until I came across it again on my way to the butchers. It was weird discovering a cinema that played American movies, in English, in this foreign land. I had more than enough money in my pocket to pay for a ticket and still get the meat for Mom. I was sure she wouldn't mind if I caught a picture; she was the one that was always encouraging me to venture out, after all. The guy in the ticket office spoke good English and told me he'd keep an eye on my bike. I bought my ticket and settled down to watch Paul Newman in *Cool Hand Luke*. Newman plays a former soldier called Luke Jackson who is arrested and gets sent to work on a prison farm in Florida. Instead of keeping his head down and doing his time, Luke always stands up for himself even

when the odds are against him. He even attempts to escape several times. For two hours, I couldn't take my eyes off the screen. I forgot about the world outside as I witnessed this hero not taking no for an answer.

By the time the movie was finished, it was dark outside and I'd completely forgotten about the shopping.

When I got home, Mom rushed to the door, worried because I had been gone so long.

'Are you OK? Did something happen?'

'No, sorry, Mom, I'm fine,' I told her, releasing myself from her embrace. And I really did feel better, as if a little of Luke's confidence in the movie had rubbed off on me.

In the following weeks I watched as many movies as I could, wiling away the hours after school. *A Fistful of Dollars*, *The Dirty Dozen*, stories about heroes – but not superheroes, real people who put themselves in the way of real danger.

I came out of the Electric Palace and imagined I was bullet-proof. I still found the Wall intimidating, but somehow, I felt less afraid. I started exploring again too. Discovering more of Berlin's jumble of streets still scarred by the war. New buildings sprouting like young trees from the charred soil after a forest fire.

Some days, after school, I would head down to watch

the planes take off from Tempelhof. It was on one of those afternoons down by the airport that I discovered the comic-book store. It was an innocuous building between a bakery and a bank, all dusty and tired, with a door that creaked when you opened it. But inside it was vibrant, with splashes of colour from all the covers of the comic books. I remembered how much these books had meant to me back in D.C. I was drawn to them, although they were kind of childish. After what I'd seen I knew I'd never feel really excited about comic books like these again.

'Good day to you,' said the old man behind the counter in heavily accented English. I don't know how he could tell I wasn't German. 'I am Dieter, the owner of this splendour. How may I help you today?'

Dieter moved very stiffly, but his eyes were alive and flickered with curiosity.

'Are you looking for anything in particular?' he asked again.

I hesitated, unsure. 'Do you have any American comics?'

'Aha, yes,' he said, shuffling down an aisle. 'What's your poison? *Der* Incredible Hulk? *Herr* Spider-Man?'

I went home with two new issues of *Superman* that day and started visiting Dieter's store on a regular basis after that. The cinema was great, but there weren't enough new

movies to keep me busy and I sometimes felt silly sitting watching on my own.

Dieter always seemed pleased to see me, but never pushed me to talk. We'd sometimes spend hours in each other's company. I would read half a dozen comic books before buying one to take home with me, while he fussed around the shop or assisted the occasional customer.

Whilst a lot of the shop was given over to German comics, Dieter seemed most drawn to American culture. He would sometimes show me some of his old comic books, early versions of *Superman* and *Captain Marvel* from before the war. It was fascinating how they'd changed, the illustration styles becoming darker, more complex. He always had his radio tuned to American or British stations as well, listening to The Beach Boys, The Beatles and The Rolling Stones. He would dance robotically around the shop when no one else was around, even sometimes singing along. It was strange how spending time with him somehow reminded me of home.