

# OVER AND OUT

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# CHAPTER 1

There are books hidden beneath my floorboards.

I was moving my bed because my only fountain pen rolled underneath while Katarina and I were doing our homework. At first, I tried to climb under after it, but my head was too big, no matter which way I turned it.

Not ones to pass up an opportunity to create something, my best friend and I decided to move my heavy bed—with our brain muscles. A much better choice for us than our actual muscles.

The sketching of a pulley system was quick. The putting together of it—taking rope and a wheel from my Inventor’s Box and attaching it to the beam across my ceiling—took some trial and error. Actually going beneath our creation took some guts because neither of us was sure it’d hold.

We both remembered the go-cart we’d designed and built . . . that lost a wheel when we were halfway down

the hill. And the slingshot that wouldn't quite sling at first.

This time it was "You go, Katy," followed by "No, you go, Sophie." Eventually, we did it together. And we were rewarded. As we retrieved my pen, the pulley held and my foot struck a floorboard. It made a hollow sound.

Katarina and I locked eyes.

Now we're side by side, on our knees beneath my tilted bed, the floorboard removed, and a secret cavity revealed.

Mama must've put the books there. Or someone who lived in our small two-bedroom apartment before us?

"Are they State-approved books?" my best friend asks.

My eyes train on a dark-colored cover. We're only allowed to read, watch, and listen to the books, newspapers, television shows, and radio programs that our East German government produces. "Hmm, I'm not sure if they're ours."

They *are* hidden.

"Well, grab one," Katarina prods. Her worried gaze shoots upward at the raised bed.

"Should I?" I look over my shoulder, expecting Mama to roll into the doorway, but she shouldn't be

home for another hour. Monika is here, though. She keeps an eye on me after school. With so many working mothers, most kids go to an after-school program. But for as long as I can remember, Mama instead had Monika watch me. She's become more of a big sister than a babysitter. I'm twelve, after all.

I reach for the top book. It's about women aeronauts from history.

My mouth drops open. I'm already intrigued. Together, Katarina and I crawl backward from under my tilted bed, leaving it elevated, and lean back against my dresser. We begin turning pages, neither of us saying a word until she whispers, "Let's look for our names."

*Sophie.*

*Katarina.*

We find mine first, a woman named Sophie Blanchard. The first woman to pilot a balloon. She once ascended to a height of nearly four thousand meters. She crossed the Alps in her balloon. She performed for kings and all over Europe.

I'm more than intrigued now. I'm in awe. This other Sophie's life is more than mine will ever be.

I'm stuck living behind a massive wall. Actually, two walls. Two tall concrete walls separate the city of

Berlin into two sides: East Berlin and West Berlin. I'm on the east side—what feels to me like the wrong side.

The walls went up twelve years ago—to stop people from leaving our side, I've heard—and Mama says the walls will be standing for a long, long time. Some people can't handle being stuck here. They *need* to get out. They need freedom. I've heard stories of daring, unbelievable escapes . . .

Digging long tunnels *beneath* the walls.

Derailing a train to go *through* the walls.

Walking across a tightrope *over* the walls.

. . . but I usually only hear about the people who *don't* make it out—the ones who try to escape but are caught. Those are the people who end up as headlines in the government-controlled papers . . . to scare us not to try.

There was once this girl from school. Hanna and I were friendly, though not friends. Her brother tried to escape by hiding in the trunk of someone's car. It didn't work. Hanna's brother was never seen again. Her parents disappeared, too. Monika thinks Hanna's parents are in prison, even though they weren't the ones who tried to escape. And Hanna is different now. She still goes to our school, but she doesn't talk to a soul. She

doesn't respond to smiles. She only wants to be left alone.

Mama says we should keep our heads down, too. She says it's not safe to draw any attention to ourselves. We should just try to live the best lives we can on our side.

Best lives.

I scoff at that.

My best life would be full of inventions and mathematics, just like Sophie Blanchard's—precisely the things the State isn't likely to let me do once my schooling is done, which is especially disappointing since my classwork focuses so much on science and math. Doesn't matter, though. Mama has a scholarly job she loves. She works in a lab. And because Mama has a job that's not in a place like a factory, I probably will have to work in one, despite how I have a mind for numbers. The math is simple for our family of two. One family member is middle class: Mama. One family member will be working class: me. It keeps a family balanced. If we're both in an academic field, then our family would be too middle class. Too . . . what did Monika call it . . . bourgeois.

She once explained my future to me in whispers.

*You'll never be a scientist here, Sophie.  
You'll be assigned a job in that factory.  
If you grumble, the Stasi secret police will  
find out.  
They'll create a file on you.  
You'll be spied on.  
You could go to prison.  
Everything you do will always, always be  
watched.  
You'll have no future. Not one you'd want  
anyway.*

Maybe Monika was just speculating, but she's one of the smartest people I've met. As I remember her words, all I know is that it sounded horrible then and it still sounds horrible now. I rub the goose bumps on my arms.

Across the room, my raised bed and pulley make a groaning noise. I eye it as Katarina flips through the book's pages. "I can't find my exact name. But look here," she says, "there's a Katharina Paulus, a performer, too—a parachute jumper. And look! She's also

the inventor of the first collapsible parachute.”

“I bet *she* would be able to invent a way over the Wall,” I say, being sure to keep my voice low. We have neighbors, and our shared walls are paper thin.

Katarina asks, “What could we invent?”

“To get over the Wall?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“But—”

“Just pretend with me,” Katarina urges. “If we were the other Sophie and Katharina, what would we do to soar over the walls?”

I think on it. I rub my lips together. “Strap ourselves to a rocket and whoo—”

“A rocket?” I hear from the doorway.

I slap the book closed and yank it behind my back in a heartbeat.

Monika is standing a step into my room.

She laughs but then lowers her voice to match the tone Katarina and I have been using. “You don’t have to hide that from me. You know that. But I will say that a rocket doesn’t sound very safe.”

Katarina smiles. “Neither does how that trapeze artist hung that wire and tightroped across.”

“Or that,” Monika agrees, taking a few perfectly

straight steps with her arms outstretched on either side. With exaggeration she falls to one side.

We all laugh, but my mind is elsewhere.

After the walls were built twelve years ago—oddly enough beginning on the exact day I was born, 13 August 1961—it's said that one of the very first people to flee was a guard who was supposed to be keeping people from escaping to the west side. That side is controlled by the United States, Great Britain, and France. That side believes in capitalism, where people can pick their own jobs, where there are choices of what food to buy and what clothing to wear, where the government doesn't own everything.

You want a car? Great! Go buy one.

That doesn't happen here. You want a car? Request one from the government. Maybe they'll let you have one someday. But fair warning: It could take ten years.

What does our guard fleeing our side tell you?

It tells me a lot.

Mama doesn't think I know as much as I do. I'm constantly watching and listening and adding more to the equation of why West Berlin > East Berlin.

I remember a few years ago when I first realized that the Wall separates us from the West but that it's

the West that's actually surrounded by both walls. "Why?" I asked. "If the West is surrounded, why is it that we're the ones trapped?"

"Because the Westerners can come and go through checkpoints in the Wall to other parts of Germany," Mama said. "We cannot. We cannot enter their side. We cannot leave our side."

The Stasi police claim the Wall is to protect us. But I think Mama is right. I think the Wall is meant to keep us here. Not long ago, the State even started allowing people from the West into our side. If the Wall is for our protection, then why do their students come to our museums and theaters? Why do their people come to our restaurants? They just have to leave by the end of the day. Sometimes I watch them go with the worst kind of envy, wishing it were me who was going back to the West.

Mama says she's been there before. "A different lifetime," she let slip once.

I ask Monika now, "How would you do it? How would you get across?"

Monika was five or six when the Wall went up, but she says she remembers very little from before. "Only my grandparents," she once told me. "They are all I

remember from before the Wall went up. I haven't seen them since. But I'll see them again."

Had she meant she'd try to escape someday? It seems impossible to actually do it. It's why we only ever daydream.

I wait for her to answer about how she would get across.

Monika smiles, but it looks like she's forcing her lips to go up rather than down. "Your mama will be home soon. Probably best to put all this away." She nods to the pulley system wrapped around my bed and to the book still behind my back. But then her brow wrinkles. "Do you think your mama hid those books there?"

I'm not sure.

Mama can be confusing. Or maybe the better word is *elusive*. I have always thought of her like a volcano. It's like her emotions and thoughts are kept below the surface. They're there, you just can't see them, unless Mama wants you to know what she's thinking or feeling.

"Well," Monika says, "whoever put the books there, it'll be our secret that you found them."

I nod, just as the rope gives and my bed crashes to the floor. The three of us jump.

"Looks like your newest invention could use some

tinkering with,” Monika offers with a genuine smile. “We’ll perfect it. Don’t worry.”

It feels good knowing Monika’s on my side. And as she leaves my bedroom, she also whispers, “Going over by balloon sounds pretty dreamy to me, too.”