

CHAPTER ONE

I knew almost nothing about Germany when Pan Am flight 66 sliced through the scattered clouds and touched down smoothly on the southernmost runway of the Frankfurt International Airport, and I knew even less about the United States Army. What I did know, and all that really mattered, was that inside the terminal, at the other end of the narrow jetway leading from the plane to the waiting area, was the most handsome Army lieutenant in the world. He would be looking for me, tall and proud and dark-haired, and I would step into his open arms and feel them close around me, and I would smile because finally, after a year apart, after months of silence between us and only a recent reconciliation, we'd managed to get back on the right path.

I stepped from the plane and strode down the jetway with a ready smile, scouring the crowds gathered at the gate, trying to spot his signature hair: dark and smooth, extra short on the sides, just long enough on top to meet regulations for an officer's cut. But my lieutenant wasn't there. I waited, thinking he must just be late, but as the crowds thinned and I eventually stood alone, I knew he wasn't coming.

Nick, who begged me to visit him, insisting that the only way we could get back together was if I came to see him, had stood me up.

I shifted the strap of my carry-on and tightened my grip on my purse handles, palms now beading with sweat and beginning to tremble. Tentatively, I peered into the river of people surging through the airport corridors, heard their foreign voices spiraling around me, confusing

me further. Overhead, a man's voice boomed over the loudspeaker, while signs in German and ten other languages screamed at my ignorance, as if chiding me for getting myself in over my head, again. My pulse quickened, my knees softened, and I began to think maybe I'd made a mistake. Maybe I should have listened to my family and friends; maybe I shouldn't have taken this risk, coming all this way for someone who had promised me nothing.

My mind raced. I trusted him, didn't I? *Of course I do. He's just late. Or lost. Or...* The idea was too big to digest. *Or maybe this is the plan. Beg me to visit and then leave me stranded at the airport. Serious payback, the ultimate revenge for what I did last year.* I needed to find a pay phone. Or a ticket counter.

Passengers streamed past me, all swimming toward a sign with a suitcase on it, so I eased into the current and rode along with them. Somewhere along the way, I would find help.

I landed first in a big pool of people, all grabbing suitcases from the baggage carousel before shimmying upstream through Customs. German soldiers wielding black assault rifles channeled the crowds into lines, and I recalled that just two days ago, an unidentified terrorist group had set off a suitcase bomb in the departure lounge of this airport. *Security is tight*, I thought. *Maybe Nick couldn't get through to meet me at the gate.* A somber soldier nudged me on; I retrieved my suitcases and squeezed into line, my hopes restored for the moment.

When I stepped up to the inspection counter, a rotund German official about my father's age locked eyes on me and requested my passport. I fumbled around in my purse, pulled out the navy booklet, and handed it over. A quick glance to my right revealed throngs of people pressed against a plate glass wall separating Customs from the outside world, a sea of faces looking in.

"Anna Millson?"

"Yes?"

“You are here for business or pleasure?”

A trick question. “Pleasure.”

“Do you have anything to declare?”

I could declare that I felt as nervous as I ever had in my life, or that my knees might give out any second. Instead, I muttered a simple, “No.”

He scrutinized my passport and customs form and stamped them with the official seal of the Federal Republic of Germany along with the date: June 21, 1985. I had officially arrived.

Just beyond the glass door, I saw a hand rise high, and my stomach began to untwist. The handsome face from a year ago smiled at me, and I felt my face go red as I scolded myself for thinking he would ever leave me here alone. With that one smile, all my misgivings vanished. A moment later, with my bags stacked and tucked and slung over my shoulder, Nick slid a steady arm around me and escorted me to his brand new Porsche, conveniently parked at the curb outside.

The scenic drive to Bad Kissingen, nearly two hours long through the most picturesque valleys I’d ever seen, mesmerized me. While Nick chattered on and on about tanks and military maneuvers, words bursting out of his mouth like popcorn in a popping machine, constant motion and noise, I gave myself to the views of the passing countryside. Where streams cut through the meadows, thick piles of grass curled over the banks. The lush green carpet spread across the land before disappearing into tall forests, where the trees climbed the rise of the grey shadowed hills.

“It’s beautiful here,” I gushed, interrupting him mid-sentence. “I could get used to living here.”

“Germany is okay,” he said, ignoring my hint. “But my job here is dangerous and demanding, and I have three years ahead of me. I guess it doesn’t look as great to me as it does to you.”

“How could this not look great? Beautiful hills, little villages... seriously, to be able to spend three years in a place like this, you got lucky. You could’ve gotten stationed in Korea or Japan.”

He slid his hand over to my knee. “True. And I know you wouldn’t have come that far to visit me, so I would’ve had to go AWOL to see you again. Maybe I did get lucky.”

My stomach flip-flopped happily. “You’re really that glad I’m here? I was worried you hadn’t forgiven me for what happened between us last year.”

Nick pulled his hand back to the gearshift, his thumb tapping out the rhythm to the song playing on the radio. “Of course I have. Water under the bridge. I hold no grudges. You figured out what you wanted and you came back and you’re here now.”

“Yeah,” I said, even though I hadn’t actually figured anything out – that’s why I was here. To see if I had ended things too hastily last year, if he indeed was the right one for me. And I needed to find out now. With my last summer break before college graduation, this might be my only chance to resurrect this relationship and put it through a fair test – the kind with no parents hovering, no ex-boyfriends lurking, no distractions interfering.

“You nervous?”

“What?”

“Your leg is shaking up and down like it does when you get nervous.”

I stopped my leg. “Sort of,” I admitted. I wondered if he felt the same way.

“Thought so.” His thumb drummed harder on the shifter. “You shouldn’t be. You’re going to love it here. This is going to be the best eight weeks of your life, Anna.”

“Five. Remember? I’m spending the last three weeks with Jenny in the Mosel Valley.”

“We’ll see. I’ll bet you change your mind and stay with me the whole time instead.”

I hoped he was right. I hoped I would stay all eight weeks here, maybe even go home with a ring on my finger. That would prove everyone wrong about him. And yet even as I hoped, I couldn’t help but feel nervous – to be alone with him, to meet all his new friends, to live the experiment and become more than we were, more than we ever had been.

“Sorry we had to leave Frankfurt so early,” he said, changing the subject. “With our troop just back yesterday from a month of border duty at Camp Lee, I need to get in at least a half day’s work at the office. I know it’s not what you expected, but I hope you’re not mad.”

“It’s okay,” I said. I stared at his perfect features and distinctive coloring – dark hair, fair skin, square jaw, Caribbean-hued blue green eyes – it was hard to be mad at someone who looked like Nick. Even on those rare occasions when he drank too much and said or did something unforgiveable, I couldn’t stay mad. I always forgave him. “I’m not mad.”

He folded a stick of Big Red gum into his mouth, and I watched his jaw work up and down. “I’ll make it up to you. It won’t be the perfect romantic first weekend I promised, but it will still be fun. We’ll go back tomorrow for the day, unless you’re too tired.”

“I won’t be tired.”

Nick drove on and took a series of turns through a suburban area, eventually pulling into the driveway of a plain white two-story house with a red roof like all the other houses I’d seen along the way. Tucked deep into a neighborhood, it sat sideways on the lot, the front door opening to the driveway that curved around toward a small garage behind the house.

“You’re home!” Nick turned the key and the Porsche’s engine fell quiet. He climbed out and disappeared around the back to unload my suitcases.

I eased myself out of the car and peered up at the house. I liked how private it was down here at the end of the street. “Are Lieutenants Collett and Faust here?”

Nick stopped unloading and peeked around the side of the car at me. “Who?”

“The female lieutenants you said I would be staying with.”

Hilarious laughter erupted from the back of the car. Nick pulled the trunk closed and stumbled over to me, his face flushed. “Oh my God, Anna. You believed me!” His voice cracked and he laughed even harder. The wad of chewed up gum fell from his mouth and bounced under the car. “There is no Lieutenant Collett or Lieutenant Faust! I made them up!”

My stomach dropped like a rock in water. “But you said I would stay with them.”

“That’s what you were supposed to tell your parents! I thought you knew that! Such a blonde...” He tried to swallow a giggle but it got stuck in his nose.

“I brought them gifts from home,” I said. “Candles from Berea College and bourbon candy from Kentucky Chocolates. Are there even any women officers?”

“I’m sure there are somewhere, but not here in Bad Kissingen.” He glowed, sprite-like. It was becoming easier to feel mad at someone who looked like Nick.

He laughed at me with his blue-green eyes, then sidled up to me, wrapping his arms around me and nibbling his way around the curve of my ear, his hot breath weakening me. “Come on, Anna,” he crooned in that low voice that I loved. “Don’t be mad. You’ll love staying with me. We’ll be together every day.” I soaked up his voice while he nibbled my anger away.

He led me into his house, plain on the exterior with only a couple of windows and a glass front door. Just inside, a black door led to a first floor apartment, while a wide curved staircase circled up to the second floor apartment. Where the staircase curved, a slender indoor tree grew, the top branches reaching almost to the ceiling. Everything else was pure white.

Nick lived upstairs, in what he described as a three-bedroom bachelor pad. I followed him through the front door and into his room, where I set down my bags. He pulled the window curtain open and said, “My room is the smallest, but I have the best view. Come see.”

I looked out over a lush expanse of green. Behind the house, the landlord’s garden squeezed itself into every inch of the enormous rectangular yard, rows of vegetables neatly planted and obviously well-tended. Beyond the garden fence, a gentle slope of grass stretched upwards toward a densely forested hillside that rose high above the town. “It’s beautiful,” I said, making a mental note to go explore it later.

Nick moved in behind me, but he remained silent, which was unusual for him. Nick always had something to say; he was the kind of guy who could start a party just by walking into a room. People gravitated toward his wit, and he loved to laugh at his own jokes, which was funny in itself – he had a ridiculous, musical laugh. A contagious laugh.

He didn’t laugh now. I turned, and he slid his arms up my back, pulling me close. He pressed his lips against mine eagerly, and I kissed him back, feeling that desperate collision of longing and relief that often comes at the end of a long separation.

“I missed you,” I managed to whisper between breaths.

“Anna, you’re so beautiful,” he said, his hands moving over all of me. “I’m so glad you’re here. I’ve waited too long for this. I wish I could stay here with you the rest of the day and not go back to work.” His hand fell to my lower back and he pulled me in, closer. The way this was going, I was glad he had to go to work. I’d made my wishes clear about taking the physical part of our relationship slowly, but I suspected he could change my mind without too much effort.

He took a step back, unbuttoned his shirt, and let it fall to the floor. Thick muscles rippled across his chest as he unfastened his jeans and slid out of them. I watched, rapt, as he walked in

his boxers to the closet and pulled his work clothes from hangers; one foot in and then the other, arms eased into a heavy shirt, and moments later, he was a man transformed. Gone were his preppy designer clothes with polo players and alligator icons. Instead, he wore the garments of a functionally dressed soldier: camouflage jacket, pants, dark boots, and cap with a single gold bar on it. A patch above his jacket pocket spelled out his last name in large black letters – BARCLAY; a crest-shaped patch on his left sleeve depicted a rearing black horse. I must have looked startled, because Nick let out a little laugh.

“Surprised? Better get used to it. It’s who I am now.”

I stared at the man who looked taller, stronger, less identifiable. There was something very attractive about the way he wore his uniform – I eyed him up and down, noticing the breadth of his shoulders, the rolled up sleeves stretched taut over the bulge of his muscles, the way his pants flowed into the stocky black boots. Before me stood temptation at its finest.

“Why don’t you wear those drab green uniforms with pointed hats, like in college?” That would be safer.

“Those are dress uniforms. We can’t wear that out in the field. The BDU – Battle Dress Uniform – is for every day. We have to be combat ready.”

“Combat?”

He adjusted his cap. “Why do you think we’re here? We don’t just go out there and play games.” He sounded offended.

“I know that, but... I guess I never really thought about what you do here.”

“Well, I’m the 1st Platoon Leader of Eagle Troop. The primary mission of the Eleventh Cavalry Regiment is the surveillance and defense of 386 kilometers of border between East and West Germany. Our squadron is responsible for 152 kilometers of that border.”

I watched as he adjusted his sleeves. “So you just watch the border?”

“In simple terms, yes. We have to know what’s going on in the East at all times. Up at Camp Lee, we go out on daily patrol and monitor what goes on in the East – for example, there’s a town just across the border that this old man lives in with his family – he goes around turning lights on and off in the buildings to make it look like the town actually has a population. The Soviets think they’re fooling us – but we know it’s only him. Most everything is in decay and no traffic goes in or out of the town except for military vehicles.”

I felt sorry for the man and his family.

“And that’s classified information,” he admonished. “Your first lesson in Army life. What I tell you in private, you do not repeat. To anyone.”

“Understood,” I said.

Nick went on. “We watch the border every hour of every day to preserve freedom in this sector of the world. And if our presence alone isn’t sufficient to deter the enemy, we’re the first line of defense in the case of a likely Soviet crossing.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means if the Soviets decide to attack, we’re the front line.”

I stopped breathing.

“You’re sitting in the middle of the Fulda Gap, Anna,” he went on. “In case you don’t know, the Fulda Gap is strategically important. It’s been used throughout history as the traditional route for westward-bound armies. Today it still holds an advantage, because it offers the shortest, easiest, and most direct route for the Soviets to sweep through West Germany, divide defending NATO forces, shut down West Germany’s financial center, and cripple the U.S. military.”

“But the Soviets aren’t going to do something like that. Are they?”

Nick ran his hand across the top of his dresser, as if looking for something. “Hard to tell. They’re going through a political change right now. But if they do ever decide to launch a Warsaw Pact invasion, we’d be the first to fight. We would have to hold the Soviets until other units are mobilized and deployed – and that could take eight hours or more. Basically we would have to hold back several Soviet tank divisions as well as infantry divisions that are equipped with thermonuclear weapons.”

I stared at him, astounded. I understood this was the Cold War and Nick was here to protect the border, but I thought it mostly involved spies and defectors. Not entire divisions armed with nukes.

Nick grabbed his wallet and stuffed it into his pocket, then picked up his car keys. “We’re a long way from Kentucky, Anna. We have a whole different reality here. The danger is very real and always present, so we have to be at the top of our game every minute of every day. There’s no room for error.”

I found my voice, barely. “What if something happens?”

“If they cross the border, it’ll be the start of World War Three. If that happens, just think of the Blackhorse Regiment as a highly mechanized and technologically superior well-armed road block. Although the Soviets will probably just see us as a speed bump.”

I felt my knees weaken as I considered the possible scenario. I had ventured into a potential war zone, trying to find love in the most volatile of places.

CHAPTER TWO

There was no way I was sharing a twin bed with Nick. Crammed against the wall, one of us would feel trapped while the other would struggle not to fall off the edge. Besides, I knew it wouldn't take much for him to exercise his advantage over me. So after he left for work, I moved my suitcases out of his room and into the empty third bedroom I discovered in the front of the house. I unpacked, explored the rest of the apartment thoroughly, and took a chilly shower in the small green-tiled bathroom that contained a dirty bathtub with no curtain and a jammed open window above the toilet. I also made sure to call my parents and my best friend Jenny. My mother didn't take the news lightly that I would now be staying with Nick instead of female officers. But after she calmed down, she suggested we not tell my dad right away, and then she offered up a kernel of advice. "Don't let him come in your door, no matter how hard he knocks," she said. "Make him wait outside. If he really loves you, he'll wait patiently." I knew she wasn't talking about doors. Awkward.

My conversation with Jenny didn't go much better. My best friend for three years, she possessed the petite, sculpted body of a gymnast, the liveliness of a cheerleading captain, and the directness of a cop. A newlywed, she had recently joined her Air Force husband on the western side of Germany, and I already missed her. My parents had only consented to this trip because I promised to split my time between her and Nick and to escape to her house earlier if necessary.

Her first question went straight to the point. “Did he try anything yet?”

“Almost,” I said. “We were in his bedroom, but then he had to leave to go back to work.”

“What happened to the romantic weekend in Frankfurt?”

“He said they just came back from the border, and he had to finish some office work.”

Jenny was silent on the other end, and I had to ask if she was still there.

“I’m here. I told you he’s only interested in one thing, but you wouldn’t listen.”

“He’s interested in more than just that. Besides, nothing happened.”

Her voice dripped with disdain. “It will. Trust me, he will try. He’s using you.”

I watched numbers on a black box by the telephone slowly flip, like the counter on a VCR. “No, he isn’t.” But secretly I wondered if she were right, if that was the underlying reason he wanted me here. “I have to give this a chance – I’m not giving up after just a couple of hours. Maybe it didn’t start off like a fairy tale, but that doesn’t mean he won’t end up as the prince. I have to try.”

Jenny sighed. “He’s just going to disappoint you.”

“No, he won’t.” Snapping sounds came through the phone line as Jenny bit the ends of her fingernails. “Don’t worry, Jenny. It will be fine. You know I needed to do this.”

“You think you did. But I never thought he was right for you.”

I watched the numbers on the box turn steadily. “What is this black counter thing by the phone? The numbers on it keep turning.”

Jenny laughed. “That’s a phone meter – it has a counter on it that clicks to monitor your time on the phone. We pay a fee based on the number of clicks. The farther away you call, the faster it clicks, so long distance is expensive. It’s probably best not to talk too long.”

I looked closer at it. It looked as though it were four decades old. World War II era.

“I should go, then. This phone clicker thing is going to charge Nick a month’s pay for my phone calls.”

“Call me if you get in trouble. I’ll drive over there and get you myself if I need to.”

We hung up and a few minutes later, I heard Nick’s car pull into the driveway. I ran back into my new bedroom and watched him from the window. He pulled his cap off as he walked briskly to the door. I sat on my bed and tried to act casual as his footsteps thundered up the steps.

“What’re you doing in here?” Nick asked suspiciously as he entered my bedroom.

“Nothing much. Just waiting for you.” I stood up; he came to me and wrapped his arms around me. He pressed his lips against my ear, my cheek, my mouth, and then he lowered me to the bed, the weight of his body confining me. “Nick,” I said. “Nick, wait.”

“I don’t want to,” he whispered. As his lips descended to my throat and worked around to the side of my neck, thoughts began to burn in my mind – tempting thoughts that could potentially set my willpower ablaze and turn it to ash: *alone in this room... my gorgeous guy... those magical lips... that move, right there...*

And then I heard the front door open and close. Heavy footsteps echoed against the floor.

“Nick, someone’s here,” I whispered.

“Shhh. I need you. I haven’t been with a woman in four months.”

Nick had only lived in West Germany for three months, arriving right about the time we reconnected through a mutual friend. I knew he’d been with other women before we got back together, but I didn’t want to be reminded of it, and I certainly didn’t want to feel like this was the main reason he wanted me to come.

“We can’t do this now.” I ran my hands across the bumps of his shoulder blades, smoothing his tensed muscles. “You know how I feel about this. It’s too soon. Let’s wait until

we hit France, and then it can happen the way you wrote it – in St. Tropez with wine and the sunset and a backrub and the beaches of Pampelonne...”

“Damn, Anna. I can’t wait until we go to France...”

“There’ll be no distractions. Nobody to get in the way. No parents, no ex-boyfriends...”

He buried his face between my neck and shoulder. “There are no distractions right now.”

“There’s a distraction that just walked through your front door.”

He lifted himself up, drilled his blue-green eyes into me. “I thought you came here to be with me, to see if we’re compatible, if what we had before is the real thing.”

“I did,” I said. “But I’m not ready for this step.”

“There’s no better way to find out, Anna.”

I tried to peek around him to see if anyone was there, but before I could get a good look, a deep voice flooded the room. “Sorry, man. You want me to shut the door?”

Nick turned around and looked behind him, then he looked back at me. “It’s cool,” he said to the figure who stood silhouetted at his door. “Just give me a sec.” The figure left and Nick stared into me, his eyes shimmery like turquoise pools. “I’ll wait, but I don’t know how long I can manage.”

“I’ll make it easier on you. I’m going to sleep in here.”

Nick sat up and let his eyes drift around the room. They stopped on my empty suitcases stacked in the corner. “Why aren’t you staying with me? In my room?”

I sat up and scooted to the edge of the bed. “We’ll both be more comfortable if I sleep in here, Nick. You get up too early and I really don’t do well sleeping against the wall.”

“You can have the edge if you want.”

“You’d have to crawl over me every morning. You won’t sleep well. You need to be well rested for work. Believe me, it’s better this way. And I’m only one room away.”

His fingers trailed across my hand. “I lost you a year ago and found you again, and now after all these months, I finally get you over here. The way I see it, one room away is still too far.”

I was mildly afraid to share a bed with him. We had slept in the same bed once before, when I spent the weekend with his family at their horse farm in Woodford County. On this occasion, we stayed in the guest cottage a fair distance from the main house, an arrangement I was sure Nick had orchestrated, but which backfired after he imbibed too many after-dinner drinks and opted to take the long walk back through the horse barns to the cottage. By the time we returned to the cottage, he couldn’t walk a straight line or speak without slurring, and although he had his hands all over me as soon as we walked in the door, he passed out in no time, sprawled half-clothed across the top of the tufted bedspread. At the time, I considered it divine intervention.

“I just want to start out slowly, you know? I can always change my mind.”

“Oh, you’ll change your mind.” He leaned in and kissed me, and I felt myself weaken. “You know what? I couldn’t wait to come home today. First time I’ve really had something to look forward to since I got here. It’s kind of cool knowing I’ve got someone like you waiting at home for me.”

I liked the sound of that. I knew Nick wouldn’t disappoint me, regardless of what Jenny thought.

“Tell you what. Let me get changed, and then we’ll get something to eat. I’ve also got a surprise for you!” A devilish smile crept over his face and I couldn’t help but laugh.

While Nick changed clothes, I made my way toward the small enclosed kitchen at the end of the long hallway. A stocky, dusty-haired man a few years older than me turned and stepped

forward, extending his hand. “Hey! I’m Scott Williamson, your new housemate. And you must be Barbara.”

I laughed at his joke and took his warm hand in mine. “Nice to meet you.” His hand felt trustworthy, solid.

“Good thing you finally got here, Anna,” Scott said. “Another day, and we would’ve had to muzzle Nick. You’re all he’s talked about for weeks.”

I felt my eyebrows lift. “I hope he’s only told you good things about me.”

“No worries. He practically thinks you’re a saint.”

Scott opened a bag of hot bratwurst on the counter and grinned boyishly at me, with pink cheeks and round blue eyes that sparkled. “Hope you’re hungry,” he said, offering me some.

I lifted a plate from the rack on the wall and began my first meal in Germany with my new friend.

Eventually, though, jet lag caught up with me, and the glass of wine with dinner didn’t help. I felt as if I were walking on a trampoline – the earth supported me as I walked, but it seemed to bend and give with every step I took. If the decision had been mine, I would have gone straight to bed after dinner – but Nick had news for me.

“My friend Todd is the best bartender in the squadron,” he said as we cleaned the dinner plates. “He and some friends are coming over tonight, and he’ll make you the best Amaretto Sour you’ve ever had.”

“Your friends are coming over tonight?” I felt my leg begin to tap against the cabinet.

“I want them to meet you. Kind of like a welcoming party. That’s okay, isn’t it?”

I wasn’t sure I was ready to meet the family. But I couldn’t say no.

“Don’t worry, they’ll love you,” he assured me, while handing me a plate to dry. “You already know Scott, and there’s Todd and another guy I work with who comes in handy – he speaks fluent German.”

I didn’t care about the particular traits of Nick’s friends. I just wanted time to adjust to being here, to being with Nick. I stared hard at his blue-green eyes.

“God, you’re beautiful. And I’ve missed you,” he purred. “Since the day you first ran back to what’s-his-name and every day since.”

I leaned into his arm. “That was a big mistake on my part, going back to Andrew instead of staying with you.”

“I tried to warn you.”

“I know. I was dumb.”

Nick flicked soap suds at me. “Why did you go back to him? You never really told me.”

Because I wanted a sure thing, and you were leaving for three years. No – I couldn’t say that. It was too harsh. “Because he was safe.”

“Hmmp. I defend our country. But I’m not safe?” He stared down into the dirty dishwater and swirled the dishrag across a plate.

I swallowed hard. I hadn’t expected this conversation to start so soon. “I was with Andrew for over two years before I met you. I didn’t know you as well. You were...more risky. But a risk I’m now willing to take.”

Nick thought a moment and then shrugged before handing me another plate to dry. “Fair enough. I knew you’d come back eventually. Like I said before, water under the bridge.”

As soon as we finished in the kitchen, Scott came in and grabbed three beers from the refrigerator. He offered one to me, but I politely declined. I leaned against the small wooden

table crammed against the long wall of the kitchen. “You have a nice place here, Scott. Thanks for letting me stay.”

Nick giggled. “Yeah, she thought she was staying with female officers.”

I shot him a dirty look and warned, “No blonde jokes,” but that only made him laugh harder.

Scott looked from Nick to me, misunderstanding. “No female officers here. We’re lucky we have a decent place to offer you. Not everyone lives on the economy. Only officers have the privilege, but many of them live down at the BOQ or in the Family Housing Area.”

I felt as though he spoke a foreign language only remotely associated with English. “What does all that mean?” I asked.

Nick grinned and threw an arm around me. “The BOQ stands for Bachelor Officer’s Quarters. Married officers and those with children can live in the Family Housing Area – it’s like an apartment complex – even has a playground. Some of them live on the economy too. Either way, the kids here all go to the same schools – we have our own elementary school for dependents right here in Bad Kissingen. You might be interested in seeing it since you’re going to be a teacher.”

I nodded. “But what does that have to do with the economy?”

Both of them burst out laughing and Scott choked on his beer. While they laughed shamelessly at me, I smiled stupidly, trying not to let myself get swept up in the sound of Nick’s idiotic laughter.

“Sorry,” Scott said as he caught his breath. “‘Living on the economy’ means you live out in the community, in private residences. You pay for your housing and you generally get a better place.”

Someone knocked on the door then and a chorus of deep voices drifted down to me, an ensemble of tenors and baritones marching to the beat of a dozen shoes striding down the hallway. A slew of strange men advancing to meet me, and fear caught in my throat. I wondered if they could smell fear the way a dog could. *Show no weakness, swallow the fear*, I thought as the team of men approached and the familiar veil of shyness dropped over me.

Nick gave a general introduction and then a short parade of new faces passed by, each officer taking a turn introducing himself. Names and faces quickly blended into a mishmash of identities, except for Todd, who had been mentioned earlier, and an officer named Mike who stood out because he resembled Tom Cruise.

“We don’t mean to stare, but you’re pretty enough to star in a USO show,” Mike said, sporting a Cruise-like smile. I thought I saw a tint of blush creep into his cheeks.

“Watch it,” Nick warned.

I thanked him, and then the men scattered for beer or the long wooden antique dresser in the dining room that performed double duty as a bar, holding bottles of every kind: Stolichnaya Vodka, Jim Beam, Tanqueray, Tequila, Kahlua, Amaretto, Puerto Rican Rum, and mixers of every type, even mint flavoring for juleps. Uninterested in the bar and uncomfortable being the center of attention, I excused myself to the living room, a space dedicated to entertainment. One wilted houseplant parked next to the loveseat barely qualified as alive; the stereo system, with multiple components connected by tangled wires, was well-fed by crates full of vinyl albums and loose piles of cassette tapes sitting nearby. A worn and faded yellow plaid couch anchored the back wall under the windows; next to it, a brown vinyl easy chair sat at an angle, both pieces within easy reach of an old wooden coffee table that, evidenced by the numerous scratches in its finish, had seen its fair share of parties. Several newspapers lay strewn across the bottom shelf of the coffee table: *Stars and Stripes*, the military newspaper. On the far wall, bookcases flanked

each side of the corner television, displaying an assortment of Cavalry mugs, framed photos, and an impressive collection of books of all colors and sizes, including *The Be-Happy Attitudes* and *The Story of the U.S. Cavalry*.

The bookshelf on the right caught my eye – it was Nick’s space. Conspicuously bare, it held only a few items: four volumes of *The Kentuckian*, the University of Kentucky yearbook; a few soft bound books by Zane Grey; and a large wooden fraternity paddle leaning against a college highball glass and a ceramic beer stein. A pile of stickers with the Blackhorse insignia sat in front of the paddle, next to a license plate frame that read “World’s Sexiest Man.” *Where did that come from?* As I bent down to look at it, against the dark wood of the shelf I noticed a dusty photograph tucked just under the frame. The subject of the photo was a dark-haired sorority girl smiling over her cleavage.

The plucky beats of the latest Madonna album burst from the two enormous speakers against the far wall, and someone in the kitchen whooped. I flipped the picture over, turned from the bookshelf, and retrieved my own book from the coffee table where I’d left it earlier – a hardbound classic edition of Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. I settled into the soft brown easy chair and found the page where I left off.

A male character argued in the story with a woman over her driving habits and his observation that she was not a careful driver. ‘They’ll keep out of my way. It takes two to make an accident,’ the book read, and the other character answered, ‘Suppose you met somebody just as careless as yourself.’ I paused to consider the next line: ‘I hope I never will,’ when from somewhere in the distance I vaguely heard the front door of Nick’s apartment close, followed by a new set of footsteps down the hall.

The steps stopped abruptly at the entrance to the living room, and when I looked up at the man standing in front of me, everything in the world disappeared except for him.

Tall and blue-eyed, he was handsome to be sure, but not even a close second to Nick as far as looks were concerned. Still, something about him grabbed me – something in his eyes captivated me and blotted out the rest of the world.

My chair slid backwards, or at least it seemed to, and startled me enough that I sucked in a quick breath of air. My pulse jumped, and I sensed a familiar flush rise to my cheeks and burn there. I couldn't tear my eyes away – I felt as though he had reached inside me and seized whatever it was that grounded me to the earth, and lifted me from it. He stared at me too, and then his eyes crinkled at the corners and his lips lifted into a smile, flashing a glorious dimple on his right cheek. It almost seemed as if he had read my feelings and thoughts and laughed at them. The walls and furnishings of the room slowly came back into my periphery, and I returned to the moment, staring awkwardly now at a stranger.

I ripped my eyes away from him and glued them to my book, seeing nothing but scribbles on the page. *What just happened?* I didn't know this man, or why I felt suddenly self-conscious, or where the walls had gone for that matter. My face blazed and beads of perspiration broke out on my forehead, and still I felt him staring at me, unmoving. *Read the words on the page,* I urged myself.

Just as careless as yourself.

He was still staring.

My face burned red hot. I read a sentence, and then read it again, but the words wouldn't make sense now. I was afraid to look up, afraid he had noticed my reaction. Then Nick's voice exploded through the silence.

“Anna – that's Ryan,” he called from the kitchen. “He's the one who speaks German.”

I had to look up – it was the only polite thing to do. But I feared that if I looked at him again, he would sense the way he had seized me, perceive my confused thoughts, read the unintended betrayal in my mind. I lifted my head defiantly and locked onto his eyes.

They burned through me.

“Nice to meet you,” I said properly, clearly, dispassionately.

The dimpled smile faded and his face lost all expression. His mouth closed tightly and his chin moved forward as his jaw set. He nodded almost imperceptibly. A set of perfect denim blue eyes bored through me as if they knew all my secrets.

“My pleasure.”

Somewhere between tenor and bass, his voice poured out mellow and rich, like liquid chocolate. He crossed the room to shake my hand, and when his palm overtook mine, a powerful sensation surged through me and I didn’t want to let go. He withdrew his hand slowly and stepped back, never breaking his eyes from mine. A moment longer he lingered, and then he turned and walked to the kitchen.

I watched him cross the length of the room; I knew I should look back to my book, but that was impossible now. I took the opportunity to inspect the man who had caused this strange reaction in me. Ryan stood at least an inch or two over six feet and he was strong-shouldered but lanky, even looking as if he could stand to gain a few pounds to fill out the seat of his jeans. He sported a substantial five-o’clock shadow, and I wondered if he had gone several days without a shave or if it had just grown since this morning. From the look of his thick hair, I guessed it to be the latter. His hair fell somewhere between dark blonde and copper, cropped short according to officer standards but still somehow out of control, like there was so much hair that it couldn’t be made to obey without shaving it off entirely. But what had captured me the most was his eyes – eyes I could no longer see with his back to me.

Nick emerged from the kitchen and the officers followed, flooding the living room with beer and mixed drinks. Ryan disappeared into the kitchen and came back out with a beer in hand, but he stopped at the entrance to the room, where he leaned against the wood trim, sipping his beer and stealing glances at me. The other officers scattered, and while Scott lifted the needle off the Madonna record, Nick turned on the TV and popped in one of the many MTV tapes I had recorded for him – how many hours I had sat in front of the television, taping music videos and movies for him. It had been his only request of me –he missed nothing more about America than MTV. The first video that played, “Money for Nothing,” got Nick all charged up.

He sauntered over, mouthing the lyrics, and perched himself on the arm of my chair. “I told you they’d like you,” he whispered in my ear. I looked up at him, into eyes that could have stolen their color from the waters off Key West.

“Your friends all seem really nice.” I smiled, and then glanced over at Ryan. *‘Nice’ doesn’t describe him, though – maybe intense? Mysterious? Captivating?*

Nick followed my gaze. “Most of them are. That one has issues. He won’t say a lot to you.” Nick let his fingers glide down the length of my arm. “Now put your book away and enjoy a drink. I’ll have Todd make you one.”

Todd didn’t wait to be asked; he scurried away to the bar.

“What do you think of Germany so far, Anna?” The question had come from someone with a strong Southern accent, but I couldn’t remember his name.

I glanced again at Ryan. “It’s beautiful.”

“Yeah, it’s a pretty decent place to live,” the man answered. “Except for the cold, snowy winters and oh-four-thirty cold starts on the hard stand...”

“In tanks that slip track in the mud,” someone added.

Scott dropped a bag of chips on the table and sat down on the floor in front of it.

“Summers are nice, and the beer is plentiful. There’s good and bad about everything.”

Todd approached, carrying three drinks. He set one on the table for himself: a dark concoction with a layer of white on top. He handed an identical drink to Nick, who muttered a sign of approval. The last drink, amber in complexion, he handed to me. “Amaretto Sour for the lady. If it’s too strong, let me know and I’ll soften it up.”

I thanked him and took a sip. Definitely strong, but I’d had stronger. I could handle it as long as I didn’t have too many. Then the volume on the television went up, someone started singing along to “Legs,” and the party began.

I stayed near Nick most of the night as music filled the room and the officers consumed ever increasing amounts of alcohol. We sang and screamed to Boy George, Duran Duran, the Talking Heads, and The Cure. One officer even performed the *Thriller* dance when it played. For hours, beer flowed, music blared, voices bellowed, and soon the cigars were brought out and passed all around. Todd made sure my glass never went dry, and so I walked the fine line between control and abandon, which meant that my inhibitions disappeared but I retained enough presence of mind to not make a complete fool of myself. I flirted with Nick and chatted up every officer in the room – except for Ryan. He avoided me, and each time I came within earshot, he moved elsewhere. I didn’t mind – after the strange reaction he caused in me, I wanted to keep my distance from him, too. But that didn’t stop me from watching him throughout the night – and apparently, it didn’t stop him either, as I caught him staring at me on more than one occasion.

It was when the Frankie Goes To Hollywood video played that Ryan came close to me. As the band urged listeners to “Relax,” Nick laughed at Ryan. “Those guys personal friends of yours, Ryan?”

“Any friend of yours is a friend of mine,” Ryan laughed back, the nearness of his voice startling me. I had been so busy watching the TV and talking to Scott that I hadn’t noticed that Ryan had crossed the room and now hovered behind me. I felt a strange mix of desire and discomfort, and I thought I could feel his hot breath spilling over the back of my neck.

I turned my head to look up at Ryan and found his denim eyes staring down into mine. He wore no smile, flashed no dimple, but his eyes penetrated mine just the same. *He’s reading my thoughts, my feelings.* I didn’t care, and I felt no fear. I fought the urge to tilt my head to the side and let my blonde hair sweep across his arm.

Instead, I excused myself to go to the bathroom. I needed to collect myself, to seize control of the lightheadedness that threatened my equilibrium, and a quick splash of cool water would help, or so I thought. Rounding the corner on my way back, though, I nearly collided with Ryan in the hallway, sending his drink sloshing like waves over the sides of his glass.

"I'm so sorry!" I said. *Dang, my words are slurred.*

"It’s no problem," he sang in his mellow voice.

“Where are you going?”

“I… don’t know,” he said, and I sensed that he couldn’t think up an excuse fast enough.

I studied his hand as it held the glass – it was a habit of mine to peruse people’s hands, as if they could tell me something about the person – and I noticed how different it was from Nick’s, whose hands were sturdy and stout, like they should be wrapped around the handle of a sledgehammer. Ryan’s hand was more refined – strong and tanned, but more suited for holding an exquisite pen about to sign an executive order of some kind.

I looked up at him, into his too-blue eyes. He didn't seem in a hurry to move out of the way and neither was I, so I stood there feeling short, waiting for him to say or do something. *He's really tall,* I thought, *my mind swimming in alcohol, and really beautiful. His complexion is*

so...perfect...and the stubble really is kind of cute... I wanted to reach up and run my fingers across it, but I stopped myself. He looked down at me as if daring me to do it, but I shook my head and wobbled unsteadily. Ryan smiled and his eyes crinkled and a sort of deliciousness seemed to emanate from him, triggering a feeling of euphoria and rendering me oblivious to anything else going on in the apartment. For the moment, we were the only two people in the world, and with mere inches between us, I felt even more intoxicated.

"You're not what I expected," he finally said quietly, almost apologetically.

"Okay...Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" I heard my words seep out as if in slow motion, and I hoped they were at least coherent.

Ryan stared at me, his eyes intense. "Both."

I contemplated his glass, noticed how the ice sparkled in the dim light of the hallway. An urge too powerful to resist overcame me, and with one finger I wiped carefully at a streak of amber liquid that had spilled over his glass and trickled down the back of his hand. His skin felt smooth and firm.

"Are you always this blunt with people you don't know?" I asked pointedly. I turned my eyes up to him and licked the bitter bourbon off the end of my finger.

"No, I'm not." He glanced at the place where I had wiped his hand. "Are you?"

"Depends on the person."

He adjusted his stance and his eyes flickered away.

I leaned slightly toward him and lifted my chin to see him better. "You're not like the rest of Nick's friends."

"How so?"

I wasn't sure. I wasn't even sure why I said that. All I knew was that something about Ryan was different, and it grabbed me in a way nothing ever had before. And I wanted more.

“You’re just different, you know? And rather beauti...”

“Anna!” Nick said as he bounded around the corner. “Come on! You’re missing the party!” He grabbed my arm and held it up like a trophy in front of him.

"He claims his prize," Ryan said with a dull voice and sparkling eyes.

Nick yanked me back into the living room, back into the midst of the party, away from Ryan, leaving him alone at the wall. Sweet hazy smoke filled the room and the voices and music tumbled over each other and tangled my mind, and then I was talking to the Tom Cruise look-a-like and searching the room for Ryan, who had vanished. Sometime later, Nick corralled several of the officers in a game of Quarters, so I stole from the room and isolated myself in the kitchen with a glass of cold water. *What’s wrong with you?* I scolded myself. *You came here for Nick!* I couldn’t allow Ryan to produce any kind of effect on me again. *Forget the eyes – forget whatever it is about him that makes you feel so...* And then Ryan appeared at the doorway, blocking my exit. I caught my breath as he looked me over, and I leaned back against the small table.

“You really shouldn’t do that, you know,” he said.

“Do what?”

Ryan’s lips tightened as he struggled to suppress a smile. “Everything.”

“What did I do?”

As Ryan shook his head and sipped his drink, I noticed his glass, half-empty now. I walked to the freezer and pried ice cubes loose from the tray and dropped one into his glass, the clinking of the ice ringing like a silver spoon against crystal.

“Your eyes – they’re greener than Ireland...” he said, studying me.

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never been.” I dropped another cube into his glass, and then another. I closed the freezer door and forced myself to step back from him.

He leaned heavily against the doorway and looked at me with an odd smile. “How do you do that?” he asked, and after too many drinks and not enough sleep, I wasn’t sure what he was talking about.

“Um, I pull the ice cubes out of the trays and drop them into the glass.”

His eyebrows came together and his face turned scarlet, and he shoved his glass toward me. I took it from him reticently, allowing my hand to linger over the exchange.

“That’s not what I meant. It’s the way you...” A roar from the Quarters table interrupted him and then died away. “Never mind.” Ryan pivoted and walked with heavy, deliberate footsteps down the wood-floored hallway.

Nick had been right about some things – Todd was a good bartender, based on the effects of my fourth Amaretto Sour – usually I couldn’t drink this much and still be standing – but Nick had also been wrong. Ryan did have something to say to me. He just didn’t know how.

At the end of the hallway, Ryan flung the door open and whipped his head around toward me, stopping long enough to stare at me, as if I’d done something wrong. Then he was gone, disappeared into the night without a goodbye. As the door closed behind him, I felt a strange yearning, like I needed to follow him. Instead, I looked at the glass in my hand and took a sip where his mouth had been.