

The Second Chance
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Anneliese's Story

Chapter 1

“Sorry,” I mumbled as I tripped over the legs of a soldier seated inside the entrance of Dr. Ransom's office.

“No problem,” he replied giving me a quick glance as he shifted his position in the chair.

I glanced around the Ramstein Air Force Base mental health facility. The office at Ramstein looked pretty similar to the office at Whiteman. The suicide prevention posters were a little unsettling no matter which office at what base. The message was good though, reach out for help. I felt right at home.

“Take a seat. I'll be with you in a moment,” the receptionist called from her desk. She was seated behind a frosted glass window that made her image kind a blurry. It must be a little intimidating to be in a psych office where the majority of the patients really were armed and dangerous.

“Sarah Keller,” the receptionist called. The little sliding window opened and the receptionist was once again visible. Slowly rising from the seat in the corner of the office, I walked a few steps to the receptionist's window.

“I'm Sarah Anneliese Keller,” I handed the receptionist my military ID. “Could you please make a note for the doctor that I like to be called Anneliese?”

“Sure,” she replied as she took my ID to complete the chart. “Here you go, Anneliese.”

I took my ID from her extended hand and stuck it into my wristlet.

“The doctor will be with you shortly.” She slid the window back in place with a resounding click.

Returning to my seat, I flipped through the magazine selection. *Sports Illustrated*, the base newspaper, and a super old *People* magazine were part of the collection. The *People* magazine was so old the happily married couple on the cover was probably divorced. Shoved in the back of *People* was the *Captain America* issue dealing with suicide prevention. I glanced at the cover and then hid the magazine at the bottom of the stack. I rolled my shoulders and tried not to look at the other patients in the office.

“Damn it, Dad,” someone yelled from the other side of the door as something slammed into the wall. “I’m so damn tired of this shit too.”

Poor guy, I can totally relate.

The door opened and a nurse stepped out. “Sarah Keller,” she asked as she looked up from her clipboard. So much for the receptionist noting my name was Anneliese.

“Anneliese.” I said to the nurse. “I go by Anneliese.” My heart started to race as I followed her down a short hallway to the examination room. I stopped and placed my hand on the wall. *Inhale...exhale...inhale...exhale*. Closing my eyes I tried to gain control of my breathing.

Issues, I have issues...issues with examinations rooms, issues with doctors, and issues with my issues. No doubt, I was totally messed up and probably needed more help than just another bottle of pills.

Taking a deep breath in, I exhaled out slowly. The breathing technique from my previous doctor was actually pretty effective.

Don't think about the examining room focus on determining which room the ballistic dude was being examined. *Breath in...breath out...breath in...breath out...*

He was talking to his dad; he might be a military brat like me. I might run into him at school maybe. Of course, I wouldn't know it was him. Why do I even care? Maybe it's because he might be messed up like me. Well, he might be messed up, but no one is messed up like me. Okay, no one is not quite accurate; according to my previous doctor a very small percentage of the population suffer from night terrors like mine. How comforting.

"The doctor will be in to see you in a few minutes."

"Thanks," I replied as the nurse made her exit. The doctor was probably going to take forever. Hopping up on the table, I practiced my breathing techniques. Inhale, exhale, don't think about the examining room. Inhale, exhale, don't fall asleep. I continued to breathe deeply hoping my breathing would help me overcome the panic of being trapped in an examining room. Looking at the pristine stainless steel counter across from the examination table made me feel sick. Trapped was the right word.

The door slowly opened. The doctor entered the examining room carrying his tablet and dressed in fatigues. "So, let's see Sarah Anneliese Keller recently of Whiteman's Air force Base. Whiteman's in Missouri? I've been there. That's kind of in the middle of nowhere." Glancing up from the computer that likely contained all of my deep, dark secrets he continued, "Sarah, how do you like K-Town?"

Name issue, name issue, it was like a trigger for me. I exhaled slowly, "I prefer to be called Anneliese; I guess the nurse did not make a notation on my chart." *Breath in...breath out...* K-Town? Should I know what that is?"

“Well, Anneliese, K-Town is what we call Kaiserslautern.” He totally emphasized the Anneliese. He was fast, he figured out my name was just one of my many issues or he noticed it in my charts.

“Good to know,” hopefully I sounded friendly. “We arrived in Germany a couple of days ago. I’ve just been on the base for three days. We’ll see the town when we’re settled in.”

Pausing, I tried to be honest and not whiney. “My dad wanted my first stop to be the local shrink. Sorry, I hope that’s not offensive. Sometimes what I think comes out before I think about what I should really say.”

The doctor studied his tablet, his finger quickly scrolling down the screen. It felt so invasive, him scrolling up and down the screen reading about me, reading about my life.

“How’s the sleep since you arrived?” he asked as he continued to study my records.

Tilting my head back I stared at the ceiling debating the best way to respond. Being a struggling optimist I laid it out there.

“Honestly?”

“Honesty would be helpful if you want me to help.” He dark eyes bore into mine as he waited for my reply.

Breath in...breath out... “Worse, I mean way worse. Back at Whiteman I had the nightmares maybe once or twice a week. Since arriving at Ramstein I’ve been waking up pretty much every hour. Last night I didn’t sleep at all.”

The doctor raised an eyebrow in apparent disbelief. “I wish I was exaggerating. Maybe it’s the move? That would make sense, right?”

Looking directly into the doctor’s disbelieving gaze hoping he could see my sincerity, “I think it’s really tough on my dad. I pretend to sleep so he can actually go to sleep. At

Whiteman's they gave me some pills that actually helped. You can see the prescription on the screen. I don't know how I'm going to start school tomorrow if I can't get some sleep."

The doctor scrolled down the screen. "Your records indicate your mom passed away several years ago. Do you think your dreams might be associated with your mom's death?"

"I don't think so. I had the dreams before my mom died." The frustration was clearly evident in my voice.

"Your records also indicate you can't remember the dreams. Is that still true?"

"It's true. I can't remember. When I try to remember my head starts to hurt, the pain is really bad it makes me want to throw up. Maybe you can figure this out, not that the other docs had any luck." I exhaled slowly. *Breath in...breath out...* "Seriously, I know you have more important cases and I am not your primary concern. So, any type of sleeping medication would be appreciated."

"You sound a little frustrated. I guess I'm not the first shrink to ask you to delve into your dreams." Arching his eyebrows at me he emphasized the word shrink. He stood up and placed his tablet on the counter near the door. "I'll be back in just few minutes."

Great. Taking a deep breath I thought about the last dream. I squeezed my eyes tightly and tried to remember. The pain was instantaneous. Shock waves hit my head. My head felt light. I was going to pass out. Little lights started flashing behind my eyelids...

Where was Maman? Where was Anna? I glanced at the people being herded through the camp. Everyone looked the same. Everyone looked less human. I wanted to believe the worst was over. Glancing around my barren surroundings, studying the camp guards and watching people being prodded like cattle...the worst must be over?

"Anneliese, Anneliese," a voice invaded the darkness. Where the hell am I?

Voices continued to invade my personal black space. The dream was elusive but it was there. Something was there.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. “I was trying to remember the dreams. Sometimes when I try, I well, I pass out.”

Taking my wrist in her hand the nurse took my pulse. “Take a few deep breaths. You’re going to be just fine.” *Inhale, exhale...inhale, exhale...*

The door opened. The doctor entered the room with a small bottle in his hand.

“Okay Sarah, sorry, I meant to say Anneliese.”

Nodding slightly in acknowledgement to his apology I waited for him to speak. “Here’s your medicine and a journal. If you remember anything about the dreams, jot them down. Keep the journal by your bed.”

Handing me the pills and the journal he said, “We need to dig into the dreams. Set up an appointment with the receptionist in two weeks. That will give you time to monitor the use of the medicine and time to settle in at the base.”

“Sounds good.”

The doc stared at me intently, watching me put the pills in my pocket. He must have noticed the accidental overdose from a couple of years ago in the notes. “Two pills, Anneliese, right before bed. No more.” He paused, “Roger?”

“Roger that.”

Was ballistic boy was still around? The doctor was not having a good day; furniture flying, patients passing out, not good at all.

“Sarah,” the nurse said. *What part of ‘my name is Anneliese’ was confusing for these people?* “Do you have a way home?”

“I’m good. I’m going to use the shuttle. Thanks for checking.”

“Here’s your appointment card. We’ll send you an e-mail.”

“Thanks, ma’am.” I waved as I walked out of the office. I quickly walked down the hallway, took the elevator down to the main floor and escaped into the sunshine. Closing my eyes I took a deep breath. I had pills. I would be able to sleep. I opened my eyes and started down the steps.

A boy stood at the bottom of the steps. He looked familiar...head pounding, breathing quickening, I sat down on the step clasping my head in my hands...oh shoot...

Max and Karl stood at the bottom of the steps waiting for me as always. My heart skipped a beat as I looked at Max. I waved and gave my friends a smile. I studied Max under lowered lashes wondering when our feelings changed. It seemed one moment we were friends and the next moment more than friends. Karl seemed oblivious to the change in our relationship. He was so involved with the Party that he noticed little else.

“Hello Hannelore,” they said in unison. Both were smiling broadly. For some reason me in my uniform made them smile.

I watched as Karl’s face changed from warm and welcoming to almost evil. I glanced behind me to see what caused the drastic change in my friend. It was Samuel our former classmate.

“Dirty Jew,” Karl snarled as he started up the stairs toward Samuel. Max grabbed his arm to stop his ascent. Karl didn’t move up the stairs as he kept his icy glare focused on Samuel.

I sighed as Samuel reached the bottom step. A confrontation was avoided.

Karl jerked his arm from Max’s hold and shoved Samuel to the ground. “Dirty Jew,” he repeated as he spat on Samuel. My stomach roiled as I watched Samuel struggle to his feet.

“Nein, Karl,” I said from the steps. “Please.”

Karl nodded in response turning away from his victim and focusing a smile on Max as he gave him a friendly shove. “You’re no fun, old man, nothing like a little Jew bating on a sunny Sunday afternoon.”

A chill ran down my spine as Karl reached for my hand assisting me down the final stairs. Max’s feelings would never change. Karl, however, what would he do if he knew my secret?

Max's Story

Chapter 2

The rage was all consuming. I could not remember the frigging dreams. It's not like I hadn't tried. Picking up the chair the doctor just vacated, I heaved it against the wall.

"Damn it, Dad. I'm so damn tired of this shit too."

Dad looked from me to the chair shaking his head as he reached for it. Ignoring the chair he opened his arms.

Just like a kid I hugged him with all my might. Even at six foot two and two hundred pounds I felt small compared to him. "Sorry about that sir," I mumbled into his epaulets.

"It is okay son. You know I don't care if you go to the Air Force Academy. Hell, I'd prefer you didn't follow in my footsteps if the truth be told. What kind of life have I given you anyway?"

I stepped back and grinned, "A helluva good one, sir."

"That's what I'm talking about boy, swearing like a sailor. You are hurting my virgin ears. There I go again, I'm hoping you don't understand my meaning." He grinned too. Relieved, like me, the awkward moment passed.

"I'll pick up the chair and you can apologize to the doc, okay Max?"

"Yes sir," I replied with a mock salute. "Do you think I can convince the doc not to add something about a tendency to violent behavior to my records? I mean I've never demonstrated violent behavior. I've got enough to work through anyway. How do I explain suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome when I've had absolutely no traumatic stress? Maybe I could have a career as a research specimen, for the greater good and all." Dad shook his head and tried not to laugh. He patted me on the shoulder and shook his head.

Opening the door to the hallway I walked toward the doctor. “Sir, I am very sorry about rearranging the furniture.”

The doctor turned from his tablet, faced me, and raised an eyebrow, “So, that’s what you call it, rearranging the furniture. First, tossing the chair was an act of frustration not a tendency toward violent behavior. Second, I need a favor.”

“Certainly, sir,” great, what type of favor could the doctor want. They have people who are paid to wash the latrines.

“No, I don’t need you to clean the latrines,” he said with a grin. I must have given him a look that said something like, how the hell did you know that’s what I was thinking because he laughed.

“This favor is a task you might actually enjoy. I met with a girl who just arrived from the States. Her dad was stationed at Whiteman and they’ve just been deployed to Ramstein. Anyway, I was hoping you could assist her in navigating the shuttle system back to her new home. She lives near you.”

“Now? Aren’t you concerned I might lead her down the wrong path? After all I just demonstrated...”

Cutting me off midsentence Dr. Ransom replied, “Your ability to rearrange office furniture? You’re fine Max. Well, maybe not fine in all aspects of your psyche, but fine to ensure a pretty girl gets back to her base housing.”

“Well, hell, doc you didn’t tell me she was pretty. Not that looks matter; it’s all about a girl’s personality.” I grinned at the doc, pretty or not pretty I hadn’t found any girls I was remotely interested in here at Ramstein. It’s hard to be new. I was happy to help her, pretty or not pretty.

“You’re a good guy, Max, I’m confident we will get this figured out before you apply to the Academy.”

“Thank you, sir. My dad probably thinks you had me lobotomized. Hey, now there’s a course of action we haven’t considered.” It was easier to joke about my condition than to deal with it.

Doctor Ransom rolled his eyes. “You can wait for her outside. Thanks for your help.”

“No problem, sir.”

“Sounds like a plan, see you at 1600 hours.” Dad said into his cell phone as I entered the examination room.

“I’m good to go. I promised the doc I’d help a new girl home from the office.”

“Damn,” I said and popped myself in the head, “I forgot to ask the doc her name. I can see it now, me asking every girl coming out of the building, ‘Hey, are you the crazy chic Dr. Ransom wants me to walk home?’.”

“Son, adding ‘crazy’ as a qualifier won’t get you near the plane. Her name is Sarah Keller and I know her dad from the Sand Box. When we were in Iraq I saw her picture once, a pretty blond girl if I remember correctly. Well, she was pretty when she was around six. Look for a girl about your age in civvies. That should narrow the field.” We entered the elevator in compatible silence and continued to the street.

“See you, son,” he said as he patted my shoulder. “We will get through this you and me.”

“Hey, Dad,” Dad turned back to wave. “You da man.” He grinned and waved again as he walked down the sidewalk.

“Hey, blockhead, don’t get so caught up in Temple Run or whatever the hell you do on your phone and miss the girl. I told her dad you’d take care of her.”

“Yes, sir,” I replied.

Leaning against the wall I was prepared to wait patiently.

“Oh shoot” a voice said from the stairs.

Turning my head, I glanced down to see little pills rolling everywhere. I looked up to see the owner of the pills seated on the top step with her head clasped in her hands. She looked like she was going to fall over.

“Are you okay?” Sprinting up the stairs two at a time I reached her in seconds.

She didn’t respond. Her head lolled to the side and I caught her in my arms before she tumbled down the steps.

“Hey, are you okay?” I asked again holding her tightly against my chest

“What...” she said in a soft voice as she slowly opened her eyes. “Max?” she asked and her head once again lolled to the side. She knew me. How did she know me? It was crazy, I felt like I knew her too. She fit me.

Suddenly I was staring into the deepest blue eyes I had ever seen. Eyes that were incredibly familiar in the face of a girl I’d never met but instinctively knew I knew.

I pulled her tightly against my chest. She fit me.

“Umm, hello,” she said softly.

Jeez, I was hugging some girl I did not know. I am a friggin’ imbecile.

I slowly loosened my tight embrace. “Have you ever gotten the feeling that you aren't completely embarrassed yet, but you glimpse tomorrow's embarrassment?”

She looked perplexed as she stared blankly into my face. Then she started to laugh, “You’re quoting *Jerry Maguire*.”

“What do you want from me, my soul?”

“Why not, I deserve that much?” She completed the line from the movie with a smile.
“*Jerry Maguire*, I do love me some *Jerry Maguire*.”

She gestured at the pills scattered all over the steps, “Actually, you can keep your soul. What I want is a little assistance picking up my pills, you in?”

The pills were scattered down the steps. “I’ll start at the bottom and work my way up.” As I picked up the pills on the second step from the bottom I asked, “Are you Sarah Keller recently arrived from Whiteman?”

The girl looked up at the sky and started ranting, “I do not know what it is about this place. Why is it so hard for people to call me Anneliese?” To no one in particular she repeated, “Why? Why I ask you?”

“So, you’re Anneliese not Sarah?”

She stopped talking to the sky and smiled at me. “Sorry, sometimes I just lose it. It’s so dumb. Okay, my name is Sarah Anneliese Keller. For some unknown reason I do not like to be called Sarah. So, yes, I’m Sarah Keller. But please call me Anneliese.”

As she explained what I should call her, I walked up the two steps to give her the pills. I reached out to clasp her wrist so I could hold the pill bottle in her hand steady as I put the pills back in the bottle.

My fingers touched her wrist and I was friggin’ rocked with the need to pull her back into my arms. The feel of her skin was familiar. Her wrist clasped in my hand felt, I don’t know, right, it felt right. It was the first time I’d ever felt right, like a missing part of me had been returned and I was now complete. Maybe, I had given her my soul. She fit me.

Anneliese stared at my hand clasping her wrist. Her pulse accelerated under my light touch. She lifted her head slowly and stared into my eyes. My heart sped up. I knew this girl. I

don't know how I knew it, but I did. She was the reason I hadn't found a girlfriend, I'd been waiting for her, Anneliese Keller.

“Anneliese,” I repeated not letting go of her hand and trying not to drop the pills.

“I get it...I really get it. I'm Max. When I was two years old the first words I said were 'me Max' my parents had been calling me Christian, I guess I didn't like it. Oh, and I refused to answer anyone unless they called me Max. So, when I was around seven years old my dad had my name legally changed to Max. I get the name thing...I really do get the name thing,”

“Changed your name to Max, that's pretty awesome,” she said as she looked at my hand clasping her wrist. “I think you do get the name thing. I really do.” She smiled and my heart raced.

Anneliese's Story

Chapter 3

“Do we know each other?” It was weird the touch of his hand on my wrist was hauntingly familiar. It was something I'd never felt before but somehow knew I'd been missing it. Weird, totally weird.

Max smiled and continued to hold my wrist, “Nope, I would never forget you.” He slowly poured the pills he collected into the container.

“Okay, you just seem really familiar. Well, it's nice to meet you Max who does not like to be called Christian.” I moved my wrist from his hand turning the wrist clasp into a handshake. He did not let go of my hand.

“Max?” I said his name as a question while tugging for him to let go of my hand. Honestly, I didn't want to let go, but it was starting to get a little awkward. Max...the name seemed connected to my blackout on the steps.

“Oh, sorry,” he let go super slowly and a blush covered his cheeks...so cute. “Are you feeling okay? You kind of freaked me out on the steps.”

“Sometimes I have these blackout things. I don't remember what triggered it. Hmm, actually seeing you at the bottom of the steps might have triggered it. Weird.” Shaking my head I tried to make the connection. Nothing...

“So, how do you know who I am?” Changing the subject seemed like a really great idea.

“Doctor Ransom suggested I escort you home. We live near each other on base. Oh, and my dad served with your dad in Iraq.”

Interesting. “Were you the guy throwing furniture?”

He blushed again, “I like to think of it as rearranging the office.”

“Rearranging the office? Seriously? Okay Max, lead the way. Thanks for helping with my pills.” I said as I put the container back in my pocket. Glancing at the number prominently displayed on the medical center, “I’m ready to leave Building 2121 behind. So, how do we get back to housing exactly? My dad gave me the shuttle route map and I found my way to the medical building. Sometimes I’m a little directionally challenged. It’s probably my only flaw.”

“Good thing you got me as your escort and I think you’re pretty flawless.” Max blushed again, “Can you forget I just said that?”

I nodded and laughed.

“So yeah, anyway, it’s not so much about the shuttle getting you back to housing, it’s about actually finding your house once you get off the shuttle. They look pretty much the same.” Grabbing my hand, Max gave me a little tug, “Let’s catch the next shuttle.”

As we walked down the sidewalk, I tried to figure out the purpose for each of the buildings; was it a rec center, a place to eat, a grocery store?

Max read my mind or more likely he determined the new girl might like a tour of the base as he started pointing out buildings and stuff, “So, in this area of the base you’ll find the bowling alley, a gym, but we have a gym right by our houses, the Shoppette and Chili’s. Oh yeah, and the 24 hour laundry. I think my dad’s your dad’s sponsor so I’m guessing you guys will be doing your laundry at our place until you get your major appliances.”

“Here’s the shuttle now,” I glanced at my shuttle route and then I glanced at my cell to see the time, “exactly 1245 hours If we missed this one it would be another 30 minutes.”

“Well, let’s not miss this one,” Max said pulling me to the shuttle. “We get off near the community center. It’s about a five minute ride.”

He smelled good. I noticed his clean, soap smell as we sat next to each other on the shuttle.

“Max,” I said softly, “are you going to let go of my hand?”

Glancing down at our clasped hands he grinned and covered them with his other hand, “Nope.”

“So, Anneliese,” I knew what was coming, “what’s a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?” Max wanted to know about my visit to the doctor’s office not being with my dad here at Ramstein.

“Well, Max, I don’t know if I know you well enough to share my dirty little secrets. Why don’t you guess?” I asked with a lift of my eyebrow.

Max placed his hand gently under my chin and tilted my face toward his, “Hey, I know this isn’t something to joke about. It’s just kind of how I cope. For some reason I feel compelled to tell you my issue. I’m hoping, maybe, our issues are alike or something. You know a diagnosis to have in common.” Breaking eye contact he sort of shook his head, but he kept my face cupped in his hand, “Sorry, I can’t help it. I feel less crazy, making jokes.”

“I get it, I really do.” I turned and pressed my lips against his palm. I don’t know how that happened, I like actually pressed my lips to his palm, like a kiss, that is so not me. But, I really did get it; get him. My dad and I joked about my perpetual sleepless nights too. I could feel myself blushing. Luckily the shuttle came to a stop; perfect timing.

“Hey, we’re here.” I said.

“You think you’re saved by the bell?” Max asked as he pulled me to my feet. “I don’t think so little girl.” Standing next to Max I realized I was a little girl, at five foot five I never felt little. But he was a big guy.

We stepped off the shuttle and I looked around at all of the houses. They all looked exactly the same; tan and brown, row after row. Oh my God, I would not be able to find my house. What a nightmare! Max noticed my dismay. “Wow, they all look the same.”

“Did you put your address in your cell?”

The relief was overwhelming. “Genius!” I said, “Yes, I did. Now, I can ask my phone to get me home.”

“Anneliese,” Max said, “let me see your address.”

Max looked at my screen. “It’s about a ten minute walk. If I didn’t want you to learn the fastest way to get home I’d take the long route.”

I looked at him with a question in my eyes.

He grinned, “I want to take the long way because I want to spend more time with you. I know, I shouldn’t tell you that. I should make you think I’m not interested so you will be more interested.”

“We obviously watch the same movies.” I replied with a smile. “Perhaps it’s your turn to lead the way now?” *Your Highness* 2011 no way Max would know this one, I mean really.

Glancing at me for a moment he replied in a pretty good British accent, “Step back, new friend; I’ll lead the way.”

I hit his shoulder. “No way, we are like the only people who watched that movie.”

He grabbed my hand and we walked down the street. “Well, your highness, it may not have received rave reviews, but it was better than staring at the ceiling hoping to fall asleep. You know, it has the potential to be a cult classic.”

“Agreed,” I said as I squeezed his hand in a show of support or something about the lack of sleep not about the movie being a cult classic.

Max took a deep breath, I glanced up. His eyes were closed and he nodded his head. It looked like he was trying to convince himself to do something.

“Okay, so I suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome. The doctors can’t determine the cause. I’ve never been in a military conflict ever and no traumatic event has ever occurred in my life. Yet, I’m a classic case. I have been a classic case since I was two years old. The docs on base are working with some new technology for guys with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. My dad got me into the study group. I don’t sleep because of the PTSD. I watch a lot of movies. The office rearranging resulted from my clear understanding the impact my condition could potentially have on my future. Basically, I won’t meet the entry requirements for the Air Force Academy. If they can fix me or I can fix me before I turn 18, my records will be sealed and I’m good to go. Time is running out and I just realized that today. So, rearranging the office furniture seemed like a pretty damn good idea,”

Clasping my hand even tighter Max continued, “My mom left when I was three years old. She couldn’t deal with my strange behavior I guess. So, it’s just been me and my dad for almost 14 years. So, that’s about it. Except the part about my name, I don’t know how it’s connected, but I think it’s connected. I’m just going to say it, I think I might be reincarnated from a soldier who probably suffered and died in battle. Okay, that’s my crazy.”

I didn’t say anything; I just stared at the rows of military housing. What should I share with Max? Maybe Dr. Ransom saw more of a connection between the two of us than our age. Who knows, maybe Dr. Ransom was making a study of people who believed they were reincarnates.

Max held on to my hand and pressed it against his chest. Anticipating the rejection he was sure was coming, I guess. He really shouldn’t second guess people.

“Interesting,” it’s the first word that came to my head. Well, if he’s willing to share his crazy I might as well share mine. It’s like the suicide prevention poster at the shrink’s, ‘shoulder to shoulder; finding strength and hope together.’ Maybe I could find strength and hope with Max. Maybe he could find strength and hope with me.

“I have nightmares or night terrors. I’ve had them since I was born. In addition to the nightmares, I can’t sleep. Or it’s more like I’m afraid to sleep. All the doctors I’ve seen, and I’ve seen a lot of them, want me to remember the dreams. But I can’t. When I try to remember I get horrible pressure in my head and sometimes I pass out, like today. Since, I’ve been at Ramstein it’s way worse. When I sleep, my screams keep my dad awake pretty much all night. So, I really needed the pills. My mom thought I was reincarnated from someone who experienced a horrible death and she did everything possible to make my life perfect. When she died my dad tried so hard, he’s still trying. I feel like I’m letting him down by not remembering the dreams. Everyone seems to think if I remembered the dreams I’d be fixed. Honestly, I hope I’m reincarnated because the alternative is I’m just crazy.” A line from *Alice in Wonderland* popped into my head and then out of my mouth, “Do you think I’ve gone round the bend?” I whispered.

Max replied with another line from the movie, “I’m afraid so... you’re mad. Bonkers. Off your head... but I’ll tell you a secret... all of the best people are.”

Strange, I hadn’t noticed we’d changed positions. Max and I were standing on the sidewalk hugging and he stroked my hair. He whispered, “It’s okay, babe, it’s okay.” So, we’ve known each other for all of, I don’t know, an hour. And, however strange it may be, it felt perfectly perfect for Max to be holding me against his very broad chest.

“Max,” I said in a questioning voice muffled in his shirt.

“Anneliese,” he replied in a voice that sounded like he was smiling against my head.

“Umm, a little awkward here,” I said, but I didn’t pull away.

Still talking into my hair he said, “Awkward is holding a girl you don’t know on the stairs of the shrink’s office. This seems pretty perfect.”

Max stepped back not releasing my from his hold but changing positions so he was staring into my eyes.

“I just want you to be clear that we may have had a, what do you girls call it, a bonding moment. I don’t want you to be under the misconception we are just going to be friends. I mean we will be friends, but I want us to be more than friends,” Max blushed. “Okay, now that was awkward.”

“You’re talking too much. You need to stop while you’re still ahead.” I decided to ignore his full disclosure about our future relationship. “ So, which one of these bad boys is mine? They all look just alike. I should have put down bread crumbs or something.”

“Your castle,” he pointed at the house we were standing in front of. It was tan with brown shutters just like all of the others.

“Here’s the plan,” Max said. “Tomorrow I’ll come over at around 0730. We can go to school together.”

“I see how you are, a very bossy boy,”

“You can boss me around later.” His smile was adorable.

“Okay, Max, you can be my new BFF. I think I need my hand to enter my house. It kind of works that way.” He let go of my hand and I felt, well, deprived.

Max looked down at his now empty hand. “Wow, I knew we felt right, but now that we aren’t connected I know it’s even more right. Strange, really strange.” He said the last more to himself than me.

“Thanks for everything. I’ll see you tomorrow at 0730. I’ll make us some coffee. Have a good night or a good day, whatever. Thanks again.”

Max didn’t move or say anything. So, I waved and walked in the front door. Closing the door behind me, I leaned against the closed door. Dumb, dumb, dumb, I should have kissed him. It’s the twenty-first century and girls can initiate the first kiss. I’ve known him for like all of two seconds, but it would have been totally right. I hit my head against the door. Dumb, dumb, dumb.

A tap on the door nearly gave me a heart attack. I opened the door to Max.

I started to smile, but he looked so serious. He didn’t say anything as he pulled me into his arms. He stared intently into my eyes, I felt like I was drowning in his eyes or something. He leaned down and I knew he was going to kiss me. The first brush of his lips against mine was electric. He cupped my chin and held me close deepening the kiss.

I’d been kissed before, but this kiss was different. It felt familiar yet it was unique. The kiss seemed like it lasted forever, but when Max gently kissed my lips and pulled away I didn’t want it to end.

Touching his forehead to my forehead he said, “Now, I’ll have a good day.”

He kissed me again, and then he kind of lifted me up to move me out of the way of the door, gave me a quick peck on the lips, “See you tomorrow, gorgeous.” He raised one eyebrow, smiled and walked down the sidewalk.

I slowly closed the door.

What just happened? Did I just let a boy I met less than two hours ago kiss me? I did. I really did. Do I feel bad about this? Pausing I considered the possible consequences of the kiss. Nope, I didn’t feel bad. I felt pretty perfect. *His name was Max...that seemed perfect too.*