



# Homesick

By Carollyne Hutter

## Chapter 1

**August, 1989**

**Madison, Wisconsin**

“I hate it here! I want to go home!” I shout in the middle of the kitchen, trying to stir up some attention in this way too quiet house. It’s like a library here.

Before my mother speaks, I know what she’ll say, what she’s always said since I was really little and had temper tantrums. “Brigit, you’re acting inappropriately. You need to calm down. Please leave the room. When you’re calm, we can talk,” she says, word for word what I expected. Then she turns her back to me and loads the dishwasher.

Ted, my mom’s fiancé, doesn’t look up from doing the *NY Times* crossword puzzle. I swear if the world were coming to end, if a bomb were pointed toward our house, Ted would coolly continue doing a crossword puzzle.

But even without the puzzle, I don't expect Ted to react. He made it clear when he proposed to Mom that my sister Annabelle and I are totally Mom's responsibility, especially me. Lucky Annabelle has escaped to college.

For Ted, Annabelle and I are the wilted, strange-smelling Brussels sprouts you have in order to get the delicious dessert, which in this case is my Mom. I sometimes wonder if Ted whispers in Mom's ear as she's falling asleep, "Boarding school. Send Brigit to boarding school."

Brigit. That's what they call me here in the United States. In Germany, I'm Brigitte. So much prettier with that extra syllable and that "ta" at the end. Makes you think of a dancer. Or artist. Or sophisticated world traveler.

"It isn't fair! Andrea and Gunter are having fun in Munich. Without me. And I'm not having fun here!" I shout again, waving Andrea's letter in the air.

No response in this cold library room, so I stomp up the stairs, and into my bedroom. Then I slam the door, creating a nice, loud echo throughout the house.

I toss Andrea's letter on my desk, throw myself on my bed, and wait for Mom to come to my room. I want her to know how awful I feel, how I ache all over—like I have bruises on my body. Moving is like being in a terrible accident.

As I lie in bed, the phone rings. Probably another relative or old family friend calling and offering to come by.

Since we moved here to Madison, Wisconsin, from Germany (about three weeks ago), it's been a nonstop parade of relatives and friends dropping by to welcome us back into the fold. They usually come by with a casserole or bottle of wine.

When they see me, they always pat me on the head and say how I've grown, which is so annoying—of course I've grown. I was seven when we left Madison and I'm fourteen now—I would have serious health problems if I hadn't grown.

And then my relatives say the most nauseating thing of all, usually while rubbing my back: "Wasn't it awful to live so long in Germany? Aren't you glad to finally be home?" Home? This isn't my home! Munich is my home. Awful? Are they crazy? I love Munich! I love Germany! We had the best, really the best, time living there.

What is awful is having to move back to the U.S. just because your mom is going to marry some cold-fish, pasty-faced, crossword puzzle-loving physicist.

I wish all those annoying relatives and family friends would stop coming over—although they do bring some super tasty casseroles.

Still in bed, I hold Fuzzy Bear close to me. (Poor Fuzzy he's no longer very fuzzy. Like me, he's been dragged from Madison to Munich and back). Still no sign of Mom. So I get up and go to the window to look out at the neighborhood. The houses are so boring here—all these square boxes. It's like they hired one architect. Not like in Munich. I love the Munich architecture: it dips and dives and twirls around. I want to be an architect when I grow up. My sister Annabelle teases me that every week I announce a different career.

But this time I'm sure. I love buildings! I love cities! I love traveling around and taking pictures of amazing buildings. I have an album full of photos of all these great buildings from our trips. You should see Barcelona—super cool architecture.

I continue looking out the window and watch our neighbor rev up his lawnmower. Lawn mowing seems to be the major sport around this neighborhood. The grass barely has time to grow before it's mowed again. It's the buzz-cut, military look in lawn care around here.

Ugh! The neighbor is mowing without a shirt on, and his huge gut is hanging out. There really should be a law, an international law, that only men with nice, flat chests can go shirtless.

In Munich, they have the same problem with big-bellied men. There's a place in the Englischer Garten (an enormous park in the center of Munich) where everyone likes to sunbathe on a hot day. Germans have a much more relaxed attitude about nudity than Americans, so some of the women are topless and some of the other people are totally nude, which I think is okay. Of course, when American relatives visit they are totally shocked by the nudity. (It's so fun to see the Oh-My! look on their faces when they first spy the nude sunbathers.)

What I hate, though, is there's usually one guy with the most enormous beer gut walking around nude. In Germany, they call these bellies "beer tombs," and you know lots of beer died for this belly. It's really disgusting. Well, at least our lawn-mowing neighbor has his shorts on—you got to be thankful for that.

As quietly as I can, I open my door and tiptoe out into the hallway to find out what's taking Mom so long to come to upstairs. I hear her telling Ted that Aunt Clare (her younger sister) was on the phone and is coming by later with wedding cake samples. Do they want to go with a traditional white cake or a double chocolate cake?

Chocolate! I shout in my mind (I don't want them to know I'm listening to their conversation).

If they're going to do something so stupid as to get married, they should at least have a thick, rich chocolate cake for me. Aaah, chocolate. Just thinking about chocolate helps me forget how awful I feel. I do love chocolate.

Oh, Mom's walking toward the stairs. I sneak back into my room and fling myself on my bed, grabbing Fuzzy Bear again and getting in position.

"Brigit," Mom says, opening the door.

"Brigitte," I say, staring at the ceiling.

Mom sits on the bed next to me, "Sweetie, I know it's tough coming home."

"This isn't my home." I hold Fuzzy Bear tightly.

"I know you're fond of Munich, but in a little while you are going to love living here."

"Never. It sucks here. It's so flat and boring. It's the capital of Boringville."

"You've forgotten what Madison is like, but it's a nice city."

"I want to go back to Munich. I want to be with my friends. I'm lonely here. Really lonely!"

"I loved growing up here," Mom says. "You'll see what a wonderful city it is. Hey, I have idea. I'll make some time for just us this weekend. We can bike down to Vilas."

I feel like Mom and I are playing verbal ping-pong, but we each keep serving new balls. "Mom, this isn't our life. This is his life. Our life is in Munich," I say.

"And if it's hot, we could go swimming."

“Mom, listen, it’s not too late. We could go back. I bet they’d take you back at your old job.” I flip over to my side and look at her, but she’s not seeing me. She’s staring out the window.

“And I could pack a nice lunch to eat at the lake, maybe some tomato and cheese sandwiches.” She stands up and walks to the window.

“We could live with Aunt Hannelore again,” I say. “Mom, she looked so sad when we left.”

“You know what else would be fun? After lunch we could bike over to Michael’s. They have these amazing soft ice creams, not like anything you normally have, in all these delicious flavors.”

I watch her looking out the window and wonder what she sees. “Mom, we could eat real bread again. It’s so terrible here,” I say to get her attention. Really, American bread is the worst. In Munich, you buy your bread at the bakery. Rich, dark bread. The bread here is so soft you could use it as a pillow.

Meanwhile, it’s so clear that Mom hasn’t heard a word I’ve said. “On Sunday, we can go to the farmer’s market,” she goes on. “It’s all around the capital. There’s cheese galore and lots of fresh vegetables.”

“Mom, soon it will be fall. It’s so pretty in Munich in the fall.” Summer is my favorite time in Munich, but fall is nice, too.

Mom turns from the window and finally faces me. “Sweetie, I understand that this adjustment is tough. It’s hard moving between countries,” she says. “You forgot: you had problems adjusting when we first moved to Munich, but trust me, it’s going be the best time of your life.”

I stand up, fling Fuzzy Bear on the bed, and meet her by the window. “Mom, it’s not too late. We can go back.”

## Chapter 2

### Munich, 1989

Okay, confession time. Mom's right: Annabelle and I didn't like Munich at first.

After my dad died, Grandma Joyce, Dad's mom, told Mom that we should leave Madison and start a new life. Aunt Clare said the same thing.

I don't want to talk much about Dad's death. Even now it's too sad and awful. Because Mom worked so much, Dad was like our mother and took care of us.

It was so terrible the day of Dad's accident. Really terrible. I was seven and in second grade, when it happened. I woke up one morning and came down to breakfast and found something really strange: Mom setting out our breakfast.

Annabelle, being eleven, was quick to catch on. "What's going on?" she said. "Where's Dad?"

Mom didn't speak, but continued setting out the breakfast, her head kept low, but we could still see the tears.

"Dad was coming home from his church meeting last night. . . ." Mom stopped talking and finished with the breakfast. Then she put out her arms and we walked over and she engulfed us. "He was coming home when a drunken driver hit his car."

Mom sobbed loudly, clutching us tightly. We waited.

“Is he okay?” Annabelle asked.

Mom cried and then she took a deep breath. “No, he’s in intensive care. The doctor says he only has a day or so to live. Grandma Joyce is with him. After breakfast, we’ll all go to the hospital.”

When I heard this, I started to scream, “I want my Daddy!” I cried and cried and cried. Everyone says that I cried for days—waiting for Dad to comfort me.

Pretty soon after the funeral, Mom packed us up, sold the house, and moved us to Germany.

According to Annabelle (I don’t remember well), we all thought Germany was really strange when we arrived.

First thing we noticed was that everywhere we went—in stores, on the streets, on television, at school—everyone was speaking German. How weird is that? Mom already spoke some German, but Annabelle and I didn’t know a word.

Then there was the strange apartment. Aunt Hannelore, who’s actually a cousin of Mom, but we call her “aunt” out of respect and because she’s older—invited us to stay with her. By Munich standards, she has a fairly large apartment. But we weren’t used to Munich standards, we were used to American, Midwestern standards, we were used to the land of the large houses, and Aunt Hannelore’s apartment seemed dinky in comparison. Annabelle and I had to share a bedroom and Mom slept in a room only big enough to hold a small bed and dresser, about the size of an American walk-in closet. Really, that tiny.

We were only going to stay with Aunt Hannelore for a few months while we looked for our own place, but we never left. Aunt Hannelore loved having us there, and after awhile we loved being there.

Mom says that she and Aunt Hannelore got along really well from the start because they understood each other. They both had recently lost their husbands. Uncle Antonio, Aunt Hannelore's husband, had died two years before we came.

To be honest, I don't think Mom would have made it in Germany on her own. The German system is set up with all these booby traps for single, working mothers. The main trap is that the school only goes until lunchtime; then the mom picks up the kids for the rest of the day. If you don't have a "mom," you are sunk: where are the kids to go? Luckily, we had Aunt Hannelore and she became our mom.

And so, after awhile we settled into Munich and we all got used to living there and speaking German all the time, and everything was great for years and years and years. Okay it wasn't always great, but most of the time it was good. Until that awful day in May.

What was funny was that it started out as a really great day. In the morning, I'd gone to school. Well, school wasn't ever great. School was just dull, dull, dull. But it was bearable because it was over with at 1 p.m.

After school, I'd bicycled home as I always did with the Twins. (Andrea and Gunter, "the Twins," are my best friends. We all lived in the same apartment building in Munich.) They walked me to my apartment because my apartment is on the third floor, and they were on the

fifth floor. Before we got to the door of my apartment, we smiled. We sniffed the air. Aunt Hannelore was making something good!

We rushed to the kitchen.

“Oh, Aunt Hannelore, you’re making Sauerbraten with Knödel. My favorite!” I said as I looked at the stove.

Aunt Hannelore smiled. “You have many favorite dishes.” I do. I love Bavarian food, and Aunt Hannelore is the best, really the best, cook.

We set the table, and the Twins joined us for this super lunch. In Germany, people eat their main meal in the middle of the day.

As we were starting to eat, my sister Annabelle came in. She said exactly what I had said: “Sauerbraten with Knödel. My favorite!” We all laughed and then dug in.

After lunch, Aunt Hannelore shooed the Twins out of the apartment. It was homework time! And Aunt Hannelore never let the Twins stay for homework time: they were too much of a distraction.

Annabelle and I cleared the table and we took out our enormous stacks of homework. They really, really pile it on in Germany. When we were little, our backs were always so sore from carrying home such heavy backpacks of homework. We felt like bricklayers carrying home our bags of bricks.

So Annabelle sat at one end of the table with her Eiffel Tower of homework and I sat at the other end with my Eiffel Tower, and Aunt Hannelore hovered above us, like a helicopter, flitting from Annabelle to me, carefully inspecting our work with her X-ray eyes: she could spot even the tiniest mistake. She’s a former classics teacher (Latin and Greek), so she was really

picky about my work since I was at a classics school. Hey, maybe there's a reason these are dead languages. They're too hard to learn.

Just as we were finishing our homework, the Twins rang the bell.

"Aunt Hannelore and I are going to the Roman museum," I said when I let them in. "We were thinking it would help with my studies."

"Are you kidding?" Andrea interrupted. "Look outside." I peered through the kitchen window and saw the most amazing thing. The sun was out!

There's an unwritten law in Munich: warm, sunny days, which can be so rare, are to enjoy. This is not sunny Italy, this is rainy Germany. So when the weather is nice, you drop everything and go outside. Immediately! You just never know how long the nice weather will last. In a few hours, it can rain, or just become dark and cold. Ugh!

Since it was May, and it wasn't warm enough to swim, we grabbed the soccer ball and headed to the park. There we met some friends who were already playing soccer and joined their game.

As we played, Aunt Hannelore sat on the bench while she knitted. She would wave her knitting needles in the air and curse at the other team (she's always loyal to the Twins and me). She's a really rabid soccer fan. If she got this involved with our neighborhood kids' game, you can only imagine how crazy she was when her beloved Bayern-München team (the soccer team of Munich) played. She became totally insane.

After the game. Andrea said that she was heading to Schwabing (an area of Munich near the university) to check out Isabella's Italian Leather store. Of course, I had to come with her. I

love that place. They have these amazing clothing, shoes, and other stuff made from really beautiful leather.

Gunter said he would come with us to Schwabing to check out the bookstores. He said the word “books,” but we all knew he meant comic books.

We were then faced with the big decision: to go by bike or by U-bahn (the subway). I wanted to go by bike cause it so fun to bicycle around Munich. It’s such a pretty city. Really pretty, with such cool buildings.

Andrea wanted to go by U-bahn because she likes seeing all the different people. (The U-bahn is great for people watching.)

In the end we decided to go by U-bahn because Gunter said he thought he had pulled something in his leg playing soccer. When we got to Schwabing, Andrea and I linked arms and went off to the Italian leather store while Gunter went off looking for “books.”

Before we entered the store, we first checked out the window to see if there was anything new displayed. Oh, la, la! What a cute red, leather mini skirt.

“I’m getting that for my birthday,” Andrea announced, as if I were a newspaper reporter. “Definitely,” I said. Andrea is taller than me and with these endless, long model legs. “You would look so good in that skirt. Really cute.”

Then we went into the store. I immediately went over to my love: the most wonderful pair of black leather pants. They look so good on me, but way too expensive. Sob! Every since I’d seen them in the store about a month earlier, I’d been dreaming about having them.

I fingered the smooth leather. Should I try them on again, I wondered. Or would it be too painful?

Isabella, the storeowner, came over to my side.

“You love those pants, don’t you?” she said.

I signed. “Oh, I do.”

“Then why don’t you buy them?”

“I don’t have enough money.”

“How much do you have?” She asked. I told her much I had with me and how much I had at home. The total was still way below the pants’ price—hey, leather pants are expensive. What can I say? I like nice clothes.

“Why don’t you give me what you have now and bring the rest tomorrow,” said Isabella.

“But it’s not enough.”

Isabella whispered to me “You should take them. Just don’t tell anyone how much you paid, or I’ll be out of business.”

I reached over and hugged her. “Thank you! Thank you! This is the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me!”

“I tell you what. You can do a favor for me. You wear these pants often and whenever anyone asks where you got them, you tell them about my little store.” I love how Isabella speaks German. Because she’s Italian she makes it roll up and down.

“I will! I will!” Then I followed Isabella to the counter and watched her wrap up my beloved pants.

When I left the store with Andrea, who had bought a really cute pair of green leather gloves, I was so happy I felt like bursting into song and dancing down the sidewalk, the way they do in musicals.

We met Gunter, who had a pile of comic books and also seemed happy with his shopping experience.

When we got back to our apartment building, it was still sunny, so the Twins and I had the same thought: dinner at the Biergarten.

“Aunt Hannelore,” I said as I walked into the apartment. “Andrea, Gunter, and I want to eat at a Biergarten tonight.”

Aunt Hannelore held up two big wicker picnic baskets. “I’ve already spoken to the Twins’ parents. We’re meeting downstairs in a half hour.”

The Twins went back to their apartment and I got ready to go out, changing to a warmer outfit, in case it got colder. Annabelle walked into our bedroom and announced that she was joining us, but Mom was working so she couldn’t make (what a surprise!).

“What about Hans?” I asked. Hans is Annabelle’s boyfriend.

“No,” said Annabelle in a little sad voice, he couldn’t make it.

When I heard this, I felt like dancing around the room. Only Andrea and Gunter know this, but I don’t really like Hans. The problem is he’s the most depressing person I’ve ever met. Within seconds, he can turn anything into a negative situation, even something really positive. Captain Negative to the rescue. You will never be bothered by a positive thought again around him. Even if you won the lottery, he would find the negative—you’ll be hounded by all these people wanting you to buy things.

Before we headed out to the Biergarten, we had to decide which one. Munich is covered with Biergartens. In the end, we decided to just go to the one in our neighborhood, which is connected to a brewery. Biergarten means “beer garden.” I know that sounds strange, but it’s actually really fun. You can bring a picnic dinner to a Biergarten or you can buy the food there,

but you have to buy your beverages there. They sell sodas, water, juice, milk, maybe wine, and lots and lots of beer, of course.

We found a spot for us on one of the long, wooden benches under some chestnut trees. Aunt Hannelore and the Twins' mom took out food from their picnic baskets: ham, tomatoes, various cheeses, bread, cucumber salad, and potato salad, while Annabelle, Andrea, and I went to get the beverages.

Then we all settled in to enjoy the evening and eating outside. A man in Lederhosen (leather shorts with suspenders) was walking around playing an accordion. Ooompah, ooompah, oompah.

We started to eat and chat and drink. All around us were the sounds of accordion music and people talking and laughing, and the noise of heavy, thick glasses hitting the tables. Everyone was in a good mood, maybe because the adults drink so much beer.

When we got home, Annabelle and I got ready for bed. I took out my new leather pants and hung them outside my wardrobe in such a way that I could see them from my bed.

I was just falling asleep and Annabelle was reading a book in bed, when Mom came into our room. No matter how much work she had, Mom always came home in time to tuck us in. She would sit on our beds, first mine, then Annabelle's, hearing all about our days. Then she would kiss us, turn off the light, and say, "I love you both with all my heart. Sleep well."

This night it was different. Mom stood in the doorway. She didn't come over to my bed. "I have something to tell you," she said. But before she made her big announcement, Annabelle figured it out.

“Mom, you’ve got a diamond ring on your finger. You’re getting married!” Annabelle jumped out of bed to hug Mom, but I didn’t move from my bed. I wasn’t sure that this was such good news. I figured if she’s getting married it must mean she’s marrying Ted, since there weren’t any other candidates I knew of. Mom and Ted, both physicists, worked together. Ted’s a visiting researcher from the University of Wisconsin.

“When?” I said, folding my arms across my chest and sitting up in bed.

“We’re still talking about that, but we think in the fall.” Good, that means we had some time before I had to live with Ted and see him every day. Ugh! Being with Ted is like having ice cream in winter. Brrrrr! Cold! He barely talks to me. Mom says children make Ted nervous—Hey, I’m not a kid. Annabelle and Ted do okay because they can talk about science stuff.

“Is he going to live with us here, or do we need to move to a new apartment?” I asked. Moving would really suck because I love living with Aunt Hannelore and having the Twins in the same building.

“Actually, there’s more good news.” Mom said. She had on her fake smile and I knew that this wasn’t really good news, it was fake good news, which is actually bad news. “We’re moving back to Madison in the summer.”

“No!” I screamed, feeling like I had been hit in the stomach with a fastball. “I’m not going. Last time we were there it was awful!” I knew what we were in for. When I was nine, Mom took us to Wisconsin. Thankfully, it was the last time! All I remember is going from one group of relatives to next and them examining me, like a bug under a magnifying glass. I would hear them whispering, “How’s she coping?”

Why would anyone want to go back to that?

“Madison has great schools; it’s a lovely little city,” Mom said to Annabelle, as though I wasn’t in the room. “And we’ll be close to you.” Annabelle was starting college in the fall at the University of Minnesota, where Mom and Dad had studied.

“I’m not going!” I shouted, while holding my aching stomach. But Mom and Annabelle ignored me (Oh, how I hate that!). Mom and Annabelle sat on Annabelle’s bed and Mom talked about how Ted had proposed, saying it was so romantic. How could anyone say the word “romantic” together with cold-fish Ted? Ugh!

I put a pillow over my head and tried to block out the noise. Eventually, Mom left the room and I went to sleep. I love sleep! Such a great escape.

Over the spring and summer, Mom kept saying how wonderful Madison was—good schools, big houses, lots of lakes, friendly people—but I wasn’t buying it. I’m a city girl and I was meant to live in Munich. It’s my home.

Maybe I would have been okay with moving if we were going to another European city, like London, Berlin, Barcelona, Paris, Rome (hey, they’re pretty cool places, especially Berlin, the coolest city in the world), but not dinky Madison, stuck in the middle of Wisconsin, miles and miles from anywhere.

## **Chapter Three**

**Madison, 1989**

On the weekend, Mom and I drive to Vilas Park. The original idea was to bicycle, as we did in Munich. When the weather was warm, we would bike around the Munich countryside.

I have to say, I love long bike trips, so I was kinda psyched up about going on a bike ride, even in dull Madison. Of course, when we got the bikes out of the garage and looked them over, they both had flat tires. Nothing works here in Madison. Mom sighed and announced that we would drive over instead of riding.

“That building,” Mom says on the way to the park as we drive pass a big square building, which looks really boring and way too serious, “is owned by the university. They must be leasing it out.”

I nod.

“A lot of land in Madison is owned by the university.”

I nod.

Then there's silence. We pass various houses, all looking like blocks on a lawn.

"When I was little," Mom says, but then she stops talking and shakes her head. We continue on in silence. Not a nice comfortable silence, like I have with Aunt Hannelore when we're both watching Bayern-München play on the television, but an awkward silence. Not as awkward a silence as those that spring up and smash me in the face, turning it red, when I meet a cute boy, but still it's really uncomfortable.

I try to think of something to say to Mom, but my mind becomes a desert, so I just stare out the window and read the street signs.

I know this sounds strange, but I think the problem is that Mom and I aren't used to being alone together. In Munich, there was always someone else around—Annabelle, Aunt Hannelore, the Twins, other friends, colleagues from the Institut, relatives visiting. (We had lots of relatives visiting since Mom stopped taking us back to the U.S. when I was nine.) You know, I can't think of a time in Munich when it was just Mom and I. Even at night, when Mom would tuck me in, Annabelle would be across the room.

I think the other problem is I feel like an alien here in Madison—one of those alien that looks like a normal person on the outside, but is actually from another planet. On planet Madison, we drive everywhere and I have to ask Mom or Ted for a ride. On planet Munich, I get around easily on my own with the streetcars or U-bahn (subway). I hate being confined in a car or having to have to ask for a ride. I feel like I'm two years old.

We get to Vilas Park and park near the beach on the lake. Once there, Mom sets up a folding chair and settles in to read a mystery.

"I'm going swimming," I announce. Mom nods her head, already reading her book.

I peel off my clothes. Underneath is my new favorite swimsuit, which I bought with Andrea: a blue and yellow polka dot bikini. Andrea and I love polka dots: they're just so fun. So cute! I look around to check out the other suits. Most are okay, but I think Andrea would say none are as cool as mine. What I do like is that the guys here wear long, baggy suits. I'm just not into those little Speedos that European men wear. Luckily, Nick doesn't wear those. (I'm not going to talk or think about Nick.)

Enough of the fashion squad. I run down the beach and plunge into the water. Aaaah...it's chilly! What a shock ! To warm up, I swim around and around and around, moving as fast as I can. In a few minutes I do feel warmer and the water now feels so good. I love water. I love to swim. I dive in and out of the water.

When I'm all worn out from swimming, I leave the water, plop on a towel, and Mom takes out a cooler filled with food.

Wow, am I hungry. Swimming always makes me famished. I gnaw on a spicy chicken breast and then chow down on some dill-cucumber salad.

Mmmmmmm.

“You are hungry,” says Mom, gracefully eating her chicken with a fork and knife. “How is it?”

“Really good.” I say, grabbing another chicken breast. “Who made it? Ted?”

“I did.”

I stop gnawing and stare at her. “You did?”

“You sound surprised.”

“I didn’t know you cooked.” In Munich, Aunt Hannelore did all the cooking. And since we’ve come to Madison, we’ve been eating dishes brought over by friends and relatives, or else Ted cooks.

“I do a little. I plan to do a lot more once the wedding is over and we’re settled in Madison.”

Settled in Madison. Wedding. Oh, don’t remind me. I feel like a heavy stone in my stomach is sinking.

We finish the lunch in silence. After lunch, Mom goes for a swim, while I nap on a towel. Then we drive home. More awkward silence, and not a cute boy in sight.

When we walk in the house, Aunt Clare is in the kitchen chatting with Ted. Actually, Aunt Clare is talking and Ted is saying, “Oh,” and looking at his crossword puzzle.

Mom’s face lights up when she sees Aunt Clare, as though someone has thrown her a life preserver. She probably thinking—uncomfortable time trying to bond with difficult daughter is over with for now.

Aunt Clare also looks relieved: she now has someone she can actually converse with.

Ted bends his head lower, probably so he can focus more on the crossword puzzle.

And I slip upstairs to write a letter to my cousin Susanne in Berlin.

