

ELEVEN

The lido was bursting at the seams. After the last day of the school term, everyone was trying to drown all the frustration of the past year in the pool's chlorinated water. Lea would never be able to find me here! At least there was no danger of bumping into Sandra. She preferred the indoor leisure pool. I wondered if she was doing her laps with Florian just then. Sitting around with him on the hot rocks, with her knees drawn towards her, her nails freshly polished?

I went over towards the wave pool, picking my way among the blankets that were spread out. To my left, a radio was droning on, and some Turkish lads sat in a circle, smoking a hookah.

"Would Torben Müller please come to the main entrance," the loudspeakers boomed. This was followed by an announcement from the pool manager: "The wave pool will start up in ten minutes."

Okay. In the worst-case scenario, I would have them make an announcement for Lea over the loudspeakers.

Then I stopped short. Of course I couldn't have them make an announcement. I would just have to hope she'd be able to find me in the crowd herself.

Over by the fence, I managed to find the last bit of grass available and spread out my towel.

My eyes wandered across the sea of heads, li-los and sun umbrellas. It was such a stupid idea to agree to meet here, of all places! In fact, it was a stupid idea to meet Lea outside of Freak City, full stop. What were we supposed to talk about? *How* were we even supposed to communicate? We could hardly just stare at each other without saying anything the whole afternoon.

Maybe I should have brought my dad and Calimero along. On days when the weather was nice, not many people used the climbing wall, so you could have the good sections all to yourself.

The thought of my dad and Calimero gave me a sinking feeling in my stomach.

Suddenly, I caught sight of Lea's head of curls over by the water slide.

"Lea!" I waved to her.

My face turned beetroot-red. At exactly the same moment I called over to her, it dawned on me. Of course she couldn't hear me calling out. To her, the whole lido complex was a soundless space, crammed full with people opening and closing their mouths like mute clowns.

The kids on the blanket next to me were staring.

I waved more frantically. If only she would look over in my direction, she'd be bound to see me!

Lea turned her head, and we made eye contact. She waved back.

It was only then that I noticed she wasn't alone. There was a young boy walking alongside her. Apparently she had brought her brother along to keep an eye on us on our first date. Brilliant.

The two of them came straight over to where I was sitting and were soon standing right in front of me.

Lea greeted me with a raised hand and a nod, and I did the same. Then I looked at the little pain Lea had brought in her wake.

"Alright?" I said in a grumpy voice to the runt.

"Hi!" he replied and put his towel down next to mine.

He took off his clothes and was now standing in front of me in a pair of swimming trunks with a Spider-Man design on them.

"My name's Kevin," he said. "I'm Franzi's brother. I guess you've already met my sister."

I looked at Kevin, the wind blown out of my sails. Great. Just great. If Lea had had to keep an eye on her brother, I could just about have understood that. But what on earth was her best friend's brother doing here on *our* date?

"I've got half an hour, tops," said Kevin briskly as he sat down cross-legged on his towel. "Then I've arranged to play table tennis with my mates. Got it?"

I had no idea what was going on.

Lea took a patterned blanket out of her bag, spread it out on the ground and sat down on it. Then she took off her T-shirt. She was wearing a light blue bikini, and for a millisecond I glanced it over. Her breasts were smaller than Sandra's, and her skin was tanned. She was covered in freckles. Kevin looked at me sternly.

"Well?" he asked. "I haven't got all day, folks!"

Lea rolled her eyes. Using her hands, she said something irritably to the runt.

He nodded and replied to her, also using sign language.

"Yeah, all right," he muttered. "Anybody got anything for me to drink?"

I stared at the boy, gobsmacked. He was able to blabber away and speak in sign language at the same time! And he was only a child!

Lea reached into her bag and tossed a bottle of Pepsi over to Kevin. He took great gulps from it.

"Where'd you learn sign language from?" I asked Kevin as he put the bottle aside.

He shrugged. "Franzi taught me. My mum says I knew how to use sign language even before I said my first word. Everybody in my family knows sign language. But it's harder for my parents because they only learned it as adults."

I was totally blown away.

Kevin looked me up and down. "Lea texted me to ask whether I could come along to translate. But like I said, I've only got half an hour. And besides, it's annoying. I always have to come along whenever Lea meets blokes. She's constantly falling in love, just like my sister. But Lea's last boyfriend was a total loser."

Kevin looked at me, like he needed to check me out to see if I was a total loser as well.

I was concerned about what Kevin said. I guess I had viewed myself as some kind of hero for agreeing to meet up with Lea in the first place. If I'm honest, I wouldn't even have thought there would be other guys who were interested in her as well. Maybe I had come to that ridiculous conclusion because she was deaf.

"Has she had a lot of boyfriends?" I asked in Kevin's direction.

Kevin translated it for Lea and gave a cheeky grin. She gave me an annoyed look and made a pretty unfriendly hand gesture.

"She says that's none of your damn business!" Kevin translated for me.

I rolled my eyes. "Do you have to translate everything?" I asked him, full of remorse. "That question was intended for you!"

Kevin was still grinning, and translated that for Lea as well.

"Ask her something about her family," I hastily interrupted Kevin and finally looked back at Lea. This runt was really a little toerag. But Lea seemed to be enjoying the game, because she gave me a forgiving wink.

With fluent movements, Kevin made a couple of signs.

I recognised the sign for 'family': a small circle joined to a larger one. Lea grimaced. Just at that moment, a flock of birds flew over us. It looked strange, as if a shadow was passing over Lea's forehead.

Without pausing, her hands began to explain.

"Her mother works half-days as a secretary," Kevin translated. "And her father is some big cheese with the railway company. There are four kids in the family. One sister, who's four years older. And two brothers who don't live at home any more."

“Have you always been deaf?” I wanted to know, and looked at Lea’s face. She had a tiny beauty mark that I hadn’t even noticed before. Her lips were full and soft, and I bet it would definitely feel amazing to kiss her.

Lea nodded and continued to speak in sign language.

“Ever since I was born. My parents refused to believe it at first, because there had never been anyone in our family who was deaf.”

We sat in silence, and I gazed at the pattern on the blanket Lea was sitting on.

The volume of the noise surrounding us was extremely high. There were children shrieking everywhere, music was blaring and bodies splatting into the water. It was unbelievable that Lea was missing out on all that.

The kids who had been sitting on the blanket next to us had headed off towards the snack bar, so the three of us were on our own.

“Lea wants to know if you’ve got any brothers and sisters,” said Kevin.

I tore my eyes away from the pattern on the blanket.

“Yes, a sister.”

Kevin translated for me. “Iris,” I added. “She’s seven. My dad’s a teacher. And my mum runs a party planning service.”

“That sounds lovely!” Kevin translated for Lea. “What a nice little family.”

I stared at the blanket some more. It might have sounded nice, but it wasn’t really. But I could hardly explain that to Lea. Not like this, sitting on a blanket at the lido. With a little boy beside us who was following every word of our conversation. I wondered whether I would ever get a chance to talk to Lea in peace.

“Lea’s got a lot of problems with her family,” Kevin said, bringing me back from my thoughts. He was translating for her again.

“How come?”

I looked at Lea. Her eyes were so green, they made me dizzy. Her face had taken on a defiant look. I was really eager to know how many blokes she’d been with. And what exactly did that mean? Was her life really so similar to that of other girls?

“Both of her brothers are lazy arses,” Kevin translated for me. “And her sister is a total stuck-up bitch. And there’s loads of arguments at home these days about Lea’s future. Lea wants to go to university. But her parents are against it. One of her uncles has a company that manufactures plastics. Lea could get a trainee position there. But she doesn’t want to.”

“What do you want to study at university?” I looked at Lea.

“Psychology,” Kevin translated.

He suddenly sounded tired. This constant translating must be hard on him. “Can’t you two talk about something interesting?” he asked. “I’m gonna fall asleep here!”

Lea and I had to laugh.

“Are there schools for deaf people?” I asked. Kevin pretended to give a long yawn. Even so, he continued translating.

Lea nodded. “There’s a comprehensive school for deaf people in Munich,” Kevin explained. “That’s where Lea goes.”

I nodded. Kevin looked at his watch. The time had flown by.

Suddenly, a bloke strode over to us. He was tall, with a pumped physique, and had an even, all-over suntan you had to envy.

He also had a three-day stubble, which was something totally unachievable for me. My facial hair was a difficult topic.

Lea noticed the shadow cast by the bloke and looked up.

Something about her facial expression switched to tenderness for an instant, and she leapt up, as if I were invisible, and as if she had been waiting solely for this guy the whole time.

The bloke nodded indifferently to me and Kevin, then gave Lea a big hug and kissed her on both cheeks.

Then the two of them began conversing in sign language.

In sixteen whole years I had never met a single deaf person. And now, suddenly ...

Next to me, Kevin groaned. "Flirt alert!" he whispered, as if Lea or the bloke might have been able to hear us.

Lea's cheeks were glowing, and she smiled, as if she had inhaled some laughing gas.

"Who's the bloke?" I asked. I felt like I'd been well and truly left behind.

"That's Marcel," Kevin muttered. "My sister and Lea are both totally in love with him. My sister even carved a tattoo of his name into her arm. With pale blue ink. That's six months ago now. She keeps retracing it, every morning at breakfast."

"Mm-hm," I looked at my unemployed translator. "I guess there aren't too many deaf blokes around, eh?"

Kevin grinned. "Oh, there's plenty of them. But most of them don't exactly look like Marcel, know what I mean?"

He wasn't wrong there. Even most blokes who could hear, including me, didn't look like Marcel. This guy seemed to have come straight off the TV series 'Baywatch'. 'Baywatch' with subtitles, that is.

"What are they talking about?" I asked.

Kevin shrugged. "Mate, that's private. But I can tell you that Lea is well into him. I think if she manages to snag Marcel, my sister will die of grief. She's been mad keen on Marcel ever since she was two years below him at primary school!"

"Really?"

The god-like Marcel gave Lea a pat on the shoulder and gave us a brief nod. Then he trudged off towards the diving platform.

Lea sat down again. Our eyes met for a moment. I tried not to let on that the bloke had really intimidated me. If Lea fancied guys like that, what on earth was I doing on this patterned picnic blanket?

But Lea left me no time for depressing thoughts.

"What do you want to do after you finish school?" she asked, and Kevin translated.

I felt embarrassed. "No idea ..." I mumbled. But then I saw an excellent opportunity to play my trump card. Lea didn't need to believe that there were no girls interested in me. "Actually, I wanted to go to Mannheim. To follow my girlfriend. Well, actually, my ex-girlfriend. She's a singer and wants to go to the Uni of Popular Music."

"Cool!" Kevin beamed. Finally I had found a topic that interested him. "Dave Mette, the drummer with Laith Al-Deen, learned his stuff there!"

"Did Lea say that?" I asked, confused. Kevin shook his head. "Nah. Obviously she hasn't got a clue about music. Doesn't even know what it is. But I'm thinking about going to the Pop Academy," he explained, using the common nickname for the university. "I'm saving up to buy a drum kit. Is your ex famous?"