

Ivy Leagh: WHERE SUMMER STAYS (Festival series vol. 1)

CARLSEN

Where Summer Stays

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WHERE SUMMER STAYS
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PREVIOUS NOTICE TO READERS



Dear reader,

This novel contains potentially triggering content. For this reason, there is a trigger warning. At the end of the novel you will find a topic overview, which therefore contains spoilers for the novel.

Please decide for yourself whether to read this warning. Be mindful of yourself while reading. If you encounter problems and/or are affected while reading, do not stay alone. Contact your family, friends or even professional support services.

We wish you all the best and the best possible experience reading this special story.

Ivy Leagh and the Carlsen Team

YOUR ULTIMATE FESTIVAL SET-UP - MAINSTAgE



DAY 1

I Wanna Be Your Slave - Måneskin

Hate Me - Blue October

Madness - Muse

DAY 2

Cut - Plumb

Alles Wegen Dir - Kraftklub

Tissues - Yungblud

DAY 3

Running Up That Hill - Placebo

Blue Light - Kraftklub

With You - Felix Kummer

LoveOnStage Special Guest: Harry Styles

DAY 4

It Ends Tonight - The All-American Rejects

Crooked Ways - Motion City Soundtrack

Pointless - Lewis Capaldi

I Will Follow You Into The Dark - Death Cab for Cutie

Encore Stage: Yungblud & Måneskin

Part 1: Welcome to the Rock Never Dies

HOW NICE TO SEE YOU AGAIN!

For your own safety, we ask all festival visitors to refrain from using containers of any kind in the event area. All non-essential items should be left on the campsites. In addition to clothing, only mobile phones, wallets, urgently needed medication, key rings and fanny packs are allowed on the festival site. Security procedures will be developed and implemented together with the police and security authorities.

It is not permitted to bring beverages. There are numerous free water points, which you can find on the water point map.

Festival-goers will receive urgent alerts via the festival app and the screens at the music stages. The *Rock Never Dies* enjoys an area-wide LTE network coverage. Please keep your car key with you at all times so that you can make your way directly to a vehicle if necessary. A tent is not a safe place during a thunderstorm! Hazard lights that are switched on signal to other visitors that there are still seats available in the car.

With the code phrase "Which way to Panama?" you can discreetly ask for help in emergency situations at all stalls, from the security authorities, staff and guardian angels.

THE CHAPTER WHERE I HATE NEANDERTHALS AND GLITTER BUTTERFLIES

Charlie

"That makes it official." Ella's brow furrows as she flings her phone in the direction of her tent before turning her attention back to my cheek, gritting her teeth. "Toni's a complete idiot."

I believe her immediately. "What is he saying?"

"That I'm exaggerating." She blows her fringes out of her forehead as she dips the brush in her left hand into the stray glitter and fixes my head with her other hand. "At the moment Toni is being totally ignorant. Instead of responding to my fears, he's been blocking everything since he's been in Canada. I don't know what he's doing over there, but he seems to pretty much not give a shit about our relationship anymore."

"That's why you're mad at him?"

Now the tip of the brush is pressing against my cheek again.

"I'm angry because Toni won't talk to me about it."

I nod and allow Ella to rest my head on the back of my neck. "I hope he gets it soon."

Ella's bitter laughter drowns out the sigh that escapes her. "Anyway, your left cheek is as good as done. I thought I'd gone for the regular glitter, but it's quite bright for pastel pink ... It's no big deal," she quickly adds as she catches my gaze. "Don't worry."

That's so easy to say. Because the mere idea of having to stay in this chaotic place for another ninety-three hours already makes my throat tight.

Why on earth did I agree to a festival? I hate glitter. I hate deafeningly loud rock music and heat and camping... Great. I've only been through three hours of the upcoming four-day horror and I already hate everything and everyone around me.

I glance discreetly at the tin can castle Leni stacked along the wall of my tent earlier. Ending up as a tribute to this year's Hunger Games at some point was pretty much the last thing I would have expected in my life.

Just a few days, I explain to my mind. It's part of my job. I will survive. I have to.

"Regarding Toni ...", I direct my thoughts away from the rising panic, but Ella interrupts me in the same breath.

"Fuck him!" She grabs my chin and turns my head a little too roughly to the side. "When he comes back I'll just beat him to death with my record player and that'll be the end of us." She rolls her eyes before leaning her upper body back a little and putting a finger to her lips. "Looks really nice, but you absolutely mustn't touch the glitter or it'll smudge right away in this heat."

"You got it."

With a smile, Ella adjusts her patterned oversized dress, which she wears with simple sandals and far too much glitter on her face. She has woven colourful leather strips into her bronze-coloured boxer braids, on which my gaze rests until Ella leans forward again and the fine hairs of the brush tip tickle me once more. It's obvious that she's more upset about what happened with Toni than she'd like to admit. Even though the corners of her mouth are pointing upwards, her pinched look betrays her.

I gulp, because she and Leni gave me the exact same look

when we entered the tent area earlier. This is another reason why my mind has been suggesting escape plans in a panic for the last three hours. I ignore them, as well as the fact that something inside me tightens with every worried look from my friends. Because if I start thinking too much about what I've gotten myself into here, I might remember that I actually lack the courage for such exciting adventures.

Strictly speaking, I don't know what to do with myself in a strange place like this. I only agreed to the festival last minute the day before yesterday because I wanted the boss of the classical radio station where I'm doing an internship at the moment to believe that I'm up to my dream of working as a radio presenter, and not that I have absolutely no idea what I'm doing. I didn't want to tell him the truth.

Since he really urgently needed someone to go to the rock festival in his place, Jonas luckily didn't ask any further and gave me three free tickets yesterday morning. That's why I was able to bring my two best friends, Ella and Leni, with me. I definitely wouldn't have gone alone. It doesn't matter that Jonas has unexpectedly offered me his recommendation for a trainee position if I do well at the rock festival.

As if on cue, my phone vibrates. Without moving too jerkily, I pull it out from under my thigh and unlock the screen.

JONAS: It's 1pm, Charlotte, and the only thing I see in the story so far is a half-eaten croissant. Lordy, you do know how to behave on social media, don't you?!

My guilty conscience makes my blood rush to my head. Jonas is referring to the newly created Instagram channel of the classical radio, which I am supposed to fill with enough content in the coming days. It's a few stories and posts that make my throat go dry just thinking about making my way through the confusing chaos of tents and people.

I've never been to a festival. The good thing about Jonas' text is that he hasn't found that out yet. And if he has, it doesn't seem to get in the way of his recommendation, as long as I deliver appealing content while he's stuck at an urgent distribution meeting. The dusty station desperately needs more reach, because - surprise - hardly anyone listens to the radio any more. The numbers are a disaster, and Jonas' last attempt to save the station, as I understand it, is social media. Unfortunately, I haven't been active there for a year.

"When Leni is back from the toilets, she could make a video of me putting make-up on you." Ella smiles and points to the phone screen where WhatsApp is still open. "That would be suitable content, wouldn't it?"

"I guess." Toilets are just a really bad subject. Oh God, cramped, smelly festival toilets! The idea of catching a nasty infection locked in there is enough for my brain to instantly provide me with a new escape plan.

So while Ella silently turns her attention to my cheek, my gaze wanders over half-finished tents, white camping sets and individual groups of people, in the rough direction of the car park. There stands Leni's old jalopy, with which we made it from Berlin to the Brandenburg wasteland this morning, contrary to her expectations. For a moment

I estimate the distance. I used to be on the track and field team, and since we entered the tent area, I've been under a constant current, which is why I'm sure I'd somehow make it across the area in a slalom run, despite the heat. Leni never locks the car because no one would be stupid enough to steal the thing. Maybe it takes a little bit of force to get the door open, but at least the belt on the driver's side works perfectly.

However, I don't have a driving licence. I wonder how expensive it would be if the police... Oh, damn, what am I even doing? Big events are part of my job as a budding radio presenter. I know that the rock festival has been sold out for months. Other people would probably be busting a gut to be here in my place because of that. It's just...

Normally I plan unknown situations meticulously in advance so as not to be overwhelmed by all the new impressions. But as far as this festival is concerned, I failed miserably. I was afraid it would happen - absolutely nothing in this unknown place is controllable. My premonition becomes more real with every minute that the campsite fills up more and more with visitors. Despite the warm temperatures, my treacherous fingers are now shaking, and because I can't suppress it, I sigh softly.

Ella immediately pats my shoulder with her free hand.

"Are you okay?"

"Everything's okay," I lie and push my hands together with the phone inconspicuously under my legs. "I think I'll have a drink." The fact that I jokingly asked Ella and Leni on the drive to chain me up here if necessary, in case I give in to my inner urge and want to run away, seems silly to me by now. Especially Ella

would carry me to Leni's car to help me escape an emotional overload.

With an overprotective look, Ella throws her water bottle into my lap. As soon as I reach for it, her attention lands on my fingers, which tighten around the plastic.

"I know what we agreed on," she says, "but if it's too much for you, you'll let me know, won't you? I think it's really great that you dare to go to a festival, and -"

"It's all good!" Still, I can feel my heart beating faster now that Ella has said it out loud. "The more you remind me, the worse this is going to get." At least, I now remember why I didn't tell my parents about my festival visit. Although my father understands that I finally had to dare to apply for a job at the radio station a year after graduating from high school, his, and especially my mother's, concern has only increased.

Ella sighs softly. "I'll be as silent as the grave from now on, I promise." It's absurd, but I imagine that the tip of the brush glides over my skin extra carefully anyway, and Ella's tone becomes extra relaxed as she continues. "You haven't even told me how the conversation with your sister went last night."

"Alex hasn't been in touch." Immediately I notice a lump forming in my throat, which I can only swallow with difficulty. I close my eyes. Surely Alex expects me to call her after the escalated conversation with my parents last week. I can't explain to myself why I preferred to stare at my phone and wait for hours yesterday rather than simply dial Alex's number.

Just because Ella exhales a little too loudly and the

sound forces me to open my eyelids again, I recognise out of the corner of my eye the broad figure sprinting towards Ella and me in a colourful shirt. Before I can grasp anything, a gush of water lands out of nowhere in the middle of my white radio T-shirt. For a tiny moment I freeze in shock, then I jump up screaming and see the lanky guy with midnight-black hair running past me and then, with a groan, after his buddy. The latter is swinging the handle of a mop bucket back and forth in his left hand. He yells and clenches the other into a fist when the lanky man catches up with him not five metres from our tents and wrestles him roughly to the ground.

"*What the hell?!*" yells Ella in her sternest kindergarten teacher tone.

I was just thinking the same thing. My eyes fall on my black lace bra, which stands out under my wet T-shirt. And ... oh God! This is a nightmare. I don't know why I want to turn around and run away. It's not like the guy was harassing me, but I just hate being caught off guard like that.

I take a deep breath and see that the black-haired man has just slapped the back of the other guys head with little love. Shortly afterwards he gets up, knocks the dust and dirt off his cloth trousers and plain black tank top and offers the bucket guy a hand.

As he pulls his mate up from the floor, his gaze briefly meets mine. All I recognise from the distance are unusually thick black ... eyelashes?

Well, he basically seems to me exactly how Jonas wants the radio station's social media channel to look: relaxed and carefree. It's as if someone had kindly placed a learning example in front of my nose. The many tattoos alone,

some of which disappear as he slips his hands into his trouser pockets....

"Sorry, you two," he calls out then. "Otis is our problem child."

"It's okay," I blurt out and press my lips together because suddenly it's Otis's challenging gaze that searches my bust.

"The cold water suits you."

My heart stops for a moment, then plunges into my stomach. He didn't just say that!? A feeling travels up my spine, as disgusting as if a stranger had first licked my food and then forced me to eat it. Overwhelmed, I automatically tie my radio shirt in a knot underneath the visible bra and cover my bare stomach with one arm.

"Disgusting Neanderthal!" Ella shoots up from her avocado air mattress and is now standing next to me with a paintbrush in one hand and a powder compact in the other. She gasps for air. "You'd better watch out that a mammoth doesn't trample you while you're making a fire."

Although I know that Ella is the quick-witted one of the three of us, and even Leni lets her have the floor in unpleasant situations, I could have thought of something like that. But it always happens minutes later. So I stare dumbly at the two guys, half-bury my face in my hands and hope that the high-wrapped fabric at least covers my bra. I s h o u l d have listened to Ella and put on my bikini this morning.

"All right!" Otis raises his hands defensively and pushes past his mate. "Tiring, the females, aren't they?"

The black-haired guy gives us a quick glance. "Sorry again! Otis has been making women go dry since he was a teenager, instead of getting laid." His hand reaches for Otis' shirtsleeve

to pull him back. "We are still trying to find out where exactly we lost him, but on a good day he even manages to apologise."

"Dude, seriously?" For a moment Otis looks like he wants to row back, but what he then adds is: "Didn't know that all that me-too shit also applies at festivals."

"Ouch." Ella throws the brushes and glitter onto the air mattress and crosses her arms in front of her chest. "If I were you, I'd be glad to finally be able to look women in the eye."

For a moment Otis can't seem to think of a suitable retort, which is why it's silent except for the music that has been coming from one of the neighbouring tents for a few minutes.

I think I know the band. My father idolises Muse, and if I'm not mistaken, it's the distinctive style of their lead singer that just breaks through a regular drum beat.

"Whatever." Otis looks served. "Let's get out of here, Levy!" The drums kick in again and my dad would be drumming his fingers on the kitchen table right now, falling into the beat.

Levy, on the other hand, flinches, like it's a reflex. The next moment he presses the flat of his hand on Otis' back to push him forward and hold on to him at the same time. I don't understand his behaviour, but it's none of my business. Besides, he catches himself a second later.

"If I can bring you both anything as compensation, my tent is near the supermarket. Just let me know." Levy's voice suddenly has a dark, rough undertone that somehow manages to make me want to answer him.

"Just teach Otis some manners as compensation."

Levy touches his nose. For a moment I fear I've gone too far with that line, then he laughs. "I'll do my best."

"I actually believe you." With a snort, Ella picks up the make-up kit. "You seem all right."

It takes two breaths before Levy murmurs a soft "Thank you" and finally pushes Otis away from us. A few more seconds pass, which I spend watching the two of them. Otis pushes his buddy - presumably he expected more contribution from him - and when the two are out of sight, I exhale with relief.

"What an idiot."

My gaze swivels to Ella, who looks worried again. My goodness, the water, Otis' sayings, that guy Levy - I was just a little taken off guard, that's all.

"Uh, Charlie ..." she begins, and I immediately want to intervene, but Ella suddenly presses her hands to her face in panic. "Oh man ..." she blurts out, "I told you to be careful ... Well, let's put it this way, Otis would now have a reason to stare at your face and not your tits."

"What? Why?" There's something in Ella's undertone, and as I look frantically at my hands, I also see the reason. They are covered in glitter. "Crap, I've smeared it all over, haven't I?"

"You have." Ella bites her lip, and somehow it seems as if she has to pull herself together to keep from snorting out loud.

"Guys," I hear Leni's voice shortly afterwards. "The power bank offer was a miss and Ella should definitely have brought her DJ set. On the way here, I was handed countless flyers of DJ collectives with stupid names, but at least the toilets are clean."

I can't see why Leni is faltering because Ella's arms, which are raised in the air, block my view of her. It takes a few seconds of

hectic arm-waving until Leni's voice sounds again over half the square.

"Oh my God, Charlie!" The fact that it sounds to my ears as if Leni is singing the words doesn't really make it any better, because: "Is that a glitter penis on your face?!"

THE CHAPTER IN WHICH I AM QUITE
LIBERAL ... FOR A CLASSICAL RADIO
STATION

Charlie

"Is that ... what?!"

Come on, destiny, are you serious? With so much going wrong within a few minutes, I hope for Leni and Ella's sake that they have enough ropes to tie me up.

"It only looks like that at first glance." Leni squats down relaxed on the air mattress and pushes the make-up things aside to make room for me. "It's more like ... Remember that dick pic I sent you guys in the group chat the other day? From the Spaniard who wouldn't leave me alone after the last Bully Tour?"

"No. No. No." I rub the flat of my hand across my cheek before giving up and sitting down with Leni. "Where's my phone?!"

Ella leans forward over my shoulder and pulls my phone out from under the air mattress to hand it to me.

"You mean the one we sent the urologist's number to in response?"

"That's the one!" Leni bursts out laughing.

"Can you please stop that?! I knew this was all really stupid! I should never have said yes to Jonas, fuck the free tickets, fuck his recommendation!" I don't have to open the camera app. What's reflected in the darkened screen is enough. "Fuck all this shit! How do I get this stuff off, damn it?"

My empty stomach turns with outrage, and because Leni and Ella have been quiet for a moment after my tiny outburst, the growl inside is excessively loud. The two of them immediately start giggling again and this time I have to stifle my snorting with my hand as well.

"That's not funny," I scold, but can't hold back my laughter. "I've got a dick on my face and only half of a dry petrol station croissant in my stomach, for crying out loud."

"We've got plenty of food, and it says here that you can easily get the glitter off with soap and water." Ella turns the neon-coloured package in her hand. "Just go to the toilets for a minute and wash up there. When you get back, we'll make sure you don't have to fuck all this shit anymore, okay?"

"I don't know," it suddenly comes dryly from Leni. "We once put something similar on the faces of a few kids during a tour. It only came off with adhesive tape. It was a huge drama. I almost went crazy, the kids were screaming like banshees..."

"Not. Helpful. Leni!" I stretch to reach the turquoise otter-themed bath towel in my tent. "You'd better explain to me why the hell I have to meet the biggest idiot of the festival in the first three hours here."

"No idea," says Ella. Her eyes speak volumes. Great, so Otis was just the tip of the iceberg. *I just won't think about it any more ...* and take a deep breath.

"Does that mean I'd better cross my own fingers that nothing moves in the toilet bowl?"

Leni and Ella cackle again. "They were still clean a moment ago," Leni assures me between two laughs. "But Ella is

right: When you come back, we'll make a survival plan! Your boss can't expect you to move mountains here if you've never been to a festival before." I bite my lip. In retrospect, it might not have been such a good idea to lie to Jonas about my lack of festival experience and the fear of having to abandon it all after just a few hours because I am so overwhelmed. Because now I'm under a lot of pressure.

Ella knows my fears. "Give me your phone," she demands. After I've handed her the device, she snaps a picture of the tin can castle in front of my tent. "Now you just write something funny about that."

"Like what?", I ask uncertainly. "'Sign me up as a volunteer tribute for this year's Hunger Games'?"

Ella laughs. "I'd like that."

"Seriously?" I find pictures of tin cans totally boring.

"Festival content is all about the atmosphere, the vibe," Leni explains with a wink, while Ella now snaps a picture of a bottle of red-orange liquid she pulls out of her backpack.

"And about music, alcohol," Ella continues. "I mixed us some Pimm's." She opens the bottle and takes a sip. "With cucumber, lemon, raspberries, orange and extra fresh mint, exactly like your recipe, Charlie. But maybe you should eat something first."

I reach for the bottle, and while I don't linger long, but take several sips from it, Leni nudges me in the side. "Besides, have we already forgotten the rule about not asking questions about anything with the word 'free' in it?"

Grumbling, I pass the bottle to her and close my eyes for a moment. The smell of sun-heated earth rises to my nose and I concentrate only on

inhaling it deeply and exhaling it again. That helps a little to calm my tense nerves.

"It's not as dramatic as it looks," Ella reassures me and stows the bottle back in her bag. "And if need be, we have enough alcohol with us."

I would like to have a few moments to myself right now, but it's difficult with the noise around me. So I put my hands in the dry grass next to the air mattress and push my body upwards. The heat hasn't quite left my face yet.

Leni notices that too. "Does it reassure you that a glittery dick in the face doesn't even make the top twenty of my most embarrassing festival moments?"

The corners of my mouth twitch. "Definitely." I throw my bath towel over my shoulder and grimace as Ella and Leni pull me into a hug, giggling.

The festival is like a four-metre hurdle that I have to jump if I want to get Jonas' recommendation, but especially if I want to prove to myself, my parents and him that I am ready for my own life. As for my fast overstimulation, I've only been training for a year, but with a lot of run-up, it will work out. So from now on, I will focus on the goal, put on blinders and sprint straight through to my recommendation without detours ... or to the toilets for now.

My eyes dart one last time in the direction of the car park, then meet Ella's worried expression. I probably can't really fool my only school friend, but somehow we'll get through the next few days.

* * *

The grassy area I cross shortly afterwards is completely dry, trampled flat and brown. The sun burns my face and I cannot prevent my gaze from wandering helplessly between the chaotically erected tents. Tent. Path. Tent. Path. Heavens, why does everything look the same here?

It is already so oppressively hot that I really regret having put on a pair of tight jeans. At least the T-shirt dried in record time. I put the towel between my legs and tie my hair up in a b u n . I t ' s n o t really the right length for it, but I want it out of my face, if only because the fine strands keep sticking to my lips. Then I use my free hand to protect myself from the sun as best I can. In retrospect, Otis' cooling down wasn't that bad, even if I would have preferred to pour water on my face myself.

I stop for a moment in front of a colourfully painted VW bus with a pop-up roof. In front of it, a petite girl with a flower chain in her hair is dancing so relaxedly to soft rock beats, as if there were only her and her friend with a pretty Afro look, who has put both hands on the girl's hips and is completely lost in her rhythm with closed eyes. The two of them seem quite engrossed, which is why I don't ask them for a picture for the story, but listen for a moment to the music coming from inside the bus. Leni carts tourists around Germany with a similar thing. Technically, she wants to be a musical actress, but as far as I know, she hasn't sent out any of her applications yet because her parents want her to take over the family travel business.

I take a deep breath as a smile convinces the corners of my mouth. For a fraction of a second, I feel what Leni and Ella find so fascinating about festivals.

Then my phone vibrates again. But because my tight jeans stick to my sweaty skin due to the heat, I have to press the phone out of my pocket from below. When I finally get hold of it, I trip over a tightly stretched tent cord in the same breath. I jerk my arms forward to protect myself, stagger and just manage to catch myself in mid-air. Only my phone lands silently on the withered grass. Alex's picture on the display disappears.

"Hey, someone's wild." The voice that reaches my ear sounds breathless and hoarse. Like a long night of partying and too much alcohol.

I pick up my phone and as soon as I turn my head a little to the left, I look directly at a pair of sunglasses whose lenses are made of beer mugs. Irritated, I straighten up.

When I don't react immediately to his remark, the guy adjusts his straw hat and turns away from me so that I can see his red neck. He raises his shoulders apologetically and starts the 'Wetten, dass...?'-worthy attempt to simultaneously juggle a full beer can in one hand and press a tent peg into the dust-dry floor with the other. I have to bite my lower lip to keep from laughing out loud because he looks pretty stupid doing it.

"I'm actually looking for the toilets," I say quickly. Before the guy looks up, I put a hand flat on my blemished cheek to be safe and pretend to think about his answer together with him.

"Just keep walking straight." He raises his arm a little too vigorously, and the beer in his hand spills over the rim of the can right next to his buddy's bare feet. He's also wearing a pair of those beer mug glasses, along with a blue football jersey and red flowered swim shorts, and looking up from a white poster on which he's written *10/10*.

I think he's only really noticing me now, but something else is more important to him anyway.

"Dude, Sven, are you serious?" he scolds. "The beer!"

"What? The young lady here is in distress ..." Straw hat suggests a bow, which looks totally silly from a crouching position, spills more of his beer and immediately receives a firm blow to the shoulder. Not a second later, the beer can rolls across the grass to just in front of my shoes. Brown-golden liquid spreads everywhere. The smell of brewery mixes with the shimmering heat and I feel sick.

"That's great, you idiot! Here, have a new one."

The uncontrolled fidgeting of the two makes me nervous, and I don't even know exactly why. It's probably because I don't know how I should behave now. So I look for the right moment to slip away with a quiet murmur, but every time I try to do so, one of the two boys says something.

But now a third guy is coming towards me. He is wearing a plain dark blue shirt with a star on the right breast, in the middle of which is the Berlin Bear. I know the golden emblem from somewhere. Instinctively, I glance at my crumpled classical radio shirt, which until just now I actually thought was a good choice in contrast to the jeans.

"Who did you find?" When the guy reaches us, he stops in front of me with his arms crossed. His facial expression is arrogant, and this makes my cheek tense with heat and my legs tingle. I won't have a better moment to escape, but I realise immediately that I've waited too long because the stranger is now taking a deep breath.

"I'm Leon ...", his gaze falls on the poster, "... and we can certainly try this out on you."

"Charlie," I reply automatically, although I don't really feel much like making friends with someone who rates people in numbers.

"Do you listen to that classical radio station on your shirt?" Leon looks surprised.

"I work there," I say truthfully - that will definitely lead to questions.

"So what are you doing at *this* festival?" I sigh because it doesn't matter now anyway. "Taking pictures for our Instagram channel."

"Really?" Leon looks curious, and Sven and the other guy also look at me with interest.

I pucker my mouth. Is it really so far-fetched for a classical radio station to cover a rock festival? "We're a pretty liberal radio station."

I look quickly at the colourful bully, trying not to pay attention to my accelerated heartbeat and the boys' reactions. Nevertheless, out of the corner of my eye I see Leon raise a brow in irritation.

"Then you'll want to take a picture of us."

It takes me a moment to realise that this demand makes quite a lot of sense. "Sure, that would be ... great."

Leon grins. "Of course, you can also use the picture for your private pinboard -"

"No, that's fine," I interrupt him, and as I push a few loose strands behind my ear, my gaze brushes the other two. "Is that okay with you?"

Sven clears his throat and for good measure I give him a big smile. *Please don't involve me in a long, drawn-out conversation now!* "Sure, why not?"

I breathe a sigh of relief, and as I take a few steps backwards, my eyes fall on my festival ribbon:

If you don't want to stand out in a flock of sheep, you should probably be a sheep first and foremost. I'll write that down somewhere later, or I'll use it as a caption for Leni's tin can castle.

Sven and his buddy straighten up with a groan and pluck a few thin pieces of grass from their bare knees. Leon slides his black sunglasses from his head onto his nose and positions himself between his two friends. I open the camera app and turn the phone to the side.

"If it's for a story, you'd better hold that thing upright." Sven smiles at me encouragingly.

"U-upright, sure." If I carry on like this, I might as well have it tattooed on my forehead how little I know about festivals.

Leon turns his head to his mate. "I guess it's for her pinboard after all." And back to me. "What's that in your fa-"

"Dude, don't ask so much, we still have to set up your tents before we meet up with the others at the supermarket tonight," Sven beats me to it with a wink. "Are you ready, liberal radio station?"

"Ready."

I turn the phone, point it at the three boys and take a few pictures before putting it back in the pocket of my jeans.

"Great!" The situation makes me take a deep breath before I continue. "I'll upload the picture to our story in a minute."

The boys sneer and Leon immediately digs his mobile phone out of his pocket. "I'll check it out, and if you like, feel free to come by the supermarket later. On the first evening we all sit there together and ... drink."

Certainly not. I nod politely to Leon and see how

the other two position themselves around him. All three stare at the screen, where the radio station's Instagram page is almost certainly loading right now. Follower count: sixteen. It would actually be seventeen, but Marianne from marketing is critical of social media.

"This is really a fucking classical radio?!" Sven's roar motivates my legs to walk a little faster. "A modern take on classical", he now reads out the station bio. "Managed by Charlotte Leyfert." Jonas insisted on this addition so that he could better justify the recommendation later.

I run a little faster, but the laughter of the guys reaches me, and Leon's loud voice follows right behind. "I'll follow you anyway, liberal radio station," he shouts. Why? "You're definitely a ten out of ten."

For once, I accept the reasoning because, well, maybe I'm not such a bad sheep as assumed.

Uncertainly, I turn to the three of them, because for a tiny second I have to think of the situation with Levy earlier, when I simply dared to say what was on the tip of my tongue. Maybe that's how it works at festivals? Foreign place, foreign rules.

"I thought it was more because your grandma would be happy to see you there."

Sven laughs and I decide that him I like. After all, he saved me from the glitter penis question, which I simply interpret as a good omen. Not wanting to tempt my fate any further, I make sure that I trudge on towards the toilets before the three of them expose my feigned casualness.

But when I feel like I'm walking in circles after a few minutes, I take a deep breath and walk purposefully towards a shaded area.

My phone has vibrated during the conversation. A quick glance at the display is enough to tell me that Leni has sent a map with important festival information to the groupchat. As I run, I skim over the countless tips that the organisers have summarised in one picture: areawide internet, hazard lights during thunderstorms. What the hell?!

I swipe the message away before I reach a narrow row of trees and lean against one of the trunks. I've only been here for a few hours and I already feel totally exhausted. Maybe it's the unfamiliar surroundings. Or maybe it's just that I still haven't properly eaten anything. At therapy I have learned a mental sequence of steps for overstimulating situations like this, which is supposed to take away my fear of being blindly at the mercy of an overload like this.

If I had already mastered the combination of breathing exercises and body awareness during highschool, I could have prevented everyone but Ella from seeing me as the oversensitive victim Charlie. That's why I can't possibly be angry with Ella when she worries about me. I myself am ashamed not only of how helplessly I have been exposed to the hostility of my classmates, but also because for years I have judged myself for something that is simply my nature. Sometimes I am almost grateful to them for what they did to me. Otherwise I would never have gone to therapy after my eighteenth birthday, where I in turn met Leni. What will be, will be, my father always says.

I close my eyes and project every single part of my body as an image in front of my inner eye. Like this, I relax bit by bit. Meanwhile, I allow the thoughts and feelings to circle around inside me like a swarm of bees.

A year ago, every thought and feeling was like a wasp that stings wildly and keeps coming back because one sting won't kill it. Thanks to therapy, irritations have now become bees that know that a single use of their sting will kill them. At the same time, I have realised that bees are needed for an ecosystem to function. That's why for the past year it's mostly been working out between the thoughts, feelings and me.

I loosen my shoulders and scan the unfamiliar surroundings with my eyes. With sweaty fingers, I brush my hair out of my forehead, pull out my phone and open the Instagram app. I add the new picture to my Story. Immediately, a little tension disappears from my body. Inwardly, I give myself a high five and push my phone back under my towel before closing my eyes again and trying to relax. Maybe I'll have fun the next few days if I continue to be such an easy-going sheep.

Sounds pass me by, a chaos of loud voices and music. I take a deep breath and swallow a lot of the overload. From somewhere, the constant beat of an electro song mixes into my thoughts, and when after a few minutes the last *boom* is followed by a new beat, the breathing exercise finally helps to calm my tense nerves.

THE CHAPTER IN WHICH I QUITE LIKE
NEW ANGLES

Charlie

"Hey, you!"

I feel something on my arm and open my eyes in shock. In my head, a wild jumble of voices, electric music and laughter immediately starts pounding against my racing pulse. For a moment my mind is still stuck in the relaxation exercise, then panic rises in me and I let out an overwhelmed gasp. I try to pull myself together and get up, but apparently I'm not quite back to myself yet. I lose my balance, topple over with a helpless cry, and at the same moment instinctively jerk my hands forward to keep my head from hitting the floor.

"Fuck, are you okay?" Again there is a strange hand on my arm, which I push aside with a jerky movement, although a part of my mind registers that I know the voice, which continues uncertainly: "Did you fall asleep?"

At a festival? How stupid would that be? My confusion at his question is pretty much the only reason I don't crawl away in panic from the rising overload.

Groaning, I yank my upper body back, which is not a good idea at all, because now it feels like my head is going to implode. Gasping, I close my eyes. With all its might, the unknown place seems to want to overrun me right now. Countless horror scenarios flood uncontrollably through my mind,

and no meditation exercise can help me to calm down. Only with full concentration do I manage to transport oxygen into my lungs.

I only notice the guy next to me again when I hear him squatting down by the rustling of his trousers.

"Or have you had too much to drink? Can you look at me?"

I feel him coming closer and instantly sink back on his heels as I open my eyes with a strangled sound and back away from him.

"Okay, forget it."

"I'm not drunk, I was trying to relax." The words come out of my mouth with difficulty, and it takes even more effort to get my body to straighten up. I ignore the hand that is immediately held out to me again and push myself off the floor with both hands.

I blink. The first thing I notice is the naked upper body full of small and large black and colourful tattoos, which seems to have shielded me from the sun until just now. Then I realise that the body belongs to Levy. He's not as lanky as he seemed from the distance earlier. But it's Levy - the guy who put his buddy in his place because of me and is now standing up as well.

"I didn't mean to scare you, sorry. You're sitting in the blazing sun and I was worried you wouldn't notice if you got heatstroke." He pulls a hand out of the pocket of his cloth trousers, and with that my eyes automatically fall on the jet-black sequence of numbers there: 1206. An indigo line goes right through the middle of it, ending just above a mark on his thumb. It is circular and dark red, not really a noticeable scar.

Now Levy raises his arm and I follow the movement up to his face. He notices my gaze and wipes his eyes, smearing the carefully drawn line of eyeliner on his lower eyelid. There's a simple ring in his left nasal wing, and around his neck he wears a kind of band that looks like Leni's velvet choker. Wow, that's ... well, it certainly distracts me for a moment from the fact that I still can't quite control my breathing and therefore feel a little woozy.

Levy leans forward. Immediately, the unexpected movement takes my overstimulated senses by surprise. A stifled gasp escapes me.

"I'm just picking up your stuff before someone can steal it, okay?" With a smile, Levy waits for me to agree, and when I nod in perplexity, he reaches for the phone and towel beside me to hand them both to me. "It's best not to leave valuables lying around so obviously next time you're *relaxing*."

"Believe it or not, I didn't fall asleep."

"Even if ...", Levy replies nonchalantly and bites his lower lip. "It's happened to me before. Cost me fifty euros and my fully stamped tattoo bonus card." With a grin, he holds out his other wrist to me. "See. That's why I still didn't get it done." He turns it so that I can read the tattooed writing that ends in the middle of the sentence. *Dare or ...*

Truth? Who gets the name of a game tattooed in reverse order? I have to smile. "As if ..."

Grinning, Levy runs one hand over the back of his neck, the other grabs his water bottle to put it under

his arm before both disappear back into his trouser pockets. "What did you have to *relax* for?"

"It is absolutely impossible to find the toilets in the chaos of the tents."

"I see." He glances over his shoulder. "You mean the ones next to the supermarket tent, right back there."

My gaze falls on the large white tent with colourful fairy lights, which admittedly clearly stands out among the others. Right behind it, with a lot of imagination, I recognise a first row of blue porta-potties.

I can't hold back the frustrated sigh. "If there were proper signs around here somewhere, I would have seen those things right away, too."

Levy turns his head again and examines me.

"There are ... forget it," he finishes the sentence. But his expression alone makes it clear that there are indeed signs on the paths. His gaze wanders from my sneakers over my tight jeans upwards, briefly lingers on my hands tightened into fists and finally lands on my painted cheek. The glitter dick - damn it.

"Don't ask!" it bursts out of me.

Levy frowns and tilts his head. "Is that a ...?"

"It's a very dignified glitter butterfly, that's right. Which, by the way, your mate destroyed stone cold, which is why I'm looking for the stupid loos. I can't photograph it like that."

Levy takes a sip from his water bottle before handing it to me. With a shake of my head, I refuse. There's no way I'm going to touch a drink from a complete stranger, no matter how trustworthy Levy seems.

"I was going to say 'penis'." With a grin he finishes his drink, and I think he actually wants to crush the empty water bottle

but when he notices my lips pressed together, he wedges it between his stomach and the waistband of his trousers.

"But maybe we'll start again." Levy clears his throat quietly and shoves his hands back into his trouser pockets. "I'm sorry Otis ruined the artwork on your cheek and your followers have to wait an hour longer than usual for the tutorial for the seven easiest festival make-up looks because of it."

I'm certainly not going to answer that. If only because Levy's tone became a little sarcastic towards the end. But like before, I suddenly feel a strange urge to counter.

I grit my teeth and shrug my shoulders.

"I'm Levy," he continues. "Twenty-three, and yep: that's Eyeliner. So if you tell me the name of your blog, I'm sure I can learn something."

Okay, that ... I can't suppress my laughter. "I honestly doubt that." With my thumb I point to the classical radio logo on my chest. "Charlie, well actually Charlotte, nineteen, and apparently with a glitter dick on her cheek."

"Not an influencer?"

I shake my head. "Definitely not."

Levy doesn't let on how he feels about that. "Your luck. There's usually a lousy reception at festivals."

"This year they have rammed extra transmission masts into the ground for influencers," I explain to him with a grin. At least that's what it said on the picture Leni sent to the group chat. "You should read the festival instructions."

Levy seems as irritated by my quick-witted answer as I am. "I guess I forgot."

"Pretty reckless if you ask me."

Levy shifts his weight to the other leg. "You forgot 'falls asleep at festivals' just now, by the way."

"I didn't fall asleep!"

"That's what you said, right."

Levy's crooked grin teases me, and suddenly I want to trump him. "You know what, I'll just save the location of the toilets on Google Maps so I don't forget it again." As soon as the words have left my mouth, I want to catch them and shove them back in. What am I talking about? As if ...

"Festival locations can't be saved on Google Maps." Levy's laughter suppresses my worry that I've revealed far too much about my inexperience with my pathetic answer. "But if anyone asks as stupidly as I did just now, you just claim that that's a one-wing-butterfly on your cheek."

Levy leans slightly towards me and I wonder how a person can smell like summer. Like lime and sunscreen, and a little sweaty, which doesn't really surprise me given the temperature. The fact that my heart tightens at Levy's smell, on the other hand, does.

"One-wing... what?"

He blinks. "Like that shitty Til Schweiger movie about rabbits without ears?"

"I see." Weird comparison. "I'll just go and wash it away."

"Or that."

"If I find the toilets without Google Maps."

Levy looks at me, then clamps the silver ring in his nostril between his fingers. "I deserve that."

I notice that Levy's eyelashes form a midnight black oval with the eyeliner around the brown in the middle, which is why the irises look really intense even in the shadows. Strangely enough, I like the combination.

"Good," he says. "I'm actually on my way to the first tent area party ..."

"What kind of party?" I have no idea why I'm even asking him that. It's definitely not the hope that he'll invite me to accompany him. Either I've caught some sun, or ... I'm trying to prolong a conversation that I actually wanted to end, in a place that I really want to leave. Involuntarily I have to smile again, because the idea alone is really absurd.

"Some DJ collective is spinning in a converted caravan in the middle of the campsite, people are dancing tightly packed to deafening music. Summarised it is ..." Even in my imagination it's sheer horror? Frightening? Crazy "Quite ingenious! Kind of liberating. Do you want to come?"

"Absolutely not!"

Again, I can't make out whether Levy finds my shocked exclamation as embarrassing as I do. It's a little scary how good he is at barely showing obvious reactions - like standing in front of a soldier of the British King's Guard. "The good thing about festivals is that you don't have to do anything, but you get to do everything. However, it doesn't hurt to change your perspective every now and then. Try something new for a change. That's what they say, isn't it?"

I'm not sure if it was just me who heard the allusion in his words. "Sounds pretty wise, anyway. Maybe you should think about a career as an influencer."

"Good idea," he says. "I can't believe I haven't thought of it myself yet." Now he's suppressing a laugh, I'm sure of it. I can tell by the way Levy grits his teeth with difficulty, while his facial muscles move upwards anyway. Oh God, it looks so stupid that I burst out laughing.

Really loud, with that stupid piggy squeal at the end. Often enough, someone has teased me about it, so I usually try hard to suppress it. But just now ... I couldn't. And I immediately regret it.

Because Levy tenses up. His eyes suddenly narrow and his lips thin. "Well, my people are waiting for me. If you want to relax again, it's best to stay in the tent or ..." He leaves the sentence unfinished and swallows a few times.

Levy's abrupt detachment confuses me because I know his physical tension, far too well, and yet I can't see the reason for it. Now I'm sorry that I rejected his invitation so abruptly.

I notice that I've been automatically breathing in and out slowly for a while now, and because Levy is now adapting to my regulated breathing, I smile. "Well ... er, see you."

"You know what they say about festival lakes?" A wink accompanies his hand gesture towards my bath towel, which I'm about to throw over my shoulder.

"What?" I don't think I want to know.

"Better go in too early than too late. As of tomorrow, the lake is no longer exclusively water."

"Yuck." I grimace in disgust.

Levy shrugs his shoulders and turns to leave.

"Have a great time at the festival."

I have no idea why my heart is beating up to my neck and why I am only now noticing the voices around me again, the volume, the music and my physical reactions. As if Levy had simply switched it all off for a few moments.

"Thank you," I call after him. "And meet -"

Levy spins around, and this time he interrupts me immediately before I repeat myself. "You can't *meet again* so easily at festivals." He doesn't smile, but I notice that his face looks softer again anyway. "But ... I haven't tried Google Maps yet."

"Yeah yeah." This time I'm the one who energetically walks past him, but damn, the corners of my mouth are pointing suspiciously far up.

"Take care ..." Levy's voice falters, and I think he is unsure which name to call me. "Charlie."

Damn, that sounds nice coming out of his mouth.

I want to reply that I'd actually be quite happy if Google Maps worked here so that I could run into Levy again, but then I don't. Instead, I give a quick wave and head for the toilets. It's only when I've already turned the corner at the supermarket that I remember. The Instagram channel! The recommendation! Levy! Picture!

No, I can't ask him for a picture now. That sounds like the cheapest excuse to continue a conversation that has clearly ended.

There are dozens of people in front of me I could ask. But talking to strangers isn't exactly my favourite discipline, and I already know Levy a bit. Besides, he said something earlier about new perspectives. So I could justify turning back to him now ...

Am I finding arguments to run after a situation rather than away from it right now?

That is ... more than unusual. And a problem. Because the idea of spending the next few days together with Levy at the festival makes my stomach suddenly tingle violently.

EVEN BE A CLOWN, JUST TO AMUSE YA

Levy

Tuncer: Your father was just here in the shop. Dude, tell him not to do that anymore. Every time I think they have something on me.

He found out, all right. Although I didn't expect anything else from my father, this information makes me even more crazy than Charlie. Why am I meeting this girl today of all days? Two years after... Fuck.

I don't need that at all, because my father will make sure that I regret my decision to come back to the rock festival with Otis and Gloria after a year's break. By Monday morning at the latest, he'll have me over at his place to remind me, in his own way, of the exact wording of the agreement.

With sickening relief in my stomach, I check the contents of my Adidas sports bag, which I quickly threw into Otis' car this morning: the polo shirt - navy blue with a gold emblem - and black Oxford shoes. I'll have to put on the disguise first, because I don't need to show up at my father's with a tank top and cloth trousers. He'd kick me out if he saw the remains of eyeliner on my lower eyelid. Still, I jump when the idiot calls for me. How fucked up is that?

I put the phone back in my pocket and take a deep breath. Muse is blaring from one of the tents. I don't condemn the rock band for being one of the best musicians of our time and therefore almost obligatory for the campground of every rock festival, but some of their damned songs are hardly bearable for my fucked-up mind.

More worrying than thoughts of my father and Muse right now is Charlie. I don't know why her hair has to end at the level of her shoulders and why Charlie has tied it up in a messy knot despite its short length. I don't know why it makes her face look like it's only made up of her bright blue eyes. Her fucking eyes. Even worse than her laugh.

Both challenged me at first, then overwhelmed me.

I could imagine Charlie having a similar experience with the festival. At least that's what her tense body language suggested. So what's she doing here? In a classical radio t-shirt? I know the station because I listen to it occasionally, because of the harmlessness of its song selection. Otis and his sister make fun of me all the time because of it.

I stare at the supermarket tent and feel restless, but have no idea why. There is one simple rule in my head for situations like this, and I try to stick to it meticulously. If I had bumped into Charlie in any bar in Berlin, I would order a soft drink and, as I empty it, decide to get with a woman who chooses me, not the other way around.

But that Charlie attends the festival solely for the music and trivial sex is definitely not something I believe. Still, I want to run after her. For a moment

I even imagined that she didn't want to end our conversation any more than I did ... and the very fact that I notice such things about her triggers even more anxiety in me.

Charlie isn't the first woman to bring up some fucking memory in my head. It happens all the time, and I'm usually pretty damn good at blocking it out. But there's something about Charlie that I just can't ignore, and even less grasp, that triggers a nervous, almost urgent feeling inside me to want to get to know her. Damn it, what's wrong with me?

Was it not a good idea to come back here after all?

Fuck. If that's how it starts ... lousy conditions.

Actually, I should leave right away because of that, but I can't get the way Charlie smiled at me, when I briefly blew a fuse because of her squeal of laughter, out of my head. As if she knew exactly about the abyss I was standing at in that moment, Charlie began to breathe in and out in a controlled manner. I could have imagined it. And even if I didn't. So Charlie was breathing. So what? Everybody breathes, for God's sake.

My skull pulsates. Only a few thoughts penetrate the grey confusion inside, but they all make me realise how abnormally interested I am in this woman.

"Charlie?" My legs are already heading towards the sanitary facilities anyway, so I oblige my mind. "Wait a minute!"

Charlie flinches when she hears her name and I immediately want to slap myself for not simply leaving her alone. Nothing about her behaviour was a clear indication that I should follow her. How frighteningly good I am at talking myself into such crap. Meanwhile, I, of all people, should know better about physical overload and lack of evidence...

I could still end this right here and leave.

"Yes?" Charlie has turned around and is now looking at me hesitantly.

My gaze slides over her face, along the round shape of her head to her full lips and then back up to her eyes. It's not exactly the same sky blue, of course not. But my heart doesn't give a shit. A fact that puts me right back off track, which is why I can't get my mouth to open.

"Did I forget anything?" Charlie asks uncertainly, checking first her trouser pockets and then the towel over her shoulder. Instead of following her lead, my gaze follows her involuntary movements. If she hadn't crossed her arms in front of her chest at that moment, I would have been staring blatantly at her again. Not that her breasts interest me more than her face. They certainly don't. They are just more innocuous.

I push my shoulders back. "Uh, no." God, I haven't been this helpless in ages. Have I eaten anything today? Maybe that's it. "I just wanted to apologise to you."

"What for?" This comes as if shot from a gun, while she puts a hand to her cheek to cover the glitter again. Yes, what for?

"Because of my reaction just now..." To her laugh? Shit, I can't just say that now because then I would have to tell Charlie a lot more for her to understand.

"It's alright."

Now I feel really stupid. My brain could definitely have tried harder.

Charlie's gaze rightly bores into mine. In contrast to me,

she's not wearing eye make-up, yet her eyelashes are incredibly long and thick. It looks insanely good. She looks insanely good. And apparently she makes me go insane as well. I'm already imagining again that she understands something. But I'm not sure what exactly she's supposed to understand.

"But if you're so desperate to make it up to me, you can actually help me with a little something." Charlie clears her throat quietly and lowers her eyes to her hands.

Surprised, I look at her. "Just tell me what you want me to do and I'll do it." *Ready to serve ya* - it even says so in my Instagram bio. With that thought, we are back on safe ground for the moment.

Hesitantly, Charlie grabs the back pocket of her jeans and pulls out her phone. "W-well," she stammers self-consciously. "I'd like to take your picture."

"My picture?"

She does not answer immediately. Her gaze rests on the curved writing below my collarbone: *I'm not afraid, I was born for this*. The expression in her eyes darkens so much that I wish I hadn't taken off my tank top earlier and thrown it carelessly into the tent. Those damned eyes.

"*Shit, Levy ... wait,*" her voice from another life suddenly echoes in my mind. *Her tone doesn't allow any arguments as she hastily adjusts the blonde topknot on her head and turns to me.*

"*Leave him!*" Under her uncertain gaze, he grabs her hands, holds them, protects them. "*Levy will get over it.*"

"Of course your picture," Charlie answers with a slight delay, and because I'm obviously not really listening to her and stare at her with a blank expression, she follows up with uncertainty in her voice: "Are you all right?"

I can't even get angry about losing control of my thoughts right now, because I want to leave the festival right then and there. I want to run away, as I always do when the memory carries me away.

"Did I take you by surprise?" she asks. Her voice thins. "Well, it's perfectly okay if you don't have time for a picture or don't want to; it's not a picture for my private pinboard or anything either ..." Charlie bites her lower lip uncertainly. "It's for this station." She points frantically at the logo on her chest with her thumb before her hand lands on her cheek again. Two fingers bend her ear slightly forward and now it looks as if she is resting her head on her palm.

For a split second, this gesture distracts me from the feeling of suffocating. Although it's been two years since I've seen people behave in a similarly tense manner on a daily basis, I'm now sure that Charlie wants to run away as well. From me, from this place.

"It was a totally stupid idea anyway," she confirms my suspicions, and now her voice is so quiet that it is almost lost in the background noise around us.

It wasn't! The memory is just choking my throat right now, and at the same time I'm afraid that a hysterical laugh will rise up inside me when I open my lips, which is why I press them tightly together. Because I feel like *she's* incredibly close, for the first time in a long time. For the first time since ... the end.

Emotionally, I've just been thrown back two years. Fucking shitty years in which I was constantly reminded of one thing: *I was born for this.*

"Hello?"

Charlie's hand clears my blurred vision, and when,

after several gasping breaths, the roaring in my ears becomes quieter, I see her again properly. Hear her, smell her. Fuck. There is *one* fucking rule in my head.

"Sorry," I press out between clenched teeth. "I think I -"
"It's okay," she jumps in for my overwhelmed mind and smiles at me. With her lips, with her eyes ...

One rule!

"No," I say, avoiding a nervous breakdown. "It's not okay. I'm sorry. I really am. Sometimes I am..."

An idiot. Her expression screams exactly that to me. Her pupils twitch back and forth frantically, first becoming the size of a doe's eye and then narrowing again into narrow slits. Even pinched like that, they flash in the sun like the fucking surface of the sea. "Weird?"

I laugh, and that frees me a little from the emotional vice I've got myself into.

"I'll take that. And because of the picture..."
"Forget the picture." Charlie's gaze flits briefly to the festival supermarket, in front of whose entrance we are currently standing. It opened a few minutes ago, which is why more and more people are gathering around us. "I'll just ask someone else."

Someone who's not an ass. Copy that. "You got it." Involuntarily, I touch the back of my head. With just the tip of my finger, I carefully stroke the slightly curved spot behind my left ear, only to quickly withdraw my hand under Charlie's attentive gaze. How badly do I actually want to provoke it today?

"Are you sure you're going to be okay?"

"Don't worry about it, Charlie."

In the next moment, her upper body rises and falls again at regular intervals. I still know the breathing exercise

from training, I recognised it earlier on Charlie and immediately feel that she is helping me to calm my nerves. It's crazy because she can't know that I've just been on the verge of panicking again. How on earth does she still manage to help me?

I hear Charlie take a breath to say something else, coming closer. "So ... keep having a good time."

"Thank you, you too."

I should leave it at that, because there are already far too many questions floating around in my head for a carefree festival experience. The banal answer to all of them is probably that this place triggers a kind of flashback and that I shouldn't have returned. That's all.

For a long moment we just look at each other. Charlie opens her mouth and closes it again. I've already noticed that she doesn't do or say rash things. Not even now, when she pushes past me with a quiet "goodbye" and her jeans very lightly graze my thigh. I know immediately that the touch was not planned because Charlie winces with a strangled sound.

"Sorry," she mumbles, and I'm not fucking okay with that. Charlie doesn't need to apologise. I'm the idiot. Who actually managed to make her feel even more insecure...

Since I surprised her earlier, she has practically been trying to avoid this situation, avoid me. That has to be okay for me. At least it should be, usually it is. But the idea of not seeing this woman again at the crowded festival feels wrong to me, and that's why I can't keep my fucking mouth shut.

"Listen ..."

I think Charlie is holding her breath as she turns around.

However, I forbid myself to look at her chest again. She's probably just as tense as I am, waiting to see what I'm going to say next. To be honest, I don't even know.

I have to think about the fact that she has just helped me for the second time and whether I can somehow return the favour.

"So you work for the classical radio station? Then you are an influencer after all?"

She needs several attempts to answer me. Yes, I also find the question quite random now, but my social media accounts are the only thing I could think of in a hurry.

"Yes and no." Charlie's thumb points again to the print on her shirt. "My boss wants to target a younger audience, and I'm supposed to provide fancy festival content on social media. I'm a journalist."

It's close enough. Jackpot!

"If I do well, I'll get a recommendation for a trainee position." Her fingertip briefly runs down her cheek to her neck, spreading more glitter on her skin. I notice that, unlike me, she hasn't painted her fingernails, and suddenly I wonder if that bothers her about me.

"Fancy content?" I demonstratively pinch the ring in my nose between my fingers so that Charlie can see the black nail varnish, and grin. "Right in front of you. You should take your chance!"

She looks at me in irritation, and because I can't bear the restlessness that builds up in me because of this, I feel compelled to say something else.

"Maybe I'll stand in front of a shelf of canned soup at the supermarket ... for the vibe, you know?"

Shit, what are you doing? Why am I describing the

content of my social media profile to her? It's pathetic even by my standards - after all, I haven't yet mentioned that I'm half naked in some of my pictures.

My babble already makes Charlie's skin turn pink under the glitter.

"What is it with everyone and this stupid canned soup?"

I try to interpret her tone of voice, but I don't succeed. Somehow it sounds like this is not her first canned soup conversation of the day.

Irritated, I cross my arms at the back of my neck and lean my head back slightly. "Maybe you don't know, but when the canned soup supplies run low at a festival, it's not to be trifled with..."

The corners of Charlie's mouth twitch. "Thank you, Haymitch. I'm just hoping for generous sponsor donations to be parachuted into the festival grounds."

Is she comparing me to Katniss Everdeen's boozy mentor from *The Hunger Games*? I deserve that.

By now I only feel sorry for myself. I mean, what did I expect from this situation? Charlie is wearing a classical radio shirt at a rock festival. I can still tell that she is uncomfortable in the huge space by her cramped posture. She doesn't fit in here, that's more than obvious, and I just can't get it together and give her a feeling of security. Which is not my fucking job. I shouldn't have even tried. With a woman who, as I've already discovered several times, works completely against the only rule I know.

"Okay, I'll take that as a hint to get lost," I say, pointing in a random direction. "My friends will get angry if I keep them waiting any longer."

At least my brain manages not to ask her again if she wants to come along. Her shocked reaction earlier seems to have become ingrained.

But Charlie grins. "I think you would have convinced me more with chocolate chip cookies."

Damn. "Why didn't you say that before? Let's -"

"It's okay," she stops me right in my tracks. "I don't want your friends to be angry."

"Okay, okay. I'm off."

I run my hands through my hair and realise that Charlie is trying to decipher the writing below my right armpit: *Do or do not. There is no try*. It's a quote from *Star Wars*, from Yoda. It probably won't convince her that I can behave more maturely than the *Hunger Games* mentor. The meaning of the quote - *Don't babble, do* - could also have come from his mouth.

I hold out my hand to her. "If we run into each other again, we'll take that picture. Deal?"

Pretty sad that this isn't the most pathetic deal I've ever made in my life.

Charlie hesitates, and I should actually pull my hand away, seeing how long she stares at it, but then she puts hers in mine. I hold it gently and without pressure. She watches me very closely, as if she doesn't even trust me to do that. That's why I'm extra cautious, to prove to her that I'm good at it ... Oh darn, that I'm good at holding hands with her?

It sounds really pitiful, and yet I don't make any frantic movements because she doesn't do that either. I assume she feels safest that way. Until her index finger very briefly touches the circular spot on my thumb where a bit of skin stands out in dark red. I gasp softly and Charlie immediately withdraws her hand.

"Call me crazy, but because I don't seem to have a clue about festival rules, I'll go along with it. But only if you really bring chocolate chip cookies next time."

Her smile. Her touch. Both hit me unexpectedly in the stomach and then even deeper. Fuck, I want to do this again. I want to hold hands with Charlie again.

"If you promise me to post some pictures to the Story and Feed by then?" Earlier, when I clicked on the stations profile, the feed was empty. Shouldn't stay that way if Charlie wants a recommendation.

"Double deal," she says without hesitation. "Don't look like that - I'm not sure how I feel about you being so stubborn either."

"I suggest 'good'."

Charlie laughs. "Your ass-kicking is pretty motivating, I have to admit." I thought her smile was my biggest concern. But I had forgotten how Charlie laughs. She squeals a tiny bit, and that's a big problem.

"You take your tattoos pretty seriously, don't you?" Her gaze lingers on my arm again, covering the spot below my armpit where Yoda's words are written.

I am so irritated that I forget to panic because of her laughter. "What makes you think that?"

"*Don't try, do* - sounds like your motto in life." How fucking quick-witted can you be? With my index finger, I point at the writing under my collarbone. "Could be." *I was born for this* - my life summed up in five words.

"Are you actually sure you can't pin festival locations on Google Maps?"

"Why?"

It twitches around her mouth again. "No reason."

All the way to the concert I wonder if I've ever had a conversation like this in the last two years that was funny, painful and ... beautiful all at the same time. But my mind doesn't have to bother finding an answer to that question or talk Charlie down because my fucking heart can't be lied to right now.