



LEARNING
CURVE

Harper Bliss

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Preview

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Warning: This title contains graphic language and f/f sex.

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“Ja?” Giselle asks.

“Yes Djeesel.” I sneak a peek at my watch. It’s two minutes to six and I pray she’ll let me off the hook.

“What did you say?” She pins her sky blue eyes on me. The sky looks a bit icy today though.

“Sorry. Ghie-sel-le.” I stress every syllable of her name as I pronounce it slowly.

In my head, the imaginary bell to signal the end of another gruelling lesson rings. Only, I’m not in school. I’m in private tutoring hell. Every Friday afternoon I leave work early to spend the last three hours of the week learning German. You’d think it would be easy for someone English-speaking, what with the two languages belonging to the same linguistic group, but let me assure you it’s bloody hard. The main problem, I duly confess, is that when it comes to learning, I might be over the hill. Picking up practical skills isn’t so much the issue, but studying exceptions to very rigid grammar rules—and remembering them—is proving quite difficult. The other issue is that I’m not convinced I need it and I find it hard to invest myself in useless activities.

My company sent me to Berlin five months ago and I’ve been having these weekly sessions with Giselle for the past fifteen weeks. That’s a lot of hours spent gazing into the impossible blue of her eyes. If only I could pick up German by doing that.

“Watch the news on ZDF,” Giselle says in impeccable English. I’m sure she does it to taunt me. I bet she’s a genius who speaks at least seven languages with no sign of a native accent.

“And address people in German this week. Don’t worry about making mistakes.”

“Sure.” I bury my books in my backpack with no intention of digging them up before next week’s session. Giselle has told me many times that German is not a language you can learn without memorising vocabulary, articles, and the dreaded verb cases, but does she honestly believe I have nothing better to do?

“Any wild plans this weekend?” She takes off her dark-framed glasses with those long-fingered hands and I can feel my heart skip a beat before it starts thundering in my chest. It doesn’t matter that those hands have pointed out countless mistakes and have, occasionally, slapped the desk in frustration with my apparent German learning disability. If Giselle wasn’t my teacher, she’d be perfect. Apart from her hands, they’re perfect already, regardless of our relationship.

“Just the usual speaking your fair language to everyone I encounter and maybe a few drinks in between.” I grab my leather jacket from the back of the chair and sling it over my shoulder. I need to get out of here before I lose my cool completely. I can feel it slipping away as I skim her freckled face for a sign of a smile. She shoots me a small one at last. One that says—*I know you want to fuck me, but you’ll have to learn German first.*

Granted, I could try harder with the flirting. Maybe ask her out for a drink after class. It is Friday night after all, but what if she says no? It’s already so excruciating to sit across from her every week, her dirty blonde hair caressing her face in all the places I want to touch it. I’m also ninety percent certain she’s straight. She looks like she may have a dark-haired, square-jawed boyfriend, a bit of a bad boy maybe, on a motor bike.

“Viel Spass,” she says. At least I know it means ‘have fun’. I scour my brain for the German translation of ‘likewise’ but it doesn’t come so I just wink and walk out, but not without conflicting

emotions. It happens every Friday at six. The elation linked to the start of the weekend courses through me, elevated by the relief of surviving another three-hour lesson, but then there's that crushing weight on my soul. A new cycle of seven days minus three hours begins before I see Giselle again.

I realise it's fairly immature for a thirty-year-old to have a teacher crush. Believe me, I've tried to stop it, but having to sit across from her every week doesn't help. And, crush or not, it doesn't inspire me to give German my best shot. It must be my rebellious streak. I've never been one to please.

Giselle teaches from a spacious basement studio in Prenzlauer Berg, a ten-minute walk along broad boulevards from my flat. I breathe in the autumnal Berlin air and I couldn't be happier. I couldn't believe my luck when my company sent me here. I'd never made it a secret that relocating to Berlin was my ultimate goal. I just hadn't expected it to happen so soon. I work for an international architecture and design firm and they could have sent me to Poland or the Middle East instead, but here I am. The only caveat was that I had to learn German. "No biggie," I had said all swag and confidence, "I'll master that in no time."

I stroll along the Kastanienallee and consider a Friday night cocktail when my phone buzzes in my pocket to announce a text from my friend Max. He is one of those Germans who only want to speak English with foreigners. It reads, *Now your weekly all-expenses-paid lusting session is over; meet me at Der Hobby in half an hour.*

I'm not one to keep a crush a secret—and I'm sure Giselle was the first to know.

"I'm not kidding." I try to convince Max with a bold stare. "We need to speak German. What if Giselle flunks me and the firm sends me back to the UK?"

"How can she flunk you when you don't even have exams?"

"She must give them progress reports or something. This private teaching business isn't exactly cheap."

"Then try a little harder, darling."

My biggest misconception about Germans when I first arrived was that they would all speak with a gayish lispy accent. Max is one of the biggest poofs in Berlin and his English pronunciation is better than mine.

"Anyway, let's move on to more important subjects. Berghain tonight?" He bites his lip in anticipation of his monthly night of complete hedonistic escapism. I've only accompanied him once and it took me three months to recover. Berghain is such an assault on the senses. Of course, Max calls it a thrilling feast.

I grimace and scrunch my mouth into an indecisive pout. "I'm not sure I'm up for it tonight."

"Come on. Andreas is bringing Ellen and we both know she has the hots for you."

Ellen is a nice girl, a typical Berlin hipster wearing polkadot dresses under heavy leather jackets, with black-dyed bangs and huge brown eyes. I do find her attractive and even kissed her once, but truth be told, the second I closed my eyes all I saw was Giselle's face scolding me. *You can kiss them but you can't speak German with them?* It kind of put a damper on things. So much

so, that I haven't popped my Berlin cherry yet.

"This teacher infatuation is getting out of hand. Give Ellen a chance."

Max has always championed Ellen as a prospective love interest for me. Judging from his rave reviews she's the second coming to lesbians around the world, but I can't help but wonder why she's single then. And going for me.

"You're right, Schatzie." Giselle would be so proud of me for utilising her language to address Max, instead of the endless affected 'darlings' we shower each other with in casual conversation. "I'll keep an open mind tonight, but don't you get her hopes up."

"As if." Max smirks and checks his watch. "One more drink followed by a disco nap. Let's meet at midnight. The queue should still be doable then and it gives us plenty of time to get into the groove."

I check myself in the mirror. I have a bit of a dark circle situation going on underneath my eyes and my eyelids sag slightly. If someone is drunk enough to want me tonight, they'll have to take me flaws and all. I remember Ellen and decide it's in the bag already, anyway. An unexpected shudder of anticipation creeps up my spine. It really has been a long time.

I head out wearing just a white tank top underneath my leather jacket—a big thing in Berlin—despite the early autumn chill. Golden-brown leaves tumble to the ground around me and I feel that surge of contentment rushing through me again. This is my city now and, if circumstances allow, I'm never leaving. I haven't been to many places in my life, but something tells me that, now that I live in Berlin, I don't have to anymore. There's always this buzz of possibility in the air. This electric enthusiasm infecting people and spurring them on to have one more drink and one more dance. Raves are not just for the young in this town and tonight we'll show them how it's done.

I recognise Max' green hoodie sticking out from under his jacket as I approach the tram stop. He'll take them both off the minute he walks inside the club, ready to show off his five-days-a-week-in-the-gym body. I spot Andreas' peroxide mane of hair and then, there she is, Ellen Kauer, my sort of date for the night.

"Guten Abend," I try and they look at me as if I'm speaking Chinese. So much for cultural integration.

"Hey, Ada." Ellen throws her arms around me and I must admit it feels pretty good. "Long time, no see," she whispers in my ear, her breath warming my skin.

Maybe we should skip the whole going out charade and head back to my place. It would make my liver happy, for starters, and I could spend my Saturday as a human being instead of a red-eyed zombie. I need some alcohol for this to work though and for whatever else Berghain has to offer. And I didn't move to Berlin to go home early on Friday evenings.

The tram arrives and we hop on. Max is a hyped-up bundle of excitement. It could be the promise of all his favourite things—boys, booze and blow jobs—crammed together in one club or he could already be on something.

"How are your German classes going?" Ellen asks and I wish she hadn't.

Her question transports me right back to the unrequited lust balling up inside of me every

Friday afternoon, as if I'm some half-grown teenager who can't deal with her hormones yet. Maybe it's more than lust, I ponder. I spend more time with Giselle every week than I do with most of my friends. We sit across from each other, our hands almost touching and our breath audible.

"Wunderbar," I say and fix my eyes and attention on Ellen. She'll have to deliver tonight. I need some sort of release and she looks more than willing.

"What's the name of your teacher again?" I do wish she'd stop going on about that.

"Giselle Cromm," I say and the mention of her name, the ease with which it rolls from my lips, as if I'm meant to say it for the rest of my life, ignites the fire in my belly again. Ellen could well just have ruined her chances.

"A lanky, bohemian blonde, right?"

"Yes." My heart thuds violently. With icy blue eyes, I want to add, and three freckles on the side of her nose.

"I believe I may have met her a few weeks ago at a freelance teachers' conference."

Of course, Ellen is a teacher as well, which, I'm beginning to think, might be the only reason I kissed her that time.

"Really?" Regardless of the fact that I don't want to have this conversation with Ellen, I am extremely intrigued.

"A group of us hit some bars afterwards and I remember she quite fancied herself some shots of tequila." Ellen smiles broadly at the memory.

I don't know whether to like her less or more now that she's divulged this bit of information. She had drinks with Giselle. It does make her more attractive-by-proxy. It also stirs an irrational bout of jealousy inside of me.

"She's a party girl, that one," Ellen continues and I'm confused.

Giselle has always struck me as anything but a raging night owl searching for cheap thrills after dark. She always seems so proper with her black-rimmed glasses and her endless array of purple-tinted scarves, so mature and above us mere mortal drunkards.

"Wouldn't be surprised to see her at Berghain tonight," Ellen concludes.

My pulse starts racing. I need to take a few sharp breaths to steady my heartbeat. Max winks at me and I don't know where to look. What I do know is I'll be roaming the club halls until I find her.

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