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SAVE US

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SAVE US

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Epilogue

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For Anna

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Is n't *today the time for certainty?*
Probably so. We'll see

GERSEY, A DAY TO BE CERTAIN

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playlist

A Day to be Certain – Gersey
You – Keaton Henson

Surrender – Natalie Taylor
The Tide – Niall Horan

Dream In A Dream – THIS one

In My Blood – Shawn Mendes
Fallin' All In You - Shawn Mendes

The Shortchange – Thomston

Bill Murray – Phantogram
Critical – Jonas Brothers

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1

Graham

My grandfather always asked, "What will you do when the day comes when you lose everything?" Until now, I had never thought about it, and each time I answered with the first words that came to my mind.

When I was six years old and my brother deliberately broke my little excavator, I told myself: I'll fix the excavator.

When I was ten years old and our family moved from Manchester to the London area, I said teasingly: I'll look for new friends then.

And when my mother died and as a seventeen-year-old I tried to be support for my father and brother, I said: we will cope.

Even then, it never occurred to me that I might give up.

It is only now, when I am almost twenty-four years old, here, in this office where I suddenly feel like a criminal, that I find no answer. At the moment I feel like I'm in an impossible situation.
My entire future is in doubt. I have no idea what will happen next.

I open the squeaky drawer of the massive cherry wood desk and take out the pens and notebooks that have accumulated there over the past year. I move slowly, my hands feel heavy as lead. But I have to hurry: I have to leave the school grounds before the lunch break ends.

You *are suspended immediately. I forbid you any contact with the students of Maxton Hall. If you don't comply, I will report the matter to the police.*

The pens fall out of my hand and hit the floor with a loud thud.

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Cholera.

I bend down to pick them up and haphazardly throw them into the box that contains all my stuff. In addition to the textbooks, there are also my grandfather's old globe and materials for tomorrow's classes, which I have already prepared and could actually throw away now, but I am unable to do so.

I look around the office. Empty shelves, only single sheets of paper on the desk, including one smeared on it, reveal that just a few hours earlier I was correcting class work here.

It's *your own fault,* says a persistent voice in my head.

I rub my aching temples and look into the drawers and cabinets in my desk one last time. I shouldn't delay the goodbye, but parting with this room is costing me more than I expected. I had decided weeks ago that I would look for a job at another school to be with Lydia, but it makes a huge difference between quitting on your own terms and being kicked out with security guards behind your back.

I swallow hard and take my coat off the wooden hanger.
I put it on instinctively, pick up the box from the desk and walk towards the door.
I leave the office without looking back.

Countless questions swirl in my head: Does Lydia know yet? What about her? When will I see her again? What now? Do I still have a chance to work as a teacher? What if not?

I won't know any answer at this time. I try not to panic and walk down the corridor towards the office to hand over the keys. Students pass me, some of them greet me warmly. Something stabs painfully in my stomach.
With the utmost effort, I manage to return their smiles. I enjoyed working here.

I turn towards the office and suddenly I feel as if someone had poured a bucket of ice water over my head. I stop so abruptly that someone behind me bumps into me and apologizes vaguely. I don't hear his words, staring at the tall, broad-shouldered student with golden-red hair who got me into this situation.

James Beaufort won't even bat an eye at the sight of me. On the contrary, he seems completely indifferent, as if he hadn't ruined my life at all a moment ago.

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I knew what he was capable of . I knew it was a mistake to get in his way. I remember Lexington warning me on the first day. “He and his buddies are unpredictable. Please watch out for them." Back then, I didn't pay attention to his words because I knew a different version of him. Lydia told me how much this boy was suffering, overwhelmed by family pressure, how withdrawn he was and how he didn't even confide in his twin sister.

In hindsight, I feel like an idiot for not being more careful. I should have known that James would do anything for Lydia. My fall is probably just an insignificant blip on his agenda.

Next to James is Cyril Vega, whom luckily I never had to teach. I don't know if I would be able to stay calm and be professional. Every time I see him, the photo of him with Lydia comes to my mind. In this photo, they leave school together and get into the Beauforts' Rolls-Royce. They laugh. I still remember him hugging her and comforting her, something I wasn't allowed to do after her mother died.

I grit my teeth and keep walking, hugging the box to my chest. I feel the keychain in my hand hidden in my pocket. I'm very close now. The boys have stopped talking and are watching me with serious, inscrutable faces.

In front of the office door, I stop and look at James.

- And what? Are you

satisfied? No response, which infuriates me even more.

– What were you thinking? – I throw him a defiant look. He still doesn't respond. – Do you realize that you wasted my life with your little prank?

James exchanges a meaningful look with Cyril and blushes slightly, just like his sister does when she gets angry. They are so damn similar, yet so incredibly different in my eyes.

“ I guess you should have thought about that ,” Cyril drawls.

There's even more fury in his eyes than James's.

It occurs to me that they were probably planning this together to get me kicked out of school.

Cyril's gaze leaves no doubt that of the two of us, he is the one in power. He can do anything with me, no matter that I'm from him

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older. He won, and he knows it. He has victory written all over his face, pride and a sense of power radiating from him.

I smile resignedly.

“ I'm surprised you're still able to smile,” he says. - This is the end. You have been exposed. Do you understand?

I grip my keys so tightly that the metal teeth dig into my skin. Does this rich bastard really think I'm unaware of my situation? That I don't know, that no one cares where and when I met Lydia? That no one would believe me when I said that we met and fell in love before I got to Maxton Hall? And that we ended our relationship when we found out I was going to teach her? I know all this, of course. I realize that from now on, in the eyes of others, I will be that sleazy guy who had an affair with a student in his first year of work.

Just thinking about it makes me sick.

Without giving them another look, I enter the office.

I take a bunch of keys out of my pocket, throw them on the counter and turn around. As I pass them again, I see Cyril pressing the phone into James' hand.

“Thanks, man ,” I hear him say, and then I look away and head towards the exit as fast as I can. I barely realize that James is saying something out loud.

Every step hurts, every breath seems like an impossible task. My ears are ringing so much that I can barely hear anything. The students' laughter, their loud footsteps, the slam of the double doors through which I leave Maxton Hall for the last time and enter an unknown, uncertain future.

Ruby

I'm stunned.

When the bus driver says that we have reached the terminus, at first I don't understand what it means. It takes a few seconds for me to realize that I have to get off if I don't want to travel all the way to the car again

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Pemwick. I don't remember what happened in the last three quarters of an hour, I was so lost in my thoughts.

My body feels heavy and shaky as I slowly step off the bus. I grip the straps of my backpack as if to keep my balance. Unfortunately, I still feel terrible.

As if I was in the middle of a tornado from which there was no escape, as if I had completely lost my orientation.

It's impossible that all this really happened. There's no way I was kicked out of school. There's no way my mom believed I was having an affair with a teacher. It couldn't be that my dreams of Oxford were gone.

I think I'm losing my mind. I breathe faster and faster, clenching my fingers frantically. I feel sweat trickle down my back and at the same time my whole body is covered with goosebumps. My head's spinning. I close my eyes and try to calm my frantic breathing.

When I open them, at least I don't feel sick anymore. For the first time since I got off the bus, I look around. I've gone three stops too far and I'm at the other end of our town. Under different circumstances, I would be furious with myself. But now I feel something like relief, because right now I absolutely don't want to go home. Not after the way Mom looked at me.

Right now I can only think of one person I would like to talk to. The only person I trust unconditionally and who knows perfectly well that I would never do something like that in my life.

Ember.

I run towards the local high school. The lessons must be about to end because I pass younger students on the way. Several boys are bantering as they walk along the narrow sidewalk, trying to push each other into the bushes. When they see me, they stop and pass me with their heads down, as if they're afraid I'll scold them for behaving this way.

The closer I get, the weirder I feel. Two and a half years ago I attended this school myself. It's true that I don't miss those times, but when I walk towards the building again now, I feel as if I had gone back in time. Only then, no one looked at me curiously or turned their heads at me because I was wearing a private school uniform.

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I climb the stairs to the door. The walls, probably once white, have long since turned yellow, and the paint is peeling from the window frames. It is impossible not to notice that no one has invested in this school in recent years.

I push past the students pouring out. I try to find someone familiar in the sea of faces. After a while, I notice a girl with tightly braided braids. She leaves school with her boyfriend.

– Maisie! – I shout.

He stops and looks around searchingly. He raises his eyebrows questioningly when he sees me. She signals the boy to wait for her and pushes her way towards me.

–Ruby ! What 's up?

– Do you know where I can find Ember? - I'm asking. My voice sounds completely normal, and I wonder how it can be when my world has fallen to pieces.

– I thought she was sick. Maisie frowns . – She wasn't at school today.

- What ?

It is impossible. This morning, Ember and I left the house at the same time time. If she didn't come to school, where the hell was she?

– She wrote to me that she had a sore throat and was staying in bed. Maisie shrugs and glances at her boyfriend. – He's probably at home and you just passed each other. Listen, I have an appointment. Wouldn't you be angry if...?

– Sure, of course. – I nod. - Thanks.

He waves me goodbye, then runs down the stairs and takes the boy's arm. I follow them with my eyes, trying to control my racing thoughts.
If Ember had a sore throat in the morning, I would know about it. She didn't look sick, she acted normal. Everything was fine at breakfast
Always.

I take out the phone in my pocket. Three missed calls from James.
I delete them with a hot face.

I took these photos. His words ring in my ears again . I try to ignore the weight in my chest. I open the speed dial and find Ember's name. I'm calling. I hear a beep, so she didn't turn off her cell phone. Unfortunately, he doesn't answer even after the tenth ring.
I hang up and quickly write a message.

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Talk to me. I absolutely need to talk to you.

I send it, stuff the phone into my jacket pocket, walk down the stairs and look at my old school for the last time. I don't belong here, obviously. Except there's no room for me at Maxton Hall at the moment either.

I don't fit in anywhere anymore, the thought runs through my mind.

With this reflection, I leave the local high school. I turn left and walk down the main street towards our neighborhood, although at the moment the last thing I want to do is go home. I can't stand another disappointment in my mother's eyes, I don't want her to look at me the way she did in the principal's office.

Those moments still flash before my eyes. I hear Lexington's voice over and over again. Just a few words were enough for him to ruin my entire future, everything I had been working towards for many years.

I pass a row of cafes and small shops and catch snippets of conversations between local students, groups of whom are heading in the same direction as me. They talk about homework, get angry at teachers, laugh about something that happened during the first break. Suddenly I realize that I have no one left to talk to like this. There's nothing left for me to do but move on, let the sun mock me, and accept the fact that my life is over. No school, no family, no boyfriend.

My eyes are watering. I try in vain to master them. I need my sister. I need someone to tell me that everything will be okay again, even if I don't believe it.

I'm about to reach for my phone again when a car stops next to me. Out of the corner of my eye I see that it is a dark green, old car with rusty rims and dirty windows. I don't know anyone who drives a similar car, so I keep walking, ignoring it.

The car starts following me. I turn to look at him more closely,
and then the driver opens the window from his side.

I didn't expect this face at all . Startled, I stop mid-step.

-Ruby ? Wren asks. Apparently I look as terrible as I feel, because Wren squints and leans out the window to look at me.

- Everything's all right? You need help?

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I press my lips into a thin line. Wren Fitzgerald is the last person I want to talk to right now. Especially since I can guess why he's looking at me like that. The news that I've been expelled from Maxton Hall has probably already spread. I feel uncomfortably hot. I'm going further. I don't answer him.

Behind me I hear a car door slamming and quick footsteps.

-Ruby, wait!

I stop, close my eyes. I breathe deeply, once, twice, three times. I try not to let on how upset I am and what's happening to me, and then I turn to Wren.

“You look like you're about to faint,” he says seriously. - Can I help you?

- Help? – I say contemptuously. – You?

Wren presses his lips into a thin line. He looks at the ground, and then he looks into my eyes.

“ Alistair told me what happened. Terrible.

I stiffen and quickly turn my head away. So it's exactly as I thought. The whole school already knows about everything. Just great. I stare at the facade of the health club across the street. I see people training on treadmills, others lifting weights. Maybe I could hide there. No one will definitely find me there.

“ Bomb ,” I mutter.

I 'm about to turn away from him and move on, but something stops me. Maybe it's the fact that Wren wasn't in a limo, but in an old car that looked like it was going to fall to pieces at any moment. Or maybe it's his look, serious and sincere, without a hint of malice. Maybe it's also that we're here in Gormsey, the last place I'd expect to meet someone like Wren Fitzgerald.

– What are you doing here anyway?

Wren shrugs.

– I happened to be passing by .

I raise an eyebrow.

– Through Gormsey? By chance?

- Listen. – Wren quickly changes the subject. "I can't believe James had anything to do with this."

“He sent you to tell me that?” – I ask with a trembling voice.

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Wren shakes his head.

- NO. But I know James. He's my best friend. He wouldn't do something like that.

– Wren, these photos look like I'm kissing my teacher.
James admitted he did them.

– Maybe he actually did them . However, this does not mean that he also sent them to the director.

I press my lips into a thin line.

“ James wouldn't do it,” Wren repeats confidently.

– Why are you so sure about this?

– Because I know how I feel about you. He wouldn't do anything to harm you.

He says it with such emotion that my emotions burst with new energy. Will the fact that it wasn't James who sent these photos make any difference? But then why did he do them at all?

“ I 'd like to know what this is all about,” adds Wren.
– I'm on my way to see him. Come with me, Ruby. You will learn the truth first hand.

I stare at him. The question on the tip of my tongue is whether he has lost his mind reason, but for now I am silent.

Today has already hit rock bottom. It won't get any worse, because I really have nothing to lose.

Without another thought, I walk over to Wren's rusty car and get in.

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2

Lydia

The news that Graham had been suspended with immediate effect spread through Maxton Hall like wildfire through a dry forest. I thought I was going crazy as I stood outside the school waiting for Percy to come pick me up, especially since I hadn't been able to contact either James or Ruby, not to mention Graham. Just thinking about how he feels right now makes me feel sick. I'm going crazy not knowing what's happening to him.

When we finally get home, I run to my room and try to contact him again. This time he answers. I breathe a sigh of relief.

–Graham?

- Yes. – There is no life in his voice.

“I'm so sorry,” I blurt out. I pace nervously around the room. I'm buzzing with adrenaline, my heart is pounding like crazy in my chest. - I'm so sorry. I didn't want this to happen.

I hear him take a deep breath.

– It's not your fault, Lydia.

Yes, mine. It's my fault Graham and Ruby were kicked out of school.

– This afternoon I will go to the director and explain everything to him. Everything will be fine you'll see. I will take the blame and…

“Lydia,” he interrupts me quietly.

– Ruby was also suspended. She didn't deserve this at all. I won't let that happen she was being punished for something she didn't do.

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“Lydia, I…” But before he could finish the sentence, someone interrupts me
cell phone from hand. Terrified, I scream violently and turn around quickly.

My father is standing behind me. He looks at me coldly.
He glances at my phone's bright display, then swipes his finger and ends the call with one swipe.

- Hi! What's that…? – I'm starting.

“You will never speak to this teacher again,” she interrupts
my father with an icy voice. – Understood?

I open my mouth to protest, but the coldness in his voice and the anger in his eyes prevent me from uttering a word.

He knows.

He knows about me and Graham.

Oh my God.

“Dad…” I start desperately.

As I say this, I see his face contort into something like a grimace of pain.

– If your mother were alive, she would be ashamed of you.

He says it so calmly that it takes a while for the full meaning of his words to sink in it comes to me. They are like a blow. I instinctively move away from him.

– Dad, let me explain. It's really not what you think.
Graham and I had known each other before, we…

Suddenly, my father raises his hand and throws my cell phone against the wall with all his might. The camera breaks into pieces and covers the floor with shards of plastic and glass. I stare at him in disbelief.

– I'm telling you for the last time: you must never talk to this man again. Understood? - His voice shakes with anger.

– Listen, I just want to explain this to you, you see...

– I don't want to hear it, Lydia. – He's getting into my words.

I hate it when he's like this. When he doesn't want to listen to me, even though he knows perfectly well that I have something to say.

– I didn't do everything in my power to protect your reputation just to make you make another idiotic choice. Stop this now, understand?

It feels like he's splashed ice water in my face. It takes me a while before I can speak.

– Protect my reputation? What do you mean?

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His face hardens.

– I made sure that the family's name did not suffer even more.
You should be happy about it, not look at me like that.

My throat tightens painfully.

- It was you? – I ask hoarsely. – You sent the photos to Principal Lexington?

My father stares at me coldly.

- Yes.

I feel like I can't breathe. It makes me sick, peace
suddenly spinning. I instinctively grab the chair so as not to fall.

My own father caused Graham to lose his job and James' girlfriend to be expelled from school.

- Why did you do that? – I whisper.

There was no trace of the desire to explain everything to him.
I only feel disbelief and rage that is overwhelming me in an increasingly powerful wave.

– Because you could have destroyed this family. Don't you realize how much you risked with your careless behavior? Does all this mean nothing to you? You should be grateful to me, Lydia! – the father shouts.

- Family? You don't care about this family at all? – I answer.
I clench my fists. My hands are shaking, I feel like I'm going to explode at any moment. – You only care about money. You don't care what's been happening to James and me since Mom died. And now you come in here and expect me to be happy that you kicked my boyfriend out of school?

When the word "boy" is said, the father flares his nostrils slightly, except for his there are no emotions on your face.

– I would do much more to save the good name of this family.

His calm voice drives me crazy. I breathe faster and faster, digging my nails into my skin so hard that blood will flow at any moment.

“You should be grateful to me, Lydia,” he adds.

I can't control my rage anymore. I can't hold back the words
they pour out of me chaotically.

“You may have gotten him out of school, but you can't get him out of my life,” I scream at the top of my lungs.

– Of course I can. – Father turns and wants to leave the room.

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But I'm not done yet.

– No, you can't. Because I'm pregnant.

He stops mid-step. He turns slowly, as if in slow motion.

- I'm listening?

I raise my head proudly.

- I'm pregnant. With Graham.

It's strange to watch his reaction. For a moment he just looks at me and blinks nervously, like a funny man in a GIF. Then I see his shoulders tremble as if he was struggling to breathe, and red spots appear on his cheeks, spreading to his forehead and neck.

I felt like I had seen every form of his anger before. James and I both learned as children to guess the meaning of the slightest changes in his facial expression and posture, so that we could get out of his sight at the right moment.

But I've never seen anything like today.

He stares at me as the seconds pass and I slowly take a step back because I have no idea what will happen next. To my surprise, my father finally turns and leaves the room without a word.

He slams the door behind him so vigorously that I flinch involuntarily. I press my hand to my chest and breathe deeply. I feel my heart beating fast and the blood rushing through my arteries.

Less than ten seconds later, the door opens again, so hard that it hits the wall and is sure to leave a scratch on it. My father returns to the room and stands in front of me.

- He knows? – he asks so quietly that I can barely hear him.

I wasn't expecting this question, and it takes me a few seconds to shake my head.

- Not me…

- All right. – He won't let me finish. Without giving me another glance, he strides across my room. He goes to the dressing room and disappears into a small room. I hear a loud rustling.

I walk closer and stare at my father, who has just pulled one of my largest suitcases from the top shelf. Now he reaches for his bag, which he vigorously throws to the ground. He kicks open the suitcase and randomly fills it with clothes from the shelves and hangers.

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- What are you doing?

He doesn't react. As if in a trance, she grabs T-shirts, blouses, pants, underwear, handbags and shoes. His hair is sticking out in all directions, and the spots on his face and neck are getting darker. Even when the suitcase is full, he doesn't stop, he keeps throwing his clothes into a messy pile on the floor.

– Dad, what are you doing?! - I shout and come closer to stop him from this madness. I grab his arm, but he pulls it away.

The rage in him makes me take a step back. At the last moment I grab onto the doorframe so as not to fall.

At that moment, James bursts into the room.

- What is going on here? – he asks. I can see the concern in his eyes as he looks me over to make sure everything is okay. And then he sees his father. He opens his eyes wide.

– What are you doing, dad? – he asks.

His father turns and looks at James.

- Did you know that?

James frowns.

- About what?

– Why am I even asking? Of course he knew, his father mutters under his breath. He stares at the chaos he has created for a moment, then bends down and, with energetic, nervous movements, stuffs all the clothes that have landed on the floor into the bag.

– Dad, why are you packing my things? – I ask hoarsely.

– You're moving out of here. Immediately.

I'm starting to feel sick.

- I'm listening? – I say with difficulty.

James puts his hand on my back, as if to let me know he's there for me.

– The tabloids have taken a toll on us enough this year. I won't let my company's reputation be tarnished again just because you were so stupid as to let some teacher make a baby for you! – My father shouts the last words in my face.

I move closer to James, feeling his hand tighten on my back.

I can almost physically feel how much willpower it takes for him to control himself right now.

With forced calm, I try to reason with my father.

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– You can't pretend nothing happened.

The father struggles with the zipper of the bag. A piece of material got in between the teeth. There is an unpleasant crack of tearing fabric. I cringe.

“As much as I can,” he gasps and closes the bag with a sudden gesture. He leans over the suitcase again. He kneels on her lid and pulls the zipper. – You'll go to your aunt. And immediately. No one can know about... about your condition.

I take a sharp breath.

- What?

“You can't do this,” James whispers.

The father freezes. He looks at us. It's almost a comical scene, him kneeling on my silver suitcase, breathing heavily, with disheveled hair and a sweaty shirt.

– I was the only one with common sense in this house. Do you really think I'm going to let you... - he points to my stomach - continue to represent the family? Do you have any idea what light this will put us in? Us and Beaufort?

- That's what you mean? - James' voice trembles. – Is that all?

- Of course. And what else?

– For example, your daughter, damn it!

The father snorts contemptuously.

– James, don't be so naive. - He shifts his icy gaze at me.

– Lydia, you should have set your priorities earlier. In this condition, you are of no use to your family. The walls of my room are

getting dangerously close. I resist

about James, I hug him desperately.

“You can't send Lydia into exile and pretend she doesn't exist,” he says

James moved. I feel his hand tremble on my back.

The father gets up and picks up the suitcase. Red with anger, he grabs the handle, takes the travel bag in his other hand and walks towards us with big steps.

James blocks his way.

– Step aside, James.

– Even if you send Lydia away now, the truth will come out in a few months at the latest. Her leaving now will not change anything, and you will only destroy our family.

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A second passes and then the father drops the bag, raises his hand and…

I react instinctively.

When my father throws a punch, I cover James with myself. It hits me in the cheek and ear, so hard that my head snaps to the side and black dots dance in front of my eyes. I hear tinnitus in my ears, getting louder and more intense, and suddenly I lose my orientation. I also lose my balance and try to grab something to help me stand. The moment James hugs me, my vision goes black.

I have no idea how long it was before I finally regained consciousness. Seconds or maybe minutes? I think I'm lying on the floor. Some voices reach me and intensify the pain in my head.
The pulsation in my temples is getting stronger every moment. I try to lift my eyelids.

Someone kneels next to me and gently grabs my arm. James. He says my name over and over again, more and more terrified.

I blink and gradually the world takes on clear outlines. My brother is lying by my dressing room door. He puts my head on his lap and gently strokes my shoulders. His eyes widened, but when he saw that I had regained consciousness, he breathed a sigh of relief. My father stands next to us and looks down at us, with a suitcase in his hand.

Maybe it's just what I'm telling myself, but I think I saw something like relief in his eyes, too. However, it only lasted a fraction of a second, and the next moment he takes his phone out of his pants pocket and raises it to his ear.

Looking into my eyes, he says in a neutral

tone: "Percival?" Please go upstairs and carry my daughter's luggage to the car. Lydia is moving out today.

And then, without looking at us anymore, he bypasses the bag and suitcase and leaves the room.

I feel like someone has placed their hands on my throat and is squeezing it slowly. My fingertips touch the spot where my father hit me and I can no longer control my tears.

“Everything will be okay,” James whispers and hugs me tighter. – Don't worry about anything. We can handle everything.

Unfortunately, I feel like for the first time in our lives, my brother hasn't is able to protect me from what the future will bring.

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3

Ruby

– What's going on with this car? I ask Wren as we drive towards Pemwick. The silence is broken only by music, accompanied by crackling noises, coming from ancient speakers. It is not known when it started raining; I'm afraid that the poor windshield wipers will stop working at any moment. Or they'll drop out. They squeal louder and louder with each movement. But Wren seems to be used to it by now.

– There have been some changes of a… financial nature in the Fitzgerald household – he replies after a long while. – And thus I became the proud owner of George.

I look around the inside of the car again. He doesn't look like George to me. Honestly, it doesn't look like a car to be named at all. The seats are covered with brown corduroy, pitifully worn out in places, and filled with the smell of cigarettes and old age.

“Did you really call him George?”

- Not me. My friend. – Wren turns left and fiddles with the radio dial, the only piece of equipment that appears to be less than twenty years old. But it doesn't work completely smoothly either, because after each turn Wren has to look for a music station again.

“Oh,” I say, and then there is silence again. I don't have the courage to ask what exactly he means by financial changes. We're not friends after all. We don't really have anything in common except that incident in the past and James. I shift uncomfortably in my seat. So why exactly did I get into his car right away?

Wren glances at me sideways, then returns his gaze to the road.

"I've wanted to talk to you for a long time, Ruby," he says suddenly.

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I look at him not calmly.

- Why?

– Because I acted like the worst asshole towards you. Then, at that party. I should have apologized to you a long time ago. - Wren clears his throat and fiddles with the radio knob again, although we haven't turned anywhere and the music continues. – I shouldn't have done that. I was stupid and inexperienced. In hindsight, I feel very ashamed. I'm so sorry.

It's the last thing I expected, and it takes a moment for the full meaning of his words to sink in. I swallow hard. He seems sincere, but then again I'm skeptical. People don't change overnight.

– At Cyril's party, you totally blew me away when you reminded me of that. You didn't seem to regret anything then, I note.

- I know. I... I was suspicious when you and James suddenly showed up at our party, and I wanted to know how it happened. And in all this I made a total idiot of myself. I would never in my life have acted as I did two years ago. I have changed. I hope I can prove it to you.

I stare out the window with furrowed brows. They flash among the fields green trees, here and there I see small houses.

“You know, then I would kiss you even without alcohol,” I finally say and look at Wren. He returns my gaze, but then returns his gaze to the windshield. – You really did something wrong. You should have told me it's not just juice.

– I regret what I did, I really do. I know how much James cares about you, and that's why you're important to me too. And I hope that one day you will forgive me for that misdeed.

I don't know him like that at all. I don't know what he's going through right now, but it obviously forced him to reflect more deeply.

– Apology accepted – I say after a long moment.

He nods briefly and returns to driving.

There is silence and my thoughts automatically return to the photo and the sweeping B on the envelope addressed to Principal Lexington.
I remember James's look when he admitted he took those photos.

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I trusted him. I believed I knew him as he really was. Could it be that I was so wrong? But then why did he want to, why would he do this to me? After everything we've endured these past months?

The more I think about it, the less the pieces of the puzzle fit together. The whole situation is completely unreal. When I got up in the morning, my plan was to discuss the next event with the organizing committee and study with James in the library. And now? Now I'm sitting in Wren Fitzgerald's house because he was the only one who offered to help me.

– Why exactly do you want James and I to get back together? – I ask more suspiciously than I wanted to. I see Wren tense his muscles. – It sounded bad – I explain quickly. “I just mean, I think it pisses you off that he spends so much time with me.”

Wren turns on his indicator and we turn onto another side road. Another ten minutes tops and we'll reach James. When the music stops this time, Wren doesn't turn it back on.

“It's not about you,” he replies after a long moment. – I simply couldn't believe that after over fifteen years of friendship, we were suddenly no longer important to him.

- Not true. You are more important to him than everyone else.

Wren smirks to himself.

– I doubted it for a moment. Probably because I had plenty myself things on your mind.

I nod thoughtfully.

“And besides…” Wren takes a moment to search for the right words. – I've never seen him like he's been these past weeks. Few people know this, but he has been deeply unhappy for a long time. His father is a terrible asshole, and although James has never told me this, I know that if he had a choice, he would never have worked at Beaufort. He won't change it, but ever since he met you, he's been more... laid back. Calmer.

I feel my heart warming up.

– I want him to be happy. “Wren glances at me sideways. – And he is with you.

I search for the right words, but he's not finished yet.

“When Alistair told me you were suspended and I suddenly saw you in Gormsey, I just wanted to help you. I do not have any

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nefarious intentions. Parole.

- All right.

“Besides…” Wren clears his throat. – I understand James better and better. Maybe this also has something to do with it.

I'm already wondering what he's talking about, but now we're entering the Beaufort property. Wren rolls down the window on his side and I expect him to ring the gate bell next to the keypad and camera that lets you see every visitor in the house. However, to my surprise, he takes a magnetic card from the steering wheel compartment and puts it against the reader.

The gate opens slowly. We pull into the driveway.

My stomach does somersaults when I see the limousine parked at the entrance to the mansion.

- What is going on here? Wren mutters at my side.

Only now do I notice the open trunk that Percy has just entered
he puts in a big suitcase.

I swallow hard. Something is wrong.

Wren parks. We get off. At that moment, Lydia appears in the doorway.
She buried her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking. James, ashen-faced, puts his arm around her. He whispers something in her ear. Lydia nods. This view reminds me of photos from a funeral. I shudder.

Wren and I exchange anxious glances, then head towards the house. As we reach the steps leading to the front door, Mortimer Beaufort stands in the doorway. His icy gaze hits me like a blow, but even he can't stop me from running to Lydia.

James's eyes widen when he sees me.

“Ruby,” he whispers. - What are you…

I shake my head and gently touch Lydia's shoulder.

“Hey,” I whisper.

He lowers his hands. She's crying, but that's not the worst thing. Half of her face is covered with a huge red and blue bruise. My heart leaps into my throat. I instinctively shift my gaze to Mr. Beaufort.

He won't even blink. I didn't expect that I could hate him even more than I already did, but right now I would love to throw myself away.

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at him and forced him to feel the suffering he was causing Lydia and James.

- What happened? “Wren says at my side, looking between James and Lydia. – Why these suitcases?

They both seem shocked.

“Lydia, it's time,” Mr. Beaufort says calmly. He passes us and comes closer to the car. He opens the door demonstratively.

– The father knows about the pregnancy. I… I have to move out,” Lydia says with difficulty. – To my aunt.

– About pregnancy? Wren frowns.

“I'm pregnant,” Lydia whispers. – With Graham Sutton.

Wren stares at her with his mouth wide open, about to say something, but then he closes it again. He was obviously stunned.

-Lydia! - Mr. Beaufort orders.

Panic begins to rise within me. I look back at the car.

- Can I help? - I'm asking. There's an air of farewell in the air, and that's something I can't deal with at all. Especially when it comes so unexpectedly. – Is there really nothing I can do? – I say, panicked.

Lydia shakes her head and wipes the tears from her cheeks.

- NO. I'll call you... As soon as I get my phone back.

- All right.

Slowly, she frees herself from James's embrace and moves towards the stairs car. I have never felt so helpless in my life.

"Ruby," James says quietly. Our eyes meet. He shyly takes my hand, runs his thumb over the back of my hand. – I swear to you, I didn't send those photos to Lexington.

There are thousands of thoughts swirling around in my head, I don't know what to do concentrate. James seems to feel the same way.

“Listen, I'd like to explain everything to you, but I won't let Lydia go to Beckdale with her father alone. – He squeezes my icy hand. - Please trust me.

I think about everything we have built in the past months.
About how we promised each other that we would always be honest with each other that

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we will always be able to count on each other and we will not let anything separate us.

This is not the right time for a serious conversation. And although a few hours ago I didn't think I'd ever be able to look him in the eye again, now I know I'm ready to listen to his explanation.

– I won't wait forever – I emphasize. – You hurt me a lot today.

– I know and I'm very sorry. But I'm asking you, this one last time -
whispers.

I nod and let go of his hand.

James looks at Wren.

– The others don't know about the pregnancy. Please keep it to yourself.

Wren just nods.

And then James runs down the stairs and gets into the car with Lydia. Percy slams the door and slides into the driver's seat. For a split second, our eyes meet over the roof of the limousine. Percy seems as sad as I am.

He starts the engine and after a while the car starts moving. I follow him with my eyes until he disappears behind the gate. My heart is beating like crazy.

“Shit,” Wren says.

I can only nod my head without saying a word.

For a long moment we stare in silence at the place where the Rolls-Royce disappeared. Then Wren sighs.

– Come on, let's take our minds off this.

Alistair

Training is really bad today. James, Wren and Cyril didn't come at all, none of them even letting the coach know, which of course put him in a bad mood. He shouts orders and chases us around the pitch like a madman. When it's finally over after an hour and a half, exhausted, I walk with relief to a bench for a bottle of water, but I don't make it there.

Kenton, one of the new players on the team, rushes into me. I didn't expect it, I lost my balance and it was a miracle that I managed not to fall. I give him a menacing look, but he responds

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with a feisty look. Jesus, that's really the last thing I need right now. I take a menacing step towards him.

– Hey, Kenton, do you have a problem? - I'm asking.

“Coach gave us such a hard time today because of your fucking pack,” he hisses and spits at my feet.

– And it's my fault because…?

– Make sure it doesn't happen again. Because, you know, there are those who really care about this team.

With these words, he walks away towards the locker room. It costs me a lot not to run after him and clearly show what I think about his attitude.
I grit my teeth and unbutton my gloves. I take them off and stuff them into my training bag.

Despite myself, my eyes wander towards the goal. Kesh is just collecting balls for one of the boxes.

Under different circumstances, I would have described this situation to him with the new guy. Kesh he can always calm me down, he just needs to listen to me.

When you talk to Kesh, you feel like he takes you seriously. He is calm and composed, his advice is always well thought out.
From the beginning, it was one of the features that I appreciated the most in him, especially since I am his complete opposite, temperamental and impulsive. We complement each other perfectly; that's part of why he's been my best friend for as long as I can remember. He was, I correct myself.

He was my best friend.

Sometimes I wonder if it was worth getting involved. Perhaps if it weren't for that, we would have managed to save our friendship. And then I remember our moments together and the shadow of those chills, those emotions he evoked in me returns.

But it's over, and I don't see any way to fix the old mistakes.
When Kesh attacked my brother a few weeks ago, the argument between us escalated to unprecedented proportions. I told him I couldn't go on like this and I couldn't stand to pretend one more day that we were just friends when we had been more of a couple for a long time. That I want to be able to hold his hand and kiss him in public when we go out with friends. And since he can't give it to me, I want to go back to the point

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where we were just a year ago. Let us be best friends again. Only best friends. Nothing more.

In response, I heard a quiet "okay", which on the one hand was like a slap in the face, but on the other it gave me a glimmer of hope that at least our friendship could be saved, because the situation between us was finally clear.

But no matter how hard we try to act carefree in each other's presence, nothing is the same anymore. There's something between us that I can't ignore, and it grows stronger the more time I spend with Kesh.

Or the longer I stare at him, which I should stop immediately.

I move my gaze to the edge of the pitch, to my bag on the bench. By one hand I take out my water bottle and my second cell phone. Wren wrote to me.

SOS Can I come over with Ruby? Something bad is happening at the Beauforts', and we could use a moment of entertainment.

“Fuck,” I mutter under my breath. That's all I needed.

- What is? – I hear Kesha's voice behind me. He stands at a distance, and yet the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. I concentrate on texting Wren, then slip my phone into my bag.

"Wren and Ruby will be here soon." – I turn to him. Looks at me. It takes a lot for me to control myself, like every fucking time he's close.

“Ruby's probably in terrible shape,” he says. He grabs his bag from the bench and we walk together towards the locker room. – Apparently she was hanging out with Sutton and that's why she got kicked out of school. – The skeptical notes in his voice reveal that he doesn't believe in the rumors.

– She definitely wasn't hanging out with Sutton.

Kesh gives me a questioning look.

– You were there when James took these photos, right? –
I notice. Kesh is a great observer. He couldn't have missed it.

– Yes, but I can't imagine he would pass it on. There is a deeper meaning to this case.

I mutter something halfheartedly. James has done much worse than sending a few controversial photos, but then again, I don't believe he would do anything that would hurt Ruby that much.

I clear my throat.

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– Will you come over?

Keshav stops in the corridor. He gives me a questioning look.
A few stray strands of hair had fallen out of the loose ponytail she always puts in before training. I'd love to put them behind his ears myself. I resist the urge and grip the water bottle so tightly that the plastic creaks dangerously.

– Do you want me to come over? – he replies.

We haven't spent much time together since our last fight. I actually don't remember the last time we actually talked, just the two of us, without our other friends. Whenever we are alone, the atmosphere thickens and I withdraw for fear of making the mistake again and settling for the only thing Kesh can give me: stolen kisses in the dark and eternal secrets.

I still hope that soon everything will be as it was before and we will be able to become friends again. Nothing more, but also nothing less. So I nod, even though I know that an evening in his company is not the best solution for my heart.

– Sure, the more people, the better. – I return his look.
He must have read from my eyes what was happening to me. You notice such things after years of friendship, and Keshav is one of the most empathetic people I know.

Sometimes I think I wish he hadn't done that before he broke my heart.

“I'd love to, then,” he replies quietly.

- Cool. – I clear my throat. - All right.

“I'm going to take a shower,” he says and points to the bathroom at the end of the hall.

I feel like I'm getting hot again, even though my heart rate has more or less returned to normal after the workout.

I pass him quickly on my way to the locker room.

“I'm waiting outside,” I say over my shoulder.

I can feel his calm, wise gaze on my neck all the time.

Ruby looks like she's had a long, hard day. As soon as she walked in on me, she slumped on the couch and hasn't moved since. She is very pale. We are all wearing regular clothes, she is the only one still in her school uniform. It looks really pathetic. It awakens protective instincts in each of us.

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Kesh turns on the music and I go to the kitchen and look for something to eat. Since Elaine and Fred are no longer living with us, my parents have laid off some of the kitchen staff and stopped eating together every day. I don't regret the latter at all. I usually sat tense anyway, and my parents talked mostly to Fred and mostly about Fred.

Now there are days when we don't see each other at all, but that doesn't really worry me. I like being alone. At least I don't have to pretend anything and hide from my parents that their attitude hurts me.

I take the previously prepared lasagna out of the fridge and put it in the microwave. I put four large portions on my plate and go back to my room.
I put two plates on the table by the couch for me and Ruby, another for Wren, and the fourth for Kesha, who's sitting at my desk, playing with his phone. I go back downstairs and bring the cutlery and glasses.

- Please. – I hand Ruby the fork.

- Thanks. – He has a hollow, dead voice.

I sit next to her on the couch and start eating the lasagna. As always, I'm starving after training.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Ruby reach for her fork and timidly bring it to her mouth, but he immediately puts it aside.

– Shall we talk about what happened? – I ask carefully. - If
Do we pretend nothing happened and talk about something else?

Wren, who has taken a seat in the chair across from the couch, looks up and looks at Ruby. The girl shrugs as if she doesn't care.

“Mortimer kicked Lydia out of the house,” Wren blurts out.

Kesh lifts his head abruptly.

- What?

“I wanted to take Ruby to James,” Wren explains. – But when we got there, the trunk of the limo wasn't closing properly from the suitcases, and Lydia was crying. And then they all got in and drove away.

“Fuck,” I blurt out. – What did Lydia do?

Ruby and Wren exchange a knowing look and both immediately look at their plates. They obviously know something that no one else does.

– I wrote to James that we are at your place. Wren pretends he didn't hear my question. – He'll come as soon as he can.

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- All right. – Although just thinking about how Lydia must be feeling right now makes me lose all my appetite, I eat the whole lasagna. I set my plate down on the low glass-topped table, then glance sideways at Ruby. She still hasn't eaten almost anything. He mechanically digs into the plate with his fork.

“I heard what happened today,” I say quietly.

He looks up. It's easy to see how much effort it takes for her to control herself.

“Listen, I was there when James took those photos,” I confess. Her eyes flash with anger, and I quickly continue before she interrupts me. – You didn't know each other at all back then. He treated them like an insurance policy. Since then, he has completely lost his mind for you. I don't believe he had anything to do with what happened today.

– I need to hear it from him.

- I see. – I nod.

The silence between us stretches on. At some point, Ruby puts down her plate and looks around my room. Her eyes linger on a framed photo of James, Cyril, Wren, Kesh, and me standing in lacrosse uniforms, muddy like heavenly creatures. Still, we smile brightly and James, standing in the middle, triumphantly raises the championship trophy that we won for the first time. I still remember what it felt like. We were overcome with euphoria.

I look back at the desk. Keshav seemed to be just waiting for me to look at him.

I jump up from the couch abruptly.

“I need a drink,” I say and go to the bar where I keep my alcohol supplies. I take out a half-full bottle of whiskey and pour the liquid into three glasses. I place one in front of Wren and approach Kesh with the other, but he shakes his head and glances at the water bottle on the desk.

I don't know what to do with the two glasses in my hands. And then I go back to the couch and definitely hand one of them to Ruby.

He looks at her suspiciously. I assume he will refuse, but much to my surprise he takes the dish from my hand. Before I can toast, he throws his head back and drains the glass in a few sips.

I whistle in admiration. Ruby holds out her hand with a glass and looks at me significantly.

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After a moment of hesitation, I pour it in.

– Are you sure this is a good idea? - Wren looks between us.

At this point, Kesh plays a fast, rhythmic song.

“No,” Ruby and I answer at the same time.

I sink onto the couch and propose a toast.

– For bad ideas.

For the first time this afternoon, a faint smile appears on Ruby's lips.

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4

Ruby

Music pulsates in my veins, fills me from head to toe, makes me want to move. So I dance, without thinking. I get carried away.

Fantastic feeling.

I realize that today will have serious consequences, but right now I don't care. I want to enjoy the moment while I can.

I rotate around my own axis. Alistair applauds me.

“The whiskey is great,” I say. I turn to Alistair, who, like me, is dancing around the room. He proposes a toast. I don't know when he replaced the glass with a whole bottle.

– I haven't heard truer words in a long time – he says. – You know, Ruby, you're very smart when you drink.

– Oh, I'm sorry. I'm always very smart.

Alistair smiles broadly.

– And you're right again.

I have no idea how it happened, but suddenly Alistair seems like the greatest man in the world. Now we have an unbreakable bond. It's as if alcohol brings to light similarities that I couldn't see when sober.

I take my phone out of my jacket pocket.

– Wren, take a picture of us. – I hand him the phone. He takes it with a smile.

– Ready?

– Just a moment! - Alistair puts his arm around me. We smile at the camera together. - Now!

– Three… two… one…

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I break free from Alistair's embrace, walk over to Wren, and look at the photo. Great, but we didn't manage to stand still and the photo is a bit blurry.

- Thanks. – I take the phone from Wren and want to put it back in my pocket.

“You have about two hundred messages and missed calls,” he notes quiet. – Maybe take a look at them before people turn gray with concern for you.

The seriousness in his voice cuts through the alcohol fog. I freeze. After a moment's hesitation, I take out my phone again. The screen waves in front of my eyes, and I blink several times before I can read the information on the screen: five missed calls from Ember and Lin, three from my parents. Seven in total.

“Shit,” I mutter.

I stagger slightly as I try to open the first message.

I heard what happened. Do You want to talk? Come to you?

Reading Lin's words, I swallow hard. I realize I should text her back, but I can't do it right now. For the first time since visiting the principal's office, I'm not afraid I'll burst into tears at any moment. Alcohol helped me forget that terrible day, and talking to Lin meant analyzing everything in detail. It would be the same with Ember, who also wrote to me.

I'm sorry I was busy! What happened? Where are you?

Right now I don't want to think about the problems that await me at home. I don't know what the future holds. I don't even want to know at this point.

I shake my head, don't read the rest of my messages, and put my phone back in my pocket. I avoid Wren's worried gaze, take off my jacket and toss it carelessly on the couch. And then I roll up the sleeves of my blouse.

Alistair walks over to me, grabs my hand and turns me around, as if he senses my change in mood. I smile despite myself. It turns me around again.
He smiles back. As if he had a perfect sense of what I needed at the moment. Maybe he has something to deal with too, I think to myself as I follow his gaze to Keshav's back once again this afternoon.

For the first time in a long time, or maybe for the first time ever, I let myself be carried away. I close my eyes and move to the rhythm of the music. I do not think about that,

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what happened today, I let Alistair help me forget everything. At some point I no longer think at all, I move involuntarily. I barely register any fragments of Wren and Kesh's conversations, only the music and the freedom of alcohol surround me.

I have no idea how long Alistair and I danced. I lost track of time and how much whiskey I actually drank.

– Another sip? – Alistair asks and holds up the bottle. I'm already giving him mine a glass when a new voice sounds behind us.

- What is going on here?

I turn around abruptly. James is standing in the doorway of the room. Wren must have let him into the house, because a moment later he stands right behind him.

“I have nothing to do with this, just to be clear,” he mutters, passing away James and walks over to the chair he was sitting in previously.

James looks into my eyes and for a moment all we see is each other. His gaze shows all sorts of emotions.

Remorse. Rage. Sadness. Fear.

My heart squeezes painfully. I would love to run up to him and throw my arms around his neck. On the other hand, I want to scream at him, I want to finally find out who doctored the photos of me and Mr. Sutton and sent them to the principal.

“Go for it, man,” Alistair says. James crosses the threshold. As he walks, he unbuttons his coat and nonchalantly throws it over his shoulder. I remember him. He was wearing the same gray coat when I introduced him to my parents. A lump forms in my throat at the memory.

He stops next to us. He looks at me uncertainly.

- Hi.

- Hi.

He winces slightly when he sees the glass in my hand.

– You stink of whiskey.

“You really have an impressive sense of smell, my friend,” Alistair remarks. – Ruby and I were drinking our sorrows away.

James doesn't react. He nods at the couch and raises his eyebrows questioningly. I hesitate only for a moment.

There is no trace of the previous euphoria, whiskey no longer excites me, now it feels like a hot, unpleasant burden in my stomach.

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Kesh turns down the music. We sit down. James throws his coat on the ground, leans back, and puts his face in his hands. He seems very tired when he finally turns to me and stares at me with dark eyes.

“I took these photos,” he begins. – At the first party after the holidays.
We didn't know each other then.

I nod.

“I didn't know what you would do with what you knew about Lydia. I thought I had to catch up with you.

– What did she know about Lydia? Kesh asks. He frowns thoughtfully.

James sighs loudly.

– Ruby wasn't the one who had the affair with Sutton.

Alistair lowers his hand with the bottle.

– Lydia and Sutton? – he asks in disbelief. Although he drank at least two
times more than me, he pulls himself together surprisingly quickly. - Really?

– And that's why your father is so crazy? – Keshav guesses.

- Yes. - A moment of silence. – And also because Lydia is pregnant.

-James! – I blurt out. How can he just spill her secret? But then I realize he wouldn't have said it if he didn't have her permission. She probably knew he would come here and want to talk to us.

James covers my hand with his and squeezes it lightly. He runs his thumb over my skin.

“Lydia asked me to tell you,” she tells Alistair and Kesh. – Her father kicked her out of the house and sent her to live with her aunt in Beckdale. – I feel myself tense up.

“Fuck,” Alistair says. He offers the bottle to James, but he does
shakes his head negatively.

– How did he even find out about this? Wren frowns thoughtfully.

– From Cyril. James almost spits the name out.

Bewildered, I look away from our intertwined fingers. This is also for
something new for me.

- What? How so?

– He saw Lydia with Sutton on Saturday. Can you imagine how he reacted to this, after all we all know how long he has been in love with her.
I went to his place later to talk about it, and then he stole my cell phone. –

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James shakes his head in disbelief, as if he still doesn't get it. – I wanted to be with him, and he shamelessly took advantage of it. He gave the photos to my father to make sure Sutton was out of Lydia's life forever. - Looks at me. – And you from mine.

So that's where the sweeping B on the envelope comes from.

Mortimer Beaufort had my and Mr. Sutton's photographs enhanced and sent them to Principal Lexington to get rid of both of us.

“Two birds with one stone,” I say hoarsely.

“I don't believe it,” Wren mutters under his breath. – I can't believe Cyril sank so low.

“A man unhappily in love can go to extraordinary lengths,” Keshav observes with a gloomy face.

- And what now? – Alistair asks. – We can't let that happen Lydia was banished to the ends of the earth and Ruby was expelled from school.

I like him more and more every moment.

“I have to get Cyril to tell the truth,” James decides.

He turns to me. – You will go to Oxford. – He says it firmly, as if he was absolutely convinced of the truth of his words. – Even if I don't know what I had to do.

Before I can answer, Wren says, "You can count on us."

Keshav and Alistair grunt in agreement.

I look at James, who in turn looks at his friends. I see gratitude in his eyes and clearly feel the bond that has been created over the years of knowing him. The four of them exude mutual trust and unconditional loyalty. And suddenly my situation no longer seems as completely hopeless as it did just a few hours ago.

James

The throbbing in my temples becomes more and more unbearable with each passing hour. Even the pill Alistair dug out of his mother's medicine cabinet didn't help. On the contrary, I feel like the headache gets worse the longer I am on my feet.

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I don't want to go, Lydia's sobbing is still in my ears. These words from several hours don't leave me alone. *Don't let him send me away, James.*

I press my fingers against the bridge of my nose to relieve the pressure in my eyes. Unfortunately, it doesn't help.

I failed all over the place, as a brother and as a boy. If it were possible, I would go to Beckdale instead of Lydia. If it were possible, I would give Ruby my place at Maxton Hall so she could finish her studies. Unfortunately, wishful thinking won't help much at this point.

"James," I hear Ruby whisper.

- Yes?

– I dropped out of school.

I bow my head and look for her eyes. There's just enough light from the streetlights for me to see her dilated pupils and flushed cheeks.

I asked Percy to drop us off at the entrance to Gormsey, hoping the short walk would sober her up. If she had shown up at home in the condition I found her in at Alistair's, I would certainly have been burned in front of her parents.

A slight shiver runs through her body. I don't think twice, I take off my coat and wrap her in warm material. I lack words. I can only rub her arms and try to warm her up.

He makes a strange sound, which was probably intended to be laughter, but after on the way it turned into sobbing.

– I dropped out of school. You understand?

My heart squeezes painfully. NO. I don't understand. I don't want to understand it. Just like I don't want to accept that it's all my fault. Will Ruby ever be able to look me in the eye when she comes to her senses and fully realizes that I was the one who caused her misfortune?

“I have no idea what to do,” he whispers vaguely. – I won't be admitted to any school with this note on my papers. And without graduating from school, I have no chance of studying. I will have to look for a job so as not to burden my parents. – Even though he blinks desperately, the tears still flow. Ruby takes a sharp breath. I feel her pain flowing through me.

“I'm so sorry I let you down again,” I say earnestly.

I brush her hair out of her eyes, tuck it behind her ear, and run my thumb over hers

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cheek, I wipe away the tears. “I was serious with Alistair. I will do everything in my power to get you into Oxford. I promise you this.

No promise in my entire life has been as important as this one.

The feeling for Ruby developed slowly until it finally hit me like a storm. With her, there are no masks or facades, with her I am truly myself, and that is what scares me. I couldn't bear to lose her again. Not after we've overcome so many obstacles. Not now that I know he's the best thing that's ever happened to me.

“For as long as I've known you, my life has been fucking chaos,” he says hoarsely. – I don't know how I can believe you.

I feel my hand tremble on her cheek.

- I see. Until you succeed, I will believe for both of us.

Ruby swallows hard, then slowly, in slow motion, rests her head on my shoulder. She breathes deeply, clinging to me as if I'm her only source of support at the moment. I don't know if she really believes in me or if she's tired of the alcohol. But I reach up and stroke her hair anyway.

When he's with me, I don't feel like I'm carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders. No, then it feels like I'm holding the whole world in my arms.

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5

Ruby

I wake up to soft snoring. Slumping, I turn to my side and see Ember next to me. He lies with his hand behind his head, his mouth open.

Where did it come from in my bed?

I don't remember the last time we slept together. In the past, we often had pajama parties on weekends and fell asleep without brushing our teeth, on a bed full of chip crumbs.

For about thirty seconds I remain in that wonderful state when one has already woken up, but has not yet fully regained consciousness and reality has not had time to attack. But then I feel an unpleasant taste in my mouth and the memories of the previous day come flooding back to me.

A cold chill runs through me, my heart pounds violently in my chest. It all really happened. I got suspended, Lydia's father kicked her out, I drank whiskey with Alistair Ellington, and then James walked me home and promised to make things right.

I instinctively shift my gaze to the cork board above the desk. From this
I can't read anything from a distance, but I know these words by heart.

I'm getting sick.

“You're awake,” my sister's sleepy, hoarse voice says at my side.

I hum in the affirmative.

Ember leans on her elbow.

– Where were you yesterday? The parents were going crazy with fear.

“I could ask you the same thing,” I reply. I turn towards her. – I wanted to pick you up from school, but Maisie said she wouldn't

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you weren't there at all.

Ember opens and closes her mouth. He blushes, but doesn't look away. Finally he sighs loudly.

– Okay, I was playing truant. I'm having some trouble with math and I needed to take a break.

I watch her through knitted eyebrows. I've known her all my life and I know perfectly well when she's hiding something from me. I don't want to pressure him - he has the right to keep secrets. But I can't help the anxiety that's gripping me at the moment. I rise a little, but before I can say anything, Ember quickly adds:

– Just please don't tell your parents anything.

I don't answer, I keep looking into her eyes.

- Please, Ruby.

“I won't tell them anything,” I finally say quietly. – But if you need help, with math or anything else… You'll tell me, right?

He nods.

- Yes Sir.

An uncomfortable silence falls in the room.

- That's true? – he finally asks timidly. – Did they really suspend you?

I sit up abruptly. Black dots dance before my eyes, I hide face in my hands, then slowly nod.

At that moment there is a quiet knock on the door and my mother looks into my room. I try to read the expression on her face, but she's doing her best not to reveal anything.

“Mom…” I start, but he cuts me off with a shake of his head.

“My father and I would like you to go downstairs,” he says in a dispassionate voice. – We all need to talk seriously.

He disappears behind the door. After a while, I hear her footsteps on the stairs. I'm yawning I rub my eyes. Ember also sits on the bed.

I feel her eyes on me, I know she's waiting for an answer.

Without a word, I get up and go to the bathroom. I brush my teeth vigorously to get rid of the unpleasant taste and wash my face. I gather my hair into a ponytail and comb it as fast as I can. Ember enters the bathroom after me. The morning routine makes me instinctively reach for my school uniform as soon as I open the closet door. I withdraw my hand suddenly, as if it were dark blue

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my jacket was burning me. It takes me a moment to get over the panic attack that's brewing, then I push aside the hanger with my uniform and grab a black skirt and an oversized beige sweatshirt.

The parents are sitting at the table when Ember and I enter the kitchen. If it were an ordinary morning, they would greet us with laughter. They would ask what our plans were for that day, tell us about theirs, and meanwhile breakfast would disappear from the table. Now they look at us blankly as we sit across from them. The silence is filled only by the gurgling of the coffee machine.

Parents exchange quick glances and communicate without words. And then dad looks at me.

– What happened yesterday, Ruby? – he asks.

I glance between them, irritated.

– Mom must have already told you everything.

– Still, I'd rather hear it from you.

There is no disappointment in dad's eyes that I saw in mom's yesterday. And that's why, instead of looking at him, I'd rather stare at the scratch on the kitchen table.

“I've been... I've been suspended,” I finally say.

- Why?

I grit my teeth with all my strength. I am covered with unpleasant goosebumps, my hands are suddenly cold and wet. I've never felt this way around my family before. I would love to run back to my room.

“I don't know what you want to hear from me, Dad,” I say. – That it's true? That I wanted to improve my grades for Oxford and that's why I kissed the history teacher?

At my side, Ember shifts uncomfortably in her chair. I can't look at her or my parents, my eyes wander around our kitchen. I stop at the clock on the opposite wall.

The school bus will arrive in five minutes. I look at the clock, surprised. Usually by this time I was already waiting at the bus stop with a backpack on my shoulder. And now I'm sitting in the kitchen listening to these questions.

“No, that's not what I want to hear from you,” Dad says calmly. – Yes, I want to know what these photos are about. But most of all, I want to hear your version.

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I look at him surprised.

“I didn't give you the opportunity to do that yesterday, and I'm very sorry about that,” my mother interjects. – This situation has overwhelmed me. When I sat in the principal's office and looked at the photos... I believed everything Mr. Lexington told me, and I didn't let you say a word at all.

I hold my breath.

-I'm so sorry, Ruby.

Suddenly I feel a burning sensation under my eyelids. A lump grows in my throat and I try in vain to swallow it. Nothing of that.

– But you can't just disappear. - Her voice drops to a nervous whisper. – We were dying of worry. – It's too bad you

couldn't count on us yesterday – adds the father. – We would like you to explain to us what actually happened.

No matter how many times I blink, the tears don't disappear. To my left, Ember lightly strokes my back. I'm so glad he's with me right now.

Mom pours me tea and pushes the cup towards me. I wipe my tears and wrap my hands around the warm porcelain. Gradually the cold subsides. My parents give me time to collect my thoughts. I quickly think about what I can tell them. Will I abuse my friends' trust by telling my loved ones about their problems? But now this case is no longer just about Lydia and James, it's also about me. And although they are very important to me, I can no longer risk my good relationship with my parents.

– It all started that day when I went to see Mr. Sutton after
references – I'm starting after a long time. – Last September.

My parents listen to me intently. And suddenly this situation doesn't seem scary to me anymore. On the contrary, I feel like I'm in a safe haven where I can finally tell the whole truth. And that's why I continue.

– I thought we had an appointment. But when I entered his office, he wasn't alone.

It's hard for me at first, but over time the words flow more and more easily. When I tell her that the photos were the work of Cyril and Father James, my mother grabs my father's hand.

“Mortimer Beaufort has no scruples,” I say hoarsely. - For
the family's reputation he would do anything.

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– And he doesn't care if he destroys another family in the process. – Mom's filming head. – What a terrible man.

– Terrible man? I can think of much worse words, my dad snorts. A frown appeared on his forehead.

– How on earth did such a monster father such a wonderful person as Lydia? – Ember is surprised.

I spoke for so long that I was completely out of breath. I take a sip of tea hoping that the lump still stuck in my throat will go away soon.

There is silence in the kitchen. But now it doesn't seem overwhelming to me, but rather thoughtful.

“I can't believe that you kept it all to yourself and didn't tell anyone,” the father finally says. He takes off his glasses and rubs the bridge of his nose.

My tea is already completely cold. I put the cup down.

– I didn't want to break Lydia and James' trust.

“But it's not just about them anymore,” Ember notes. Yesterday I came to the same conclusion.

– This case has overwhelmed us. I have no idea how to prove to the principal that I'm telling the truth. Mr. Beaufort is a member of the parents' council and donates large sums of money to the school every year, as do Cyril's parents. When it comes to word against word, you know who will be believed.

– But do the originals of these photos exist? – asks mom.

– He deleted them. If they are still around, it's only at his place or at Mr. Beaufort's.

– Anyway, even if we manage to find them, it's like Ruby has it prove that these are originals and not altered photos?

– It's all for nothing. – Dad shakes his head. - We need to talk with your principal and tell him everything.

- NO! It is impossible. I can't tell Lydia's secret. Her father had already thrown her out of the house. What do you think he will do when the truth comes out?

I remember everything James said about his father. I remember the coldness in Mr. Beaufort's eyes, James' split lip, the bruise on Lydia's face.

– Dad, he's unpredictable.

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Mom leans over the table and grabs my hands.

– Ruby, it's admirable that you want to protect your friends, but this is your future at stake.

“Listen, I really can't do this to Lydia. I'm counting on James to convince Cyril to tell Lexington the whole truth.

Mom sighs heavily and looks at Dad. He has a fierce expression.

– We need to talk to the principal anyway. - I open my mouth to protest, but he silences me with a gesture. – We won't tell him anything about Lydia, but I want him to check the authenticity of the photo.

I press my lips into a thin line. Although it's wonderful to be able to say parents the truth, I am concerned that we have a different opinion on this matter.

“Please, let James try to talk to Cyril first before we do anything,” I say pleadingly.

The parents exchange glances.

– Do you trust him enough? – my mother asks quietly. – After all, he took these photos.

I tense despite myself. Of course, mom is right. Objectively speaking, there is no reason why I should put my future in his hands.

– It's not what you think, mom. – Unexpectedly, Ember rushes to help me. – James is really in love with her. He would never hurt her on purpose in his life.

I blush up to my ears. I look at my sister and she just shrugs.

– Everyone would know after a minute in your presence.

Mom glances at Dad, who still doesn't seem happy.

I hold my breath.

“We'll give him a week,” Dad decides. – Then we go to Lexington. You've worked too hard these past years to let your efforts be ruined by a few lies. – His voice trembles with suppressed anger, but before any of us can comment on his decision, he grabs the wheels of his wheelchair and drives out of the kitchen.

Mom squeezes my hand.

– Thank you for telling us everything.

I swallow hard.

– I hope you will forgive me for my reaction yesterday. I had no idea how to deal with it all.

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- I know. – I hug her back. – It's okay, mom.

He stands up, leans down and kisses the top of my head, then follows his father out.

The feeling of relief that filled me a moment ago slowly disappears. Gradually, fatigue takes its place. I put my head on my sister's shoulder. He strokes my hair gently.

“At least thanks to you, it didn't become known that I played truant last night,” she mutters.

With the last of my strength, I punch her.

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6

James

I put my finger on the bell button, but I can't press it.
It feels like invisible shackles are around my wrists, stopping me from moving.

And yet this isn't the first time I'm standing in front of Ruby's house. Not for the first time, I feel nervous at the thought of meeting her and her parents. But after the events of the past twenty-four hours, I have no idea what awaits me in this house. How can I look her parents in the eye, what should I say? I feel the same when I think about her. But what if she still isn't ready to forgive me and tells me to leave again?

Just the thought makes my stomach clench painfully. Probably never in my life I was as nervous as I was right now.

But I can't leave either. I gave Ruby my word that I wouldn't mention the fact that Lin would kill me if I didn't give Ruby the notes as agreed.

I take a deep breath, then steel myself and press the bell button. Thirty seconds later, the door opens slowly. Ruby's father looks at me with hard, unreadable eyes. His determination makes me think of Ruby. I clear my throat loudly.

“Good morning, Mr. Bell,” I begin.

–James. – He nods at me. It's obvious that he's not thrilled with my visit.

– I wanted to leave Ruby's homework, as well as notes from the classes she didn't attend today. – As evidence, I hold up a stack of papers.

Seconds pass. Mr. Bell looks at me wordlessly. I endure his gaze the same way I always try to hold Ruby's gaze.

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“Come in,” he says finally, and moves the wheelchair to the side so I can go inside. I find myself in a narrow hall where, just like during my previous visit, I immediately notice the family photographs on the walls.

If I ever had my own house, I would want to have photos like this too. Yeah the thought comes so suddenly that I look away abruptly.

–Ruby! - Mr. Bell screams so loudly that I cringe. – You have a guest!

Footsteps upstairs, then the faint creaking of the stairs as Ruby descends to the ground floor. His eyes widen when he sees me.

“Hey,” I say quietly as he stops in front of me.

I know this greeting isn't enough. I wish I could give her so much more, but I can't. Not as long as Mr. Bell looks at me with his argus eyes.

“James brought you lessons,” he says. – Go to the living room. Exactly Helen and I were supposed to have tea.

I follow him with a glance as he disappears into the kitchen. And then I look at Ruby again. She seems tired and defeated; I would love to take her in my arms and never let her go again. However, I realize that in this way I will not help her, much less solve her problems, so I hold back my impulse and look questioningly at the door to the living room.

Ruby nods and moves forward. I follow a few steps behind her.

“Lin and I decided that you'd definitely want to have your notes from class so you don't miss anything,” I start as we sit down on the couch together.

I put a stack of papers on the table.

– Have you talked to her? – Ruby leans over her notes.

- Yes. We met during lunch break and agreed who takes notes for you in which subject.

The corners of her mouth turn upwards; minimally, but always something.

“She was very worried about you,” I add. – She mentioned that since yesterday can't contact you.

“I didn't want to talk to anyone,” she admits quietly.

We're silent for a long moment, and then Ruby takes the first piece of paper and looks at me in surprise.

– Why this sticky note?

I clear my throat.

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– We marked each item in a different color to make it easier for you to find your way around – I explain. – Lin briefly told me about your color system. This is math.

Ruby looks between me and the notes and doesn't seem so distraught anymore. The despair in her eyes gives way to something else, warmer, until something like a smile appears on her face. He takes the stack of papers on his lap and looks through it carefully.

– I thought you'd probably want to look it over in peace, and if you have any questions, I'll explain everything to you. Outside of literature, you are already working through *Anna Karenina* and we haven't started it yet. But you can go to Lin about this.

Ruby nods mechanically and continues looking at her notes.

– I hope you can read everything. I tried very hard, but…

I couldn't say more because Ruby hugged me warmly.

– Great, thanks a lot – he says.

A few pieces of paper fell on the floor, but I don't care. As far as it goes possible in this position, I hug her back.

“I don't want to give up on our school,” he says, lips pressed into my jacket.

- I know.

He snuggles into me even more. I hug her tighter.

– Good morning, James. – It suddenly sounds behind us. Right now, the last thing I want to do is let go of Ruby, but Ember's mocking voice gives me no choice. I turn around. Her sister and mother stand in the doorway.
I jump up from the couch.

– Good morning, Helen. – I straighten my jacket. -Hey, Ember.

An uncomfortable silence fills the room for a moment, and then Helen takes a few steps towards me. For a moment I'm afraid he's going to hit me. I grit my teeth, but then Ruby's mother completely surprises me.

He takes me in his arms.

At first I have no idea what's going on.

Helen Bell hugs me.

“I'm so sorry, James,” he says quietly.

Her words make me gasp for air.

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He leans back, but still holds my arms. I'm stiff as if I swallowed a stick. I can't move, I can't even utter a single word. I remember my mother holding me for the last time. It was our last birthday, over breakfast. With open arms, she approached first Lydia, then me.

– If there is anything we can do for you or your sister, don't be shy, speak up, says Helen. I push away the memory of my mother.

I was afraid of reluctance and hostility. That they'll slam the door in my face. And now Ruby's mother hugs me and offers to help. Me. Although it was actually because of me that Ruby was kicked out of school.

I nod with difficulty. I don't know anything anymore at this point. All I know is that it's getting harder and harder for me to hold her gaze and not let her know how much her words mean to me. Maybe that's Helen Bell's superpower - she fights suffering with kindness.

“James brought me some notes so I don't fall behind,” Ruby says, breaking me out of my trance. If she had remained silent, I probably would have remained silent until the evening and stood like a pillar of salt in the Bells' living room.

It's only when Helen focuses on her daughter and walks over to the couch that I manage to take a deep breath again. It takes me a moment to pull myself together and go back to Ruby, who is collecting notes from the floor with Ember.

Ember looks at one of the cards, then slides it to her sister
nose.

“They look like you made them yourself,” she remarks, almost amused.

Ruby's smile pierces me like an arrow.

– Indeed.

I sit on the couch again. My heart is still racing, but Ruby's presence slowly brings me back to my senses.

– Ember, can you help me in the kitchen? – asks Helen.

Ember rolls her eyes in comical annoyance, but follows her mother without a word of objection.

And Ruby and I are left alone again.

I follow Helen and Ember with my eyes.

“You look like you've seen a ghost,” Ruby remarks, amused.

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– Your mother is… – I don't know how to describe it. I shake my head, plonk down on the couch, and smile at Ruby.

– You're not angry that I told them everything, are you?

- Of course not. They should know the truth.

He breathes loudly, with obvious relief.

– I wasn't sure if you would see it that way.

I nod. I don't know Ruby's bond with her family, not from my own experience. But I can appreciate it.

– I think it's fantastic how you treat each other. It's not that obvious that you can tell them everything. I didn't want to put pressure on you. Sorry.

– You didn't exert any pressure. I preferred to keep them away from it, as I have been doing for two years - she replies quietly, with concern.

I stare at my hands.

I remember the sound of my father's hand hitting Lydia's cheek.
He haunted me all night, he kept me waking up.

-James? Ruby whispers.

I stare at the taut skin on my knuckles.

– Sometimes I wish it were like that for us too. For me to have a family... Parents I can talk to like you talk to yours. I…" My voice refuses to listen to me.

- I know. - Ruby scoots closer until our knees are touching.

"I can't believe that Lydia's father kicked Lydia out of the house. – I'm breathing faster and faster, my heart is pounding in my chest, my whole body seems too small for the emotions filling me. – There was no way I could have prevented it. There was nothing I could do, Ruby.

He places his hands on my clenched fists. Her touch is gentle
warm, just like her voice when she starts talking.

– Nobody could have prevented it. You did everything you could.

I swallow hard. It feels like there are a million pins in my throat.

– But it still wasn't enough. I'm very... I'm very sorry about what happened yesterday.

"I know," he replies quietly. He squeezes my hand. I lift my head to look at her. I see sadness in her eyes, but also something else. Something I cling to because it's good, familiar.

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– Right now, the most important thing for me is to be with you and Lydia. You are the most important to me.

I unclench my fist, turn it over, and take Ruby's hand, gently I lift it to my mouth and press my lips against her skin.

There's more and more warmth in Ruby's eyes. More and more life.

“I doubted it for a moment,” she admits quietly. – Outside Lexington's office.

I nod. I saw it. The disbelief and disappointment in her eyes went straight to my heart. I realize that I have made serious mistakes in the past. But those photos… They're not part of my life anymore. Such intrigues do not befit the man I am now, or rather the man I would like to be.

– I had no idea I still had them on my phone.

Ruby nods.

– It won't be easy to convince Lexington that the truth is otherwise.

- Probably not.

We both get lost in thought for a moment.

– What about Lydia? Ruby finally asks. - What happens now?

I clear my throat loudly.

– She's staying with Aunt Ophelia and taking private lessons so she can finish school. Her father threatened to take Sutton to court if she objected.

Ruby stiffens, and in her eyes I see the same rage that fills me.

– I would also like to pack my things and get out of there.

– Why don't you do it? – he asks carefully. – Maybe your father then he would come to his senses and realize that he had made a mistake.

I deny it vigorously.

– I can't make things worse at home. If I move out, I will lose only chance to convince him to let Lydia come back.

Ruby frowns.

– So this means…

– That for now I will do what he wants me to do – he finishes quietly.

– Oh, James.

I shrug. The last thing I want to achieve with this visit is to bother Ruby again with my family's problems. He has enough

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a lot on her shoulders, she shouldn't worry about me and my sister yet.

– Do you think he will ever change? – he asks. Mechanically, he strokes the back of my hand with his thumb.

I think about it hard. I never wondered if my father would ever change. In my eyes, he was always just Mortimer Beaufort, a businessman who placed such high demands on me and put so much pressure on me since I was a child that I constantly felt like I was going to suffocate.

I have this recurring dream that I am drowning and my father is standing over me, watching me die. That's exactly how I feel right now.

“I guess not,” I say hoarsely.

Ruby moves a little closer. We touch our heads.

“I'm with you,” he assures in a whisper.

I don't answer, I just hug her and pull her to me.

“I'm going to Lydia's this weekend,” I say after a while. “She'll be fine at Aunt Ophelia's in Beckdale, but she doesn't know anyone else there and I don't want her to feel lonely.

Ruby looks at me sympathetically, even though that's the last thing I wanted. She has her own problems, I shouldn't bother her with ours.

- Can I go with you? – he asks after a long moment.

– To Lydia?

He nods. He must sense my surprise, because before he can answer, he quickly adds:

- Once. If you wanted it.

– Lydia will be delighted. – I pull back a little to look at her look, and I add quietly: - Just like me.

I would do anything to spend the whole day with her, but I have to today something else to do, and it's not a pleasant thing at all.

I park in front of Red Heaven and get out. It feels weird driving alone, but on Saturday, after returning from Pemwick, Percy announced that he wasn't feeling well, and no one has seen him since. I don't blame him.
Taking a crying Lydia to Aunt Ophelia and then returning as if nothing had happened had taken its toll on him as well.

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With more force than necessary, I slam the car door shut and take the few steps to the club entrance. Meanwhile, the sun has almost completely set, with only a red glow illuminating the sky in the distance.

I open the heavy velvet curtains and step inside. Suddenly, a familiar, sweet, powdery smell surrounds me, choking me, rising to my throat. I don't think I've ever been here sober. Without alcohol, the smell, combined with the sight of pole dancers writhing in pink-red light to a slow song with intense bass, seems unreal to me. Like a world in which I am a stranger, although I once belonged to it.

-James! – Bear's booming voice comes from some distance. Apart from him and the dancers, there is no one in the club, which doesn't surprise me at all, because most of the guests will arrive much, much later.

I turn and watch as the owner of Red Heaven walks towards me with his arms wide open. Bear – this name suits neither his tall, slim figure nor the tailored Beaufort suit he is wearing.

– First Cyril, now you. To what do I owe this honor?

- Hi. – I shake his hand. His handshake is as strong and unyielding as my father's. I return it without blinking an eye.

– I'm looking for him right now. Where is?

Bear's eyes take on a different expression, although the smile remains on his lips.

– In one of the next rooms. He's having fun.

I swallow hard. Well of course.

– I hope it's possible to talk to him.

Bear motions for me to follow him.

– Judging by your expression, he was in a lot of trouble.

I shift my gaze to the massive doors leading to the VIP area.

I'm not answer.

“James, you know I don't tolerate brawls in my club,” Bear continues firmly. – If you want to explain something, please do, but not here.

“I'm not going to fight anyone,” I reply.

“Good,” Bear mutters, opens the door and adds, “It's at the very end.”

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I nod and walk down the long corridor in the direction he pointed me. Without hesitation, I draw back the curtain.

Cyril sits on a black leather sofa. He seems relaxed, throwing his head back and watching the dancer move in front of him to the music. He watches as he puts his hands in his hair and moves his hips in circles, going lower and lower... I clear my throat loudly.

Cyril doesn't turn his head towards me, but I can see every muscle in his body tensing.

“Linette,” he begins, never taking his eyes off the dancer. – Let's make it short a break, okay? – His voice seems completely devoid of emotion.

Linette freezes in surprise, but nods when she sees me in the doorway. He steps off the tiny dance floor, passes me, and gives me a fleeting smile.

I slowly walk to the couch. I pull up a leather pouffe and sit down, I want to be opposite Cyril. He doesn't even bother to look at me. He keeps staring blankly at the ceiling, as if he had taken something else besides alcohol, something much stronger.

I remember his words yesterday. The provocation, clearly audible in his voice: *Ask him, Ruby. Ask him who took these photos.*
I remember how he gave me back the phone and had the courage to thank me for it. It took me a lot of effort not to lunge at him but to turn around and leave him alone in front of the principal's office.

I know Cyril. If I hit him, I would do exactly what he hoped for.
But it won't be that easy. I won't use my rage to ease my own pain. Because you can immediately see that Cyril is suffering. At least when you've known him all your life.

“Lydia's father kicked Lydia out of the house,” I begin.

I achieve the desired effect: Cyril cringes inwardly and looks at me sideways.

Only Lydia interests him. I knew I would reach him this way.

“He shouted at her, hit her and sent her to her aunt in Beckdale, Cyril,” I say calmly. I promised myself that I would keep my composure, but the moment the memory comes back, I instinctively clench my fists. It's instinct.

A dark light appears in Cyril's eyes.

“He said he would make sure Sutton was out of her life,” she says hoarsely. – That we'll get rid of both of them in one fell swoop.

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My nails dig painfully into my palms as I clench my fists so tightly.

"What did Ruby do to you?" – I hiss.

There is no trace of amusement in Cyril's laughter. He runs his hands over face, weaves them into her dark hair.

– Man, before these two showed up, everything was perfect.

– Nothing was perfect. Before Lydia met Sutton, she was in terrible shape.

Cyril cringes inwardly. Like me, he clenches his fists.

- Not true.

– Maybe you just didn't know her as well as you thought.

– Fuck! – He hits the couch with all his strength. – I just wanted everything to be as it was before!

– You act as if everything was perfect before. And that's not true. “We had a great time,” he says in a

trembling voice. – James, we were invincible. And now there's nothing left of it.

His cheeks are flushed, his shoulders are rising and falling faster and faster.

And suddenly I know what the problem is. While I never really wanted the life my parents planned for me, Cyril felt completely different. I was always afraid of the future, and Cyril was waiting for it. He wanted to study at Oxford and follow the path laid out for him; I always wanted something more - Cyril was satisfied with what he had.

– You don't want to tell me that you did it for the sake of our friendship.

– Of course I did it for our friendship! - He looks like he's about to jump to his feet at any moment.

– You did it for yourself. You are selfish. You can't cope with change.

- Not true.

– What were you thinking exactly? That my father will be happy with this one the news? – I say coldly.

“He said he'd make sure Sutton disappeared. I don't care about anything else.

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– And you achieved just the opposite. Neither me nor Lydia ever again we will look at you the same way.

He cringes into himself. Looks like I punched him in the face.

– I... I didn't want it. I didn't know he would punish her.

I lean down to look him in the eye.

– You hurt the two people I care about most in the world. I will never forget this.

- I can not turn back time. – I hear the pain in his voice; with difficulty says words.

– Yes, you can.

He shakes his head.

– Lexington won't believe me when I go to him now. Anyway, what with my reputation?

I furiously bang my fist on the table between us. The hand explodes with pain that spreads throughout the entire arm. I don't care at this point.

- You know what? Now I don't give a damn about your reputation. Idiotic You ruined Ruby's life with lies.

I look at him significantly. He stares back at me firmly.

– I know you still have the original photos. I'll give you a week to he went with them to Lexington.

- I…

I get up and look down at him.

“If you don't give Lexington the originals, it's over friendship will be the least of your problems, I say quietly.

Cyril swallows hard, looks at his hands, clenches his fists, unclenches them again. From a distance you can see that he is fighting a hard internal battle.

I can't help him with that. I said everything I could.

“James,” he calls hoarsely once I'm at the door. – I really didn't want it.

The rage at him combined with the uncertainty about Lydia and Ruby's future almost makes me feel dizzy. Maybe deep down Cyril isn't evil at all, but right now I don't know if our friendship can still be saved. I can't look at him at this point.

- I know.

I don't say anything more. I'm leaving.

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7

Graham

Beaufort.

I have been standing still for about five minutes, staring at the elegant plaque on the building's glass facade.

I used to pass by here often because our theater troupe met two streets away. At that time, however, I had no idea that this was the headquarters of Beaufort's company, probably because I had never been particularly interested in fashion or large corporations.

I always wanted only one thing: to become a teacher.

When Lydia told me her name, it didn't mean anything to me.
She had to put me on the right track before I realized that the suit my grandfather had given me at graduation had been made in a company owned by her family.

I adjust the collar of my dark green shirt once again and slide the strap of my bag over my shoulder.

Then I look at my watch: five to three. I take a deep breath and move.

Accompanied by two businessmen in suits, I pass through the revolving door and find myself in the lobby of a modern office building.

Lydia once told us that the old Beaufort headquarters, which today houses one of the branches and a tailor's workshop, turned out to be too small in the 1980s and that is why this skyscraper was built next to it, to which subsequent departments gradually moved: marketing, accounting, PR and finally the entire management team. The building rises twenty floors and no one doubts that this is where the heart of the company beats and the most important decisions are made.

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The floor is covered with light marble and the walls are made of glass. In the middle of the hall there is a huge Beaufort company logo and its name in a semicircle.

- How can I help you? – the young man asks when I finally approach the reception desk. He has neatly gelled, parted hair, and, like almost everyone else here, he's dressed in a black suit that fits so perfectly that it must have been tailored.

I left my Beaufort in the closet on purpose, but at this point I'm wondering if that was a mistake. In jeans and a slightly too large plaid jacket, I feel like an outcast right now.

–Graham Sutton. I have an appointment with Mr. Beaufort, I answer.

The young man raises his eyebrows questioningly, but then leans over the computer and quickly clicks.

– Yes, I already have it. – He types something on the keyboard, moves with the chair to the side, to the small black cabinet, opens the drawer, returns to the counter and hands me a white rectangle. It says "guest" and above it is the Beaufort logo and a black barcode.

– Please go through the security check on the right, slide your pass under the scanner. After crossing, you will see the elevators on the left. Please go to the top.

- Good, thank you very much. – I take the pass and set off in the indicated direction.

“Good luck,” he calls after me.

He has no idea how much I need him.

A woman and a man get into the elevator with me. They look at me when they see which floor I'm going to. I turn my head and stare at my leather shoes.

The ride to the twentieth floor feels like it's in slow motion, but the elevator moves terrifyingly fast. I only think about Lydia all the time.

She hasn't spoken to me in five days. I'm dying of worry. I've been trying to call her all morning, but after our last conversation, her phone stopped working. It was only late in the evening that I received a message from her: *I'm only bringing trouble to you. Maybe it will be better if it's*

about me

you will forget. I'm so sorry. Lydia

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She didn't react to my answer. I don't know where he is, I don't know how he feels. When Mr. Beaufort's secretary called me yesterday, it felt like the ground was giving way beneath my feet.

If her father wants to talk to me, it only means one thing: he already knows. On the one hand, it makes me more nervous than I was before my first lesson at Maxton Hall, but on the other hand, I feel almost… relieved? The last few days have certainly been some of the most difficult of my life. I lost my job and probably my teaching career. But in all this hopelessness there is also the thought of Lydia. Lydia, with whom perhaps now I can count on a future together, without constant fear and remorse. It's a high price, but it's worth it.

I'm the last one to get off the elevator. Another reception. A dark-haired woman greets me with a professional smile.

- Mr. Sutton, right? Please wait here. Mr. Beaufort will see you soon will accept. – He points to the chairs at the end of the hall.

I walk in the indicated direction, but I don't sit down, I just stand by the window from which there is an impressive panorama of London. I look at the city where I grew up. The Thames glistens in the spring sun, bringing to mind a gentleness that does not match the storm inside me.

“Mr. Sutton, please come in,” the assistant tells me.

“Thank you,” I reply hoarsely.

And then I take a deep breath, pass the row of chairs, and touch the doorknob.

Lydia's father's office looks just like the rest of the building: clean, cold, emotionless. On the right side there is an aluminum filing cabinet and next to it a gray sofa with metal legs. On the left I see a large desk with a glass top.

Mr. Beaufort is standing behind him, at the window. He clasps his hands behind his back and only turns around when the door closes behind me with a soft click. He looks at me coldly.

“Sit down, Sutton,” he says and points to the chair in front of the desk.

At first I'm annoyed by the lack of greeting, but I follow his instructions anyway.

– Good morning, Mr. Beaufort.

He walks over to the desk and sits down, resting his elbows on the glass top. On one side there is a computer with a black monitor, on the other they are piled high

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stacks of papers; I notice catalogs and sketches. I stop looking at them for a moment, but then I return to Beaufort.

“You can probably guess why I called him,” he begins, showing no emotion.

“I guess so,” I admit.

– I assume my daughter informed you about the move.

I calmly return his gaze and try not to let on that I have no idea what he's talking about.

– You can't turn back time. But I advise you: don't waste your studies at Oxford on a romance that has no chance anyway.

The way he downplays our relationship with just a few words is like a punch to the chest. He doesn't know me at all. He has no idea what we have in common, how much we have helped each other. He doesn't understand that we need each other, now more than ever.

I didn't count on his blessing when I came here. No father wants his daughter to get involved with a teacher from his school, that's obvious.
But there's no respect in the way he talks to me, and the fact that he wants to intimidate me is just ridiculous. I don't care about his power and his money. He won't tell me what to do or what not to do, and he certainly won't threaten me.

– I don't think I really understand.

“Of course, Sutton, let me be clear,” he says after a long moment.
He leans forward and clasps his hands. Out of the corner of my eye, I see his knuckles turn white. – From now on you will have no contact with my daughter. If I find out that you are still talking to her, that you have even approached her once, I will make sure that you regret it bitterly. – He says these words with the calm and self-confidence of a man who is aware of his power and does not tolerate opposition.

I wonder if I shouldn't be afraid, but all I can think about is Lydia. About what we have already been through and what the future will bring us.

Last Saturday, during spring ball, I realized that I could no longer resist feeling for her. I chose her. I realize it won't be easy. Her father is probably the biggest obstacle in our path, but certainly not the only one. But without Lydia, my life is empty. Without it, nothing makes sense. And no matter what, I won't give up

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without a fight. I won't let her be taken away from me, especially not by her father, who has looked down on her and belittled her all her life, even though she can do a lot.

“With all due respect, Mr. Beaufort, that's not an option.”
I reply, my voice as cold as his.

Now it's Beaufort who blinks in surprise. He obviously wasn't used to opposition. It only lasts a split second and then he regains his composure. He leans back and breathes loudly.

- All right. Let's approach it differently. – The next moment he bends down, picks up a briefcase from the floor, puts it on the desk. He turns it towards me and opens the lock.

The lid lifts and I grit my teeth so hard I can hear them grinding.

The queen of countless banknotes smiles at me from her suitcase.

The collar of my shirt is suddenly unbearably tight, and I struggle not to loosen it. I slowly move my gaze to Beaufort's expressionless face.

– Please treat it as compensation for the unpleasantness – he says carelessly.

My heart is pounding like crazy, I try in vain to breathe evenly.

– Mr. Beaufort, I don't want your money.

He raises an eyebrow.

– This is a very satisfactory sum.

– That's not the point.

Damn, I raised my voice. I don't want this at all, but against this
man, I have no choice.

– Don't you understand what you're doing to your own daughter with such behavior?

Now he is the one gritting his teeth as hard as he can.

“I advise you to be careful with your words,” he drawls quietly.

I shake my head vigorously.

– You were her hero. She would do anything for you to take her seriously and bring her into the company. But there is only one path for you, a path that has been previously marked, and there is no place for your daughter. You were never interested in her. You didn't care what was happening to her.
The most important thing is that this damn company doesn't get hurt. You were always blind to her needs. The fact that you are interfering in her life like this at this moment only proves that you don't know your own daughter at all.

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Beaufort jumps up so vigorously that his chair hits the glass wall.

– You have no idea what you're talking about.

I stand up too so he won't look down on me.

– You have no idea what she's been through already.

– I would do anything for my children, no matter if you like my actions. At the end of the day, all the decisions I make are for their good. If you were a father, you would understand.

The door opens behind me, but I don't care if anyone hears it. The security guards will probably take me out any minute anyway. I have no intention of coming back here.

“When I'm a father, I'll listen to my children,” I say. – I will cheer them on and support them in everything they want. And I will never, ever put my own ambitions before theirs.

Beaufort purses his lips. He doesn't look at me, but at the office door.
I turn around, annoyed.

James is standing in the doorway. He shifts his gaze between us and then stops it on the briefcase that still lies on the desk in front of me.

James

I feel all the blood drain from my face.

It's so quiet in my father's office that each of my ragged breaths seems unbearably loud. I can't describe what I'm feeling right now, all I know is that it's something that has been brewing inside me for years and is about to explode.

“I don't think you're serious, Dad,” I blurt out and enter the office.

My father looks at me without a trace of emotion.

I nod towards the suitcase.

“Isn't it enough that you sent Lydia to Aunt Ophelia?” Do you really want to do this to her?

I feel like my face is on fire. Just like my stomach. Veins.
Whole body. Everything seems to be spinning around me, everything except my father. I clench my fists and feel them shaking. This trembling pervades me

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bones. There is so much pent-up rage in my body that I can barely stand.

– Do you think it's enough to throw some money on the table and he will disappear from Lydia's life forever? Do you think it still works like that these days?

– Skip your melodramatic tone and close the door. - Without taking his eyes off me, my father lowers the lid of the suitcase. Finally he returns his gaze to Sutton. – Please think about it again.

- I do not have to. If you called me here to blackmail me or buy me, you've come to the wrong place. Sutton nods at me goodbye. - Have a nice day.

He turns and walks to the door. He's getting closer to me. He slows down, and for a moment I think he's about to tell me something, but then he takes a deep breath, shakes his head, and leaves the office without saying a word. The door closes quietly.

I am unable to move from my place.

The father takes the briefcase from the desk, puts it on the floor and turns on the computer.

As if nothing had happened.

The rage within me is gaining strength, growing. I can't control it, and after what I just saw, I don't want to either.

Do you think he will ever change? Ruby's words ring in my ears again.

Now I know the answer.

I've actually always known her. I just didn't want to acknowledge it.

Suddenly I know where this fire in me comes from.

All these years I have been bending over backwards to please my father. Without any objections, I accepted the vision of the future he had planned for me. But that's over now.

I don't want to become a person who imposes his will on others at all costs and goes through life regardless of the damage caused. I always felt like I had no choice. But the past months have shown me that life is unpredictable. They proved that there is something worth fighting for. And they awakened something in me that I hadn't felt before: courage.

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Courage to do something for yourself.

The courage to take your life into your own hands.

The courage to disobey his father.

- Enough of this. – I can't believe I speak so calmly.

- I'm listening? – Father seems deep in thought. He writes something and even he doesn't look at me.

I take a few long steps across the office until I'm standing right next to the desk. Only then does he look up from the keyboard.

I touch the signet ring on the finger of my left hand. The signet ring I wear to every Beaufort board meeting. A symbol that I am part of this family. But in fact, it only symbolizes the bond that we pretend to the whole world. I take it off slowly, weigh it in my hand for a moment. It's not heavy, but at the same time I feel like I'm holding in my hand the weight that has weighed me down for eighteen years of my life.

“I tried, Dad,” I say. – I really tried to be a good son. I wanted you and your mother to be proud of me. But…” I shake my head. Just thinking about my mother hurts. I don't know if I would disappoint her if she saw me now. – I can't take it anymore.

I place the signet ring on his desk, keeping my eyes on his face.

– I will sell my shares in Beaufort. – When I withdraw my hand, I feel a lightness that I have never felt before. It seems to me that all it takes is a breath of wind and I will float like a feather, because I have severed all ties that bind me to this company and this man.

The father is silent. Only the twisted lips reveal that he is not happy with the development of the situation. After a few seconds, he returns his attention to the computer screen. I breathe loudly and turn around.

“If you're serious, you can don't go home,” he says quietly once I'm at the door.

I glance at him over my shoulder. I think about my sister, whose last chance to escape from Beckdale is now being taken away. I think about my mother's smile. About everything that is no longer in my life.

– Which house? - I'm asking.

I don't wait for his reaction, I open the door and leave.

Right now I know one thing for sure. I'm doing this for the last time.

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8

Ember

The whole way to Wren's house I feel watched.

And yet I know perfectly well that these fears are groundless. Ruby sits in the town library at the other end of Gormsey, working through notes that James and Lin take turns tossing her way. He won't even get anywhere near this district on his way home. I should stop being nervous.

However, the anxiety persists.

Maybe it's more about the fact that I've never lied to my sister before. Of course, we keep secrets from each other, but it has never been anything of this importance. I'm dating a guy from her school behind her back. When she finds out I'm doing exactly what she warned me about, she'll blame me.

Wren and I are just friends, although I'm not sure that's the right word to describe our relationship. Because apart from the fact that we write to each other almost every day, I can count the number of face-to-face meetings on one hand.

Maybe I'm just excited. What if I go to the wrong house and ring the wrong doorbell? Or even worse, if no one opens the door for me?

But when I turn into the street whose name Wren sent me via text message, I immediately notice a small furniture cart, from which porters are taking a sofa and heading to a small semi-detached house. There are boxes piled up in front of the door, so I immediately know which house to go to.

I'm sure of that when Wren suddenly stands in the doorway and picks up one of the boxes. He is wearing a gray sleeveless T-shirt, black jeans and sneakers. He raises his hand when he sees me. I cover the last stretch, pass the car, and walk up the narrow driveway to the door, never taking my eyes off it. Only after

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Suddenly I realize that I should check the time. I glance nervously at my watch.

“It's only eight minutes from my house to yours,” I say.

“Apparently the internet got it wrong,” Wren replies.

– Or he didn't take into account my breakneck pace.

– Or he gave an approximate time for old people with a walker and that's why it took ten minutes.

I'm smiling. Wren smiles back shyly and glances behind him.
But then he returns his gaze to me.

- Come.

From the doorway, there are boxes piled up on the floor. I stop and get up one with Wren's name written in large black letters.

“I even know this street,” I say as Wren steps aside so I can enter the house. He picks up the box too and we head upstairs, leaving the door wide open. The white stairs creak under my feet. The steps are very narrow, I have to be careful not to fall.

- Here. – We enter the first room on the right. – Place it anywhere.

The room is about the same size as mine. Yellowed, empty walls with scratches and cracks here and there from the past. The floor creaks even more than the stairs. Every step can be heard throughout the entire house.

“Very here…” Wren begins. At first I think he hesitated because he was looking for the right words, but then I see that he gives up and just shrugs.

– Lovely. There's a lot you can do here. That's what I came for, right?
I put on work clothes on purpose. “I point to my old gray sweatpants and baggy black T-shirt, which has some varnish on it from Christmas to this day when Ruby and I were renovating Dad's spice cabinet. I gathered my hair into a ponytail, the ends tickling between my shoulder blades.

“Share your optimism with me,” Wren asks and looks around the room again. It already has a bed frame and a desk against the wall.
He's standing under the window. It only takes three steps for me to approach him.

– Fantastic view of the neighbor's garden. I smile at him over my shoulder. – You can spy on them. You know, if you had nothing else to do

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robots.

- Honestly, I can think of better ideas -
he replies quietly.

The smile disappears from my face as I think about other things he might have had in mind. Suddenly, images appear before my eyes for which there is absolutely no place at the moment.

As if that wasn't enough, I feel myself blushing.

“I brought everything I could find,” I say quickly, taking my bag off my shoulder and placing it on the desk. I take out the adhesive tape, foil and paint roller.
-Did you buy paint?

- Yes. – Wren points to two buckets by the door. Then he walks over to me and picks up a roll of duct tape.

I discreetly watch him sideways.

Even though we've only known each other for a short time and he's never said it outright, I can sense how much the move has affected him. Not only at this moment, but also during these few weeks when we talked to each other.

Initially, our contact was limited to comments under my entries. Wren kept his word from the event and read the entire blog; suddenly there was at least one new comment waiting for me every day; he even wrote something under my first entry. Sometimes it was just a few words, other times it was a whole epic about how he never thought about the perception of fat people and that it is actually the media that shapes social tastes and directs our attention in a specific direction. Some comments sparked interesting discussions, first on the blog, then in private messages on Instagram. When we finally exchanged phone numbers, we had already been talking not only about my blog, but about everything and nothing. He told me what was happening at home, about his father who couldn't look him or his mother in the eye, about the fear that he wouldn't get a scholarship and wouldn't be able to study at Oxford. I told him how sometimes I don't have the strength to get out of bed, not because I'm tired, but because I don't have the strength to face the next day, and that, ironically, those days are usually when the most inspiring, optimistic blog posts.

It's surprising that this just happens to some people.
Especially when night falls and the rest of the world falls into a peaceful sleep.

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“Let's tape the sockets first,” I decide and point to the duct tape in his hand.

He mutters something unintelligible in response.
I poke his shoulder. He gives me a questioning look.
- Do not be like this. It will be fun.
– If you saw my old room, you'd understand why I don't like it.

“Start with that contact,” I say, ignoring his attention. I reach for the roller and spread out the painting equipment along the longer wall of the room. There are still light green and gray streaks in the container from our last painting, and suddenly I remember Mom standing on the ladder, laughing, and Ruby pointing her brush at me like a gun.

I look at Wren as he tapes the bottom of the socket.
“Listen, I realize it's a terrible feeling to lose your home,” I say. He stops for a moment, but then continues working as if nothing had happened. – But with time you will be able to look at it from a distance. There is no other choice, it's either this or you'll go gray.
Now he looks at me, amused.
– Can you turn gray with anger?
I nod vigorously.
– Do you want to be the only gray-haired eighteen-year-old in a five hundred kilometer radius? I don't think so. – I nod and stand up. I go to the desk to get the foil.
– Look, I thought it was a new fad. Is it my imagination or have I recently read on a blog about grandma style?
I smile to myself. He also had to comment on this entry.
I was in London with my parents at the time and I saw a young woman on the street whose style I really liked. She wore a floral skirt and a denim shirt tied at the waist, but the coolest thing was her hair; pinned silver braids and frayed bangs. I spontaneously asked her if she would be willing to be a guest on my blog, and then spent about an hour asking about her hairstyle.

– *The granny look* is when a person intentionally dyes his or her hair gray. Moreover, you need to be sensitive and not rely on fashion when you are in a bad mood. And it really is a great room. – I'm staggering

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arch with his arm, covering the entire room. – We just have to put some work into it.

Wren stands up and looks at me for a long moment. Finally he nods.

- You're right. Sorry.

- You do not need to apologize. Better get to the other outlets.

The corners of his mouth turn up in a smile, and he finally nods and obediently goes about his work. Meanwhile, I cover the radiator with foil, which has also seen better days.

I'm about to check on the Internet whether the radiator can be painted normal paint when the floorboards in the hall creak loudly.

A tall woman, probably Wren's mother, stands in the doorway. He has dark brown skin, the same eyes as Wren, and short dark hair. He smiles warmly when he sees me.

– Ember, right? – He comes to me. She seems genuinely happy to see me, so I hug her warmly.

“I'm very pleased, Mrs. Fitzgerald,” I reply politely.

- The pleasure is all mine. And please call me Christine. – He frees himself from my embrace and looks around curiously. Her eyes land on the foil on the floor. – As I can see, you started working hard.

“Ember has big visions for this room,” Wren replies
from the other end. Gets up. – Can I help you, mom?

He denies with a movement of his head.

– I just wanted to say that I'm going shopping. Apparently there is a Tesco somewhere nearby. Should I buy you something?

Wren thinks hard.

– Maybe orange juice?

– I've already written it down. Ember?

- No thanks.

Christine looks between us.

– If you need help with painting, let me know.

– Of course, mom.

He smiles and disappears through the door. I turn to Wren.

“Beautiful,” I whisper.

– It's nice of you to say that. She used to be a model, she replies.

- Really?

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He confirms with a movement of his head.

– She appeared at fashion shows in Paris and Milan. But that was over twenty years ago.

- Oh my. Those must have been wonderful moments, I say with emotion.

- I do not know. Wren shrugs. – He rarely talks about it.

– Why exactly?

Wren puts the last piece of tape on the contact, then straightens and walks over to the desk.

– I think sometimes he misses his old life. In any case, it changes topic whenever the conversation turns to those times.

– Oh. – I stop next to him and take the remaining things out of my bag. – My dad does the same thing. He also never actually mentions the times before the accident, as if they never happened.

Wren places one of the rollers on the paint pot. He lifts it slowly lid. Without looking at me, he adds:

– Mom's been a little weird lately.

– How so?

He takes the rolling pin from me and turns it anxiously in his hands.

“She pretends she's not impressed by all this, but…” She hesitates for a moment. – Yesterday I heard her crying in the bathroom. The walls are quite thin here.

I bite my lips.

“Such a change doesn't come easy for anyone,” I say quietly. – It takes some time to get used to it.

Wren is silent for a long moment, then takes a sharp breath.

– I can't stand it when he cries.

He seems so helpless, so broken, that I would love to go up to him and embraced him warmly. Still, I don't move from my spot.

– Actually, it's better that he cries, because with tears you shed tears self-frustration.

Wren nods, although he doesn't seem convinced.

– Maybe she should go up on the roof and scream at the top of her lungs to get rid of it everything that bothers her.

Now the corners of his mouth turn up a little.

– The neighbors would probably have a good time.

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- Fact. She'd better wait until you've made friends with everyone in the area, then no one will hold it against her.

I spread out the brushes on the desk and look at each one in turn decide which one to start with.

After a moment, I realize that Wren is watching me. A smile appears on his face.

- What is? - I'm asking.

He runs his eyes over my face, his lips parting slightly. After a while however, it closes again and tightens it into a narrow line.

“Nothing,” he replies and points to the bucket of paint. – Shall we begin?

– That's why I'm here, right?

All the while we're painting the walls of Wren's new room, I wonder to myself what words he lacked the courage to say.

Ruby

My calendar looks completely different than it did just a week ago.

Up until now, I've been organizing my day around my lesson plan, organizing committee meetings and preparations for Oxford, but now I have no reason to get up at a specific time in the morning or do my homework for a specific day. At first it completely baffled me, but then I decided that I would not sink into despair and would just build a new routine.

I spend my mornings in a small city library, where I read subsequent items from the Oxford reading list and at the same time prepare for my final exams. After classes, James or Lin bring me notes from that day's classes, and I spend the evening studying them and trying to understand everything that was discussed in class.

I feel weird not going to school. With each passing day, it is harder for me to get rid of the fears that have been coming back since Monday and seem to be choking me. They don't leave me alone when I go to the library, they bother me on the way home. They are with me when I sit down to dinner with my family, they keep me awake even though James calls me and tells me anything and everything just to distract me.

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But I won't give up without a fight. I don't want to come to terms with the situation. James has given Cyril an ultimatum, and until the allotted time has passed, I cling to the hope that the Headmaster will learn the truth and allow me to return to Maxton Hall. Right now I can't think about what would happen if everything played out differently.
If I let this happen, I'll see my entire future burst like a soap bubble, and I simply can't stand that.

Ember, on the other hand, presents me with a new alternative every day in case plan A (Oxford, no matter what) fails. So far, she has presented me with a plan B (apply for an internship with Alice Campbell and then work at her cultural foundation) and a plan C (drop everything to hell and start a clothing company with her), and of course the latter option makes her much more excited. enthusiasm than in me, at least for now.

I lean back and stretch my arms above my head. You can say anything about gray fabric-upholstered library chairs except that they are comfortable. Or stable. Over the past three days, I have determined that there are exactly two that do not swing, and one of them has a screw falling out at regular intervals. I found this out the hard way, as I almost had a heart attack twice when the seat suddenly moved beneath me and I almost fell to the ground.

So far I'm fine, but I'm almost 100% sure that William, the retiree who also sits in the library every day, has done the same research on chairs, because whenever he appears here before me, he takes the one non-swaying, non-threatening seat. he falls over his chair and watches me with an almost mischievous gleam in his eye as I choose one of the worse seats.

I like him anyway.

When I stand in front of the library door on Friday morning, it turns out that it is closed for inventory purposes and will only open its doors at noon. At first I'm confused, but eventually I end up with a book in a small cafe and kill time there. At twelve o'clock sharp I arrive at the door, where William is already there. When I leave a few hours later, he smiles at me for the first time, because until now it was me who said goodbye when I packed up my notes and left the small reading room.

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him with a slight smile. Delighted with this small victory, I head home.

- I am! – I shout from the doorway.

“In the kitchen,” Dad replies.

I take off my shoes and hang my thin jacket in the closet.

– William smiled at me for the first time today – I announce in the hall. – I think he…

I stop mid-step and blink nervously.

Dad is not alone in the kitchen.

James is standing behind the counter.

He rolled up the sleeves of his white shirt, past his elbows. He holds a potato in one hand and a peeler in the other. Dad is sitting next to me and cutting potatoes into thin slices.

At first I'm not sure if this is really happening or if I'm just having a strange dream.

– What are you... What are you doing here? – I choke out with difficulty.

“A casserole,” Dad replies without looking up from the cutting board.

I look closely at James and immediately see that something is wrong.

I can see it in his eyes, his attitude, and the dark aura that surrounds him.

- All good? - I'm asking. I try to keep my voice calm, but I can't help but tense up and instinctively tighten my hands on the straps of my backpack.

James clears his throat. He looks at his hands, as if he's momentarily forgotten what he's doing, and then looks up again. The corner of his mouth moves slightly upwards. It's not a real smile, just a pathetic attempt that makes my stomach grow uneasy.

“I wanted to visit you, but you weren't home,” he replies and glances at his dad. “And that's why your dad hired me as a cook.”

I watch them with furrowed brows.

“It turns out I'm not as bad as you might have thought,” he adds, and my dad confirms with a nod of his head.

- True. We've gotten to the point where we have more potatoes than skins.

Under any other circumstances, this comment would make me laugh, but there is nothing comical about this situation. James stands with his shirt rolled up

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sleeves and hair that looks like he ran his fingers through it repeatedly. I've never seen him like this before. Usually he fills even the largest room, but now he seems unsure of himself and lost. As if he didn't know where he was, much less what to do next.

“Go upstairs and talk while I finish dinner,” Dad decides. –
James, you helped me a lot, but I can handle the rest myself.

James hesitates for a moment, but then nods and hands it to his dad
peeler. He puts the potato on the board, goes to the sink and washes his hands.

I give my dad a grateful smile. He responds in the same way, although I can see the anxiety in his eyes. I don't know if he's worried about me or James.

I wait until James finishes washing his hands, and then we go upstairs to my room. I take off my backpack and turn to the boy while he stands uncertainly in the middle of the room.

I come closer. I look up at him. He returns mine
look and he looks like he wants to smile at me again.

“You don't have to smile if you don't feel like it,” I whisper.
I'm afraid it will disappear at the slightest sound. This is probably because I have never seen him in such a condition. I have no idea what to do. I can only think of one reasonable solution: give it to him
time.

“I did it,” he finally says hoarsely. He clears his throat. – I left Beaufort.

It takes me a long time to realize the meaning of his words.

- I'm listening? – I ask in a barely audible voice.

– I witnessed my father trying to bribe Sutton to stay away from Lydia. - He shakes his head, runs his fingers through his hair.
– I don't know how it happened, but something inside me broke. It dawned on me how unfair all this is. And that I can't go on like this.

My hands find his hips almost instinctively.

– I told him I wanted nothing more to do with Beaufort and that I would sell my shares.

I hold my breath.

Just a few weeks ago, James told me that he was afraid he would disappoint his mother and waste her life's work if he failed to continue

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her work and run the company the way she wants. Freeing himself from his father's influence had always been his greatest dream, but there was never any chance of it coming true. No matter how much I wished it for him. The fact that he did this today, with all the consequences that this decision will bring, is beyond me.

– How did he react? – I ask in a whisper.

– He said I might not come home.

Something hurts in my chest, especially when I see how hard it is for James to maintain his composure. He is as pale as a wall; when I touch his hands, I feel how cold they are.

– I don't have a family anymore, Ruby. - His voice breaks.

I throw my arms around his neck.

He trembles as he hugs back. He clings to me desperately.
I automatically think back to the day when, after his mother died, I went to his house and held him while he cried. This is similar
moment.

I don't know how long we stand there. Only our breathing fills the silence, initially fast and nervous, over time more and more calm.

Finally, James pulls back a little and looks at me. He's blushing
cheeks and red eyes.

“I wanted… I wanted to come to you,” he confesses quietly. - I'm sorry that I put it all on your shoulders.

I shake my head vigorously.

- I'm happy, that you came. I want to be a support for you.

“When I was leaving Beaufort…” She exhales loudly. – I have never felt so free. As if I could do anything I wanted now.

I give him a questioning look.

– But I'm slowly realizing what I really did. - With difficulty
he swallows. – And what does it mean from the perspective of the rest of my life?

I reach for his hand and pull him towards me, onto the bed. We sit down. I turn to him. Our fingers are intertwined all the time.

– Together we will survive whatever happens.

James looks at our hands. His hair falls on his forehead. Preferably
I would take him in my arms again.

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– Do you need anything? - just asking. – We have to go to your place home for things?

“No,” he replies with effort. – I took the most important things straight after the meeting. I also took my car. I have an account that my father doesn't have access to, which is credited with my salary from Beaufort and which holds everything I've saved over the years. – After a moment of hesitation, he adds: – I have booked a hotel room for the next week. Here, nearby.

My eyes are watering.

– You don't have to stay in a hotel – I assure you. – My parents for sure They won't mind if you stay with us.

"I can't expect that from you, Ruby." You have enough trouble without it.

He shakes his head.

– I won't let you stay in a hotel, not after what happened.

James sighs, but before he can say anything, I cup his face in my hands.

– Stay with us. At mine.

He closes his eyes and leans in until our foreheads are touching. I gently brush my fingertips against his skin.

-I love you, Ruby.

Hearing these quiet words, I close my eyes too.

This moment is special, like the end of something great and at the same time a beginning full of hope and possibilities. James deserved it. He's the bravest boy I know. I'm very proud of him.

As we sit snuggled together, I whisper it into his ear over and over again.

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9

Lydia

After less than a week in Beckdale, I found out the following things about my aunt: There's always

something going on at her house. Even when she's gone, friends and acquaintances bump into each other in the corridor, each loaded with papers like catalogues, each wanting to know her opinion.

My aunt never makes anyone feel that she is out of place. Since I've been living here, she's eagerly taken me under her wing and constantly lets me know she's glad I'm here, even when she's on an important call or conference call with colleagues from one of Beaufort's companies. Even at night I could play on her bed while she was sound asleep and she would still give me a friendly smile and a high five. She's so cool.

I also found out that she is a fan of the Jonas Brothers.

Yes Sir. My forty-two-year-old aunt loves, as she puts it, the energetic pop of the Jonas Brothers. Whenever another song by this band comes on the speakers, I look at her in disbelief and watch as she hums to herself and taps out the rhythm with at least one of her feet.

– So what are you staring at? – he suddenly says, without taking his eyes off the sketchbook. – This piece is a classic.

He says it with such conviction that it makes me want to laugh. I quickly bend down over the sketchbook.

We are sitting in her office, she behind the desk, me in an armchair in the corner, on the other side of the room. Lately, I've been watching her work from this spot, listening to her phone calls, and I'm amazed to see that she still has her hands full.

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However, what I admire most is that, unlike my parents, she manages not only to work from morning to night, but also to use every moment of free time. After a long day at the office, he spends his evenings in the garden or invites friends for a glass of wine. Or he sits in the conservatory and draws.

“The most important thing is balance,” she said when I asked how she did it. – Beckdale gives me the peace I need to find my creative energy.

I thought about her words for a long time and I am intrigued why my father limited our contacts so much. I remember terrible family dinners that always ended in unpleasant moments and after which my father portrayed Ophelia as a crazy, frivolous hippie who couldn't be trusted with serious decisions. Gradually I realize that this is not true.

I glance at the project I've been working on for an hour. I don't start private lessons until next week. Ophelia insisted that I accompany her and draw during the day. She thought it would take my mind off other things. She also added: – I always really liked your designs in the

past. I'm curious in what direction you've developed.

At first, I was embarrassed to draw in her presence. Besides, I was out of ideas. But now it's almost routine that I sit in a chair and scribble something.

“James and Ruby are coming tomorrow,” I say after a while and glance at my aunt. Today she is wearing a floor-length white skirt and a denim shirt tied with a knot at the waist. She gathered her hair in a loose bun, with unruly strands sticking out. My mother would never leave the house, let alone go to the office, in an outfit like that, and yet Ophelia looks so much like her right now that I find myself staring at her a little too long.

“I'm glad to meet Ruby,” he says. Even if she noticed my gaze, she doesn't comment on it, just takes a sip of coffee from a huge mug and immediately grimaces. – Oh no, it's already cold. – He pushes the cup away from him.

– Shall I make you a fresh one? – I want to get up, but Ophelia stops me with a gesture.

– No, come on. It's already late anyway. If I drink coffee now, I won't sleep half the night. – He stretches and gets up from the chair. He comes to me. –

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Show me, he says.

I hand her the sketch. It's a wallet dress, simple and elegant. The kind of outfit my mother wore almost every day. When I drew it, I felt a strange bond with her.

“Oh,” Ophelia says above me. Her tone shows that she has noticed it too. – Really nice.

I stare at the drawing and avoid her gaze.

Since I moved here, she hasn't once pressed me to confide in her. She didn't ask about the father, she didn't bring up the topic of pregnancy, and although on the one hand I'm glad I don't have to talk about it, on the other hand I'm wondering about her behavior. She treats me like nothing happened, like it's the most normal thing in the world that I'm eighteen and I'm expecting twins and living with her.

Maybe this is how he deals with problems. Or he wants to give me time until I'll be ready to talk to her.

“I'm not sure about the colors,” I finally say. – Something doesn't feel right here.

I feel him look at me sideways for a long moment and then gently stroke my arm.

– Your mother always advised to trust your instincts in such situations.

I look at the crayons on the table and reach for a light gray one. I turn anxiously it in my hands and I wonder what my mother would do in my situation.

“I didn't know you two drew together,” I say and finally look at Ophelia.

“Constantly,” he replies and sits down in the next chair.

– Just clothes or other things too?

Ophelia laughs quietly.

– Mostly clothes, but your mom also drew comics. Some of them were super funny.

- Really? – I can't imagine that at all. Mom was always there deadly serious and focused on important matters.

– Before she had to take our father's place, Cordelia was very carefree and allowed herself many jokes.

I try to imagine what she looked like then: in a loose dress, with messy red hair, with a sketchbook on her lap.

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Surprisingly, it's not as difficult as I thought. Warmth fills me and I clear my throat to get rid of the lump that has suddenly appeared in my throat.

I'd like to meet her like that.

The music coming from the speakers seems inappropriate. It doesn't fit into a serious conversation.

– I have photos from that time, both of her and her comics. Your mom left all her albums here. If you want, I can look for them.

- It'd be great. Thank you.

Ophelia thoughtfully moves my sketchbook on the table.

– In the past, we always imagined what we would one day make of Beaufort – he begins after a while. “Your childhood projects…” A shy smile appears on her lips. He finds my eyes. – Your mother and I had the same plans. Women's collection. Development of the company in a new direction.

– And what has changed? - I'm asking.

– She met Mortimer. She let him and our father tell her that she couldn't break with tradition for anything in the world. For a long time I hoped that one day he would change his mind and bring me on board again, but... - Ophelia shrugs. – Apparently she didn't want it anymore after that.

There is silence for a moment. We listen to the guitar riffs of the next song.

I finally speak up again.

– Do you think you still have a chance to make it happen?

– Since Cordelia… Since she's gone, I don't believe it anymore, no. - He swallows with difficulty. – Did you know she never mentioned me in her will?

I take a deep breath.

– No, I had no idea.

I wasn't even there for the reading of the will. After my mother died, my father arranged everything with our lawyer, which was fine by me.

I didn't want to know what she left me as an inheritance. I just wanted her to come back to us.

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“She left everything to Mortimer. For a person who cares about tradition company was so important, it broke an age-old rule.

– How so? – I ask, amazed.

– For many generations, Beaufort has been inherited by the closest living relative. In our dad's case, it was Cordelia. After her death, the company should go to you or me.

“I can't believe it,” I say, amazed. – Why did she do that?

– They have been an undefeated duo for over twenty years. Maybe she wanted to bet on a certain horse who would run the company the way she had imagined.

I was about to reply, but our conversation was interrupted by a loud doorbell. Ophelia makes a gesture that suggests we haven't exhausted this topic yet, then jumps up and walks away towards the front door.

Less than half a minute later, I hear him calling to me from downstairs. I lift my head.

- Yes?

– You have a guest.

I stand up with a frown. I check my watch. It's almost eight o'clock in the evening. I wonder if it's Cyril. James said he talked to him about me.

What if it's really him? Just the thought makes me clench my teeth and fists. I slowly go down to the ground floor. But when I enter the hall and see who's standing on the threshold, my heart does a somersault.

It's not Cyril.

This is Graham.

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10

Alistair

Today's training was a real nightmare. James, Wren and Cyril did not come again, which not only affects the poor atmosphere in the team, but also drives the coach to the edge of endurance. He ordered so many extra rounds around the field that by the end I could barely feel my legs and I was afraid I would vomit from exhaustion. I would love to run home, to bed, and forget about the entire gruesome week.

But Roger Cree invites us for a beer at the Black Fox, and because he doesn't I'm smiling at another lonely evening, I'm going with the rest of the boys.

This school year was supposed to be our best year ever. Now I just smile with pity as I remember my childhood naivety from last summer. Virtually everything has changed since then: Wren has barely looked us in the eye since he moved to a more modest home, Cyril hasn't shown up at school for a week, James is desperately trying to please his father, Lydia and Ruby at the same time.

And I... And I let my best friend break my heart, and now I have to come to terms with it.

Kesh, like the rest of the team, is also in the pub. He sits with the backup goalkeeper at a dark wooden table across the room. I'd rather ignore him, but every time I look up from my beer, I feel his dark gaze on me.

It was like he hadn't let me out of his sight the entire evening. I instinctively think back to the past. I feel his hands, his skin, his lips, I hear his voice in my ears, the meaningless words he whispers as I caress him.

The fact that I've just finished my third beer doesn't help at all in repressing these memories.

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Whenever I think I can forget about the moments we spent together, one look from him is enough to make everything come back with double force. I don't know how long this will last. Especially since we still try to be friends.

I can't get rid of him, no matter how hard I try.
Certainly not when he looks at me over the rim of his glass.

– Listen, what exactly is going on with James and the rest of your gang? – Roger asks me and brings me out of my reverie.

- What? – At first I don't know what he's talking about.

He puts the glass down on the table.

- Honestly? I'm starting to suspect you're deliberately trying to take this team down.

I look at him through knitted eyebrows.

– I have no idea what you mean.

– Beaufort almost never comes to training because he prefers to be bored at the meetings of the organizing committee. I haven't seen Fitzgerald and Vega for several weeks. That I won't mention you again. You know how bad you are at it.

I freeze, beer in hand. I would love to pour it on his head.

– What do you know anyway? – I say defiantly. – If James hadn't been suspended last semester, you wouldn't have had a chance to make the team. You have no idea what my friends are dealing with right now, so you better watch what you say.

Cree scowls.

– I would have made the team anyway. Let's be honest: each of us has our own problems, but to constantly skip training? You think you're so important, but really you're just spoiled bastards who have too much time and money.

I jump up from my chair so vigorously that I fall to the ground. I take a step towards Roger and go to grab his arm, but then someone places a hand on my shoulder.

I don't have to turn around to know who. If I hadn't recognized him by his gentle but firm embrace, his unique scent would have given him away.
I love its scent. So much so that sometimes I borrow it after training

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deodorant from him, claiming that I forgot mine, although this is of course not true.

“Come on, Alistair,” he says quietly behind me.

I shake his hand off my shoulder, still staring at Roger.

– Bark it back.

Roger laughs bitterly.

– Beaufort can party all day long, but he doesn't make it to training.
The captain does not leave his men in difficult situations.

– Listen, you've been on the team for less than a year and you already think you have the right to judge James? You have no idea how much this team owes him. If it weren't for him, we wouldn't be here - I say so loudly that people around us stop talking and watch the situation unfold curiously. I have it in my nose. Roger's words made me passionate. And when Kesh touches my shoulder again, I get even more angry.

I turn to him.

“Don't touch me,” I growl and slap his hand away. “I

won't mention you two again,” Roger continues without mercy. - Everyone knows that you...

The panic in Kesha's eyes makes me act on instinct: I turn around and punch Roger in the face with all my might. I feel his bones crack under my knuckles, hitting me somewhere between his eye and his nose, or both. The Cree falls to the ground with a groan, and then chaos breaks out.
The remaining team members surround us tightly, Kenton picks up Roger, someone pulls me back. I am not done yet. I want to attack again, I want to make sure he keeps his mouth shut and doesn't talk nonsense about the most important man in my life.

Unfortunately, it doesn't work. Kesh pulls me outside, around the corner of the building, into a small alley behind the bar. Only then does he let me go. I stand with my back to him, breathing heavily, my fists still clenched.

“You didn't have to do that,” Kesh breaks the silence after a long moment.
Even from this distance we can hear the loud rock music coming from the pub.
I try to focus on the sounds, not him standing so close to me or the fact that I just hit my teammate.

You didn't have to do that.

It seems like Kesh and I are constantly doing the wrong thing
we really want.

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“I don't know what you want to hear from me,” I say. Suddenly I'm losing it all forces. As if I had already given everything I was capable of.

I feel Kesh take a step closer, I am aware of the warmth of his body behind me back. I shudder.

– I don't want to hear anything. – He puts his hand on my back. This time timidly. This touch is different from that time in the pub. It's familiar and gentle.

I swallow hard.

“Kesh,” I say warningly.

He gets closer, moving his hand forward to my stomach. He touches my back with his chest. I hold my breath.

“Alistair,” he replies hoarsely. He touches the petal with his warm breath my ear. I'm covered with goosebumps.

- What are you doing? – I ask in a whisper.

Only Kesh gives me nervous excitement, an almost electric trembling from head to toe; only with him I feel like I'm weightless.

“I don't know,” he replies and slowly runs his hand across my stomach.

“But I know that,” I answer with difficulty. Kesh moves even closer. – If you don't stop, I'll turn on you. I'll push you against the wall and start kissing you. And we both know what will happen next.

“I think you need to remind me,” Keshav whispers. He hugs me tighter. I feel his chest on my back, I feel his breathing getting faster, I feel his hardness against my buttocks. My pulse quickens. - What's next? I laugh with difficulty.

“Kesh, that's a really pathetic attempt to get a kiss.”

And then I muster up the remnants of my willpower, grab his hand and move it away from my stomach. At the same time, on trembling legs, I turn to him. The adrenaline still pumping through my veins makes me feel dizzy.

I would rather go away and leave him alone. I can't lose myself in him again, not now that I know what happens next.

But when he gently places his hand on my cheek, I'm unable to move.

“Alistair,” he whispers.

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I wanted so badly to hear him say my name again. So. My mind tells me to turn and leave before it's too late, but when Kesh touches my lips, my mind shuts down and I instantly forget all the reasons why I should stop this immediately.

I can't do otherwise. I have to kiss you back.

Kesh moves his lips, gently at first, then more confidently, more and more forcefully. I instinctively raise my hand to his face, stroke his jaw, run my fingers through his hair.

He sighs breathlessly.

– Wonderful, isn't it? – he whispers into my mouth.

I hum in agreement.

– It could always be like this.

Sobering up comes suddenly, hits unexpectedly. In one second I realize that we are in a dark alley and that this situation is the complete opposite of what I want from him.

I lower my hands nervously and take a step back.

– Kesh, I don't want to be your dark secret. I don't know how many times I have to tell you this.

His dark eyes sparkle.

– I don't understand why you want to destroy what is between us.

– You're destroying us! – My voice echoes in the narrow alley.

I expect Kesh to glance anxiously behind him to make sure no one has heard us, but he keeps his eyes on me.

– The fact that you still don't understand what I mean is the best proof that it's a mistake – I say quietly, bitterly.

“It's not a mistake,” he objects.

I shake my head helplessly.

– Kesh, have mercy.

– Is that why you broke up with me? – he asks. I hear the same frustration in his voice that fills me too. – Because you think it's not as important to me as it is to you?

I sigh in defeat.

“It's hard to break up with someone you're not really with,” I point out.

He closes his eyes and breathes deeply. He's clearly trying to get himself together.

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“You're not ready for a relationship,” I explain. I feel myself turning red. – Okay, but it's different with me.

Kesh takes a step towards me. I see the pleading in his eyes. I've never seen him like this before. He's always so damn composed and introverted. He doesn't tell anyone, not even me, what's really happening to him. But in this moment his despair is so clear, so poignant, that I genuinely feel it.

– I remember what it was like with your parents. I…” He stops, breathes with difficulty. – I'm just scared.

– I know – I answer.

Coming out to my parents was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life. But I had no other choice. I wanted to finally be who I had been deep down for a long time. Which meant I had to tell my parents the truth. Back then, I didn't care what the consequences would be.
It was liberation.

Until I saw disappointment on my father's face and tears in my mother's eyes. Until they started treating me completely differently. From then on, I preferred spending time with friends because I couldn't stand being in my own home.

I don't want to be the one to force Kesha into something he's not ready for yet. I am his friend. He should always be able to count on me, no matter what he chooses. Even if he never tells his parents the truth, I should always be by his side.

And that's the problem.

I want something more than secret kisses and whispered promises that can't be kept anyway, but Kesh can't give me that right now. This evening proved it to me once again. It's nothing new, but it hurts more every time. Because he is my friend and I see that I am losing him even more than before. And mostly because I fell in love with him and I don't know how to get rid of it.

Just thinking about it makes my eyelids burn. I swallow hard and blink rapidly to control myself.

“Alistair…” Keshav whispers hoarsely and takes a step towards me.

I shake my head and look at the ground.

I can't expect him to reveal our relationship.

And he can't expect me to hide forever.

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This doesn't lead anywhere. We both know that.

I look up at him again, my eyes traveling over his cheekbones, fine facial hair, lips.

And then I look into his dark eyes. And finally I do something I should have done a long time ago: I nip the last bit of hope in the bud.

"Maybe we should stay away from each other for a while."

All the blood drains from his face.

–Alistair…

Before I can regret this decision, I turn and walk away.

Graham

Lydia's eyes widen when she sees me.

- What are you doing here? – he asks in a barely audible voice.

I open my mouth to respond, but a second later I close it. I'm standing without a word and I look at her, my fingers clenching tightly around the bouquet in my hand.

I have so much to say to her, but no words come out of my throat right now.

Maybe it's the excitement. Or maybe it's because I don't know if we both still want the same thing. A week ago I thought we had it all figured out, but then her father stepped in and now I have no idea where we stand.

I would like to finally be the man she deserves. The man she met that first summer. But what if she doesn't want me anymore? What if she decided she would be better off without me?

“I had to see you,” I finally choke out.

Lydia just keeps looking at me.

– Maybe you'll come in? – Mrs. Beaufort interjects and steps aside.

I don't answer her, I just look at Lydia questioningly.

The seconds seem to drag on forever. Finally, Lydia nods slowly. I clear my throat and climb the last two steps into the house.

“Go to the conservatory,” Mrs. Beaufort says to Lydia. – Meanwhile, I'll put some water on for tea.

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I follow Lydia down the long corridor to the spacious living room and then through the double doors to the cozy conservatory. Lydia presses a button on the wall and soon the room is illuminated by countless lights in the wooden floor. Outside the window is Ophelia Beaufort's estate. I knew from Lydia's stories that her aunt lived in the middle of nowhere, but I had no idea that there was absolutely nothing within a ten-kilometer radius of a small gas station.

“These are for you,” I say stupidly and hand her the flowers.

She takes from me a pink bouquet of roses, gerberas and chrysanthemums and buries her face in it. A ghost of a smile appears on her lips as she inhales the sweet scent.
My throat goes dry and I wonder if he's receiving my gesture correctly.
Does he understand how important this moment is to me? Because for the first time I give her something without looking anxiously from side to side for fear of being seen.

Lydia stares at the bouquet for a long moment, then clears her throat.

- Thank you.

And there is silence again. I want to look around, but I can't take my eyes off Lydia. He's wearing a baggy blue shirt and shiny black leggings. She tied her hair in an unruly ponytail, with individual strands falling out of it and falling onto her face. She doesn't look like the Lydia I know - I've never seen her like that before. It makes me realize how little time we actually spent together and how much we still have to make up for.

When the silence between us becomes unbearable, Lydia points to a dark brown leather lounge set in the middle of the conservatory. He sits down on the couch. She gently places the bouquet on the small table. I see how much her hands are shaking.

I'm mad at myself for it being my fault.

I approach her shyly and sit down, but not on the couch, but on the armchair next to her.

“I was very worried about you,” I say quietly. – You can't send me an email like that and then sink into the ground.

The leather upholstery creaks under my weight. I place my hand on the backrest and turn slightly to look Lydia straight in the eye. She placed her hands on her knees.

- I know.

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It feels like there's a massive concrete wall rising between us and neither of us knows how to break it down. Just a week ago, I had hoped that we could be together if I finally plucked up the courage to leave Maxton Hall. Suddenly I'm not so sure.

– Tell me what happened, please.

Lydia avoids my gaze, staring at her hands. He smoothes out his leggings and straightens his shirt.

“Lydia,” I whisper when she doesn't answer. I only say her name, but I try to put everything into it: my feelings and the faith I still have in us.

He looks up questioningly. I see tears in her eyes.

– You can tell me anything. Whatever it is. It doesn't matter what your father threatened you with: I won't leave unless you want me to. I will never pretend we don't know each other again. Then, at the ball, I was serious. I want to be with you.

Tears flow from the corners of her eyes. I quickly slide out of my seat and I kneel before her.

She bows her head, tears flow down her cheeks and fall to her knees. I carefully reach out and run my thumb over the damp skin.

“I'm so sorry,” he says, his voice trembling.

“You don't have to be sorry,” I reply and wrap my hand around her cheek.

– I dragged you into my mess from the very beginning. From the first moment I was nothing but a burden to you. And now you've lost your job because of me. Graham, I'm ruining everything.

I shake my head vigorously and touch her face with my other hand as well. I wait for him to look at me.

– You didn't destroy anything. On the contrary, I was going to look for something else anyway. It's hard now just because everything turned out this way.

Lydia shakes her head vigorously. It hurts me to see her like this.

– I'm so sorry you couldn't count on me when you needed me this is the most. If you let me, I will always be with you now.

“Don't say things like that,” he chokes out with an effort and looks at me with tearful eyes.

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– I'm serious – I assure you passionately. I wipe her tears again. – You don't have to be afraid of anything.

He swallows hard. Suddenly she tenses up.

– Yes, I have to.

– So let's talk about it – please, quietly.

“Actually, I should have told you a long time ago,” she begins. I see in her sad blue-green eyes the same fear that I feel throughout her body. – Because this case… This case will turn your life upside down even more.

My mouth suddenly goes dry. I feel panic rising, but at the same time I can't imagine that what he has to tell me will be worse than everything we've already been through.

– What is it, Lydia?

He looks at me through a curtain of wet eyelashes. I clearly see the moment in which she gathers the courage to speak the words that burden her.

- I'm pregnant.

My hands freeze on her cheeks.

- I'm listening? – I choke out with an effort.

“I'm pregnant,” she repeats. – With twins.

I look up at her. I feel the pressure in my chest getting stronger and stronger until I feel like I'm going to burst. Her words are still ringing in my ears, slowly forming an image that leaves me breathless.

- Really? – I whisper hoarsely.

He nods. He doesn't seem to be breathing at all, and neither do I.

I am filled with all sorts of feelings. I have no control over them, just like the thoughts swirling around in my head. Without hesitation, I lean in and press my lips to her forehead. A sob escapes my throat and I pull her to me and hug her with all my strength. There are no questions, no boundaries, nothing that is more important than this moment. I gently rock Lydia in my arms.

“I was so afraid to tell you,” she says quietly.

I just shake my head in response.

At this point I am unable to let go of her. Even though this news should have terrified me, the exact opposite happened: I feel like everything in my life falls into place in an instant.

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place. The anxiety and fear that haunted me just a few minutes ago are replaced by joy and excitement. I feel dizzy because I'm breathing too fast.

I break away from Lydia. I'm still kneeling on the floor, with my hands on hers arms. I look into her eyes and say in a trembling voice:

– You made me very happy.

Disbelief appears in her tearful eyes. He blinks rapidly.

And then he throws his arms around my neck. I hug her back and pull her closer to myself and hug; I don't know how long - seconds, minutes, forever.

I have no idea how long we stay in this position, I only know that it is one of the most beautiful moments of my life.

“I should have told you a long time ago,” Lydia says in a whisper and he leans back a little, but he still holds me in his arms.

– How long have you known? - I'm asking.

- From November.

I close my eyes for a moment.

– Oh, Lydia.

“I didn't know what to do,” she adds in a whisper. I shake my head immediately.

– Just the thought that you were afraid of my reaction… – I breathe with difficulty. – I'm furious with myself. – I find her eyes again. – Because it's the most beautiful thing that's ever happened to me.

The corners of her mouth turn up almost imperceptibly.

I run my hand down her back.

– Graham, I have no idea what to do next.

- Me neither. But we will find out everything. Together – I assure you. - Everything will be fine.

Lydia runs her fingers along the back of my neck. I shiver as he moves his hand to my jaw and chin.

“I'm so glad you're here,” he whispers. His gaze lingers on my lips, but then returns to my eyes. And he lowers his eyes again. And then he leans in slowly. I close my eyes and meet her.

When our lips touch, electricity runs through me.

We need to talk about many things. But this kiss is like a promise.

It means that the past is behind us, that something new is beginning now.

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11

Ruby

On Saturday morning, as usual, I go into the kitchen to help my dad with breakfast, but first I discreetly peek into the living room to see if James is awake yet. The sheet, duvet and pillow are neatly folded in the middle of the couch, but there is no trace of him. I turn around, go to the kitchen and stand in the doorway, surprised.

James is alone. He stands at the counter and squeezes oranges. His hair is still wet from the shower, and this morning he's wearing dark jeans and a white T-shirt that hugs his shoulders. I watch his muscles tense as he squeezes the orange halves and I swallow hard. There is something very intimate about him standing in our kitchen preparing breakfast.

I think I could get used to this sight. Just like I could get used to spending evenings with him on the couch and talking until late at night, just like yesterday.

As quietly as I can, I enter the kitchen, hug him from behind, and wrap my arms around his waist. He tenses for a moment, probably because I surprised him, but then he relaxes again.

“Good morning,” I whisper.

James turns to me and smiles slightly.

“Good morning,” he replies, just as quietly. And then he leans down and gently presses his lips to mine. His kiss tastes of oranges. I sigh and snuggle into him until his back is against the counter. He wraps his arms around my waist, pulling me even closer to him.

I feel the hardness of his stomach against me, I want to slide my hand under his t-shirt, but just then I hear my dad enter the kitchen.

James jumps away from me as if he had been scalded, and I, wanting to keep my balance, stretch my hand in front of me and tap the carafe from which the juice pours out.

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orange. There is a small stain on the counter.

“Good morning, my dears,” my dad says behind me. I glance sideways at James and press my lips into a thin line to keep from laughing out loud. He stands straight like a soldier, stiff as if he had swallowed a stick, red to the ears.

– I… I wanted to prepare breakfast – he explains and points unnecessarily to the spilled juice.

Dad just nods. His eyes gleam suspiciously. He knows perfectly well that James has great respect for him, and he uses it brazenly, which is both unfair and damn funny on the other.

This goes on for a dozen or so seconds before Dad finally feels pity.

– How about scrambled eggs? – he says.

– Great – I reply. James mutters something under his breath. Then I wipe off the juice stain and start setting the table.

Meanwhile, James squeezes the remaining orange halves.

- Did you sleep well? – asks dad.

- Very good. The sofa is super comfortable. Again thank you very much.

Dad waves him off.

When Mom came home and heard the whole story, without a second thought, she suggested that James stay with us until the situation with his father was sorted out. I smiled at her gratefully, but it was short-lived, because a moment later she took me aside and told me firmly that she trusted us and that we could not abuse that trust. Then, for a good half hour, I couldn't look her in the eye.

“James and I are going to Lydia's right after breakfast,” I say.

– Do you want a car?

I shake my head in denial.

– No, we'll take James' car.

– That's good, because we were planning to go shopping with mom. – Dad opens the drawer on his right and takes out a frying pan, which he immediately puts on the stove.

– Dad has been excited about buying a new knife for a week – he explains mother, who enters the kitchen at this moment. - Good morning.

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– Good morning – James and I reply at the same time.

Mom sits down at the table. He looks around the kitchen.

– Is this really freshly squeezed orange juice?

James nods and hands her a full glass.

- Here you go.

– Well, well, well. – Mom looks at me with raised eyebrows. – I could get used to something like this.

Without taking my eyes off James, I admit, "Me too."

James

- Your favorite color?

I can't believe Ruby came up with a question like that. At the same time, it occurs to me that it's actually strange that she hadn't asked me this question much earlier; and it's so much her style that I smile to myself.

“If you have to think so long, it's not your favorite color,” he remarks when I remain silent.

I stare at the road ahead. We've already had an hour and a half of driving, and we still have about forty-five minutes left. It feels strange to be driving all this way alone, and yet I can't remember the last time I felt as comfortable as I do now, with Ruby by my side.

We started asking each other questions last night. I am delighted with how carefree we are towards each other, despite all this, and how easily we talk.

“Green,” I finally answer.

I glance at her sideways and see her nose wrinkle slightly. Obviously I didn't satisfy her with this answer.

– There are lots of shades of green. Please be more specific.

I shrug. I won't answer: the green of your eyes, because then I'll shoot straight at the dashboard. Although that's the truth. Before I met Ruby, I didn't have a favorite color.

Now yes.

“That beautiful little green one,” I answer and point to her lap, where her backpack is lying. Although it's impossible for her to take more

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things than me, because I'm carrying a lot of little things for my sister from her room, the backpack is bursting at the seams.

- Hi! It has served me well for years, so don't pick on it.

– Ember said this morning that you've had it since kindergarten.

- Not true! – he is outraged. – He's only six years old.

– Oh, maybe I heard wrong, maybe she meant he could go to kindergarten now.

Ruby sticks out her tongue at me in response. I want to kiss her so badly at this moment that I grip the steering wheel with all my strength to stop myself.

I try to control my thoughts, but it doesn't work very well.
Even now, when Ruby sits next to me, I miss her. I almost went crazy during the night. I was thinking almost all the time and trying hard to forget that my girlfriend was a few steps away from me and was only wearing short polka-dot pajamas.

I will burn in hell for what was going through my mind back then.

“You can have that bag back if you want,” I say hoarsely, keeping my eyes on the windshield. I listen to the rhythm of the engine and stare at the fields beyond the window.

Just don't pay attention to the fact that your pants suddenly seem too tight, because my imagination is heading in the wrong direction again.

“That would be great,” she replies, but she seems so subdued that my lewd thoughts momentarily disappear. – Except I don't really need a backpack right now.

– Listen, the James model is suitable for everything. And besides, you'll be back at Maxton Hall by next week at the latest, I say confidently.

This time he smiles. Out of the corner of my eye, I see him relax.

- You're right. Maybe this bag isn't a bad idea after all.

– Ruby Bell, my ideas are never bad.

He snorts contemptuously, sounding suspiciously like laughter. I feel warm with joy.

I'm so glad that we finally have something like this - a Saturday together, where no one can separate us, not Cyril, not father, not Ruby's parents, not anything else in the whole world. It's a dream come true. I still can't

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to believe that despite everything that had happened, Ruby had let me back into her life.

– You know what I thought? – he asks suddenly.

- Yeah?

“It's weird seeing you driving,” she says, amused. – Until now, I only associated you with eating and drinking in the backseat of a limousine.

Now I'm the one snorting under my breath.

– I didn't even know you had a car.

– I got it as a gift when I got my driving license – I answer. – But honestly, he spends most of his time in the garage.

-You don't like it? - Ruby looks around the interior of the black coupe.

“That's not the point,” I say, a little too late. "Percy has been driving us around since we were kids." I don't remember a day when I didn't see him.

And now…

- And now?

I shrug.

– He doesn't drive me anymore.

– Do you have contact with him?

I shake my head in denial.

– Why not, actually?

– It's his job to drive us. I guess he wants nothing to do with me.

- Do you really think so? – he is surprised. I shrug. Ruby adds, "He's known you and Lydia since we were kids." You are definitely close to him, especially after everything that happened.

- You think so?

He searches for the right words for a moment.

“When he was driving me to Pemwick a few weeks ago, we were talking a little about your mom. I had the impression that he was very saddened by her death.

I don't want to think about it now. No, I can't think about it. Doesn't want another person I would have to worry about.

Ruby looks at me from the side. I expect he won't let go of the topic so easily, but then he places his hand on mine, which is gripping the gear lever.

“You must be tired,” he remarks. – Did you really sleep well on the couch?

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– Very good – I answer honestly. In fact, I barely slept a wink
eye, has nothing to do with the couch.

– If my back hurts, I can sleep with Ember and you in my room.

I swallow hard. A night in Ruby's bed, surrounded by her scent, among the things dear to her heart, knowing that there was only a wall between us?
Oh no.

“I really like your couch,” I reply with a little over-enthusiasm. - Do not worry about me. Besides, isn't it my turn to ask?

- Ah yes.

I see him straighten up. I can barely contain my smile.

– Okay… Your favorite animal?

“Penguin,” he replies without a moment's hesitation.

– Penguin?

He nods vigorously.

- Yes. They look like they're parading around in tails. Moreover, they are mega-romantic and monogamous if they find a partner.

- Really?

- Yes. It's fascinating, isn't it? However... Okay, I must admit that if they don't find their old partner after the winter, they look for a new one. But apart from that, they are faithful. And they give each other gifts. Super sweet.

- Presents? Like what?

– Pebbles. Gravel, usually hidden under ice. It's not easy to get to. And that's why it's a sign of love when one penguin gives something like this to another.

I glance at her briefly.

– I think I know why you like them.

– Ember and I once watched a documentary about a pair of penguins. We both cried tears of joy.

I shake my head with a smile.

“Now it's my turn,” Ruby perks up. – Name a place where you would like to be kissed.

I don't laugh anymore, I just smile gently.

– That's not a question.

Ruby sighs.

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– Where would you like to be kissed?

- By you? Everywhere.

-James! – he admonishes me, but I see that he is smiling too.

- I need to think about.

There are so many places I would like to visit with her, so many things we can do together, moments I want to experience with her in the future.

My heart beats faster when I think about our future together. I see her clearly in my mind's eye: Ruby and I in our shared apartment, and a kiss, both everyday and romantic. There are feelings there and an intimacy that has developed over the years. The thought gives me a pleasant shiver.

I dream about a kiss like this.

However, I realize that this is not the right time to tell her something so important.

– I'm not exaggerating when I say: everywhere – I answer after a long moment. “But I wouldn't mind a kiss in the library.” Surrounded by books, secretly, but at the same time publicly... Yes, that would be something.

– Hmm…

– You don't seem satisfied with my answer.

– No, I just expected you to answer something like: yes on a yacht, under the stars.

– On a yacht, under the stars? Are you serious? He playfully nudges my shoulder.

– How am I supposed to know what's on your mind?

– What would your answer be? - I'm asking.

Ruby thinks for a long time. I sense the moment when he decides to answer. The atmosphere in the car changes from second to second, suddenly becoming much thicker.

“I wish you would kiss me again in Oxford,” she says quietly.

I instinctively think back to our night in Oxford. How she shouted at me and then threw her arms around my neck. We staggered into the room and onto the bed. How she tangled her fingers in my hair.

I clear my throat.

“Kiss at Oxford,” I say with difficulty. - Yes Sir.

I decide that I will make this dream come true at all costs.

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12

Ruby

“We always played hide and seek here,” James says as we get out of the car and walk down the gravel path from the parking lot towards the house.

– Here you can train for a marathon – I answer and look around with admiration.

On the right and left there is a huge meadow with cherry trees growing here and there, most of them still bare, but some of the branches already have green leaves. Ophelia's estate is gigantic, not to mention the mansion that rises in front of us.
The house, dating back to the 18th century, is in many respects similar to the Beaufort residence, also due to the bushes growing along the walls, but it gives a much cozier impression.

“We used to come here often, but less and less in recent years,” James recalls. – Mom once said that Ophelia wasn't at all happy when the property was transferred to her, because it also meant that she had to stay away from the company from then on. I remember a family dinner where she tried to convince my parents to let her back on board the Beaufort. Once, she even ran out crying because the situation had gotten so intense. After that, we didn't really come here anymore, we only saw her at our house or at company events in London.

I glance at him sideways.

– It's probably a terrible feeling when you want to commit, but they close the door in his face.

We walk in silence for a while. James inhales loudly.

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– On the one hand, this place is associated with beautiful memories for me, on the other hand, I am constantly reminded of the fights between my father and Ophelia. I have no idea how I should feel right now.

He seems lost. I can tell he's trying to hide how much this bothers him The whole situation. But he won't hide anything from me, and he knows it.

We stand in front of an impressive door. I grab his hand and I smile with encouragement.

He smiles back, takes a deep breath, and places his finger on the doorbell button.

As the loud gong sounds and echoes through the house, I realize how excited I am. All I could think about was James and Lydia and I forgot that I didn't know their aunt at all.

I hope she's nice.

Whenever James talked about her over the past few days, I could clearly sense that she was close to him. I don't think I could bear another member of the Beaufort family that I didn't like, especially if it was someone whose opinion mattered a lot to James.

The door opens with a soft creak. I hold my breath.

– James, Ruby! – shouts a woman in a dark green jumpsuit. He smiles at us radiantly. She bears an uncanny resemblance to Cordelia Beaufort. It's only when you look closely that you notice the differences between her and James' mother. Ophelia has more delicate features and is younger, mainly due to the smile with which she greets us. – It's great that you managed to come.

James steps forward and hugs her warmly.

“This is Ruby,” she introduces me and puts her hand on my back. –Ruby, this is my aunt Ophelia.

“I'm so happy to meet you, Ruby,” Ophelia says and shakes my hand. I hug her politely.

– Thank you, both of you – I reply.

Ophelia moves away from the door.

– Come on in, breakfast is waiting.

We follow her down a long corridor. I look around curiously. The house also looks cozy and hospitable inside. My

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modern abstract paintings and colorful wallpapers attract attention. I immediately feel at home here.

“Ruby, I heard you read manga,” Ophelia suddenly begins. I look at her amazed.

– It's true – I admit.

– Do you also watch anime?

I look between her and James. I confirm with a movement of my head.

– I love anime.

– I love animated films and have been planning to watch anime for a long time. Unfortunately, I haven't had time for it yet. Maybe you can recommend something to me?

– With the greatest pleasure.

– Ophelia, when you ask Ruby for something like this, you should be careful. He'll soon make you a list longer than a marathon distance.

- Hi! – I shout indignantly.

James just smiles.

– Well, then I would have my hands full. But no pressure, Ruby. Ophelia smiles at me over her shoulder.

We reach the end of the corridor, Ophelia opens the massive dark door on the left and lets us through. After a while, we find ourselves in a cozy dining room... And suddenly I stop mid-step because I see who is sitting at the lavishly set table.

I decided to comfort a crying Lydia all day long.
The last time I saw her, she was devastated and unhappy.

The last thing I expected was Lydia beaming at the table.
Not only beaming, also laughing. Even more so, I didn't expect to see my history teacher by her side, tenderly stroking her hand.

“Hi,” James says, as if, unlike me, he wasn't at all surprised by the sight.

Lydia and Sutton turn to us. The next second, Lydia jumps to her feet, throws her arms around James' neck, and hugs him with all her might. They hug each other warmly. James closes his eyes.

“Thanks for telling him where I am,” Lydia whispers.

“I was hoping he'd come to see you,” James replies so quietly that I can barely make out his words. Anyway, they make Lydia come around

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smiles. After a while, she breaks away from him and walks towards me.

We embrace each other.

“I'm glad to see you,” I start.

- Mutually. – He hugs me a little tighter.

– Sit down. – Aunt Ophelia points to the still untouched covers. – I'll make some fresh tea.

Since I don't move right away, Lydia takes my hand and leads me to the table.

“You all know each other already,” he notes and glances between James and Mr. Sutton and me.

“Oh yeah,” I mutter under my breath and James nods. We sit down across from Lydia and Mr. Sutton.

There is an awkward silence. I can't help myself, I keep staring at my former history teacher. No matter what I know about his relationship with Lydia, I still can't get over seeing him in jeans and a T-shirt.

“Hello,” Sutton finally breaks the silence.

– Good morning, Professor – I reply reflexively and immediately bite my tongue. It was like I was at school. Oh Jesus.

Mr. Sutton grimaces slightly.

– You know, Ruby, it's probably better now: Graham. I'm not your teacher anymore.

– I don't think it will go through my throat. Or I'll need something at least a few years – I finally say.

The corners of his mouth slightly move upwards.

- All right.

- What are you waiting for? – Ophelia returns to the dining room with a pot of tea.

He pours us a drink and sits at the head of the table. - Enjoy your meal.

I don't know what I expected, but certainly not that the atmosphere at breakfast would be so relaxed and cheerful. I watch as Mr. Sutton, no, Graham, hands Lydia a basket of toast and Ophelia puts scrambled eggs on James' plate, and I remember that dinner with Lydia's father and James. It's impossible to imagine a bigger difference.

James seems as confused as I am, because it takes a few minutes for him to relax his tense shoulders.

“I have to tell you something,” he begins, looking his sister in the eyes.

Lydia freezes with a knife on toast.

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- Sounds serious.

James hesitates for a moment, then nods and tells her what happened the previous day.

When he finishes, red spots appear on Lydia's face. Ophelia shakes his head in disbelief.

“Father has really gone crazy,” Lydia concludes.

Ophelia wipes her hands on a linen napkin and puts it on the table.

– All Mortimer. When something doesn't suit him, he crosses it out. Just because I ended up here in Beckdale.

There is silence. Neither of us eats.

“Ruby,” Lydia begins after a long moment. He looks at Graham and then back to me. – We talked for a long time last night. Also about Maxton Hall. And we decided to tell the director about our relationship. And that's tomorrow.

I look at her in disbelief.

- What? Are you crazy? I…

“It's the only way,” he doesn't let me finish.

“Your father sent you here to keep your condition a secret. NO you can go to school now and tell the principal about everything!

Lydia shakes her head vigorously.

– I don't care what father wants. I can't expect you to suffer the consequences of my... Our mistake.

I look between her and Graham, then turn to James.

– What about Cyril? - I'm asking. – You gave him until Monday to do so he told Lexington the truth.

James confirms with a nod of his head.

– Lydia, wait a minute. If Cyril shows him the original photos, no one will be punished. - He shifts his gaze to Graham. – And you won't be suspended.

Graham looks him in the eye.

– I'm not going back to Maxton Hall anyway. - He looks at Lydia and smiles slightly. – First of all, I want to be with Lydia in the near future. And then we'll see - he adds after a moment.

“What Cyril did…” Lydia swallows hard. – I didn't expect him to be capable of this. And I don't like Ruby's fate

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is in his hands.

These words make me shiver.

“Lydia…” James begins, but she doesn't change her mind.

– I've already made up my mind.

James presses his lips into a thin line and keeps his eyes on his sister. After a few seconds, he lets out a loud breath.

- It's your choice.

“This isn't how I imagined it,” I say quietly.

– Ruby, I appreciate what you did for me. – Lydia leans down and takes it hold my hand. – But that's over. I'll pay Lexington a visit tomorrow.

– How do you know where he lives? - I'm asking. My heart is beating like crazy. Could something really change soon? Will I really soon regain hope for the future?

- I do not know. – Lydia looks between me and James. There's an almost mischievous smile on her lips. – But luckily I know where and with whom Principal Lexington spends his free time.

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13

James

James,
rash decisions are part of growing up. I'm willing to forget about this matter if you show up at the board meeting on Monday at three o'clock. The information is in your calendar. Don't disappoint me.

Regards,
Mortimer Beaufort

I delete the message from my father. I'm not answer. My pulse skipped a beat when I read that, but now I shrug it off. He wasted no time on warmer words, he even used his official signature in an e-mail to his own son. Honestly, I'm not surprised that he thought my decision was rash. After all, for years he ignored all the signals suggesting that I wanted nothing to do with Beaufort.

The fact that he's writing to me now, not to bring me back home, but to save face with the other board members, reassures me that I did the right thing.

At some point it won't hurt so much anymore. I'm sure of that too.

I put my phone on the bed and look around the room Ophelia put us in. This is the guest room where Lydia and I used to sleep when we came here to visit. We were already admiring the eclectic decor, so different from what we saw every day at home, from the floral wallpaper, through the old-fashioned bed, to the heavy velvet curtains that were way too long.

One gets the impression that Ophelia picked up some of her things from the street and brought them home. Despite this, I always felt good here.

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The vibration of my phone snaps me out of my reverie. I see that I have a new message, and when I look at the sender, for the second time that evening I feel every muscle in my body tense.

Cyril.

I open it after a moment's hesitation.

I'm so sorry.

Just enough. I swallow hard and open the attachment. Photos load slowly. The same ones I did to Ruby and Sutton back then.
Originals, I see it right away. I breathe loudly, even though the sight of them suddenly makes me feel sick.

I remember perfectly what I was thinking and feeling when I made them. I didn't know what Ruby was like, I wanted to protect Lydia, make sure she never suffered again. I didn't think about the possible consequences, what might happen if someone saw them.

With my phone in my hand, I approach the narrow bathroom door. I knock softly.

"You can come in," Ruby says.

I open the door.

“You won't believe what…” I start, but the words get stuck in my throat.

I thought Ruby was taking a shower and was already done. Meanwhile, she is sitting in a large bathtub. She gathered her hair into a knot from which individual strands emerge, wet and wavy. I swallow hard as my eyes instinctively wander lower and lower. Drops of water glisten on her shoulders, and although the bathtub is full of foam, I can see her bare skin in places.

- Everything's all right? – he asks. It straightens a little.

I clear my throat loudly.

– Cyril sent me the original photos – I answer hoarsely. I raise my hand with my cell phone.

- Really? - Ruby leans down in disbelief to eat better
see. – I've actually lost hope.

“I told you everything would be fine,” I say.

The sight of her naked body distracts me too much for me to be able to formulate at least one sensible thought. I clear my throat again.

- And what now? – he asks after a long moment. I realize she's talking too in a different, more guttural voice.

I guess I should leave now.

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– I'll give them to Lydia. Preferably right away. We'll talk about it later. I didn't want to disturb you. Rest. - I turn around and am about to leave when her voice tells me to stop in my tracks.

-James? – she says quietly, and yet her voice pierces me like lightning.

I turn towards her again. He has a blush on his face.

He clears his throat quietly.

– Maybe you want... Don't you want to stay?

I swallow hard and open my mouth, but I'm speechless.

Ruby turns even redder.

– Of course you don't have to. I…

I shake myself out of my stupor.

“Of course I want to stay,” I say and slowly unbutton my shirt.

– If I may?

He nods. Just once, with conviction in his eyes.

He doesn't have to ask me again.

I lock the door. As soon as he hears his soft click, everything loses its meaning: his father, Cyril, Maxton Hall. Everything except Ruby, who is less than two meters away from me, naked, looking at me expectantly from a bathtub full of suds.

For the first time in a long time we are alone. Not like this morning - no one will come in here and disturb us. It's just us here.

Without taking my eyes off her, I put my phone on the dresser, then grab the hem of my shirt and slowly take it off. I throw it on the floor, then take off my socks. Ruby's eyes darken as I unbuckle my belt. His eyes wander over my body, following my movements as I take off my pants and then my boxers.

Now I won't hide anything from her. And I don't want that at the moment, even though the way he bites his lower lip makes most of the blood flow south.

I don't hesitate any longer, I climb into the bathtub with her. The water is still warm, so warm that wisps of steam rise where I spread the foam.
Ruby watches me as I sink in, then move closer and closer until I rest my hands on the rim of the tub right next to her. A soft smile appears on her lips.

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“Hey,” I say quietly.

“Hey,” he replies. He takes my face in his wet hands. He runs his thumbs over my cheeks. I close my eyes and lean in to kiss her. He sighs softly as our lips meet. He pulls me closer. I feel the touch of her breasts on my skin. I shudder.

“Thanks for coming with me,” I say between kisses.

Ruby slides her hands from my face to my chest.

– I'll go anywhere with you, James.

My heart is pounding like crazy. When I open my eyes again, I meet hers a warm, trusting look.

Whenever he looks at me like that, I want to be like that more than anything in the world the man she deserved.

- And me with you.

He throws his arms around my neck. I hug her naked back and pull her to me. Water from the bathtub spills onto the floor, but neither of us pays attention to it.

When we kiss this time, we don't stop for a very long time.

Lydia

“You really don't want us to come in with you?” Graham asks for the third time this morning.

I turn to him and look for his hand. And then I slowly shake my head.

- NO. It's something I have to do myself.

He frowns, clearly dissatisfied with my decision.

“I feel like we're sending you into the lion's den alone,” he says Ruby from the backseat. In the mirror I see that she has turned pale with concern.

– What else could happen? – I ask, unbuckling my seat belt. – My father has already thrown me out of the house. I won't go back to Maxton Hall. Everything will be fine, Ruby. Believe me.

James opens his mouth and Graham looks like he wants to say something, but I don't give them the opportunity. I definitely open the car door and get out. Without turning around, I walk across the golf club parking lot towards the entrance. I put my sunglasses on my nose

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and I enter the hall through the sliding doors. The receptionist greets me with a broad smile. I have no idea if he recognized me, but he moves his gaze to my stomach and lingers there for a moment. The smile doesn't disappear from his face, he's too professional for that, but I can clearly see when he realized what a rounded belly meant.

The dark blue bateau-neck dress I put on that morning clings to my body like a second skin and leaves no doubt about my condition. It was the first time in months that I had worn something this tight. I'm slowly getting used to the idea that I don't have to hide anymore.

I smile at the receptionist and walk across the hall with long steps. I'm heading to the restaurant where my father and his friends usually dine after a few games of golf. When we were little, he often took us here. Not because he wanted to teach us how to play golf, but to show us off to his friends who also brought their children. I remember their conversations above our heads, I remember how James and Alistair and I played hide and seek to avoid being so bored.

My footsteps echo across the marble floor. I enter the restaurant. I notice my father from a distance. In the company of several other men, he sits at a round table by a large window overlooking the green hills and pond on the golf course. The closer I get, the more clearly I hear their voices. Someone tells a joke, and it must be funny, because the father throws his head back and laughs loudly. It's a foreign sound to me, I haven't heard it for a long time.

I take one last deep breath and then walk over to their table.
I immediately feel five pairs of eyes staring at me. The father's laughter stops abruptly.

- What are you doing here? – he asks. He keeps staring at my stomach. Suddenly he turns pale. He glances frantically at his friends. I almost expect him to get up at any moment to cover me with his body.

“I didn't come because of you,” I say firmly.

I'm proud of the coldness in my voice, even though my heart clenched at the sight of my father. I still remember the moment when he threw my cell phone against the wall and like a madman blindly started throwing my clothes into the suitcase. I instinctively touch the cheek where he hit me.

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He seems to be thinking about it too. I see it in his eyes, it appears for a moment there is a painful flash in them, but it disappears as quickly as it appeared.

I tear my eyes away from him and look at the man across from him.

- Mr. Lexington, do you have a moment? - I'm asking.

Principal Maxton Hall looks between my father and me. Without the glasses she always wears at school look completely different.

“Miss Beaufort, if you want to talk to me, please report to the office in the morning,” he says finally.

I don't give up.

– This is a very urgent matter.

He hears that I'm serious because he looks at me. He looks at my stomach. There is silence. I hold my breath.

Finally he nods.

- All right.

He pushes the chair back. Gets up.

I glance at my father. He sits stiffly, as if he had swallowed a stick, and grips the glass with all his might. He doesn't react as Lexington takes the initiative and leads me towards the hall.

There he points to couches and armchairs placed in the middle. I shake my head. What I have to say to him, I must say standing up. This won't be a friendly chat.

“We need to talk about Ruby Bell's suspension,” I start, looking straight into his gray eyes.

He blinks in surprise.

– Miss Beaufort, I cannot talk to you about matters affecting other students, I think you understand that.

– You made a big mistake on Monday. I'd like to fix it.

– I don't know what you're talking about. – He speaks calmly all the time, but I see a vein pulsing in his temple.

– It wasn't Ruby who had an affair with Graham Sutton, it was me.

Lexington's eyes widen.

“Miss Beaufort…” he starts, but I don't let him finish.

“If you didn't believe me…” I put my hands on my hips. – Here's your proof. – I look at my stomach.

Lexington looks down, but then returns to my face.
He clears his throat vigorously, takes a deep breath and presses on.

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– Miss Bell is clearly visible in the photographs.

– Yes, because the photos were doctored. In fact, Ruby and Graham were just talking about the party.

I reach into my bag, take out my cell phone and open the photos James has he sent it to me last night. I put the camera under Lexington's nose.

The director narrows his eyes and leans forward slightly. I see his expression change, skepticism giving way to disbelief and worry. He shakes his head and rubs the bridge of his nose with his fingers.

“For God's sake, Mortimer, what have you done? – he mutters so quietly that I can barely hear him.

– My father wanted to protect me. In my own sick way, I reply instinctively. I have no idea why I feel like I have to defend him.

Lexington looks at me thoughtfully. A deep frown appears on his forehead.

– I have been the principal of this school for twenty years, but something like this... I haven't seen anything like this before.

– I am ready to submit a written declaration. Graham too. We will do everything so that Ruby can finish school. She shouldn't be punished for our mistakes - I explain with concern.

Lexington nods.

– Miss Bell can go back to school on Monday. I will contact her mother immediately.

“I'm sorry I attacked you over the weekend,” I add. – But I couldn't wait any longer.

– Thank you for your honesty. It certainly wasn't easy for you.

I just nod in response and shake his hand.

“Happy birthday, Miss Beaufort,” Lexington says and hugs her tightly.

And then I turn and walk across the hall again. Outside, I breathe a sigh of relief and close my eyes for a moment. The sun tickles my nose and I feel an indescribable euphoria.

I walk across the parking lot to the others. Ruby, James and Graham got out of the car. Graham leans against the mask with his hands in his pockets, Ruby stands next to James, who whispers something in her ear. When he sees me, he holds his breath and looks at me questioningly.

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I smile triumphantly.

Ruby breaks away from my brother and runs towards me.

– I am the queen! – I scream and throw my hands in the air.

He looks at me in disbelief. I cover the last steps by running. I grab her arms.

“You're no longer suspended,” I announce.

- Impossible!

I nod.

– Yes, yes.

- NO! – The next moment he jumps at my neck. He hugs me like this so much that I'm out of breath. - Thanks! – she sobs. – Thanks, thanks, thanks!

I hug her too. I close my eyes and enjoy her closeness. I finally said out loud what I had been suppressing until now. For the first time, I showed everyone my pregnancy without being ashamed of it. And I helped my friend. I don't think I've ever felt as good in my life as I do right now.

"I like you a lot, Ruby," I say quietly.

- I you too. And how – he replies.

I open my eyes without letting go of her embrace and look at James. His crooked smile shows that he's at least as moved as Ruby and I are.

And then I shift my gaze to Graham. In his eyes I see the promises made over the past nights. For the first time I feel like everything will actually work out. It doesn't matter when.

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14

Ruby

When I go to school on Monday morning, it seems to me that the memories of the previous week are just a bad dream. I have my planner on my lap, in which I write with a thick black marker: Monday. I am very careful not to cross the line that I sketched with a pencil at home. I look at the new card and a smile appears on my lips.
Colors have returned to my life.

For this day I planned turquoise, pink, lilac and mint green, which I've never used it before. I wrote down the following points: First day of school after suspension!

Check with Lin how the fireworks are progressing (and tell her again and again how much I missed her).

Read Ember's new blog post and respond to last week's messages (and surround her with sisterly love and try to figure out who she's secretly dating).

Cooking with James <3

Since yesterday evening, James has his own color in my planner.
Even now, hours later, I'm haunted by his face when I told him. Just remembering it makes me shudder. Like the memory of his lips trailing down my neck and his hands slowly sliding under my sweater, making me make sounds that I tried to muffle with a pillow.

– Do you really think it's a good idea to do this on the bus? – Voice James brings me out of my reverie.

I feel myself blushing. I clear my throat.
- You underestimate me.

He stares at the black notebook in my lap.

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– I just don't want you to overdo it. Last week you threw markers at me.

– It was a unique situation. The site pissed me off. And besides, last week was... last week - I translate and underline each letter. – Everything will be better now.

At that moment, the bus brakes so suddenly that I slide out of my seat and instinctively grab the seatbacks in front of me. I look at the notebook in horror: a black line crosses out the entire page.

- Oh no! – I glance angrily at the driver. He ignores me, closes the door at the front of the bus and presses the gas pedal. – It's all your fault, James. I've taken notes plenty of times while driving and something like this has never happened before.

– Sure, keep telling me that I wanted to take the bus –
replies dryly. – By car we would get to school twice as fast.

– I wanted to take the bus to celebrate this day. – I'm brandishing a felt-tip pen. – You could have gone by car.

– First of all, I didn't want you to go alone. Secondly, you have an uncanny knack for making even boring things, like riding a bus, seem exciting and interesting when they actually aren't.

He watches for a moment as I try to turn a black line into a rather impressive branch of flowers. Then he brushes my hair out of my face and tucks it behind my ear.

“I could get used to this,” he says quietly.

I turn my head to him.

– To ride the bus?

He smiles slightly.

– For this too. But most of all, I meant waking up next to you.

I feel myself blushing. He makes it sound like we're still sleeping in the same bed, but that hasn't been the case since that night in Ophelia's guest room.

– Although the Bell house is a real madhouse. Helen got up at four this morning and Ember has so much energy at six in the morning that I think it's not normal.

– Mom has had a new boss for several weeks and she is very keen not to be late. Ember…” I shake my head. – I have no idea how she does it.

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She doesn't even drink coffee.

– This is pure madness.

Like the ease with which I can talk to James about my family.

– It's nice that you live with us – I say after a long while.

James glances at me sideways. I see the warmth in his gaze. And then he puts his arm around me and pulls me towards him.

The ride to school is way too fast and too slow at the same time. Just before the last stop, I get up and walk towards the door, grabbing onto more handrails. I hear James stumbling every step behind me. It takes a lot for me to suppress a smile.

We get off. I feel very excited and my heart is racing. Almost like I was going to school for the first time. However, when I get off the bus and see who is waiting for me, I stop mid-step.

- Surprise! – Lin shouts.

She's not alone.

The entire organizing committee is waiting with her at the bus stop. Everyone smiles brightly. Even Camille, though she crossed her arms over her chest.

Before I fully realize what's happening, Lin walks up to me and hugs me warmly.

“I'm so glad you're back,” he says, his voice trembling. She pulls away from me and looks like she wants to cry. – I don't know how I would survive the rest of the school year without you.

“And I don't know how we'd survive the rest of the school year with Lin as our boss,” Jessalyn interjects and hugs me as well. – Ruby, she's killing us. One week felt like a whole semester.

“She just wanted everything to be perfect for Ruby's return,” Kieran notes. He hugs me too. He smiles shyly. – Nice to have you here. We missed you.

“He's a good talker,” adds Doug.

“It was weird without you,” Camille finally says. She tucks her hair behind her ear and sighs dramatically. – It's actually good that you're back. – Finally she comes up to me to say hello.

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When he releases me from his arms, I get emotional. The entire organizing committee came to welcome me. As if they really missed me. A lump sticks in my throat and doesn't go away, even though I swallow again and again
Together.

At the beginning of my studies at Maxton Hall, I never thought this would happen. It seemed to me that it would be better to stay away from everyone, finish this school and nothing else. Now I see that was a mistake. And that I probably missed a lot of beautiful moments.

– Shall we go? – Camille asks. – Roll call soon.

I confirm with a nod. We head towards Boyd Hall. Lin takes my arm. He puts his head on my shoulder.

– It's about time.

- I think so too. You have to tell me everything.

I enter the school with her and James and feel the eyes of the other students on me. Heads turn when they see me, a murmur of voices echoes through the corridor.

I'm completely indifferent to it.

“I've never had such delicious lasagna in my life,” I say with my mouth full and raise another portion to my mouth.

– She's as bad as ever. You see everything through rose-colored glasses because you had a week off - Lin notes and looks at the food on her plate with disgust.

– No, you're the one with too high expectations.

– And you are very, very short, if you really like it. What is this?
is it supposed to be? Spinach? Overcooked broccoli? It's impossible to know.

I chew with a blissful expression, and Lin gives me a sideways glance.

-I missed you so much, Ruby.

– I miss you too. I missed everything. Even behind the stinking locker room in front of PE.

Lin grimaces again. –

Great, you're equating me to the locker room. I should be offended, but yes
I'm really glad.

I just smile in response.

After eating, we take the trays to the window. Before I leave, I glance at James, who is sitting with Kesh, Alaister, and Wren at their usual table.

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table by the window. Everyone is very serious, talking leaning over the table. I wonder if James is just telling them what happened over the weekend. That he no longer lives with his father and has nothing to do with Beaufort. And that Cyril sent him the original photos on Saturday.

When I think about everything that has changed in their pack since September, I feel sad. James once mentioned what their plan was for this year: fooling around, partying, anything to not worry about the future. Meanwhile, everything turned out exactly the opposite.

I instinctively fix my gaze on Cyril's seat, empty throughout the lunch break. Even though I will never forgive him for what he did, the sight of it disturbs me.

– Have you talked to Cyril? – I ask Lin when we finally leave the cafeteria.

He tenses up violently. He tucks a black strand of hair behind his ear.

- NO. And after what he did to you, I never want to talk to him again.

I'm getting sick. It's true that Cyril's actions were reprehensible, but still something like sympathy arises in me. It can't be easy - first to lose your loved one and then also your friends.

– Why do you ask, exactly? – Lin says.

“Just like that,” I brush her off. I try to ignore the strange feeling in my stomach.

– How did you do in class today? – he asks after a long moment, during which we walked side by side in silence.

– Thanks to your notes, great. – I smile gratefully. –
You really saved my life.

- No problem.

– One day I will repay you – I assure you. – Also for your hard work on the organizing committee.

Lin waves me off, then smiles slightly.

– If I ever get suspended from school because someone frames me in an affair with a teacher, take notes for me.

I lunge at her, but she jumps back laughing.

– By the way – he adds when we enter the library together –
you missed history. The new guy was shocked because you kept reporting.

By "new", he means our new history teacher, who will replace you for the remaining months of the year

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Sutton. He was brought out of retirement especially for this purpose. It was interesting, but also strange, to have a history lesson with someone other than Sutton.

– Is there anything else I should know before the meeting?

- Yes! - Lin stops between two shelves and looks at me with wide eyes. “I think Camille and Doug are a couple,” he says in a whisper.

- What?

– I have no idea how it happened, and it's not certain yet, but last week I saw them hugging in the parking lot.
They seemed very concerned, holding hands and everything.

“Camille and Doug,” I mutter. – Who would have thought?

“That's actually sweet,” Lin remarks and opens the door to the meeting room. – Already have your keys?

I shake my head in denial.

- Unfortunately not yet. Actually, I should have gone to Lexington in the morning, but I haven't gotten around to it yet.

- Come with you? – he suggests after a moment of hesitation as we unfold ours things.

– Would you do it?

- Of course. After such a scandal, I would also be afraid to go to him alone.

– Honestly, I'd rather never see him again. – I remember my disappointment when, not knowing my side of the story, he simply expelled me from school.

“The most important thing is that you're back,” Lin notes. – If you want, I'll go with you.

I suppress the anger that bubbles up at the memory of my last one
meeting with the director, and I smile gratefully at my friend.

– Thank you very much, really.

The others slowly arrive - everyone except James, who has to attend a crisis meeting of the lacrosse team called by Coach Freeman. James assured me I had nothing to worry about, but the thought still makes me feel uneasy.

– Shall we begin? Lin looks around. – I talked to Lexington last week. He presented a whole list of restrictions that we must follow during a bonfire. Last year, a lot of things went wrong.

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- That's true. Camille wrinkles her nose. – Too many people got drunk.

“Apparently the Lexington was full of puke,” adds Doug. - Probably because he waited so long to get the permit.

“It would be best if no one puked this year,” I say. – That's why we need to bring twice as many teachers to keep an eye on everyone.

There is a murmur of approval.

– Ruby and I were thinking about organizing a dance club show. Maybe this will get people on the dance floor faster. What do you say?

– Provided that we determine exactly what choreography they will show. Because sometimes they have very strange arrangements, says Jessalyn. He plays with a pencil, which he usually holds behind his ear. – Do you remember the spring show? Actually, it was supposed to be a Maddie Ziegler-style arrangement, but it didn't work out at all. And certainly not with so many people.

– Who is Maddie Ziegler? - Doug asks.

– She's the dancer from Sia's music videos – replies Jessalyn.

“Jessie's right,” Lin admits after some thought. – I was really scared during that performance. We need to tell them clearly what we mean.

“I'll take care of it,” Jessalyn offers. Everyone nods eagerly.

- Great thanks. Kieran, what about the music? With a sound system?

– Everything's settled with Mr. Jones.

“You did a great job,” I say with a smile. I look at the to-do list in front of Lin. – I will collect the wood on Friday. I will also make sure that everything goes to the right place and not, like last year, in a pile in front of the school. Do you remember?

“Oh God, yes,” Camille sighs. – Later we had to carry the wood ourselves. I got a splinter right away.

“Me too, like ten,” Lin joins in.

– Who goes to the fire brigade? - Jessalyn asks and suddenly straightens up.

“Ruby and I, of course,” Lin replies and wiggles her eyebrows significantly.

– Not fair! - Jessalyn snorts, but she looks like she's about to burst out laughing.

“That's one of the benefits of being a manager,” Kieran notes. – You can choose the coolest tasks. However, I don't really understand

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why do you all want to talk about fire danger so badly?

– Haven't you ever watched *Chicago Fire?* Kieran, the word "fire" takes on a new meaning, explains Jessalyn.

Everyone laughs loudly.

Right now I'm so happy to be here again that I feel like I'm dreaming.

When James and I get home, the hall closet is gone
not a single jacket yet.

-Ember? – I shout at the top of my voice.

Silence.

“I think we're alone,” I say to James. We take off our shoes and go to the kitchen.

– You said it as if you thought it was terrible that you were alone with me. I don't know if I should worry about this.

I give him a small smile and wash my hands in the sink.

– That's not the point. I'm worried about Ember. Lately he keeps coming out and making a big secret out of it. And yet we actually always tell each other everything.

James comes to me and puts his hands under the hot stream. A wrinkle of thought appears on his forehead.

– I think she's very happy.

I freeze and look for the right words to express what I feel.

– I can't describe it, but something tells me it's not that simple.
And I usually rely on my intuition.

– Have you talked to Ember?

I shrug helplessly.

“We've been arguing a lot about Maxton Hall lately, and it occurred to me that Ember feels like I'm disrespecting her. And that's not the case at all. I would like us to be friends who tell each other everything. Especially since I'll be moving out soon.

– At least try. Maybe Ember is waiting for you to ask her about it.

- Maybe. – I go to the fridge and look in half-heartedly. - Probably you are right.

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James touches my shoulder.

– We still have some risotto left. It's enough for you? - I'm asking. He comes closer and closer, and I feel him nod his head in agreement. His hair tickles my cheek. He's so close I can feel his chest on my back.

“Even I can reheat it,” he says and takes the bowl from my hand. As if it were the most normal thing in the world, he goes to the cupboard and takes out a frying pan, then opens the drawer and, after a moment's thought, chooses a wooden spoon. He puts the risotto into the pan and puts it on the burner.

I watch him stir the warming dish for a long moment, and I can't help but smile a little; I like that he feels so comfortable in our kitchen.

I go to the hanging cabinet and want to take out the plates, but James quickly grows in front of me. He points the wooden spoon at me like a gun.

- I will do it.

I spread my hands conciliatoryly and step aside for him to take out the covers. And then I lean against the counter and watch as he sets them down at the stove and soon serves the risotto.

With plates and cutlery we go upstairs to my room. I set the computer on the table and turn the monitor around so we can both see the screen.
On the way home, we decided to watch *The Alienist,* so I turn on the episode we left off with yesterday. And then I sit on the floor and, like James, lean against the bed.

He hands me the risotto. I'm going to eat.

– The first day at school is a complete success, right? – he asks when it rings out moving title music.

“You have no idea how happy I am,” I reply with my mouth full.

– It's obvious how happy you are. From the very morning.

You brightened up the whole school.

I smile slightly.

– I brightened up the whole school? Charming.

James just smiles over his glass, staring at the screen.
We eat and watch Daniel Brühl, Dakota Fanning and Luke Evans chase a bloodthirsty monster in Victorian New York. I still can't get over how normal I feel with James by my side.

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After eating, I put my head on his shoulder and cuddle up to him. His hand lands on my thigh. He strokes them mechanically. It's good to have it with you. For the first time in a long time I am truly calm, and I think he is too. When the episode ends, I would love to close my eyes and fall asleep next to him.

However, I still have a lot to do, as the items in my planner remind me of, and although it is difficult, I get up to do my homework. James stretches with a loud sigh, and as I take my notes out of my backpack and spread them on the desk, I hear him laughing to himself. I glance at him. Is smiling.

– Your color system defeated me and Lin – I admit, pointing with my head at the stack of sheets of paper that I covered with sticky notes and marked with felt-tip pens when I was still at school.

– You did fantastic. – I take out my pencil case and planner from my backpack and I wonder where to start.

– Do you want to be left alone? – James asks after a moment. – I can go to the living room.

– No, stay. I like having you with me.

– Can I use the computer?

- Here you go.

- Thanks. James puts him on his lap. He is sitting cross-legged at my bed while I do my homework.

I don't know how much time has passed, but when I check off the last thing in my planner, it's already dark outside and I feel like I won't absorb any more information today because my head will burst.

I love this feeling. I had even forgotten that James was in my room, but then the soft click of keys behind me reminded me.

I smile to myself.

I turn to him and watch as he stares intently at the screen.

“I'm done,” I announce.

He flinches as if I've interrupted him from his thoughts.

– What, already?

I glance at the alarm clock on the bedside table.

– It took me over an hour and a half.

James looks at his watch in disbelief.

– I completely lost track of time.

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I walk over and sit next to him again. I glance at my laptop before doing so If I see the page he was reading, he pulls it down to his belt.

I nudge him with my foot.

– I just wanted to see what consumed you to such an extent that you forgot about God's world.

– That's it.

“I guess that's interesting,” I say.

James looks at me closely. After a moment's hesitation, he opens the closed tab. I bend down to see better.

Blissful. Travel blogs.

– Wow – I mutter and browse through: Bali – a bucket list, tips for travelers, the most beautiful beaches in Lombok, seven recommended Airbnb places, traveling with hand luggage, the best snacks for the road and tips on how to start a blog on WordPress. – It's a lot.

– I read a lot.

I look at him. Looks like I caught him doing something.

– Why do you look like I've discovered something indecent?

He shrugs helplessly.

- I do not know. It was never something I could really do. I turned it on to relax.

– Like I do my ASMR videos.

- Exactly. – He smiles slightly. – I wanted to escape to another world at least this way, since I couldn't actually travel. - Varies. - But now…

I wait, but he is silent.

- But now? – I repeat carefully.

It takes him a moment to collect his thoughts. He clears his throat.

– Now I'm thinking... maybe there could be something more to it. – He grimaces. – I know, it's stupid. Who would give up their studies at Oxford to travel and blog about it?

I understand everything now. James not only wants to travel, but... also write about it. It warms my heart.

It reminds me of the list we made together in Oxford. Back then, he doubted that his desire to travel was something that could be called a dream. But then he was still under his father's influence. Now he could take that step. Now no one stands in his way.

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“Of course you can do it, James,” I say quietly and place a hand on his shoulder.

– This plan has always been there, you know? That I would go to Oxford. Without for Beaufort and his parents' sake.

I nod.

– And now it bothers me to know that nothing is drawing me there. I mean scientifically. Because of course I would like to be as close to you and my friends as possible. But again I think how much you wanted it and how hard you worked for it. It's not fair if I take the place of someone who wants it as much as you do.

– Listen, if Oxford isn't what you want to do with your life… - I start slowly - then don't go. Every person deserves a world full of possibilities, you know? If you want to travel, do it.

He looks up at me. Mars at its head has softened a bit.

- Do you really think so?

I nod vigorously.

– Ask Ember how she started with her blog. He knows his stuff and will definitely give you good advice. – I check my watch again and knit my eyebrows. – She should actually be home by now.

“As far as I'm concerned, it can wait a while,” James says with a slight smile.

- Why?

– Because I would like to show my girlfriend how grateful I am to her for believing in me and my dreams.

Without taking his eyes off me, he reaches for the computer and closes it. And then he leans down and presses his lips to my forehead. He travels them lower, across my temples and cheek, and showers my face with kisses. I close my eyes, throw my head back, and James continues to show me his gratitude.

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15

Ember

I'm waiting for Wren to eat the ice cream first.

He brings the spoon to his mouth and a look of bliss appears on his face, but even that still doesn't convince me.

I find it difficult to eat in front of others, especially in public places. Especially when it comes to unhealthy things like ice cream - I constantly feel like people are sneaking glances at me.

They immediately form an opinion about me, even though they have no idea what I usually eat.

I slowly dip my spoon into the chocolate ice cream and look at it suspiciously. And then I take a deep breath: I'm here with Wren, he makes me feel good. We are friends. And besides, I ordered a much smaller portion than he did, so I probably shouldn't make a bad impression.

I do my best to push the thoughts out of my head and put the spoon in my mouth.

– I wasn't exaggerating, was I? – Wren asks and looks at me expectantly.

– You were right, they are divine. – I put the spoon aside for a moment. – I had no idea there was a new ice cream shop here.

I look around the tiny cafe. All the tables are occupied, and a large crowd of people willing to take away ice cream has gathered at the counter. Wren said students get a discount, so I'm not surprised there's such interest. Besides, the weather is exceptionally beautiful today.

My fears aside, I was very happy to have Wren invite me.

Until now, we always had specific reasons to meet: filling out scholarship applications, his moving. But this time

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he simply asked if I would like to see him. And the fact that he bought me ice cream to repay me for helping him with my painting was an added bonus.

“I think I'm going to live here,” he says, still with the spoon in his mouth.

– Another move? After such a short time? – I tease him.

I relax slowly. The longer we talk, the better I feel, the more I ignore everyone around me.

And that mischievous smile again.

– I could eat ice cream for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Besides, look, they have a very nice counter here. Just place the chairs on one side and you can create a cozy hideout.

– My sister and I used to build hideouts all the time. It was our favorite pastime. – I eat another spoonful of ice cream. I try to enjoy this moment as much as possible.

Wren stirs his cup with a spoon, combining the two flavors, so that he is soon eating the beige goo.

– Me and the boys too.

– I'm actually a little jealous of your friendship – I admit.

Wren gives me a questioning look.

– You have been friends for many years – I explain. – Of course, I also have friends, and I'm very close to Ruby, but there is no person in my life who would be involved in everything. Every friendship ended sooner or later, people moved away, our paths diverged to the point that we had nothing in common. In your case this is not the case. Whenever you talk about boys, I feel like you're getting closer instead of further apart.

Wren freezes. His spoon stays in the cup.

– It's always been like that, actually.

Something about his voice makes my ears perk up more.

- Actually?

He shrugs and finally brings the spoon to his mouth. There was a lot of ice cream on it and Wren immediately grimaces painfully. I try my hardest not to smile.

– Has your mind gone cold? - I'm asking.

In response, he sighs loudly and puts the spoon on the plate.

– This is punishment for trying to avoid answering your question.

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– If you don't want to, you don't have to – I assure you with a shrug.

– That's not the point. I can see that our group is changing a lot, and it's exhausting me. I'm already up to my ears in change.

– In what way is something changing in your pack?

Wren plays with the napkin on the table.

– We used to meet often at my place, but I haven't yet gained the courage to invite the boys to our new house. I don't want them to see me differently, so I kind of distanced myself from them. I tell them less and… It all sucks.

I think hard. Wren tilts his head slightly. He looks at me with a faint smile.

– Supergirl, I see you've already made up your mind. Go ahead. – He gestures and encourages me to share my opinion.

- Honestly? In my opinion this is nonsense. You've been friends for years. What difference does it make where you live?

Wren purses his lips into a thin line and stares at the ice cream, which now looks more like a shake.

He thinks hard for a moment.

- You're right.

- I know.

Wren snickers. And then suddenly he leans over the table and takes my hand. He squeezes my hand and looks deep into my eyes. I feel my heart rate quicken. I instinctively hug him back. I don't know what he's doing to me. One moment he is serious and introverted, the next he completely throws me off balance with such a small gesture.

This moment lasts forever and at the same time passes quickly. When Wren lets go of my hand and reaches for the spoon again, I can't help but feel disappointed.

Wren clears his throat and continues talking as if nothing had happened.

– I would like to invite them all soon. Maybe then things will work out.

I still feel his touch in my mind. I still remember the warmth of his hand. And I'm saying something that I don't understand myself.

– Maybe someday we'll all do something together.

Wren blinks in surprise, which I'm not surprised at all. So far, we have consistently kept our relationship a secret. I guess both of them

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it was easier for us not to worry about what James or Ruby would think, especially since we had no idea what would actually come of it. But now I know that I don't want to lose him as a friend. I feel confident with him and I don't want to hide this friendship any longer.

He seems to be of the same opinion.

“Sure,” he replies with a smile after a long moment.

I try my best to ignore the butterflies in my stomach.

Ruby

Since I went back to school, time has been flying like crazy. James and I alternate between taking the bus and his car. Wren joined us; either he gets on two stops after us, or he waits on the main street and we pick him up from the sidewalk.

I spend every free moment studying for my final exams, but it's getting harder and harder to concentrate on revising with James so close. More and more often I find myself staring not at the notes, but at him. Sometimes I shiver so much that I'm sure he feels it when he's sitting next to me.

When the day of the bonfire finally comes, it feels like my suspension never happened. Yes, a few students still talk about it or stare at me a little too long in the cafeteria, but I focus on the positive: I'm back at Maxton Hall and I'll graduate.

– Listen, are you sure this is what it's supposed to look like? – Lin whispers in my ear. We stand by a large pile of wood and watch the firemen as they pile it for a fire.

“I think it was like that last year,” I answer just as quietly.

It's past 7 p.m. and the first participants are slowly arriving. They wander around the courtyard, where there is a huge stand with drinks and smaller food stalls, offering french fries, hot dogs and marshmallows on sticks.

- Really? – Lin is still anxious. – It looks kind of… misshapen.

I tilt my head and look critically at the structure behind it

it will be on fire for an hour.

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- I do not know. Now that you've said it, I'm worried too.

– Stop it. It doesn't matter what it looks like. Soon everyone will be like this too drunk to think about it, James reassures.

Lin and I both glare at him.

– There will be no alcohol – I emphasize. – And no one will be drunk.

James just shrugs.

– You both know it happens every year.

I punch him in the arm.

– We took precautions and this year we are better prepared than last time. Don't scare us.

He smiles to himself.

– I just don't want you to be disappointed if everything goes wrong it went exactly as you planned.

“How noble of you,” I reply dryly.

– Yeah, crazy noble. You're probably saying that because you were the one who got everyone drunk last year. Don't think I haven't heard about your legendary trunk. – Lin raises an eyebrow significantly.

– About the legendary trunk? – I look from one to the other. - What this is about?

“It's nothing,” James says quickly.

“He and his buddies were distributing alcohol out of the trunk of his car,” Lin explains.

I grimace in disgust.

– I now know why I used to despise you so much.

James smiles and puts his hand on the back of my neck. He runs his thumb over sensitive skin at the roots of my hair, and then leans down to my ear.

– But you don't despise me anymore, do you? – he asks throatily.

His low voice and tender touch give me goosebumps. A lot of me it costs me not to show that my knees are going weak under me at this moment.

– Miss Bell? - The voice behind us makes me stiffen.

James' fingers tighten on the back of my neck, as if he doesn't know whether to withdraw his hand or leave it.

Together we turn to Principal Lexington. Seeing his serious look, my heart instinctively beats faster. James's hand slides from my neck to my shoulders. He draws me to him.

I swallow hard.

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- Yes?

Lexington clears his throat.

– Would you have a moment?

- Now? – I turn anxiously towards the fire. – It'll start any minute now.

– I won't take up much of your time.

I still hesitate, but at the same time I know I have no choice. I can't object when the school principal wants to talk to me. I've been successfully avoiding it for the past two weeks. Our contact was limited to information provided by his secretary and one short e-mail. I know it's childish, but I still remember that scene in his office. I can't forget how he treated me.

James doesn't let go of my shoulder. I smile slightly and reach for his hand. And then I take a step forward.

Lexington moves right. I nod. Together we move away from the others.

I don't have to turn around to know that James isn't letting me down out of sight.

Principal Maxton Hall adjusts the tails of his gray jacket and glares at me looking behind glasses.

“You did a great job with Miss Wang in preparing for this event, Miss Bell,” he finally says.

“Thank you very much,” I reply stiffly.

He clears his throat.

– I wanted to take this opportunity to tell you in person once again, how sorry I am for this unfortunate incident.

I try not to show how surprised I am by his apology. I didn't expect this and at first I don't know how to react.

Another cough. It's like a miniature explosion in his throat. Any longer and I think he's getting angry.

– I hope you understand that, at first glance, the evidence against you was overwhelming. I had to make this decision. I couldn't help but react.

“I understand,” I reply. – Except… – I hesitate. I glance at him anxiously.

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He encourages me with a nod of his head.

– Please speak honestly, Miss Bell.

I take a deep breath.

– It seems to me that you would treat other students differently than you would treat me.

Lexington frowns.

– I don't think I fully understand.

– Would you do the same if my parents regularly contributed large sums to the school account?

I can't believe I actually said that. I feel like
my heart is beating faster and faster. Lexington puffs up indignantly.

– Miss Bell! I'm sorry...

I don't let him finish.

– I'm very sorry, director, but that's how I took it. You didn't even give me a chance to explain myself. After everything I've done for the school in recent years, I don't think I deserve it.

Lexington looks at me, opens his mouth... and closes it again.

I wonder if I've made a huge mistake, but on the other hand I don't care. I stood up for myself and expressed my opinion about the injustice that has been plaguing Maxton Hall for years. I don't know if this will change anything, but that's not what I want either.

“Thank you for your honesty,” Principal Lexington finally says. – I'm very sorry that it all happened this way. And I hope you will believe me when I say that I will make sure that such situations do not happen again in the future. – He still speaks in a friendly way, but now he's more formal. As if he chose each word carefully. – If you have any problems, please remember that my door is always open

hole.

I nod, even though I know otherwise. I follow him as he returns to the fire and find myself not being mad at him anymore. No, now I'm grateful because he taught me a very important lesson.
If I held a managerial position in the future and had to decide something's fate, I would never act like he did.

Because now I know that every story has at least two sides and you need to know each of them.

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James

That evening, my job is to sell sandwiches and discreetly keep an eye on the crowd, as well as Ruby. Every now and then I see her brown hair in the firelight, I notice her crossing the yard with a notebook under her arm at such a pace that I barely notice her, and then she disappears into the crowd again. So I focus on other students who keep coming to my stand and buying snacks.

Something that would have made me laugh in the past now makes me happy.

Actually, since the beginning of this year, and specifically since my mother's death, I have been thanking fate for every opportunity not to think about everything that is going wrong in my life.

During meetings of the organizing committee, I don't have to think about the fact that I'm actually homeless and living on the income of my girlfriend's parents.

At lacrosse practice, it doesn't bother me that I'm living up to my mother's legacy.

And when I'm cramming like crazy for exams, I don't think about what I need to get a high school diploma, since I still have no idea what I want to do with my life.

I try not to show anything in front of Ruby, but it's getting harder every day, because the more I think about it, the more I realize that there are no simple answers to my questions. And that makes me even more worried.

– Dude, there's flour on your pants.

I flinch reflexively. I lift my head. Smiling from ear to ear
ear Wren points to my legs.

– Nine o'clock already? – I ask, amazed. I check my watch. We agreed that Wren would come pick me up after my shift and, following our tradition, we would play together at the bonfire.

He confirms with a movement of his head. I casually dust off my jeans. I wipe it off hands in a towel, I hand over the cash to Kieran and walk out from behind the counter.

I've seen Wren a lot over the last few weeks, on the way to school, in classes, and at training, but it still feels like ages since we last had a serious conversation.

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- How are you? – I finally ask. Firstly, because I can't think of anything else, and secondly, because I'm really interested in it.

– I was going to ask you the same thing.

– Good thing I was first.

Wren smirks to himself. We move away from the fire and approach it for the fence. Smokers hide there, some of whom also drink beer.

“I'm fine,” he finally says.

The further we move away from the fire, the quieter the music becomes.

- And more specifically? – I ask carefully. Wren actually doesn't let us into his new life. He doesn't talk about the new house or how his parents are coping with the new situation. I know from Alistair that, like me, he rarely attends training, but whenever I ask him about it, he brushes me off and changes the subject.

Wren is ashamed, it's obvious. It hurts me that he doesn't think he can talk to me about it. Damn it, we're in the same mess after all.

This time too, I expect him to avoid answering, but he surprises me.

“It's different,” he admits. – But it's okay. They finally connected us to the Internet.

He takes a flask from his inside jacket pocket and takes a long drink, then hands me the silver flask. After a moment's hesitation, I take it and drink it too. This moment reminds me of old times.

“I'm slowly getting used to Gormsey,” he continues. – Although it still terrifies me when my neighbors say "hello" to me.

– It's the same on Ruby Street. – I give him the flask. – They even know my name now.

Wren smiles crookedly.

– In a way, it's even nice.

We move on in silence.

“I think I have a buyer for my share of Beaufort,” I finally say when we stop a good distance from the fire. – My financial advisor is checking everything, but things look really good.

“That would be a big step,” Wren notes. – I'm glad, man.

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– It's not certain yet. I want to meet her before the deal goes through. Yes, but if all goes well, it will be done before the end of the school year.

– Wow. Fingers crossed.

- Thanks. - I'm smiling. – At least then I can finally free up Mr. and Mrs. Bell's couch. They don't want to hear about me moving to a hotel at all.

The corners of Wren's mouth twitch upwards.

- I can imagine.

I raise an eyebrow in surprise, but he continues before I can ask what he means.

– I decided to organize a housewarming party soon. – He turns the flask over in his hands, runs his finger over the engraved inscription. – I would like to show you my new house.

– Great – I react immediately. - When?

- Maybe next weekend? I…” Wren stops, clears his throat, and then after a while he asks: - Will you go shopping with me? For alcohol and so on?

- Bright.

He nods and brings the flask to his mouth again. I see relief in his eyes, although I don't really know what it is.

– I wasn't sure if you would like it – he admits after a while.

“Of course,” I say, astonished.

He just shrugs.

– Look, I realize I haven't been a good friend over the last few months. But of course I want to know where you live now and what has changed. I just thought you didn't want to talk about it, so I didn't press it. I'm sorry if you got the impression that I didn't care.

Wren shakes his head.

– That's not the point.

– And about what? – I ask carefully.

– Under different circumstances… I don't know. We're actually passing because of the same thing, and yet it's damn hard for me to talk to you about it.

– And that's where the hip flask comes from? – I guess and try to smile. Wren responds with a shy grimace and offers a wordless toast. Then he continues.

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– There's so much going on at once. I applied for scholarships, renovated my room, and now I'm looking for a job. Unfortunately, no one wants to hire a guy who is leaving for college in a few months.

– Terrible. If you want, I'll keep my eyes and ears open.

Wren just shrugs, but I immediately decide to look through the ads every morning as soon as Mr. Bell finishes reading the paper.

- Thanks.

- Something happened? – I'm not giving up. “You seem…different.”

Wren snorts contemptuously.

– Well, you could say yes.

He stops abruptly. He tilts his head back and stares at the sky, which has already darkened completely. We're so far from the fire that we can barely hear the music. That's the only reason I manage to hear his next words: "I think I'm going to fall in love soon."

Surprised, I look at him sideways, but his expression is so grim that I don't I dare ask for details.

– You look like the world is going to collapse because of this.

He takes a deep breath and crosses his arms behind his head.

– I have no idea what to do with it. Why now? It doesn't suit me at all.

This time I can't stop laughing. Wren glares at me.

- Sorry. I just don't think love waits patiently for the right moment. It attacks you suddenly, out of the blue, when you least expect it.

Another snort.

– Then love is a tricky female dog.

I smile broadly. Wren remains frowning for about two seconds, but then he brightens up too.

– I think about our plan for this year all the time. And then I look around around and I want to laugh at our stupidity and naivety - he says.

– Look, this could still be the best year of our lives.

He lowers his hands.

– Jesus, please, no. The best year of my life can't be this fucking crappy. I do not agree.

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- You're right. I just wanted to say something optimistic.

“You're spending too much time with Ember,” he comments. Seeing my surprised look, he quickly adds, "And with Ruby."

He kicks a stone lying on the road. We watch it roll a few meters.

– How was it with you? You know, with Ruby.

I think for a moment.

– It just happened. At first I defended myself, but I quickly realized that it was pointless. I love her. And this will not change for a long time.

Wren's eyes widen.

- Really?

I shrug.

- Yes.

– It sounds very serious. As if you were already sure that you wanted to spend your life with her.

– And maybe that's how it is. – The words come by themselves. Even though half a year ago I was struggling with myself, now I'm not afraid at all. On the contrary.

– Jesus, man. Wren shakes his head.

– Will you tell me about her? - Please.

He scratches his head.

- Better not.

- All right. But I want you to know that you can always be with me talk. Maybe we should do this more often.

- Thanks. Maybe so.

I watch younger students running around the bonfire and fighting with sticks. Lin immediately scolds them, even though she stabbed me in the back with a stick.

– Cyril spoke to you? Wren asks suddenly.

I stare at the sparks that fly into the sky and then fade away.

- NO.

– I'm starting to worry about him. He hasn't been at school for two weeks. Nobody knows what's happening to him.

Even though I shouldn't care, his words scare me.

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“Maybe I should invite him too,” Wren continues. – For now, he ignores all messages from me. He's probably feeling guilty about this thing with Ruby and Lydia.

“Very well,” I say, sharper than I intended. I sigh loudly.
– I don't know if I can ever forgive him. He could have ruined Ruby's entire future this way.

– But he realized his mistake and tried to fix everything, right?

I'm not answer.

– An invitation wouldn't hurt. Believe me, I realize that he went too far.
But we've all done it once. If he can't count on us now, we'll be hypocrites, don't you think?

I grit my teeth as hard as I can, then reach out for the flask.
I take a few sips, enjoying the burn in my throat.

“It pisses me off when you're right,” I finally say.

Wren pats me on the back with a smile.

I said goodbye to him and went to look for Ruby. I have a blanket and small speakers in the car. I was hoping that after the party was over, we would stay in the clearing for a while and watch the stars.

We have had little opportunity to be alone in the last two weeks. Although Ruby's parents aren't particularly strict, they can come into the room at any time, so I always try to keep a decent distance. Well, maybe not always. I really don't want to be disrespectful to Mr. and Mrs. Bell. It's thanks to them that I have a roof over my head.

Ruby is at the campfire. He stands next to Principal Lexington, who is currently wrapping up the event and thanking everyone who attended. Shrouded in firelight, she looks like an avenging angel.

Without taking my eyes off her, I take my phone out of my pocket and turn it on camera and I take photos. I shudder when I look at the effect.

I'm about to put my phone away again when a new message arrives.
The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end when I see that her father sent her. After I ignored the first email, he wrote again a week ago and informed me that I had disappointed him, but he was giving me one more chance to show some common sense. I didn't answer again and hoped he would finally leave me alone.

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But when I read the new message, I realize I was wrong. In my father's eyes, this matter is by no means over. For him, everything is just beginning.

You wanted it yourself.

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16

James

I didn't tell Ruby about the messages from her father.

I realize this is a mistake. We promised ourselves that we would not keep secrets from each other and we would start talking openly about everything that concerns us. And yet I don't want to burden her with my problems again.

He has enough things on his plate at the moment: final exams are getting closer, the competition for scholarships at Oxford is getting fiercer. I don't want her to bother me now, especially since I don't really know what the mysterious message from my father means.

He probably wanted to intimidate me, but he achieved just the opposite. I have never been so sure that I made the right decision. And I have never been so motivated to finally do what I have been thinking about for many weeks.

On Saturday, I wait until Ruby goes to the bathroom to get ready for Wren's party, and then I go to Ember's room. I take a deep breath and knock on the slightly open door.

- Yes? – comes from inside. Ember sits at her desk, staring at her laptop screen, with a cup of tea in her hand. He raises his eyebrows questioningly when he sees me.

- Do you have a moment? – I'm starting.

He confirms with a movement of his head.

– Of course, come in. Where's Ruby?

– He's getting ready for a party and he's talking to Lydia on FaceTime.

- I see.

I walk over to her desk. Ember tilts her head slightly.

- What is it about?

I glance at her computer.

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– I have a few questions about your blog. Or rather, blogging as such.

He looks at me for a long moment, then nods. He doesn't give after to know if I surprised her. He pulls out a low stool from under the desk.

- Sure thing. Sit down.

I take a seat, run my fingers through my hair, and take a deep breath.

– I've been on WordPress for a few days now, but I don't understand anything. I thought maybe you could explain it to me a little clearer than all those smartasses on the internet.

– Of course. I regret that when I started, no one explained anything to me, she replies. He turns the computer around so we can both see the screen. She opens the browser, enters the address and in the next window her blog, BellBird, opens. – One by one: everything you see on the title page, you can change here… – Opens another window. – I advise you to learn this first, because it is actually the point of command of the entire blog. – He presses a button and a gray-black rectangle appears on the side.

- Alright. Did you do it yourself? Did you have an IT specialist?

– First of all, you need to have a host on whose server you will place the website. You can buy many ready-made templates on WordPress. Let me show you where I found mine.

Opens another page with website designs.

– You need to seriously consider what you actually want to achieve. Here, as you can see, we have a fantastic design, but it doesn't fit my content at all.

I nod.

– What should you pay special attention to?

– I wanted the website to be intuitive and work equally well on mobile devices and computers. I also wanted the home page and the bar. There are so many possibilities now, so many cool website designers. I chose the best ones and watched them for weeks before making my choice.

– I don't understand how you know all this.

– People learn over time.

– Have you approached blogging so professionally from the beginning?

– No, but I regret it. – He scrolls through website suggestions, pauses for a moment, and then glances sideways at me. - Actually

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why are you interested in this?

I shrug.

– I like blogs. They help me relax. I'm learning new things
I see places I will never go to.

– It started similarly for me. – Ember smiles significantly. - Until
At some point I created my own website.

I'm tempted to say what's on my mind right now: I have no idea what to do with my life, and this is the only thing I've been passionate about for years.

Maybe someday I'll be able to say it out loud. But not today.

I return Ember's gaze.

– How did you know you had something to say? – I finally ask.

A faint smile appears on her lips.

– James, everyone has something to say.

Ruby

Even on James' phone screen, I can see Lydia's face blushing. Her hair is loose, wavy, and her eyes truly sparkle as she talks about the events of the past week.

– We decided that there was no point in staying inside in such beautiful weather, so Ophelia moved the office to the terrace. – He smiles under his breath. – Although I think she really just wanted to watch the gardeners preparing the garden for the summer.

I burst out laughing and almost burned my forehead with the straightener I was using to straighten my bangs.

– We must visit you again soon. I'd also like to meet your teacher. Is she really that strict?

Lydia rolls her eyes.

– Compared to her, Lexington is nothing.

I look at her in disbelief.

- Really. She is extremely demanding and pays attention to details, such as calligraphy. If something isn't done perfectly, it has to be redone. On the one hand, it bothers me terribly, but on the other, I'm glad that he treats me normally.

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– Lydia, because you're normal.

- You know what I mean.

I take the nail polish from the shelf, close my eyes and spray it all over my head.

“Even a few hundred kilometers away, I feel like coughing,” Lydia says, and I start laughing again. – But you look great.

– You're a sweetheart, thanks. – I look at myself on the phone screen. Yes, everything is in place. I hope it stays like this throughout the evening. - Any plans for the weekend?

- Nothing special. Graham will come and stay until Monday.

I suspect Ophelia wants to take the opportunity to talk him into a baby shower.

– Oh! Cool.

- You think so? Lydia frowns. - I do not know. Doesn't this seem strange to you?

- But why?

– Because I know? After everything that's happened, I'm not sure a baby shower is really a good idea.

I shake my head vigorously and lean over the screen to glare at her.

– Listen, you haven't had a chance to enjoy your pregnancy so far. But it should be a beautiful time. If you are ready to let others be happy for you and your children, you should agree to party.

Lydia breathes a sigh of relief.

– Because you're happy, right?

“Yes, I do now,” he replies immediately.

“So I don't know what would stop her from making one.”

parties for you and the little ones.

A faint smile appears on her face.

– Would you come?

– With the greatest pleasure. Others too, I'm sure.

– Ophelia is keen on the idea anyway. I don't know where she finds the time, but in the last few days she has managed to knit several hats and a blanket for the little ones.

- That's cute.

– Yes, but between us, this is not her strongest point. The blanket looks more like a cloth, it's so rough. - Is smiling. – But that's without it

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doesn't matter, and I'm so happy.

– It's great to see you in such good shape. I feel like staying
Ophelia's is very good for you.

- Fact. It was actually supposed to be a punishment. My father probably didn't expect us to come to an agreement immediately.

– Would you consider staying with her longer?

Lydia nods.

- I thought about it. It's good to live with someone who understands me. On the other hand, it's not fair to turn her life upside down. And without that, he has his hands full.

I walk to the closet and open it with one hand.

– What about Mr. Sutton?

Lydia snickers.

“You really need to stop calling him that.”

I take my shoes off and go back to my desk. I carefully rest my phone against the empty glass.

– For you it was always Graham, but not for me. I'm feeling strange,
suddenly calling him by his name.

“You'll learn more,” he says confidently. He bites his lower lip before deciding to continue. – Graham... asked if we would move in
Together.

I freeze with the shoe in my hand and stare at the phone screen.

- And?

Lydia nods. A smile appears on her face.

“I guess I can imagine it,” he admits in a whisper.

Right now she's so different from the Lydia I found in the toilet of an Oxford pub, in tears, that it makes my stomach warm.
heart.

“I'm glad,” I say honestly.

“But don't tell my brother about it for now,” he adds hastily. – Because he's about to bombard me with questions that I don't know the answers to yet.

– I will be silent as the grave.

- How is he? – he asks.

I put on my shoes and start lacing them. At the same time, I wonder
over the answer.

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- Probably good. But you know that first he suppresses everything inside himself, and only then allows the volcano to erupt.

Lydia sighs softly.

- I know it from somewhere. How is he dealing with this thing with his father?

– Whenever I ask about it, I have the impression that it is an uncomfortable topic for him. For now, I try to respect that. I hope that when he wants to talk, he will contact me.

I see him nod. Suddenly he becomes serious.

– If you want, I can shake him when he doesn't want to talk.

I struggle with my shoelaces and consider her words.

– He had a long chat with Wren during the bonfire. The most important thing is that he talks to someone at all. It doesn't necessarily have to be me.

– He probably just doesn't want to burden you even more, after all, what happened.

- I have no idea. – I get up, take a step back and turn around. – And how?

- Cool! Ember made this skirt? – Lydia narrows her eyes slightly.

- How did you know? – I ask and look down. The edge of navy blue the skirt is trimmed with tiny flowers that can only be seen up close.

– I don't know, I had this feeling.

I don't really believe her. –

You're going crazy! She definitely sent you a photo.

Lydia smiles.

– He regularly sends me photos of new projects. Sometimes even allows me to show them to Ophelia and ask for her opinion.

– Do you want to say hello to her? – I ask and reach for my bag.

- Very willingly.

With James' phone in hand, I walk to Ember's room and knock on the door. I hear soft voices, and then my sister calls out, "Please!"

I open the door and stand on the threshold, transfixed.

Next to Ember, right at the desk, sits James, staring at her computer, on whose monitor I see the BellBird logo. He looks up when he sees me.

-Ember? Someone wants to say hello to you. – I go to her and give it to her her cell phone. He takes it and smiles broadly at Lydia.

“You made Ruby a fantastic skirt,” my friend begins.

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– Did you recognize her?

I hear Lydia confirm. Meanwhile, I turn to James and put my hand on his hip.

- What were you doing?

“Ember was showing me her blog,” she replies, but before I can ask more, she glances at her watch. – Shall we go?

– Where exactly are you going? – Lydia asks.

“To Wren,” James replies. – He's throwing a housewarming party.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Ember suddenly turn pale at his words. She opens her mouth and

says, “Oh.” Cool.

I hand the phone back to James.

“Thanks,” he murmurs, and says to Lydia, “I'll call you tomorrow, okay?”

- Bright. After one o'clock, I have lessons earlier.

“But tomorrow is Saturday,” he remarks from under knitted eyebrows.

– My teacher thinks I should cover as much material as possible in case the twins are born prematurely. This apparently happens often.

I whistle under my breath.

– Now I understand what you meant about her being strict.

– Well, that's life. Have fun. And say hello to the boys from me!

- Yes Sir. – James smiles crookedly and ends the call. He shifts his gaze to Ember. – Thanks for explaining all this to me. You helped me a lot.

“No problem,” my sister assures me. - Have fun.

He stares at the screen, but I think he's actually staring into space.

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17

Ember

Kingfitz: I'd like to see you again supergirl Kingfitz:
maybe coffee
Kingfitz: thanks for helping me today. I don't know if I could do it without you
Kingfitz: you are the best

Apart from the fact that the lack of punctuation in his messages drives me crazy, I'm shaking with anger when I scroll through our chat. Suddenly the words that meant so much to me seem empty and trivial.

I can't believe I let myself be made into such an idiot.

I spent hours looking for scholarships for him. I helped him arrange his room to make him feel good in his new home. I listened to his worries and talked for hours about what it was like for us after my dad's accident.
I mentioned that I was also devastated, although at that time I was a little girl and had no idea how much our lives would change.
I confided in him my fears because I felt like I had found someone I could talk to about everything I couldn't talk to my sister about.

And now?

And now he's having fun on the windowsill, to which he didn't invite me, and which he didn't tell me about at all.

I thought we were friends. It seemed to me that he, too, was ready to move on. But apparently I was very wrong.

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I'll see you tomorrow

This is the last message. He wrote this afternoon and I was so stupid that I replied with an enthusiastic: *of course.* I don't know how to act now. There's only one thing I know for sure: I won't bite myself about it.

Undecided, I stare at the display of my phone and look for the right words.

Have fun on the windowsill, traitor.

Too childish. I delete this sentence immediately.

I stare at the TV. Gordon Ramsay is currently bashing another chef. I immediately remember the night my dad and I watched clips from his shows and laughed as Gordon spewed profanities for a solid fifteen minutes.

Maybe I should watch it now.

– Why such a gloomy face, honey? – my mother asks me.

I sigh loudly. Nothing can really be hidden from her. Wren calls me Supergirl, but in my opinion the real superhero is the mom who always sees something that others miss.

– Have you ever had friends who disappeared from your life overnight? - I'm asking.

Mom puts down the reader she had just had in front of her. He looks at me thoughtfully and tucks a strand of hair behind my ear.

– Yes, I had a friend like that at school.

– How did you deal with it?

– I usually just ignored it. But I once had the courage to comment on it. It was when she had a party on my birthday and no one came to see me.

– Oh God, Mom. Horrible.

-You mean Samantha Baker? – dad interjects. – What a monkey.

– Angus! – says my mother.

– But it's true. I really liked that you told her what you thought.

Mom blushes up to her ears.

- Thank you sweetie.

– What exactly did you tell her? - I'm asking. – That

she made me feel bad. That she ignored me around other students, but whenever we were alone, we were best friends. My

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I thought it wasn't right. I gave her a chance to change, but she didn't want to.

- And then what?

– I said our friendship was over and I decided I would never be treated like that again. I have learned that I must always be mindful of my own feelings and emotions. And I advise you to do the same now, Ember.

I think about her words for a long time. *I told her she made me sad.*

No one has ever hurt me like Wren did today. And maybe that's what I should tell him.

I think it's terrible that you're having a housewarming party and didn't invite me. I thought we were friends.

As I write this, I feel strangely exposed. Same when I write especially a personal blog post about things that are important to me.

I hesitate only for a moment, follow my mother's example and send it message. And then I put the phone on the couch with the display facing down.

“Thanks, Mom,” I say quietly.

– Do you want to talk about it, honey?

I shake my head in denial, then lean on my dad's shoulder and throw it out he thinks about Wren Fitzgerald from his head.

James

– I don't know about you, but I like it here. – Alistair toasts with a beer.

Wren raises his eyebrows and looks around his room as if seeing it for the first time.

“Me too,” I echo Alistair. I'm serious. It's smaller than Wren's old room, and there's no obscenely expensive wallpaper on the walls, but it's cozy, and Wren has managed to add a personal touch to it. He's hung framed photos on the walls and has trophies we've won at lacrosse tournaments over the years on a shelf. Alistair, Kesh and I bought him a set of whiskey glasses as a gift, which now sits on his desk. Some of the furniture is from Ikea, some from his old room. In the middle there is an oriental carpet.

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“The house is lovely,” Ruby remarks. She sits cuddled up next to me. I instinctively stroke her back, keeping an eye on Wren.

There's something wrong with him this evening. He didn't put down his phone even for a moment, sometimes he stares at the display endlessly.

He's depressed and I don't think it's because there's no room for chairs in his new room and we're all sitting on the floor. There must be something else on his mind, and I wonder if it has something to do with the mysterious girl whose existence he revealed to me just a week ago at the bonfire.

– But you have a large garden – adds Alistair. – If you miss the pool, we'll buy you an inflatable one in the summer.

He walks across the room, passing over Kesha's legs without even looking at him. He sits cross-legged between me and Wren. Kesh frowns and nervously plays with the tassels of the rug. I wonder if they argued again.

“We had one like that when we were kids,” Ruby says with a smile.

“It's true,” I echo her. – The photographic evidence hangs in your hall.

Ruby nudges me in the side. It hurts, but I smile anyway.

– Please don't tell me you have photos with inflatable sleeves – Alistair snorts.

“About,” Ruby mutters. Even though she blushed slightly, she too smiles and takes a sip of her Coke. I didn't expect to see her so relaxed around my friends. I'm really happy to spend this evening here with her.

“You know, Wren, I think your neighbors will love it if you give them a striptease every day this summer,” Alistair says jokingly. – Maybe they'll even take photos of you and hang them in the hallway. – He moves his eyebrows comically.

– On the way, I passed three women who wished me a good time at a housewarming party – adds Kesh. – Clearly you have already made a lasting impression on the local residents.

Wren sighs loudly.

– Mom talks too much.

“And that's what you have to do if you want to live well with your neighbors,” notes Ruby.

“They all looked very nice,” Alistair assures us, but his smirk is ambiguous to say the least.

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– Maybe you'll do the trick with the swimming pool and seduce all the neighbors? says Wren. – I probably won't succeed.

– No wonder you keep walking around with that face on your face. – Kesh pushes away the bowl of chips that was initially floating around, but at some point stopped next to him.

Wren takes a deep breath indignantly.

- I'm listening? What's wrong with my face?

– It's about as tempting as a torture chamber. - Kesh frowns and looks around gloomily. When he reaches Alistair, his face darkens and he quickly looks away. There is an uncomfortable silence as Alistair watches him closely. He fills his lungs with air.

It's clearing up a bit.

“The corners of the mouth must be even lower,” she says after a while, and he, too, looks around gloomily. - More or less.

For a moment, Kesh seems taken aback, but when a smile appears on his lips, it seems to come from the depths of his heart.

He imitates Alistair's expression.

– Hello, I'm Wren Fitzgerald and I don't feel like hanging out.
Dear neighbors, leave me alone so that I can continue to plunge into the desperate existence of an unhappy teenager. Thank you very much for your attention.

Alistair, Ruby and I burst into laughter, and after a moment's hesitation, so does Wren agrees with us. Kesh leans on his elbows and smiles to himself.

– You're all crazy. Can someone explain to me why I invited you guys? Wren asks once everyone has calmed down a bit.

– Because you want to have friends and you don't want to sit here alone without them?

– Because you need someone to christen your couch? – adds Alistair.

– Do you want crumbs on the carpet? – Kesh picks up leftover chips from the carpet.

– It's a new carpet, man.

In response, Kesh picks up the bowl of chips and hands it to him with a smile.

“Listen,” Alistair begins and stops Wren, who was about to say something, from speaking.

We all stare at him. He holds up his phone, which shows a photo of the crowd. The photo is overexposed, so it's not immediately clear who it is

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he finds it.

– James McCormack is having a party tonight.

- And? Wren mutters indifferently.

We hate McCormack. Not because he's the captain of the East View lacrosse team, but because he's an arrogant, insolent guy who constantly taunts us during games.

I lean forward, squinting. And suddenly I know what Alistair means. At the edge of the photo you can see someone being supported by two other people.
He looks like he's about to vomit. And this person looks suspiciously like...

– Is that Cyril? Kesh asks suddenly.

“One hundred percent,” Alistair replies and looks pointedly at Wren.

– It looks terrible – says our host.

I hum in the affirmative. Cyril is pale as a sheet, his greasy hair falls on his forehead. Someone puts a camera under his nose to take a photo, he pushes it away with his hand, but I don't think he has the strength anymore.

– You didn't invite him?

Wren nods.

– Yes, but again he didn't answer.

The atmosphere suddenly thickens.

- What do you say? – Alistair suddenly says. – Shall we pay McCormack a quick visit?

The floor vibrates under my feet. The music is so loud that the walls shake.
I push through the crowd. Some people dance, others try to talk in the noise. Someone vigorously lifts the beer bottle and drops of alcohol splash on my face. Nervous, I wipe it with the back of my hand. One of the guys I know from lacrosse elbows me in the ribs as he walks by. When I look at him through knitted eyebrows, he challenges me with his eyes. I don't have the strength for that at the moment.

I lean towards Ruby, who is walking by my side and hasn't spoken for a long time.

- Everything's all right? – I ask loudly.

He nods and gives me a forced smile. I'm not surprised about her. Instead of staying in Wren's cozy little room, we took Alistair's limousine to East View, where apparently the party of the century is taking place.

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Fucking James McCormack.

“If you'd rather go home…” I say again, and Ruby responds
he just rolls his eyes.

– I'll stay with you. “He squeezes my hand and pulls me towards the stairs to the second floor.

I don't pay attention to the glances of the guests. We don't have the best reputation here. Not only did we deny them a chance at the lacrosse championship time and time again, but Alistair attacked McCormack twice, with serious consequences. As we climb the stairs, I hear someone being rude to him and I turn around to see Kesh shouldering the guy who was suspiciously close to Alistair.

“Don't let yourself be provoked,” says Wren. He walks ahead of us and searches Cyril's eyes.

The music echoes throughout the house, a rhythmic house beat that makes the candelabra shake and my skull throb. I'd like to have a drink too, but that's out of the question. I need to keep my mind clear.

– Do you have any idea where he might be?! – Wren shouts.

I shake my head in denial. This is McCormack's parents' house. I vaguely remember being here before. The spiral staircase and ugly still lifes with fruit baskets and vases seem familiar. But I was so drunk at the time that I had no idea what was where.

We climb the last stairs to the first floor and through a long corridor we reach the double doors. Wren suddenly stiffens. I look over his shoulder and see why he reacted the way he did.

Cyril is standing on a table with the remains of a poker game scattered about.
He sings a song from the speakers at the top of his lungs, in one hand he holds a half-full glass of whiskey, spilling a bit of alcohol with every movement. A girl dances on the table next to him and encourages him to drink.
Cyril tilts his head and drains the glass in one gulp, then throws it across the room.
The glass breaks against the wall, but that doesn't seem to bother anyone. On the contrary, there are shouts of admiration all around.
Cyril bows with laughter, loses his balance, clutches at the girl.

– And to think that we were worried about him. Wren shakes his head.

“As you can see, we had reasons for this,” Alistair notes. –
Reminds me of James back in December.

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These words are like a punch to the stomach.

– We have to get him out of here. – I'm trying to shout over the music.
I exchange glances with the guys and then look at Ruby. - You'll have to wait for a moment? We'll take it and leave.

Ruby looks anxiously between me and Cyril, who is swaying on the table and loudly demanding a new drink. Finally he nods.
I kiss her forehead, turn around, cross the room and jump onto the table.

Cyril frowns when he sees me. His eyes are bloodshot, I don't know if it's because he took something or because he was crying. His eyes grow serious when he sees the others. He swallows hard.

The girl who was dancing with him freezes. She seems to sense that the atmosphere has suddenly become serious, and with a sigh she allows someone to help her off the table. Meanwhile, Cyril and I stare at each other.
The rage I had felt over the past two weeks suddenly disappeared. I don't feel it now when I see how bad Cyril's condition is.

- What are you doing here? – he asks after a moment.

I swallow loudly.

– We came for you.

Cyril is swaying in all directions. He doesn't take his eyes off me.
His eyes shine glassily.

“Come on,” I say and nod towards the door. And then I take his arm and, together with Wren, pull him off the table. There are cries of disappointment around us, and out of the corner of my eye I see someone take Cyril's place at the table and immediately demand alcohol.

We try to hold Cyril, Wren on the left, me on the right,
but every now and then he falls helplessly to the ground.

– Jesus, Cyril, can't you help us a little? Wren gasps.

Cyril mumbles something in response, but I only hear him with only one ear, because at this point we get to the door... And Ruby isn't there.

I curse under my breath and look around for Alistair and Kesh, who are staring at the same place.

- Where she is? – Alistair asks.

Kesh, the tallest among us, looks around. Seeing his serious face, I guess he found her.

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– By the stairs. With McCormack," he adds, and I jump up and run in that direction. I throw Cyril's arm over Kesha's shoulders and squeeze over to her.

– Beaufort! – McCormack shouts when he sees me. He placed his hand on the railing next to Ruby. In the other he holds a cup. He proposes a toast. – How nice of you to drop by. It's true that I don't remember inviting you. – He speaks politely, as if he were greeting an old friend, even though we all know the opposite is true. "I see you've taken care of this asshole," he continues. He looks Cyril up and down with disgust. – The idiot puked all over my toilet.

I won't be provoked. Really not. But then he moves his hand from the railing to Ruby's hip.

– And what brings you here?

Ruby steps away from him at the same time I take a step forward.

I open my mouth, but Ruby is faster.

"Don't touch me, please," he says politely. I take her hand as she stands next to me.

McCormack looks from me to her. His sneer stops
becomes even wider.

– Come on, how nice. Now that everything is clear, you can go. I don't need this garbage here.

I feel my fist clench instinctively.

"Be careful what you say," I hiss.

"Leave it, James," Wren admonishes me quietly.

– Listen to the dog, Beaufort.

I take a step towards him, but suddenly Alistair is at my side and grabs my hand. I glare at him.

– The last time I attacked him, they mixed me up with mud, so
You better listen to me, he says. – We have more important things to do.

I know he's right. Still, I'm boiling with anger. When McCormack provokes me, that's one thing. But when he insults my friends and Ruby, everything in me demands that I pay him back.

But now I look at Ruby and imagine what her parents will say when I come home with a black eye or a broken arm.

They won't be thrilled, that's for sure.

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I swallow hard and turn around. Kesh and Wren lead Cyril. I'm holding Ruby's hand.

We leave the party together.

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18

Alistair

We must be an interesting sight as Cyril and I wander the empty streets of East View. At first he is unable to walk, we only move forward because Kesh and Wren are pulling him between them, but the longer we go the better he does. When, after a few kilometers, we finally reach a pub open at that time, he contacts us again thanks to a long walk in the fresh air.

He sinks heavily onto the bench. Wren and Kesh sit next to him, Ruby and I opposite. He doesn't look at us.

The longer I look at him, the more worried I become. James must be thinking the same thing, because his face shows a mixture of compassion, concern, and rage. After what Cyril did to him, Lydia and Ruby, I totally understand that.

“Why don't you tell us how the hell you ended up at McCormack's party?” – Wren asks with forced casualness. We were served drinks.
Water for Cyril, Coke for the others, although I saw Kesh and Wren looking longingly at the alcohol menu. – To forget – Cyril replies briefly. He

tries to speak clearly.
He looks terrible: his face is red, his hair is in strings, and there are stains on his white shirt, the origin of which I prefer not to guess.

– I invited you to a housewarming party. You could forget there too.

– Sure, it was a sincere invitation. – Cyril snorts contemptuously.

– And what kind? – Wren wonders.

Cyril purses his lips into a thin line and looks away.

Wren clears his throat.

– Dude, I know how you feel. I…

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“You don't know shit,” Cyril hisses. – You have no idea what it feels like to lose everything you love. What it's like to be overcome with remorse because all your friends hated you.

Silence. I think we're all holding our breath.

“No one hates you, Cyril,” I finally say quietly.

Cyril just grits his teeth. I have no idea what's going through his mind, but the red spots on his cheeks and neck show how difficult this conversation is for him.

“Alistair's right,” James says. – We were worried about you.

Cyril glares at him with icy blue eyes.

– You said yourself that our friendship is unsalvageable.

James returns his gaze and shrugs.

– You did something terrible. Yes, I was mad at you, but that doesn't mean I hate you.

Cyril laughs bitterly and shakes his head. He glances towards the exit, as if considering jumping over Wren and Kesh and fleeing the pub. At this moment, Wren leans forward and places his hands on the massive wooden table. Cyril grits his teeth even tighter and falls back. He hides his face in his hands and sighs quietly.

“I don't understand you, Cyril,” I start, glaring at him when he finally lowers his hands again. – You brewed this beer. You're the reason Lydia had to leave and Ruby was kicked out of school. You're the one who never tried to talk to us, you immediately assumed that we hated you. How do you imagine it? That it's over? – I shake my head in disbelief. - Why are you like this?

– Because I know I screwed it all up, okay? – Cyril shouts and hits the table with his fist so hard that his glass shakes dangerously. – I realize this all too well. I know you will never forgive me, so why even try?

I look at him carefully. His arms rise and fall very quickly. He looks like he was at a party when James pulled him off the table: like he's about to cry at any moment, but he's trying hard to hold back the tears.

– I don't know what you want from me – he continues, now calmly. – Why do you even care what I do in my free time?

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“We care because you're still our friend,” Wren says firmly. - Despite everything.

I hum in agreement. Cyril purses his lips again.

“Talk to us,” Kesh asks calmly. – We don't even know exactly what happened.

– Will this change anything? – Cyril notes resignedly.

Kesh looks at him with dark eyes. After a long moment, he shrugs.

– It certainly won't hurt.

Cyril looks at the table. He breathes deeply and doesn't say a word.

“I wanted to go to Lexington and tell him the whole truth,” he finally begins hoarsely. He shakes his head, looking at the table. – But then your father came to my house, James. He threatened me in case I tried to help Ruby in any way. I... I got scared and allowed myself to be blackmailed because I know what he is capable of.

Suddenly the table is so quiet that we can almost hear them flying away gas bubbles in cola glasses.

– I didn't have the courage to go to the principal, but I knew I had to do something. So I sent you these photos. – Cyril swallows hard. – I spoke honestly in the club then. I'm really fucking sorry.

A waiter comes up to us and asks if we need anything else. Only Ruby reacts and politely refuses. We sit in silence for the next few minutes. Finally I can't take it anymore.

“We have to be better than our parents,” I say. My voice breaks the uncomfortable silence. – We always told each other that, right? That we won't be like them. Except maybe Kesha's parents, because they are saints.

“I don't know about you, but I'm fed up with this,” James adds. We turn to him. “I'm tired of watching it all fall apart. And although a lot will change in the near future, I am sure of one thing: you are important to me. I want to have you in my life. Each of you – he adds and looks at Cyril.

– We've been through so much together. - Wren nudges his shoulder.

“You can't just ignore the problem, Cyril,” Kesh points out. "You can't just suddenly stop going to school, disappear into nowhere, and spend your weekends with James McCormack, wasting yourself in a dead body, okay?"

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Silence again. And then Cyril looks up from the table and looks at Ruby.

“I'm sorry,” he says hoarsely. – I would give anything to go back
time and that this photo issue never happened.

Now Ruby purses her lips into a thin line and nods. Suddenly she turned pale.

– It's...fine, Cyril.

“No, and we both know it,” he replies. – But I still want you to
she knew I regretted it very much.

He and Ruby look into each other's eyes, and it feels like a wordless conversation is taking place between them, as if Ruby wants to see if he's serious.

“I don't think I've ever heard him apologize so many times,” Wren remarks suddenly.

“I don't think I've ever heard him apologize at all,” adds Kesh.

Cyril looks away from Ruby and runs his fingers through his hair. And then, as if as an afterthought, he nudges first Wren and then Kesha in the shoulder. He tried to move away and nearly fell off the bench, which was so comical that James and I both burst out laughing.

“It's about time you went back to school,” James says to Cyril.

It takes forever before he finally nods.

- You're right.

It's after 3 a.m. when I call a chauffeur to pick us up from a diner in East View. First we take Wren, James and Ruby to Gormsey, then we drop Cyril home. He gets out, but before he slams the door, he looks inside again. He looks between Kesh and me.

“I…” he starts and clears his throat. – Thanks for today, gentlemen.

“You can always count on us,” Kesh replies.

“And next time, get drunk with us, not with James McCormack,” I add, and Kesh kicks me in the shins.

“Sure,” Cyril mutters and turns on his heel. I close the door behind him and signal to Rupert that we're moving on.

– Where to, sir? – he asks.

“To Keshav,” I reply. A moment later the car starts moving. I rest my head against the headrest wearily.

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“It hurts,” I say and rub my shin with my hand.

– You ruined a very beautiful moment with this comment. Kesh shifts his gaze to my leg. – But I didn't mean to kick myself that badly, I'm sorry.

“I just wanted to lighten the mood a little,” I reply. – For my taste it was a very gloomy evening.

Kesh mutters something under his breath. He's sitting opposite. Unlike me, he doesn't get motion sickness when he's driving backwards. He can even read in the car, which is unthinkable for me. As soon as I have the book in my hands, I can open the window and start puking.

He used to joke about it all the time and started doing experiments in the car to see what was making me sick.

Since then, I've learned that I can get away with petting, but not playing on my cell phone.

Fortunately, my body has the right priorities.

“Don't look at me like that,” Kesh says suddenly, his voice lower than usual. His eyes wander between my eyes and my mouth, but then he looks away, as if he had caught himself doing so. He turns his head to the window.

– How was I looking at you? - I'm asking.

The atmosphere changes so suddenly that it makes me feel dizzy.

– As if you were remembering the past – he replies after a long moment.

I swallow hard.

-Can't I?

The sound Kesh makes is a strange mixture of laughter and despair.

- NO.

- NO? Why?

He looks at me again.

– Because you shouldn't cling to memories when instead you can experience new moments with me.

I do not know what to say. I'm getting my act together.

– Kesh…

“I told my mom,” he interrupts me.

I only see him, everything else fades into the background.

- I'm listening?

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– I told her that I am bisexual and I like both women and men.

My head is racing with thoughts. I don't know what to say first.
I clear my throat and ask the question that seems most important to me at the moment.

– How did she react?

Kesh sighs loudly.

– Different than I expected. It was very difficult for me, and yet I was not half as afraid of my mother as I was of my father. When I told her I needed to talk to her, her first instinct was that I was sick or something, I got so angry and started crying before I could even get a single word out. And when I finally confessed, she said that a stone had dropped from her heart, that it was nothing terrible. She apologized to me immediately and asked if I thought it was a great indiscretion that she told me about her illness.

I listen to his stories with held breath.

– Actually, it was… I don't know. Better than I expected? –
The last sentence sounds like a question.

“Great,” I say hoarsely.

Kesh nods and stares at his hands.

“I... I didn't make you do it, did I? – I finally ask.

He shakes his head without looking up.

- NO. I didn't do it for you, but for myself. I wanted to say
to my mother because I thought it was important.

I feel like the pressure in my chest has eased.

– She said she loved me. And I guess she ordered information brochures or read about it on the Internet or something, because now she keeps asking me questions that sound like something from a family life education textbook. Plus, she preached to me about safe sex for the second time.
Kesh grimaces. – I think it was even worse than the first time
Together.

I laugh to myself.

– I love your mom.

Kesh smiles into his hands.

– And I you.

The car stops. My heart, too, I guess.

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I look at Kesha, who lifts his head and looks me straight in the eyes. His gaze is open, as vulnerable as ever before. And the atmosphere in the car changes again. I feel like Kesh is very close and very far at the same time. I want to reach out my hand, but I can't move.

- What did you say? – I ask in a whisper.

Kesh swallows. – That

I love you, Alistair. And it has been this way for a long time. And I'm sorry if I gave to you feel that it is different.

Every word he says strikes a tender chord in my heart. I've been waiting for it for so long, at least for a veiled hint. When I hear it now, it blows my mind. Tears burn behind my eyelids. I have no control over them.
I can't control them as they flow from the corners of my eyes and mark my cheeks with wet marks.

And then everything happens as if by itself. As if my body was working automatically. I lunge forward and throw my arms around Kesh's neck. He exhales loudly, but I don't pay attention to it at the moment. I just want to be as close to him as possible.

“I love you too,” I whisper, lips in his hair.

He embraces me and pulls me to him.

- Cool. I

laugh hoarsely and cry harder at the same time. I step away
from him to look him in the face.

– Is this your reaction? "Cool"?

He raises his hand and wipes the tears from my cheeks. A smile appears at the corners of his mouth.

– Yes – he says only. And this answer is so much his that I hug him again. He strokes my back and doesn't help my heart calm down. – Will you come in? – he finally asks. He smiles uncertainly. – I don't want to be separated from you yet.

I pull back a little to look at him again.

- Very willingly.

He leans forward and touches his lips to mine. It's just a hint of touch
and yet it's enough to give me goosebumps.

“Great,” he repeats.

And then he kisses me.

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Ember

The next week is hell on earth for me. First, I get bad grades twice and my parents are clearly disappointed. Secondly, this whole Wren thing is bothering me and I'm thinking about him all the time.

I haven't actually seen Ruby or James at all in the past two days. When they're not sitting at their desk or kitchen table cramming for exams, they're visiting Lydia or preparing something related to the work of the organizing committee. Only once did I overhear them talking about Wren's party in the living room. James then said that the evening had turned out well for everyone and that he would visit his friend more often from now on. It took me a lot to hold back a disdainful snort.

- Everything's all right? – my friend Maisie asks me as we leave school after the last lesson. We're usually not in a hurry and we stay on the stairs for a long time to talk. Today, however, I want to go straight home and lose myself so much in the Internet that I can forget about Wren Fitzgerald completely, at least for a little while.

“It wasn't the best week,” I reply, staring at my shiny shoes. Hot pink, decorated with large buckles, they don't match the school uniform at all, but I don't care. I bought them for pennies at a flea market and I'm as happy as a child every day when I wear them. Mainly because such an angry color always puts me in a good mood.

Unfortunately, not today.

– I failed chemistry too. Don't worry, Ember. – Maisie reassuringly pats me on the back.

– Since when did you become such a poet? – I ask with a crooked smile.

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– From now on, but this is another proof that I am a master of the language – he replies with a smile.

– Well, Mrs. Wright seems to think otherwise. – I manage to avoid her blow, but in the process I trip over a step.

- Hi! You have to be nice to me. Whatever the case, I don't have it secret superboyfriend who comes to pick me up at school.

“Neither have I…” I start, but stop mid-sentence because I see who's standing at the bottom of the stairs, nonchalantly leaning on the railing, hands in his pockets, looking at me.

Wren.

He is here. In my school.

I bite the inside of my cheek. On the one hand, I'm angry, but on the other hand, I'm unsure of myself. He didn't reply to my message. In fact, he hasn't spoken to me at all since last weekend.

I have no idea what he's doing here.

– I'll see you tomorrow, right? Oh, and ask your mom to give you a muffin for me again. Thanks, you're wonderful! " Maisie calls over her shoulder, and before I can stop her, she's running down the stairs so fast her braids are bouncing on her shoulders.

Left to my own devices, I take a deep breath and slowly make my way down to Wren. Whenever I saw him in the past weeks, I looked him up and down every time, trying to remember every little detail, like the scar on his left ear, the cigarette hole in his leather jacket, the tiny wrinkles around his mouth when he smiled in that characteristic smile. way.

But now, as I walk down the stairs, I don't look at him, even when he opens his mouth as I pass him. I pass by without saying a word.

- Wait! – he shouts after me. I hear him following my lead.

I don't pay attention to him.

“Ember, of course we're friends,” he says.

I stop abruptly and press my lips into a thin line.

Wren stands in front of me. The sight of him hurts me, so I stare into the yellowed tips of his sneakers.

Not much better.

How did I become so invested in this friendship in such a short time?

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– Look, I realize that this answer comes much too late, but… Yes, we are friends – he repeats passionately.

And yet I can't stand it, I look him straight in the eye.

“I didn't have that impression this week,” I reply. "I thought we were supposed to tell Ruby and the others about our friendship." And then I find out from my sister that you're throwing a party where I'm obviously not welcome.

“I'm sorry,” he whispers. He runs his fingers through his hair. Only now does it strike me how out of place he looks in his Maxton Hall uniform. There are a few students watching us curiously, but I won't bother with that right now.

– You haven't responded to my message all week. You showed no sign of life at all. Friends don't do that.

– I know and I'm very sorry. – He searches for the right words for a long time. – But that housewarming party… All my friends were there. I couldn't invite you, Ember.

These words are like a blow to the heart. I instinctively take a step back.

I renovated his room with him and spent nights searching for scholarships. I was the one who helped him deal with the new situation, I was the one he turned to when he wanted to talk in the middle of the night.
We wrote to each other for hours and talked for hours. I thought we were friends.

Apparently I was wrong.

I've been hurting all week when he hasn't spoken to me, but it's nothing compared to how I feel now when those words were said. At the same time, I realized something.

- You know what? I didn't work for years to love myself
myself to let someone hurt me so much now, I say.

Wren shakes his head, then takes another step towards me.

– I didn't know how to answer. Do you still want to keep in touch with me? I didn't think about what it looks like from your perspective.

– So it looks like you only want to date me
secretly, I answer quietly.

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I expect him to deny it and keep telling me how much I mean to him. I'm waiting for his reply. Ten seconds. Twenty. Over half a minute and then I lose track of time and things get really nasty. It dawns on me that I won't get an answer. I swallow hard and look at his face. I stare at the dark brown eyes, the black curled eyelashes, the tiny mole on my right cheek.

And then I take my eyes off him. I clear my throat.

– Hang in there, Wren. – With these words, I turn on my heel and leave him on the sidewalk. Only then do I feel how wet my hands are. How loud the blood is pounding in my ears.

And how much my heart hurts.

Lydia

- What would you say for that? – Ophelia asks.

I can barely control my expression so as not to grimace in disgust as I look at the miniature sweaters my aunt shows me on the tablet. Pig pink, covered in glitter, absolutely not what I want to dress my children in.

– Maybe a little less pink? – I answer diplomatically, and then Ophelia grimaces.

– You're just like your mother. With your clothes too
she protested when I suggested more colors.

Over the past few weeks, I've looked through Ophelia's albums and realized that Mom had fantastic taste in James and me's clothes.
They were usually in neutral colors and matched each other perfectly, although they were not identical. I would like my little ones to be equally elegant babies.

“Mom was really good at it,” I say.

With a sigh, Ophelia takes the tablet from me and continues browsing the online store, adding everything in the smallest size to her cart.

“I don't know how you stand it,” he finally says, looking at me over his sunglasses. – If I were you, I would burst with curiosity.

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– I'm very curious too. But it's more like... joyful waiting.

– When did you actually decide it would be a surprise? – he asks.

I stroke my belly thoughtfully.

– The whole pregnancy is one big surprise. When the doctor asked if I wanted to find out the sex of the babies, I thought it would be nice to wait.
Surprise is actually the theme of it all.

Since I've been living with Ophelia, I don't feel like I have to whisper whenever I talk about my children. She helped me relax and accept the fact that I had no other choice - I had to come to terms with what was and look for only the positives. My aunt probably doesn't know it, but I guess thanks to her I'm not losing my mind now, six weeks before the due date.

And because her taste in children's clothes leaves much to be desired, and to this day I still feel sick when I remember the hot green latex pants she showed me with a twinkle in her eye, but which I would only wear to keep insects away.

– Honey, your cell phone is ringing – Ophelia notices and points to the little one a small table between our deckchairs.

I move my sunglasses to the top of my head to look at
display. When I see who's calling, my heart leaps into my throat.

Cyril.

I pick up the phone and stare hesitantly at the small photo above his name. We made these on my last birthday. Cyril embraced me and pulled me to him. I smile at the camera as if these were the most beautiful moments of my life.

I am reminded of how much he once meant to me, and at the same time I am struck by the realization of what he is capable of and what he has done. At first I don't know whether to answer or reject the call.

A few more seconds and I make my decision.

– Hello? – I say quietly.

– Lydia. - He seems surprised, as if he didn't expect me to answer.
I'm waiting.

– What… What's up? – he asks.

At first I'm so surprised that I don't even know what to say.

“You've got to be kidding,” I finally say.

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He is silent. I hear him take a deep breath and sigh.

– I have no idea where to start.

– So why are you calling? – I hiss. Suddenly I can't control the rage that has been building inside me for weeks. I can't stay on the comfortable lounger any longer. I jump to my feet. I feel Ophelia's eyes on me, but I don't look at her. I go to the garden and try to pull myself together.

The sprinkler is on, I step away so he doesn't get me wet.

– I wanted to apologize – Cyril begins.

“A little late,” I say bitterly.

“You have the right to be mad at me,” she says quickly. – I'll understand if you never want to talk to me again. I called to apologize. I'm... so damn sorry this all happened.

I swallow hard and try to control the burning sensation behind my eyelids. My friendship with Cyril has always been important to me. The fact that we ended up in bed was the result of too much alcohol and a broken heart that I wanted to forget at all costs. It was wonderful, but also reckless and stupid. And if I had known that Cyril expected something more, I would never have allowed this situation to happen.

“Cyril, I realize I hurt you,” I say, my voice shaking. - But to do something like this...

- I know.

– You didn't care if you were ruining someone's life. Ruby almost lost her place at Oxford. Not to mention how worried James was about this matter.

“I didn't think this through,” he says.

– Nonsense! – I blurt out. I would love to trample the flower beds along the path, I'm so angry. – Cyril, we have known each other for eighteen years. You don't do anything without cold calculation, you're just like James in that respect. You knew perfectly well what was going to happen.

You knew what the consequences would be.

He is silent. He breathes quickly.

– I wanted everything to be like before. I wanted you and James back in my life, and I didn't care who paid for it, as long as we were together again. But now I know I made a mistake. I really regret what I did.

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I've never heard words like that from him. He usually gives the impression that he is in control of everything: himself, his friends, the whole world.
But now he seems to have lost control.

– I don't know if you can forgive me. I don't know if I can forgive myself, he says. – But if you want to give me another chance, you can count on me. Just... That's all I wanted to tell you.

I hear despair and regret in his voice, but above all, sincerity.
He's serious. However, I don't know if he realized that I'm not the same person I was six months ago. My life took a 180 degree turn while he clung to the past.

I don't know how to let him know how much Graham and our relationship mean to me. I don't even know if Cyril is entitled to such an explanation after he abused my trust so much. But I have to tell him one thing, otherwise I don't see any way we can all look to the future.

“I have something to tell you, Cyril,” I begin quietly.

- Yes?

I take a deep breath.

– My father kicked me out not only because I'm with Graham.
He kicked me out because I'm pregnant.

I hear him breathing loudly. More seconds of silence pass. I'm climbing
I stand on my toes and enjoy the feel of the warm grass under my feet.

“Now I don't know what to say,” he finally admits hoarsely.

I do not know either. I don't want to hurt him further, but I think it's high time to settle this matter between us once and for all.

“I'm sorry if this hurts you,” I say helplessly. – But I want to be with you
honest.

– What have I done? – he asks.

“Sooner or later the truth would come out anyway,” I point out. “Not that it excuses your behavior, but my father would have thrown me out of the house anyway.”

There is silence again. I have the impression that during this conversation we are more silent than we talk. And maybe that's not so bad after all. The shared silence also speaks volumes.

For example, now I can almost physically feel that Cyril is digesting what he heard from me. At the same time, I remember everything we experienced together

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over the years: playing truant with Maxton Hall as we escaped to London to shop; long nights spent talking; a moment when I thought I would never find another friend like him.

One thing is clear to me at the moment: I cannot imagine the future without Cyril. And even though he hurt me a lot, I don't want to lose him.

– Can you handle this, Cyril? – I ask quietly.

He clears his throat. I feel like he wants to answer, but there's silence on the phone. I stare at the pink flowers in Ophelia's garden, which weren't there when I came here, but are now blooming.

– Do you think I'll be a cool uncle? – finally comes through the phone.

A shy smile appears on my face. I feel a stone fall from my heart.

– One thousand percent.

Ruby

“I have something for you,” James says.

I look up from the book I'm reading in the garden and look at him. He stands next to the chair I installed myself in an hour ago and looks at me with a smile. He is holding a stack of papers.

– You sound very mysterious. What? – I close the book,
of course, first bookmark the page.

James comes to the table and sits down next to me. I try to glance at the papers, but he immediately takes them out of my sight and presses them to my stomach.

– What do you think about surprises? – he asks.

I immediately remember our date in the conservatory.
He surprised me then too, and that evening is one of my most beautiful memories together.

– I love your surprises. "I guess," I add, which brings a smile to his face.

– I would like to kidnap you for the weekend.

I jump up so vigorously that the book almost slides off my lap.
I hold her instinctively.

- When?

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- Now. If you want.

I can't help but smile.

– Where to?

“It's a surprise,” he replies.

-James!

He snorts with laughter.

– Take things for an overnight stay.

– And are we leaving soon?

– Whenever you're ready.

Gets up. As I walk through the garden, I feel his eyes on me. Before I enter the house, I turn to him. The look on his face makes my heart beat faster.

James is happy.

I walk past the kitchen and look inside. Mom chops the onion, dad heats the olive oil in a pan.

“James is taking me on a short trip,” I say. I can't quite control the excitement in my voice.

Mom turns to me.

– Yes, we know. He asked us if he could organize it.

– Do you know where we're going?

He smiles mysteriously.

- Maybe.

I open my mouth, but before I can ask anything, he threatens me with a knife.

- No way. I won't say a word. Nothing at all.

- It's not fair. You're revealing all the surprises to dad.

– Because my arguments are irrefutable, and besides, I know how to press the right buttons – says dad and throws a handful of chopped peppers into the heated olive oil.

– You realize how terrible that sounds, right? – I ask grimacing.

He thinks for a moment.

“You're right,” he notes. - Something like that. – And then, as if nothing had happened, he stirs the peppers in the pan.

I feel James stand behind me and gently stroke my back, just once.

This is always the case in the presence of parents: discreet, secret gestures and touch.

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Nothing more.

– Maybe just a little tip? – I ask with a smile.

James leans in so that his mouth is right next to my ear.

– I want to make one of your dreams come true, Ruby Bell.

I shudder.

“Then I'll go packing,” I say quickly.

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Ruby

For the first half hour I have no idea where we're going, but then we pass a sign with the nearest cities listed, and then I'm surprised.

- NO! – I shout loudly.

- Which did not"? – James asks.

– Are we… going to Oxford?

I didn't actually have to ask. His smile speaks for itself.

Since I don't know what to do and I'm about to burst with emotion, I punch him in the shoulder with all my might.

– How great! Where exactly are we going? To university? To Saint Hilda? Nothing is happening there this weekend, I signed up for their newsletter and check Facebook. Oh god, maybe I missed something?

Do you know something?

James smiles to himself.

– You'll have to wait a while before you find out the plan. – He rubs his shoulder. – It hurt, by the way.

- I can not help it. It's out of emotion.

He shakes his head with a smile.

An hour later, I notice that we are no longer on the road to Oxford, but when I ask about it, James just shrugs. We drive and drive until at some point we turn into an exit I've never seen before. Once we're on a side road, I give up and no longer try to guess where he's taking me.

Not to university, that's for sure.

Half an hour later he turns onto an even narrower road, then repeats the maneuver. Now two cars probably couldn't pass each other freely. I glance at the disabled navigation and wonder if it's James

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he didn't get lost by accident, but he doesn't want to admit it. But when I glance at him sideways, he seems relaxed.

I also notice his smug smile.

"You find it amusing that I suffer so much," I murmur.

"Just a little," he admits, still smiling. – But I'll give you some reassurance: we'll be there in about ten minutes.

The road leads to Brightwell-cum-Sotwell, a charming village in County Oxford. We pass cottages with thatched roofs, beautiful as from a postcard, and farms with sheep and donkeys in the pastures. And then James turns onto a gravel road. A few minutes later I see a small cottage in the distance. I see the added winter garden, the bushes in the driveway, now covered with flowers, making it all look as fabulous as the rest of the village.

– Shall we stay in a house like this? – I ask, not taking my eyes off him.

- Not completely. – James stops the car on the left side of the long driveway. He unbuckles his seat belt and gets out. I follow his lead and together we head to the house. His door just opens and a middle-aged blonde woman stands on the threshold. He smiles warmly.

- Hello. James, right? Marta.

– Yes, we wrote to each other – replies James. "And this is my girlfriend, Ruby."

– It's great that it worked. – Marta holds up a bunch of keys, decorated with a handmade key ring carved from wood. – Your house is over there, in the garden. If you want, I'll show it to you soon. – He turns onto the path next to the cottage.

James nods. We follow the woman through a garden full of wild flowers and shrubs until we come to a small house about fifty meters from the main house. It almost looks like a houseboat, but it's made of wood, has a dark roof and sliding doors that are currently open. The small window is covered with a white transparent curtain. There are steps leading inside, and there are intoxicating flowers around the house.

– We are here – says Marta. – You saw in the photos that there is a double bed and a view of the fields from the west side. The bathroom has cosmetics and everything you may need.

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James nods, but I can't take my eyes off the cottage.
I feel excited from my stomach to my fingertips. – We serve
breakfast in the winter garden – continues Marta. – Coffee, a selection of teas, fresh milk from the neighbor's cow, home-made jams and eggs from our hens. I bake fresh bread every morning, if you get up early enough, it will still be warm.

“Sounds great,” I say.
He hands James the keys.
– If you have any more questions, I'll be home by noon.
I'm going to work later, but you can always call me on my cell phone.
You have my number, right?
James confirms with a nod of his head.
- Yes thanks.
– See you later then. – He waves us goodbye and goes back the same way we came. I immediately grab James' hand and walk up the short steps leading up to the house. They are too narrow for us to walk side by side, so I move ahead and look inside with my heart in my throat.

The first thing I see is the double bed, which takes up space from wall to wall in this narrow house. Opposite, on the other side of the room, I see a black fireplace and a pile of firewood.
In the middle, near the wall, there is a narrow chest of drawers with an electric kettle and a box of various teas. Various cups hang on hooks on the wall. The wooden door probably leads to the bathroom.
James strokes the back of my hand with his thumb. I turn to him.
He pierces me with his eyes. I see warmth and affection in his eyes, but also anxiety and excitement. Like he wasn't sure how I would react.
“After everything you've been through these past weeks, I thought a little rest would be good for you,” she begins quietly.
- I…
He doesn't finish because I throw my arms around his neck. I close my eyes and hug him, trying to remember this moment forever so that I can come back to it whenever I feel bad.
– The most wonderful surprise ever – I say with my mouth shut
his neck and then I lean back and look into his eyes. - Thanks.

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He brushes my hair away from my face with a smile. I move my hand to his neck, I pull him to me and kiss him.

He makes a muffled noise and hugs me tighter, deepening the kiss. I sigh as our tongues meet and I feel James' hands on my back. I tangle my fingers in his hair and am about to sink my teeth into his lower lip when he suddenly pulls away from me.

“No,” he says, out of breath.

- NO? – I ask, surprised.

He denies with a movement of his head.

"We still have something to do, Ruby."

I'd rather stay here. Fall onto this bed with James, enjoy the fact that we are finally alone, forget about God's world with him.
But at the same time, I'm curious why we came here and what else he has planned for today.

“If you want, we can sort this out quickly and then come back here and continue,” he offers.

I don't think twice about it.

- All right.

Because no matter where we go, I'm already happy.

Oxford and Brightwell-cum-Sotwell are only a dozen or so kilometers apart. During the drive, which is a bit longer due to traffic jams, we listen to a goofy but very funny radio program. It's so warm outside that I open the window and stick my hand out. I grab the air with my fingers and enjoy the view of the houses and fields passing by.

We go to the north of Oxford, leave the car on Leckford Road. James gets out first and opens the door for me.
I look around curiously. We are located in a residential area full of terraced houses. I am surrounded by bay windows, sloping roofs, polished stone walls and ancient facades that have been exposed to the English weather for decades.

We approach one of the houses. The young man is waiting on the threshold man. He shakes James' hand.

“Good morning, Mr. Beaufort,” he begins politely. Then he says hello to me. – Shaun Cornell, we talked on the phone. – The first piece of information is for me, the second for James. – Shall we go in?

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I glance between them in surprise and am about to ask James what the matter is, but then I notice the folder under Cornell's arm. Specifically, I see a logo, the same real estate agency logo that was on the sign in front of the house.

“James,” I whisper as we follow the agent into the house. – What are we doing here?

He strokes the back of my hand with his thumb.

– We're looking at the apartment.

I stop mid-step. Seeing my dismay, James shakes his head vigorously.

“For me,” he adds quickly. – I can't sit on you forever
head, and after finishing school I have to have a place to live.

“I thought you didn't want to go to Oxford,” I say quietly.

– You will spoil my plan if you ask about everything now. Can we go upstairs and look at the apartment first? I'll explain everything to you when we have a moment of peace.

I am not sure. I have a lot of questions in my head and I would like to ask them right away. But then I look at the agent who is climbing the stairs ahead of us and remind myself that I should be patient. James must have it all figured out and I don't want to ruin his plans.

“Okay,” I finally say.

James squeezes my hand.

Meanwhile, Mr. Cornell opens the door with a key from a large bunch and holds it open so that we can enter.

– In this case, we are talking about an apartment in an old building. It has two bedrooms. It is a historic estate with a beautiful communal garden and parking space. Please look around. – He sweeps his hand in an arc that covers the entire apartment. – I'll wait outside. If you have any questions, I am at your disposal.

James nods.

- Thank you very much.

The real estate agent smiles politely and then leaves. I hear you
his footsteps on the stairs and then silence.

I look around slowly. The apartment is in good condition, although wooden
the floor creaks with every step.

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– Shall we see this room? – James points to the first room on the right.

I go ahead and enter a small, rectangular living room decorated in shades of terracotta. The high ceiling is decorated with stucco. I see a fireplace and a small bay window through which the midday sun streams into the room.
There is also a table showing signs of use. The chairs also don't seem particularly stable, but that doesn't change the fact that I immediately feel at home here, as if I were in my own home, not a sterile room that still needs to be filled with life.

– Shall we go further? – James asks quietly.
- Yes. – I go back to the corridor. The next room is the kitchen, a bit narrow, but its value is enhanced by granite countertops for which my dad would give a kidney. It is fully furnished, I can see a stove, fridge, oven, although this could use a good cleaning.

James doesn't have to ask if I want to see another room. This time it's me
I lightly pull his hand.
Unlike the living room, the bedroom is square and decorated in shades of gray. The only furniture here is a wooden bed frame and a built-in wardrobe, about the same size as in my room. A large white chandelier hangs from the ceiling. We look at the bathroom last. It is not particularly large,
but there are joints
clean, and I don't see any fungus anywhere on the walls.
We still have one room left, about the size of a bedroom.
Previously, it probably served as an office. Against one wall there is a large old desk and a black armchair, next to it there is a white board with notes that I cannot read.

The window overlooks the garden. I watch one of my neighbors playing with her dog and a man hanging out laundry in the neighboring plot. I watch them for a long moment, then turn, lean on the windowsill, and look at James, who is standing right behind me.

– The apartment is great, although a few things need to be improved.
He returns my gaze, lifts his hand and brushes away a strand of hair
from the face that had come out of the braid. He puts it tenderly behind my ear.
- I think so too.
I wait to see what else he will say, but at the moment he is too fascinated by my earlobe, which he lightly traces with his fingertip. It's piercing me

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a pleasant thrill.

– Will you finally explain to me why we are here? - I'm asking.

He nods, but only speaks after a long moment.

– We never talked about what would happen to us after we finished schools – begins.

I swallow hard. Until now, I hadn't allowed myself to think about such a conversation. Not after everything we've been through. I didn't want to think about another challenge in the near future when we had just overcome so many obstacles.

– Listen, I would like to buy this apartment – he says openly.

My heart speeds up, the blood literally roars in my ears.

- I'm listening?

There is a certainty in his gaze that, on the one hand, annoys me, but on the other hand, gives me a sense of security. He reaches into his pants pocket and takes out a leather wallet from which he takes out a folded piece of paper. It's yellowed at the corners and looks like it's the color of a wallet. James unfolds the sheet and then I see what it is.

His list. The same one we wrote in Oxford the night we cleared everything up. That night we were as close to each other as we had ever been.

It is very worn, as if it had been folded and unfolded many times.

- Do you remember? – he asks.

– Of course – I answer.

– You were the first to make me believe that there are dreams worth fighting for.

“James…” I whisper.

He waits for me to say something else, but I just stare at the list in his hand.

– I would like to accomplish everything on this list. Really everything – he adds after a moment. – I want to know what the world has prepared for me. I know your path is clear and mine isn't, but I kept wondering how we could be together after school too. How we can both pursue our dreams without losing each other. I see him swallow hard.

My heart is pounding like crazy. I squeeze his hand so hard that it probably hurts him, even though he doesn't show anything.

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- I can show you something? – he asks.

I nod, both paralyzed and stunned by his words.
James walks to the desk, sits down, opens his bag and takes out his MacBook. He runs it, enters his password and opens the browser.

I stand behind him, too fast for me to read anything. Less than three seconds later, a new page opens. A blog whose title appears in light letters at the top: Beyond Beaufort. The

design is simple,

clear, in shades of muted gray and blue. A slide show starts at the top of the title page.

I scroll down and hold my breath.

There is a photo of him under the "James Beaufort" tab that I haven't seen before. He's wearing a black shirt. The photo is black and white, but I immediately know that it was taken in our garden. Even if she hadn't revealed the apple tree in the background, I would have known by the photographer's signature in the lower right corner: Ember Bell.

I stare in disbelief first at the monitor, then at James.
He breathes loudly.

-I'd like to try, Ruby. I would like to implement the list we wrote together step by step. I want to find out what I'm passionate about and I want to have time for it. I want to travel and explore the world, he says quickly.
The words just pour out of him. He turns in his chair and looks into my eyes. – But most of all, I want you.

I was stunned. I try to organize my racing thoughts, but his words completely caught me off guard. I try to respond several times, but I keep stopping because I don't know how to put into words what I feel.

In the end, my only reaction was breathless laughter.

– I'm sorry, but when did you actually learn how to use WordPress?

He blinks in surprise, then smiles slightly.

– Ember tutored me.

Still in shock, I stare at the title page. I lean down and scroll down the page again. Not much content here yet, a few comments and links to other blogs, but I can already imagine James filling in the blank

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space with your experiences. When I think about how much this year means to him, my heart beats faster.

I don't think twice, I walk around the chair and sit on his lap.
I throw my arms around his neck, close my eyes and hug him.

I remember a boy I met in September. Very withdrawn, overwhelmed by the weight of family obligations; that boy would never believe that he had a chance for a future that he would build for himself.

“Fantastic idea,” I whisper, lips on his neck.

James wraps his arms around me and pulls me closer to him.

- I'm glad you think that way. I was really scared. I…” He stops for a moment. – Ruby, it's all thanks to you. You gave me the strength to listen to myself and think about what I really want to do after school. And for that I will always be grateful to you.

I lean back a little to look into his eyes. I run my hand down the back of his neck, find his jaw, and smile, even though there are tears in my eyes.

– Okay, but won't the apartment limit you? – I ask breathlessly. – If you want to travel?

He shakes his head slowly. He runs his hand down my thigh. This touch calms and stimulates me at the same time.

– My mother always said that real estate is a safe investment – she replies. – When I sell my shares in Beaufort, I still have to invest some of the money that I won't spend on travel. I won't be on the road all year, so I have to live somewhere in England. Besides, you're going to Oxford, so I can't imagine a better place.

“James, don't do this for me,” I whisper.

– I don't want us to break up. This is a sign, Ruby. I'm thinking about us seriously and also after graduation I want to be with you.

A small office suddenly seems much larger. The whole world is growing, as James looks into my eyes and says those words.

“I want to be with you too,” I confess just as quietly.

The next moment he leans down and I meet him. He presses his lips to mine, moved by this moment at least as much as I am.

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The kiss is so intense that at some point I don't know which is up and which is down. I can only hold on to James.

I don't remember the last time we kissed like that.

I run my hands around his neck, to the hem of his shirt, brushing my fingers against his bare skin. It burns me like it's on fire right now as much as I am. I feel his hands on my waist. He runs his fingers along my ribs, touches my back, and pulls me closer to him with all his might. I sigh as he deepens the kiss and lightly bites my lips.

– Mr. Beaufort? – we suddenly hear the agent's voice.

I jump up so suddenly that the chair moves several centimeters. James holds me to keep me from falling while he stands up. He closes the computer with his other hand.

“We're in the office,” he replies, straightening his shirt.

After a while, the real estate agent stands in the doorway. He looks between us. I don't miss his slight smile when he asks:

– Would you like to see the garden?

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21

James

Back in Brightwell-cum-Sotwell, Ruby and I eat breakfast for dinner. I wonder why I've never done this before. I think this is the best idea in the world right now.

We decide to take advantage of the beautiful weather and sit in the garden. Marta showed us from which corner there is a beautiful view of vast fields. Ruby goes ahead, I take two woolen blankets from the house and wrap them around each other. I start a playlist consisting of calm songs by Death Cab for Cutie, Iron and Wine, Keaton Henson and Vancouver Sleep Clinic. We watch the sky fill with colors.

– Do you already know where you want to go first? Ruby asks at one point.

"To Thailand," I answer so quickly that I feel stupid. – That's on my list too. No matter which country I read about, my thoughts always return to Thailand. I had already planned a route, including all the interesting places I had read about.

The very thought that I will get on a plane and finally see everything that I have only read about and watched on the Internet fills me with a completely new energy. It's as if something inside me is awakening that cannot be undone, and even though these are just plans for now, I feel much better than I used to when I was thinking about the future.

"I'd like to help you," Ruby says. – I am a great organizer.
We can book your flights and accommodation together, I will make a list of things to do before the trip and we will slowly tick off subsequent points.

I look at her searchingly. Keaton Henson's soothing voice plays over the speakers as Ruby stares at the setting sun. I don't think I will ever forget this sight. The golden light on her cheeks, in her hair, slightly

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blown away by the wind, lips parted. She is so beautiful that she takes my breath away.

"Is this really okay, Ruby?" – I ask quietly.

He pulls his knees up, wraps his arms around them, rests his head on them and looks at me sideways. I see longing in her eyes, but also a joyful gleam.

“It's definitely going to be hard,” he begins slowly. – But at the same time, I think it's great that you want to do it. I will support you as you support me.

I nod and realize that I instinctively held my breath.
Only now do I let the air out of my lungs.

I don't know if the blog will become popular or not. Maybe in a few months I'll come back and have to face the fact that my idea didn't work. But if everything works out... What then? Can we be apart for a longer time without risking that our paths will diverge?

I won't know the answer to this question until a few months later. Right now I can only reach out and touch Ruby's cheek. Lean in and kiss her.

This kiss is gentle. Uncertain, but wonderful at the same time.

“Don't get me wrong: I'll be sobbing like a baby at the airport,” Ruby says, breaking away from me for a moment.

– Jesus, we're going to be one of those embarrassing couples in the middle of the airport Can't they break away from each other?

He laughs quietly but sadly. I touch her forehead and close my eyes.

“You could come with me,” I say. – For the first few weeks of vacation.

Now she's the one holding her breath. I lift my eyelids.

“This is supposed to be your adventure, James,” he notes.

– I can't imagine anything more beautiful than a holiday with you – I reply.
Actually, I wanted to wait with this proposal.
A weekend trip, an apartment, a blog… I don't want to overwhelm her. But right now I can't do otherwise. I need to make her realize how much she means to me.

– Of course, if you want it – I point out immediately. – If at this time
You've planned your preparations for Oxford, I'll understand that.

He is smiling from ear to ear.

– Should I really go to Thailand with you?

I nod.

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– We'll go on a little tour or stay in one place, whatever you want.

“Too good to be true,” he whispers and snuggles into me. – I'll even go with you to the street market and eat something from the stall.

– We will go to Khao Sok National Park together. We will stay in a bungalow in Khao Lak.

- Sounds nice.

Ruby turns to the side and kisses my jaw. Over and over again.
He showers my face with kisses and moves lower and lower. I take a deep breath when I feel her tongue on my neck. It immediately goes back up and freezes just above my face. Her eyes had never looked so green.

“I love you, James,” he whispers.

My heart does a somersault. I lean down and brush my lips against hers. I hear when he stops breathing.

"I love you too, Ruby Bell."

When I kiss her again, all thoughts of the past are enveloped in a fog that grows thicker the closer I pull her to me.

I take her face in my hands, pull her closer, closer. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice the blanket falling from her shoulders. After a while, he gets up from the chair and sits on my lap, just like that time in the apartment.

This time I don't want to risk being interrupted. I hug her tighter and stand up, not letting her go. We continue kissing as we return to the house, and only when I reach the stairs do I break away from her and look down so as not to trip. Inside, I set her down on the floor, but I don't let go of my arms. I close the sliding door. I lean back against it.

- Are you cold? – I ask hoarsely. – I can light a fire in the fireplace.

Ruby looks at me with green eyes and finally slowly shakes her head.
He takes a step towards me, then another. He places his hands on my stomach, moves them higher to my chest, and I gasp for breath.

“I missed this,” he whispers, his fingers on my chest. – Your closeness.

“Me too,” I reply just as quietly.

Although almost half a year has passed since our last time, there were many nights and days when I thought about nothing else. That's what I wanted

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this, with her. I wanted to brush her hair out of her face, caress her chin, kiss her as deeply as possible.

But there was never a good time for it. Until now.

Nothing can stop us now; there is a confidence in my movements that I also see in her. The intensity of my feelings would terrify me if it weren't so wonderful to have her with me, in my life, in my arms.

Her hands roam over my body, while I lift the edge of her blouse.
I gently stroke the warm skin. Ruby imitates my gestures. He slips his hands under my shirt, runs his fingertips over my stomach and hips, higher and higher. I am covered with goosebumps, the blood rushes through my veins. It's ringing in my ears so much that I can barely hear Ruby's soft breathing, which gets faster and faster with each of my touches.

With trembling hands, I take off her blouse. She does the same to mine and then wraps her arms around me and presses her lips to my chest. Her lacy beige bra scratches me slightly and makes the bulge in my pants grow much larger.

“You smell like James,” Ruby whispers, her lips on my collarbone. I laugh breathlessly.

- It's rather good.

She nods, her hair tickling my chin.

– Even very good.

I stroke her back and run my hands over her shoulders, lower and lower, along her spine. I place one hand in the tiny hollow of the small of my back and pull him towards me, to which he responds with a loud sigh. He looks at me again.
I brush her hair away from her face and kiss her again. I move my lips, slide my tongue into her mouth, enjoy her moan and let myself be carried away. My body takes control.
Out of nowhere I push Ruby towards the bed.
When she touches him with her knees, she stills.

- All right? – I ask hoarsely with my hand on her cheek.

He confirms with a movement of his head. Her eyes shine feverishly.

I lean down, slide my lips across her cheek, to the corner of her mouth, across her chin, to her neck. I kiss her throat, feel her touch my back. She grabs my shoulders, holding on to them as I gently bite her skin with my teeth and begin to suck. I hear him hold his breath and at the same time he clings to me tighter.

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“Wonderful,” he whispers.

I'm not in a hurry. Finally, I leave her neck and work on her shoulders and collarbone. I explore her cleavage with my lips, touch her breasts, press them gently, move my hands to her belly, which I also cover with kisses.
I slowly place my hand on her pants and look up.

- Okay too?

Her eyes literally seem to glow as she confirms with a nod of her head.

I don't stop, I undo the button, then the zipper of her jeans, and slide them off. She's wearing black panties that make my heart beat faster. I straighten up. Ruby quickly finds the waistband of my pants.
He stands on his tiptoes and kisses me, harder and harder, while he gropes to undo the buckle. She finally succeeds and my pants end up on the floor as well.

Ruby falls back onto the soft covers and I follow her, still kissing her. Actually, I still have so much to say, but right now all words are choked by desire that drowns out everything else.
Ruby wraps her leg around my waist and pulls me even closer to her.

I don't remember why I wanted to take it slowly. My hands take on a life of their own as they roam her body. I touch her everywhere, I want to know all of her, feel everything. I press myself against her, right between my legs, and I almost lose control when I hear her moan. He touches me with hot hands, bites my lower lip as I repeat the movement.

I take her by the arms and pull her up a little to a half-sitting position.
I continue to kiss her while I reach behind her back and fumble for the clasp of her bra. My fingers tremble so much that I only manage to do it the third time. Ruby smiles and lets the straps slide off her shoulders, then takes off her bra.

For a long time I just stare at her. The sight of her naked skin
disheveled hair and the twinkle in her eyes is breathtaking.

We move simultaneously; she falls back on the bed, I lean over her and kiss her with my hands on either side of her head. Our tongues intertwine while her hands find my boxers.

He hesitates, whispers something into my mouth. I pull back a little and look at her in eyes.

- All right? – he repeats my question with a smile. I nod breathlessly.

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He shyly slides my boxers down my hips. I help her a little and then take off her panties. I turn around, reach for my pants, pick them up off the floor, and take the condom out of my wallet. Ruby watches as I place her on the bed next to us and lean down again.

The fire in her eyes makes my heart beat even faster.
He puts his arms around my neck and finds my mouth. I could go on like this forever: being in bed with her, naked, kissing until the past and the future disappear, only us exist. As far as I'm concerned, this moment could last forever.

Ruby strokes my back, lower and lower, I feel her hands on my buttocks. He arches his back and sighs softly, feeling my hardness.
I'm gradually losing control of myself. The next kiss is even more passionate, almost desperate, and suddenly I feel Ruby digging her nails into my back. Now it's me who can't stop moaning. I don't breathe, I slide off of her to put the condom on.

I lie on my side so I can see her face. Her eyes misted over
lust, but I have no doubt what he wants.

And then there are no more questions. We move simultaneously. I cover her with me and she wraps her legs around my hips and pulls me towards her. I enter her in one move. The feeling is so overwhelming that I close my eyes for a moment and freeze.

I run my fingers over her temple and then across her cheek. Opens eyes.
Only then do I start moving slowly. I pull out of her and back in, never taking my eyes off her beautiful face.
He moves with me, tangles his hand in my hair and holds me tight.

I've never experienced anything like this in my life. What we do is based on unconditional trust. I give her everything and she gives all of herself to me.

Whereas before, sex was all about finishing, now it's about much more. With Ruby, there's no goal I'm working towards.
There is only us and the emotions that fill me from head to toe.

I don't have to tell her how much I love her. I show it to her with my whole body, with every tender, deep kiss, with every thrust of my hips, with the way I hold her to me, when she shivers beneath me and when I, too, allow myself to be completely carried away.

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22

Ruby

For the next week I can't stop thinking about the times I spent with James in Brightwell-cum-Sotwell. And for another one. And another one.

I don't forget what it felt like to have him next to me, to feel his hands on my body, his breath in my ear. It was just the two of us that night, and at various moments I find myself remembering her.

I dream of turning back time and going back to those moments.

While having breakfast with my family, I remember that morning, the delicious fresh bread and James' smile as he passed me the jam.

As I study for my final exams, I remember the apartment he showed me and how we would lie next to each other and imagine how we would decorate it if he actually bought it.

And in the evenings, when I'm trying to sleep, I hear his voice as he whispers in my ear, breathless, hoarse, as he tells me how much he loves me and that he has never been so happy in his life.

“Earth to Ruby,” Lin says.

Startled from my thoughts, I turn my head.

- I'm listening? Sorry, I was lost in thought.

Lin looks at me sideways.

- I noticed. Everything's all right?

I feel my cheeks flush and I nod vigorously.

- Yes. What were you

saying? – That your bag looks like it's about to burst at the seams. – Lin points to the James bag on my shoulder. I brought it to school again for the first time and I've packed so much into it that I'm constantly afraid the belt will break.

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I carefully adjust it on my shoulder.

– I know, but James said this morning that he'll make it, and that's what I'm counting on.

“Well, if James said so…” Lin opens the door to the library and lets me through.

– Do you also feel like you're going to go crazy from stress at any moment? – I ask as we walk through the shelves towards the meeting room. Whenever I think about the final exams that are just around the corner and how much work the organizing committee still has to do before the last two events of the year, I feel so panicky that even my beloved ASMR videos don't help. The closer to the end of the third trimester, the higher the pressure.

“I went crazy a long time ago,” Lin replies. – Besides, I have no idea what to prepare for Saturday.

– I told you that we could buy a joint gift.

Do not agree.

– No, I don't think it makes sense. You're almost her sister-in-law, but apart from that That's why I'm not as friends with her as you are. But thanks for the offer.

I exhale loudly.

– Let me know if I can help you in any way.

Lin smiles.

– You just said that you would soon go crazy, and now you're offering to help me. Typical Ruby.

– Typical Ruby? – I raise an eyebrow.

- Well, you know. Take on too many responsibilities and then cry - he replies with a smile.

I show her my tongue.

– But we'll prepare the baby shower together, right? - I'm asking.

- Of course. What are we actually doing? Cards or cups?

– Maybe both? It will be more diverse. Mom has so many little things at home that we don't have to buy anything.

“Did Lydia's aunt finally send you the photos?” And did she reveal what the main theme would be? Will there be such a thing at all?

I shake my head in denial.

- Do not even ask. According to Lydia, Ophelia has gone completely crazy. She buys anything she can get her hands on, as long as it's colorful. Lydia says that will be the theme.

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– Colorful? Lin glances at me suspiciously. – It's not a motive.

- I know. – I shrug. – But Ophelia seems to think otherwise.

“Okay, then we need to do something…” Lin stops mid-sentence.
He stops suddenly. I look at her in surprise, then follow her gaze.

And I hold my breath.

Cyril is standing in front of the entrance to our room.

It looks better than in recent weeks. He doesn't look like he came to school straight from a crazy party. Ironed uniform, perfectly tied tie, neatly styled hair. He has shaved and the dark circles under his eyes are no longer so terrifyingly dark. It looks almost the same as before.

–Lin? – I whisper, but my friend is still in a trance.

He swallows hard, straightens up, and a second later continues talking as if nothing had happened.

“We have to come up with something,” he finishes the previous sentence. – I don't have any plans for today. Why don't we make these cards today?

I blink rapidly, confused, but then I nod.

- Of course.

- Cool. – You have to know her well to see how tense she is, how artificial her freedom is. – So everything's settled.

We reach the door. Cyril breaks away from the wall and straightens up. Lin stops next to him. They look at each other without saying a word for a moment.

I quietly enter the meeting room.

I fail to ask Lin why Cyril was waiting for her. Camille and Doug arrive right after me, accompanied by Kieran, and two minutes later Jessalyn and James arrive. After the meeting, Lin takes us home in her car, and although I'm dying to know, I don't want to question her in front of James.

Now James has gone to meet with a woman interested in buying his shares in Beaufort, and Lin, Ember, and I are sitting on the floor of my room cutting out rompers out of cardboard. We will write the children's gender and possible dimensions on them. I feel like if I don't ask Lin soon, I'll burst.

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– What did Cyril want? – I say so vigorously that Lin flinches reflexively. Ember looks up. He looks between us for a moment, then notices Lin's tense shoulders. Without a word, he reaches for another piece of cardboard and draws rompers with a white crayon.

Lin stares at the cut out template.

– He wanted to apologize to me.

I knit my eyebrows.

- And?

Shrugs.

– And that's it.

I put down the felt-tip pen.

– But how was it? He was… affectionate? – That's not a word I associate with anything with Cyril, but I feel there is something more behind Lin's silence.

- I do not know. That was weird.

- In what sense? – I ask carefully.

– He said we would meet for the baby shower this weekend anyway, and he didn't want anything unclear between us. He even asked if I'd rather he didn't go there. - Judging by Lin's voice, this is the strangest proposition Cyril has ever uttered.

– He also apologized to me. He's probably going through a profound transformation - I quit. – James believes that he is genuinely sorry for all these mistakes.

“I think he's just looking for an excuse not to be at the party,” Ember comments without looking up.

I blink in surprise.

– How so?

Ember shrugs indifferently.

– Lin says he was acting strange. He certainly doesn't want to look at the girl he loves in the company of her lover.

- You think so? – I'm not entirely convinced.

It sounds very depressing coming from Ember. My sister is usually more optimistic about life and looks for the good in everyone, while I take everything apart.

However, I have long suspected that something is wrong with her. He works obsessively on the blog, barely leaves his room, and when I ask if everything is OK, he immediately changes the subject. Until recently, I was wondering

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I wonder who he spends so much time with, now I wonder why he doesn't do it anymore.

And why he still thinks he can't talk to me.

– In my opinion, Cyril has reached the bottom from which he is starting to bounce back. After what you told me, I think it's a sign of respect that he asked you. – I'm trying to encourage Lin. – It certainly wasn't easy for him.

That's right: you don't want it to be there?

Lin strongly denies this.

– No, that would be childish. We're both going to Oxford and there too we will see each other sometimes. I'm not going to tell him to get lost.

– Actually, you could. Purely theoretical.

The corners of her mouth twitch slightly. She tucks her hair behind her ear and reaches for the scissors again.

– Besides, I'm over it.

I look at her carefully. When we last talked about Cyril, it was clear that she was very emotionally involved. Now I'm not so sure about that.

"I'm sure Lydia will understand if you don't come," I suggest carefully.

"No," he answers immediately. - NO. I want to be there. Anyway, who knows, maybe I'll meet someone there.

These words surprise me, but they also make me happy. It looks like Lin is really ready for a new relationship. I don't tell her that apart from us, Ophelia's friends will be guests at the party. I am happy for her and smile happily.

– Ruby, can I paint a penis on some rompers?

The sudden change of topic catches me off guard at first, but then I try to control my smile.

– If you must… You're welcome. I just don't know what Lydia thinks about it.

"Lydia will be delighted," Ember replies. He takes one of my favorite glitter markers and draws male genitalia on one of the cardboard rompers.

– Does it have to be so big? – I say dryly, but Ember just shrugs.

- Cool. – Lin is smiling from ear to ear. – I'll paint something funny too.

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I sigh loudly. I'm looking through the templates we downloaded from Pinterest. In each romper, you need to make a small hole through which you can then thread a string and hang it. Each pair has decorative inscriptions and sweet patterns. Ember's masterpiece doesn't have much to do with it, but if it makes her laugh, I don't have a problem with that.

“Lydia and Graham will definitely appreciate our creativity,” he murmurs, decorating the penis.

“For sure,” Lin echoes her and draws something on the other sleepers with concentration. After a while, he picks them up and looks at them critically, and then shows them to us. She painted the Superman symbol.

Ember shouts triumphantly.

“Damn, the cape should have been cut out,” he mutters to himself.

“Next time,” I say thoughtlessly. Ember and Lin look at each other and then at me with a twinkle in their eyes. After a while, they reach for new sheets of cardboard and make changes to the ready-made templates.

I have no choice but to follow suit and soon all we care about is coming up with the most outlandish design possible and making ourselves laugh.

And so we have rompers of an angel with wings, a hockey player with a stick and Lin's masterpiece - a bikini with fruit and a little devil. What amuses me the most is the not-so-successful horse head, Ember's pride. Every time I look at him, I can't help but burst out laughing again.

There is a knock on the door.

- Please! – I say.

James pokes his head into the room.

“Hello, beautiful,” Ember says in a comically low voice. All three of us laugh at the top of our lungs.

James steps inside and looks around, amused. – You're having

a great time, I see.

– See what cards we made for the baby shower! Choose the best one. – Lin points to the cardboard rompers that take up almost the entire floor.

– Is that…? - James doesn't finish the sentence, tilts his head slightly.

– A unicorn, of course. – Ember rolls her eyes comically. – As if it was so hard to recognize.

– He looks more like a piglet. And with a lot of imagination.

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- Hi! – Outraged, Ember pulls a pillow from my bed and throws it at James. Unfortunately, the bullet lands at his feet. James smiles crookedly.

– I just wanted to let you know that I'm back. And Angus says that dinner will be ready soon, so you can go down.

– How was your meeting? - I'm asking.

– Very good – he replies. – This woman knows everything about the company and impressed me as a competent person. I guess it's not just about having a piece of the pie, she's really interested in Beaufort's development.

– What does your instinct tell you? – I ask carefully.

James has been looking for a suitable buyer for his shares for many weeks, but only met Fiona Green in person. Beaufort is his mother's life's work. I guess he doesn't want to admit to himself how much he cares about finding the right person.

“He tells me I shouldn't wait too long,” he replies.

– My grandmother always says that instinct is the best advisor when a person has to make an important decision, Lin notes. Ember nods.

– You have to be sure, otherwise it won't be good.

“I'm rarely sure right away,” James replies. – I need time to properly evaluate someone, not to be guided by first impressions. But next Tuesday I'll see her again. Maybe this time it will be easier for me to make a decision.

– Very good – says Ember. He picks up a cardboard unicorn. – And if you need support, you can always reach out to Ernie.

James smiles slightly.

- I'll remember that.

– I think we're done, right? – Lin asks.

- Yes. – I look around. We have too much of it.

He raises his arms above his head, stretches, straightens his legs, touches his hands and feet. I hear her bones crack and I recoil in fear.

“It's wonderful that you're preparing all this for Lydia,” James says. When he finds my eyes, his smile changes. He becomes more open.
More warmth in it. More tenderness. It's a smile only for me, a smile full of secrets that only we know. The longer he looks at me, the more dry my throat becomes. And it makes me feel even hotter.

I nervously gather the cut-out shapes into one place. I'm sitting in my room with my little sister. At the moment, absolutely not

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I can think about James' naked body.

– Shall we go down? – says Ember. – Dad wrote that dinner is ready. – He picks up his phone and shows us the message. At the same time, I see that another one has arrived, but before I read the sender's name, Ember turns the phone towards her. Her face darkens as she reads it.

He turns off the phone, puts his hands on the floor and stands up.

James and Lin are already at the door when I briefly grab my sister's arm.

“You can talk to me, Ember,” I whisper. - Always

and about everything. You know that, right?

He looks first at my hand, then at my face. It seems to be rolling internal struggle, but in the end he shakes his head.

– Not about that, little sister.

Before I can react, I follow Lin and James downstairs.

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23

Lydia

– The guests have arrived! - I scream when I see James, Ruby, Ember and Lin, as soon as I open the door. I grab my brother's hand and pull him inside. The girls follow him in.

“It's called a greeting,” James says and hugs me warmly.
He pulls me closer to him, and then his eyes catch on something in the hall.
He raises an eyebrow. – Is that…?

– A giant heart of roses? Yes. – I walk up to Ember, Lin, and Ruby and say hello to each of them.

“You look great, Lydia,” Ember says.

I smooth out the soft material of my green wallet dress, cut in such a way that my belly, which in my opinion couldn't get any bigger, is beautifully highlighted.

“I think so too,” Graham comments behind my back.

I turn to him with a smile. I take his hand, our fingers intertwine.

I can't describe how wonderful it feels to be able to do this, no matter where we are or who sees us. Last night we talked about whether it would be weird if my friends, some of them his students, saw us, but we decided not to bother with it. Graham is my boyfriend and the father of my children. I want to touch him whenever and wherever I want.

Now I turn to the others, look into their eyes and see only joy and sincerity in them. No one seems to be fazed by the sight of us holding hands.

– You look great too – I say and admire their outfits.

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I usually love warmth, summer is my favorite season, but with my belly and swollen legs I would rather prefer autumn. Or winter.
And preferably winter in Antarctica.

Although a baby shower in Antarctica would probably not be the best idea.

"I hear the party's already started," Ruby remarks with a smile. It has
he probably means the music coming from the garden.

– Ophelia has been dancing in the garden since the morning. She wanted to get me into it, but I dropped out after two minutes, I reply. – I preferred to supervise the arrangement of the buffet. There will be a three-tier cake and lots of muffins.

“I love muffins,” Ember says animatedly. He holds up a huge package wrapped in polka-dot paper and gives me a questioning look. – Where should I take the gift?

“Follow me,” I say and want to lead them into the garden, but James grabs my hand. I let go of Graham's hand and look at him expectantly.

“We have one more unexpected guest,” my brother says.

My first thought was: hopefully not the father.

But then I remember that James knows me better than that
anyone else and wouldn't do something like that to me.

He walks to the door and looks outside. Someone else enters the house. Someone I've never seen in jeans and a regular shirt in my life.

-Percy! – I scream and throw my arms around my former chauffeur.

“I'm very glad to see you in good shape, Miss Beaufort,” he replies stiffly. He hugs me back. Suddenly I realize how familiar his scent is. It smells of leather seats and aftershave that I've known since childhood. After a while we break apart. “Your brother invited me,” he explains. – I hope you don't mind.

– Against it? - I shout in disbelief and look between him and James. – This is a wonderful surprise!

I let him into the house.

"Percy, this is my boyfriend, Graham." Graham, meet Percy – I'm introducing them. They shake hands. – Ophelia will fall dead on yours

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view - I say excitedly and turn towards the garden. – Shall we go outside?

The others nod. I take Graham's hand again. Together we go to the orangery, the door of which is open. We go out to the garden.

“Oh my God,” I hear Lin whisper behind me.

– Now you understand what I meant when I said “colorful”, I say over his shoulder. I watch their reaction when they see the decorations.

The central part of the garden is occupied by a green platform. Floating above him are countless helium-filled balloons, weighed down with tiny lanterns to keep them from flying away. A buffet was set up next to the house. Among the tiny pots of flowers and cacti, the guests are already waiting for their first drinks and snacks, the thought of which has been making my mouth water for a long time. Lanterns, balloons and streamers attract attention throughout the garden.

Ophelia sees us from a distance and runs towards us. She is wearing a floral dress and her red hair is tied in a loose bun.

- Hello!

Her eyes widen when she sees Percy. She hesitates for a moment, but then she approaches him and hugs him warmly.

- What a surprise!

"Hello, Ophelia," Percy says quietly, and adds something in a whisper that he doesn't I hear it because at that moment the doorbell rings again.

– Will you come with me? – I turn to Graham, and when he nods, I say to the others: - Help yourselves with some snacks, we'll be back soon.

We return through the conservatory to the front door. Before I open them, Graham grabs my hand. I give him a questioning look. He leans down and kisses me tenderly. I instinctively close my eyes and snuggle into him.
Our bodies literally merge into one. After a moment, he breaks away from me and looks into my eyes with a faint smile on his lips.

– What was that for? – I ask hoarsely.

He shakes his head.

- Just.

These are ordinary words, and yet my heart does a somersault. In the past, we couldn't do anything just like that.

But now the whole world is open to us.

I reach up on my tiptoes again to kiss him. The bell rings again. Graham laughs softly, and I laugh like I'm caught in the act

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deed, I squint and finally open the door.

At first, all I see is a giant gift - a pink teddy bear.
The bow around his neck is probably twice the size of my head.
He moves to the left and then I see Alistair's face. He is smiling from ear to ear.

– Delivery for Lydia Beaufort.

Kesh laughs quietly at his side. I look down and see them holding hands. Bewildered, I swallow. I think I have a question written all over my face, but Kesh just smiles and steps through the door. He hugs me warmly.

“Thanks for inviting me, Lydia,” he says in that dark voice of his.

He breaks away from me and shakes Graham's hand. Meanwhile, Alistair struggles to fit through the door with a giant teddy bear, and when he finally succeeds, he throws it to the ground and wipes the sweat from his forehead with comic exaggeration, as if he's had a grueling workout. Then he hugs me, even tighter than Kesh.

He holds out his hand to Graham.

– Good morning, professor.

“Graham, please,” my beloved responds immediately.

Alistair nods.

- Sure thing. – He looks around Ophelia's house curiously. – I couldn't wait to see what would happen here today. I've never been to a baby shower before. Do you unwrap presents right away or...?

– I would like to! – I snort.

“Ophelia planned everything down to the minute,” Graham explains with a smile. – There will be time for gifts after eating. Although as far as I'm concerned, we can start right now. Because this looks very interesting - He points to Alistair's gift. I want to pull the teddy bear towards me to examine it more closely, but Alistair quickly snatches it from the floor.

“No way,” I hear his muffled voice from behind the stuffed animal.

“I think Wren and Cyril just arrived,” Kesh remarks. Looks at
outside, where an ancient car had just stopped.

– Why didn't you all come together? – I ask, amazed.

– Wren wanted to test his junk. And the four of us didn't
We couldn't fit in it at all, says Kesh.

– Certainly not with this one. – Graham points to the gift.

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– Is it my imagination or do I smell dough? Jesus, I think I'm really smelling cake.
– Alistair leans out from behind the stuffed animal.

I can barely hold back my laughter.

– Go now. You know the way, right?

Alistair nods. He and Kesh walk down the hall, and my heart leaps with joy when I see Kesh put his hand on his back and stroke it lightly. I knew they were friends, but I didn't expect that one day they would become a couple, and that's exactly what it looks like. I shift my gaze to Graham, who is also watching them, and then he smiles at me.

– Apparently there's a party here? Wren asks. I turn around and see him and Cyril approaching the front door. Like Kesh and Alistair, they are wearing shirts. I wonder if they've made an appointment.

When I look at Cyril, my heart leaps into my throat. It's always a strange feeling to face each other after an argument. We haven't had contact since that phone call and I don't know how to behave towards him now.

“I guess so,” I say, a little too late, and return Wren's hug as he pulls me closer to him.

“Oh, man,” he gasps. He pushes his sunglasses to the top of his head and looks at my stomach. – I thought we hadn't seen each other for a while.

– I camouflaged myself well.

“I can see it now,” he murmurs. He looks inside the house. – Everyone's here?

– Yes, in the garden.

He nods and heads down the hall himself.

And the three of us stay. There is an awkward silence.

“Hi,” Cyril finally says hoarsely. Just like Wren has on his nose sunglasses so I can't see his eyes.

– Hello – I reply. – Nice of you to drop by.

Cyril swallows and forces a smile.

- Thanks for the invitation. – Finally he takes off his glasses and puts them on shirt pocket.

Cyril and Graham stand facing each other with pursed lips. The atmosphere is so tense that I instinctively hold my breath.

Finally Cyril clears his throat.

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– Professor, I wanted to…

And silence again.

I hear Graham exhale loudly.

“Graham, Cyril,” I say.

One second passes, then another. Finally Cyril nods.

– Good – he replies. –Graham.

I take a step forward to greet Cyril with a hug like the others. He seems surprised, doesn't react at first, and only after a few seconds does he pull me towards him - slowly, timidly, as if he was afraid of scaring me away if he hugged me too tightly. It's so very familiar.

Right now, he's the guy I've known my whole life and who I could count on whenever I needed him.

– Are we okay? – he asks and moves away a little. He looks at me intently, and I see in his eyes the same anxiety and confusion that I feel.

“Not yet,” I answer honestly. There's a dark gleam in his eyes. He opens his mouth to say something, probably that he can go if I want him to, but I don't let him say a word. – But it will be someday.

Definitely.

With that, I close the door behind him and lead Graham into the garden.

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24

Ember

We've only been here an hour and I can already confidently say that I love Ophelia Beaufort. And not only because the baby shower decorations are so colorful that you simply can't be sad, but mainly because Lydia's aunt is simply great.

She is one of those housewives who make everyone immediately feel good in their home, even if they have never been there before. It only took fifteen minutes for her to press a non-alcoholic drink into my hand and talk to me and Ruby about her future plans. She admitted that she reads my blog and follows the comments under each entry. I couldn't help but like her in this situation.

Unfortunately, my euphoria does not last long, because soon Wren enters the garden. The others greet him warmly, while I turn to Lin and engage her in conversation about her mother's gallery. I couldn't look at him.

I knew today wouldn't be easy. It hurts that I've lost him as a friend, and even though I promised myself I wouldn't let anything be known, at first the deep pressure in my chest is too severe, and I have to ask Lin to repeat what she said because she doesn't mean anything to me. arrived.

Afterwards, I try to ignore his presence and not cringe whenever he laughs. I am happy when at one point Ophelia comes up to me, takes my hand and leads me to a large canvas stretched in the further part of the garden.

“How sweet,” I say, seeing what's painted on it: two little turtles, clinging to a bunch of balloons rising into the sky. – Is this your work?

Ophelia nods. She's so proud of it that it makes me want to laugh.

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– I found the pattern on Pinterest.

I glance at the palette on the wooden table next to the canvas.
- What should I do?

– These are paints for painting with hands – he explains. – You fill it with colors balloons and turtle shells, yeah.

Under her watchful eye, I dip my thumb first in green and then yellow paint and stamp it on the rough canvas. The harsh sunlight reflects off the pale canvas, blinding me and making my eyes water, but judging by Ophelia's enthusiastic comments, I did a great job.

– Fantastic, Ember. You have a talent! – He smiles radiantly.
I'm intrigued as to how he can tell from a few thumbprints, but I'm glad anyway.

– Have you painted before? – I'm looking at some balloons filled with color.

“Yes, mine is this one,” he replies.

– With glitter! Where did you get the glitter? I don't see him anywhere. - I'm looking around.

– Ho, ho, you have really good taste. – Ophelia is smiling from ear to ear. “Lydia said not to overdo it, so I took the glitter, but if you want I'll get it right away.”

I shake my head.

– No, you don't have to. But you had a great idea with this painting.

– I haven't done anything else for four weeks except looking for baby shower inspiration. I had to limit myself anyway, because the garden would be bursting at the seams.
Anyway, you can probably see it... - He makes an arc with his hand. – Hey, Percy, you have to paint something too! – he shouts suddenly.

The chauffeur, a dozen or so meters from us, is pouring himself a glass grapefruit lemonade, stiffens rapidly.

– I… Well. Do you really think so?

Ophelia dismisses his objections with a wave of her hand.

Percy glances longingly at the buffet once more, then sighs comes to us.

I heard my mother raving about it, and I must admit I now know why. He is really very nice, has a low voice and a warm smile. I find it very amusing that he addresses Ophelia, Lydia and James so formally even in a sea of colorful balloons.

“Take the yellow one,” Ophelia says.

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– Why yellow?

– Because it's a sunny color, and it's supposed to be a cheerful image.

Their mutual attitude, the ease with which Ophelia gives him the paints, his smile, now less formal and more cordial, reveal that they have known each other for a very long time.

Percy takes yellow paint, dips his thumb in it and stamps on the canvas. His it is much larger in diameter than mine.

"How on earth did you manage to get Percy to paint?" – suddenly I hear James' voice behind me.

I turn around.

– He's doing well, isn't he…?

The words stick in my throat. I tense up.

Wren is standing next to James, staring intently at me. looks like as if he wanted to say something to me.

I'm not ready for this.

When he opens his mouth, I react instinctively: I mutter something under my breath, turn on my heel and run towards the house.

I run through the conservatory and down the narrow corridor to the guest bathroom. I close the door behind me, breathe deeply, and desperately try to control my racing heart. I go to the sink, run my hands and wrists under cold water, and wash my neck.

I stare for a long time at the yellow-brown tiles, here and there decorated with images of dogs. Ophelia has strange but charming taste that stirs something in me. Maybe it's the pollen outside, maybe the tiles with the dogs on them, or maybe, although it's very unlikely, it's Wren's fault that my eyes are suddenly welling up with tears.

I'm trying as hard as I can to control myself and pull myself together. It's supposed to be a beautiful day. I won't let Wren's presence ruin it for me.

I check to make sure I haven't smeared my makeup, wash my hands again, and open the door.

I turn right... And I almost bump into someone.

“There you are,” Wren says.

I stare at him. He talks to me like I'm his companion that he was looking for and finally found. As if we arrived together.

What fucking bullshit.

I take a step back.

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- What do you want? - I'm asking.

“To talk to you if you have a moment,” he replies.

I can't escape his gaze, and I thought I was the one dealing the cards. Apparently I told myself that too.

“I don't know,” I say helplessly. I look around to see if anyone can overhear us. I have no idea what I would say to Ruby if she caught me with Wren in a dark hallway. How would I explain to her that it's because of him that I haven't been home much lately and that I played truant? That I wanted to be with him because he awakened something in me that I had never felt before.

I don't think she understood me. Especially since I don't understand myself.

– We really need to talk. It can't go on like this.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” I reply quietly.

Wren cringes almost imperceptibly. A new one appears on his face, like a defenseless expression.

“Ember, I have to tell you something,” he whispers after a moment.

All the bad thoughts that plagued me after that meeting in front of my school come back in full force.

You're not good enough. You ended up in a certain pigeonhole again, as you always do when you meet new people.

– If you fed me lies before, I don't know if I want to know the truth now – I say bitterly, maliciously, not like me at all. I wonder how he does it. How does it make me think like this, even though I try so hard to have only positives in my life? I can't lose this fight. I just can not.

Wren takes a step towards me. Now we are only half a meter away.

“I lied when I said we were friends, Ember.

I feel severe pain.

I knew.

I already knew when he asked me for the first time. I'm furious with myself for my idiotic curiosity that constantly makes me cling to new people.

A storm is rising inside me, it wants to take me away, but I resist with all my strength.

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- You know what? I don't have to hear it, I say through clenched teeth. I want to get past him. – Let me through, please.

“Ember,” he says excitedly.

I stubbornly do not look at his face, I stare at his chest.

“You didn't understand me,” he continues quietly, but with the same intensity. – I don't just want to be your friend. I want to be… something more.

The thoughts in my head stop abruptly.

I look up at him, but I can't utter a single word.

Wren clears his throat and takes a deep breath.

– When we first met, I just wanted to have fun. But then I got to know you better and discovered that you are a wonderful person. I started to miss you, even though we were in constant contact. I looked forward to every meeting. I could always count on you, even though I didn't give much in return, and gradually I realize something. – As he talks, he gets hoarser and hoarser, and has to clear his throat again to continue. – I like you, Ember. Even more than I like. I think I'm losing my mind for you.

All I have in my ears is the noise and his words. I try to understand them, to understand what is happening, but it is beyond me.

I just keep looking at him in silence.

– I realize that you are not me in this respect
interested. I also know…

It snaps me out of my stupor.

– Who says that? – I don't let him finish.

He opens his mouth and closes it again.

– But who says what?

– That I want nothing to do with you in this respect. Who said that?

– You. At our first meeting at Maxton Hall. You gave me
very clearly to understand what you think about me. And I respect that.

– Do you mean that evening when, after about two seconds of knowing you, you wanted to kiss me even though you were already a little tipsy? – I ask in disbelief.

Wren swallows hard.

- Yes.

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– I didn't know you at all then! Listen, I need time to
trust someone, let alone kiss someone.

At first Wren doesn't answer, then he just sighs softly.

I feel my heart pounding in my chest. This moment is so intense it makes me feel dizzy.

– Why didn't you want me on your windowsill anyway? – I ask quietly.

Wren scratches the back of his neck.

- I was afraid. I was afraid of my friends' reactions when they entered our new home for the first time. I was afraid of Ruby and James's reaction when they found out we were dating. In a way, I was also afraid of my own feelings. At that moment everything came crashing down on me.

– And I thought you didn't want to show your friends in mine
company, and it hurt a lot.

Wren vigorously denies with a shake of his head.

- No its not like that. Absolutely not like that, Ember. It was about… I wasn't ready.

– If I had known about it, I wouldn't have reacted so violently.

“I should have told you everything,” he admits. – I was terrified that I would do something wrong in front of you and scare you… I don't know. But there's no way in hell I want this to be the end. You are too important to me.

– You're important to me too, Wren. That's why I suffered so much -
I whisper.

- Yes?

I nod slightly.

And then the smile gradually returns to his face, that carefree, crooked smile that I had noticed during our first meeting.
Over time, I started to like it a lot.

And now that I haven't seen him for so long, he makes me look good from head to toe I shudder.

– So what now, Supergirl? – he asks quietly.

He stands relaxed, but there is uncertainty in his brown eyes.

“I don't know,” I say, and I really mean it. I don't know how to deal with everything I've heard from him. My heart is pounding like crazy, the butterflies in my stomach are taking flight.

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“Tell me what you want, Ember,” he asks. – Should we still just be friends? Can we be more? Would you like me to get out of your way so you can go back to the garden with the others?

Can we be more?

It's true that I don't really know what it means, what it means for me, but I think that's what I want.

“You don't have to get out of my way, Wren,” I say firmly.

He breathes a sigh of relief.

- NO?

I slowly shake my head in denial.

- NO.

And that smile again. This time I respond shyly.

– Can I hug you, Ember? – he asks quietly.

I don't answer, I step forward and wrap my arms around his waist. I feel his hands on my back - first a gentle, then a stronger touch. I close my eyes and try very hard not to think, just enjoy the moment.

Just a few hours ago I wanted to cut him out of my life forever. Now he hugs me and I must admit that it is one of the most beautiful things that have happened to me recently.

I haven't lost it, I think as his hand brushes my shoulder blade. I feel his heart beating fast next to me, and it gradually slows down, just like mine.

As if we needed each other to regain peace.

“Wren,” an indignant voice suddenly says. – Could you please explain to me what exactly you are doing with my sister?

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25

Ruby

I can't believe my eyes.

In the middle of the hall in Ophelia's house stand Ember and Wren, hugging each other.

They seem very close to each other, you can immediately see that this is not the first time such a moment between them.

After my words, they jump away from each other and look at me as if I caught them in the act. Ember's expression sets alarm bells ringing in my head. The pieces of the puzzle fall into place very quickly. I remember the past weeks when Ember was acting strangely and making a big secret about how she spent her free time and with whom.

I also remember that she played truant, lied to her friend and me, was constantly staring at the phone and didn't want to talk to me, even though we actually always tell each other everything.

And that's why.

It's all because of Wren.

“I don't believe it,” I say, outraged. – Is he the reason you've been acting so strange lately?

Ember raises her head defiantly.

- It's not your business.

I grit my teeth so hard that I grind them. Ember is right, that's a fact.
He doesn't have to explain himself to me, but it's Wren, damn it!

– I don't care what you do or with whom, as long as you do it with someone decent!

– Damn it, Ruby, stop judging everyone! – he cuts himself off.

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“Ember…” Wren begins soothingly, but she silences him with one
with a sharp gesture.

– I'm sick of your overprotectiveness. It becomes unbearable.

I cringe when I hear words like that.

– I didn't want to be overprotective. I just want… –…

what's best for me? My friends' sisters always take them to parties, but you lecture me on who I can and can't date. In fact, you choose who I can talk to at Maxton Hall parties and assign me a babysitter. Instead of enjoying the time we have left together before you move out, you look down on me.

I feel all the blood drain from my face. Ember has never spoken to me like that before. Something is rising inside me, something powerful, unstoppable.

– Well, I'm really sorry that I don't think the guy who secretly plied me with alcohol at my first high school party and then took advantage of me while I was drunk was good enough for his sister!

Ember's eyes widen. He looks between me and Wren.
And then he shakes his head.

“You didn't do it,” she says to Wren, completely defenseless.

Wren simultaneously denies and confirms with a movement of his head. He spreads his hands.

– It was years ago. Then… I already apologized to her.

Ember's face turns red.

- I don't believe!

– I was an idiot, okay? Now I wouldn't do something like that.

Ember snorts contemptuously.

- Bright. And why did you get my sister drunk, may I ask? For
fun? To do to her what you tried to do to me?

– What did he try with you? – I interject and take a step forward. I'm ready to push Wren away, even punch him if necessary.

“Ruby, I'm not going to apologize over and over again. I'm really sorry I did it then, but I thought we already figured it out.
Ember – she looks at my sister with piercing eyes – everything I just told you is true. I hope you know that.

She looks at him for a long time, then shakes her head.

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– I don't know anything at the moment.

I wonder what he could have said to her, while she turns and walks away down the hall. He runs outside without even giving us a single glance. I feel sick, wondering if I've made a big mistake.

“You hurt her,” Wren says suddenly. I turn around abruptly and glare at him.

– I didn't need you for this, you managed it perfectly on your own. What did you actually do to her?

- I? Nothing. We explained everything and it's exactly like she said, it's really none of your business. Stop trying to control something that doesn't concern you at all.

– I want to protect her! – I shout back. – If you had someone to rely on If you cared about her as much as I cared about her, you'd know how it feels.

Wren opens his mouth to answer me, but someone else doesn't allows him to speak.

- Hi! “I turn around and see Alistair in the doorway. He is pale, his curls are unruly. – I see you're busy at each other's throats right now. Unfortunately, we have a more serious problem.

- Meaning? – Wren anticipates my question.

Alistair swallows hard.

– Mortimer Beaufort is here.

James

The sight of my father makes me feel cold. I instinctively shift my gaze to Lydia, who is laughing uproariously with Lin. I want to spare her the sight of her father at all costs. Let this day be a beautiful memory for her.

Unfortunately, he went straight into the garden and didn't ring the doorbell. When my sister sees him, my heart stops in my throat. She immediately stops laughing, and within seconds all the blood drains from her face.

I'm about to move towards her when I see Graham walking across the lawn towards his father. She stops right in front of him.

“You're not welcome here,” he says sharply.

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The father raises an eyebrow mockingly.

– And you have nothing to say.

– This is our party. If I remember correctly, you were not invited. You won't spoil Lydia's day. – Sutton stands his ground.

He looks like he wants to grab his father by his jacket and throw him out of the garden with his own hands.

I turn to Lydia. He stares at his father and Graham with wide eyes,
and then he finds my gaze.

Do something, he begs me with his eyes. Please.

Without a second thought, I put down the plate on which I've loaded myself with food from the buffet and walk over to my father.

- What are you doing here? - I'm asking.

The father is not in a hurry, he looks lazily around the garden, at the balloons, the paper flowers, the canvas with fingerprints and finally at the buffet. There's a sneer on his lips that makes my blood pump faster.

“I want to talk to you,” he says, so quietly that only I can hear him.

There was silence in the garden as if a poppy had sown. It was as if everyone was holding their breath and waiting to see what would happen. – You don't reply to my messages.

– Where does the idea come from that I even want to talk to you? – I ask coldly.

Something I know all too well flashes in his eyes. Uncontrollable anger that made him raise his hand against me every time. Although I promised myself I would never hit anyone again, that doesn't mean I wouldn't defend myself if they tried.

– Let's go. Graham's right, you won't spoil Lydia's day. – I point to the house. I turn and walk ahead, not looking to see if he followed me. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Ophelia get up and walk over to us.

“Mortimer,” he begins as we enter the conservatory. – You had to visit us today?

Her father doesn't even honor her with a glance.

“It's between me and my son,” he says, ignores her and enters the house. – Stay away from this.

“You made it my business when you sent your daughter to my house,” Ophelia remarks in an icy tone I've never heard from her.

I see my father tense up. He turns to her slowly.

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Just then, Ruby, Wren and Alistair enter the conservatory. They stop abruptly, concern on their faces as they see the tense situation.

“It's okay, Ophelia,” I say.

I have to do everything in my power to get my father out of here as quickly as possible, to keep him away from Lydia and Ruby. I won't allow that.

– Let's go to the dining room – I suggest.

He follows me as I leave the conservatory. In the dining room, I close the door behind us. I slowly turn to him. I've been focusing so much on my feelings these past weeks that now he can easily read them on my face.

– What could be so important that you show up on the day of Lydia's baby shower? – I ask, trying to keep my voice calm.

– I didn't think it was possible for a high school student to get pregnant these days reason to be proud. Besides, no one informs me about her plans.

– Of course, because you would have come if she had invited you.

Unlike mine, the mask on my father's face doesn't even twitch.
You can't read anything from his look. I know I won't get a response to my malice, because my father never allows himself to be provoked when something seems beneath him.

– What do you want, dad? – I ask with forced calm.

Shrugs. Even though it's Saturday and the sun is much hotter than it usually is in May, he's wearing a three-piece black suit, shirt and tie. He is, as always, the perfect businessman.

– I treated your resignation from your seat on the Beaufort board as childish rebellion - he begins. – But five weeks have passed since then.

- And? – I say.

The corners of his mouth turn up, barely noticeable.

– I wonder when you'll realize that you'll never make it sell your shares in the company.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

– According to the law, I have to find a suitable buyer and present him to the management board.

– Do you really think you can convince the board to sell?
Fiona Green's shares?

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My heart stops beating for a moment. I feel my throat suddenly go dry, and my father keeps staring at me. There's a twinkle in his eyes.

No matter where, but he knows about my dealings with Fiona. He knows about my plans. She knows that Fiona's visions of changes in the offer coincide with her mother's. At this moment I am overcome with a terrible feeling.

I swallow hard.

– What do you mean by that?

– I think you know.

I look at him in disbelief. When these words are spoken, my hopes that I will soon be completely free from Beaufort, and my belief that I will pass my mother's legacy into good hands, completely disappear. I can only laugh bitterly.

– I should have expected this.

– You should have known what you were getting into.

I shake my head and look into his eyes.

– You are truly amazing.

He grits his teeth.

– I am trying to save our family legacy, while you are doing everything to ruin it.

– This is not the legacy of our family, but of our mother's family. And Ophelia – I notice. – And I'm not destroying anything. I don't want to have anything to do with this company. You do not understand this?

– You haven't even tried yet. – He smiles bitterly. – On the contrary, as soon as it started to get hot, you started running.

– You almost ruined my girlfriend's future.

You wanted to bribe the man Lydia loves to get out of her life. If you really think I can look you in the eye without feeling sick after all this time, then…” I shake my head. – I don't know what to say anymore.

My father looks at me silently, showing no emotion.

More seconds pass until I can't stand the silence any longer.

– Why did you come here? – I ask again. – To

tell you that I expect you at the board meeting on Monday at three o'clock. – He straightens his shirt cuffs.

– Did you even hear what I said?

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- Yes.

– What if I don't come? Will you make me work there?

It's actually a rhetorical question, but my father doesn't even bat an eyelid.

I stare at him in disbelief.

– You've got to be kidding.

“Son, I would like to end this rift between us,” he begins. – I would like us to work side by side again, on the same team. Just like Cordelia and I planned.

When I hear Mom's name on his lips, it makes me feel sick.

"I can't believe you actually think we'll ever reconcile."

“James,” my father begins, but I just shake my head.

– No, dad. I won't go back to Beaufort. Never.

For a moment there is silence in the room. We look at each other; Father gloomily, I definitely.

And then he reaches into his jacket pocket and takes out his cell phone.

– You don't give me a choice.

I'm starting to feel sick.

- What do you mean?

He doesn't pay attention to me. He writes quickly.

- What are you doing? - I'm asking; I hear fear in my voice.

My father looks up at me. Even though we're the same height, I feel like he's looking down at me and is about to shake his head in disappointment.

– I tried to be kind, but you stubbornly reject the future. And that's why I have no choice but to point you in the right direction
track.

It's impossible not to hear the threat in his words. But I won't give in
intimidate. Not any more.

I take a deep breath.

– You don't have to put me on the right track. I'll find him myself.
And since you only came to threaten me, instead of congratulating your daughter on her pregnancy and enjoying her time with her friends, you can go back and leave us all in peace - I say as calmly as I can.

The father smiles to himself.

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– Did you know that Helen Bell takes bread out of the kitchen almost every day?
the bakery where he works? Even though it's actually forbidden?

The blood freezes in my veins.

– Half a cake here, a few rolls there…

– Otherwise, all this will end up in the trash bin –
I notice quietly. “But it sounds like she's stealing coming from you.”

The father shrugs.

– I wonder if her new boss sees it that way too. Want to find out?

I don't dare move, even an inch.

– And what about hygiene in the restaurant where Angus Bell works? My God, my hands are dropping. I will soon find a dozen or so people who will immediately confirm that they suffered from food poisoning after visiting this restaurant. When the news gets out…' He shrugs. – It's a sad thing.

There was suddenly no air in the dining room. I have nothing to breathe.

– What will Mr. and Mrs. Bell do when they both lose their source of income?

– Dad…

He smacks his lips loudly.

“And there's your girlfriend, Ruby.” “When he says her name, there's so much contempt in his voice that I want to jump down his throat.
But something keeps me stuck in place, as if I were rooted to the floor. – Do you really think he has a chance at Oxford? Not if they withdraw the scholarship at the last minute, right?
The world is spinning around me.

– What will help her then? Certainly not a reference from a teacher who was expelled from school six months later because he was sleeping with a student.

“You wouldn't do that,” I whisper.

– Have I ever thrown words to the wind? – he replies.

My father has gone mad, runs through my mind. He went completely crazy.

– What did Mr. and Mrs. Bell do to you? - I'm asking.

The father paces around the dining room with his hands clasped behind his back. He stops at the window, staring at the garden.

"I told you I'd do anything to save Beaufort's reputation."

– Would you destroy this family?

He stands by the window for a long time, then turns to me and stares at me.

– It's all in your hands, James.

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My head's spinning. I feel like I'm on this carousel when you're standing and everything starts spinning, going higher and higher.

Gradually, I am filled with emptiness.

The happiness I've known over the past weeks, the hope I've allowed myself for the first time in my life - it all fades away until there's nothing left.

Except knowing that I lost.

I feel the mask return to my face as if it had never fallen off.

And then I ask without a trace of emotion: - What should I do?

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26

Ruby

After Mortimer Beaufort left, the pleasant atmosphere was destroyed.

James returns to the garden, pale as a sheet of paper, and when I look into his eyes, I feel panic. When we ask what happened, he waves us off, takes the plate he had previously filled with food, and raises his fork to the table.

paragraph

The party is quickly coming to an end. I'm so worried about James that I don't even notice Ember getting into the car with Wren. At least he has the decency to give me a worried look, but I just shake my head and shrug.

At least this way I will be able to talk calmly with James, whose behavior worries me more and more every moment.

We've been driving towards Gormsey for about half an hour when I finally approach him and take his hand.

“Talk to me,” I whisper.

James, who has been staring out the window, turns his head towards me, then takes my face in his hands and kisses me.

He breaks away from me but keeps touching my face. When I open my eyes, I see that his are still closed.

–James…

His hands are shaking.

“I'm so sorry,” he says hoarsely. - I'm so sorry.

- But what? – I ask nervously and grab his wrists. Currently I would like to have him as close to me as possible. –James, you're scaring me.

He breathes anxiously. I panic seeing how one has affected him meeting with his father.

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- What happened? – I ask, gently stroking his wrist with my thumb.

He enjoys my touch for a few seconds and then falls back into the seat. He hides his face in his hands.

– Father… – He's looking for the right words. – Father won.

The blurry lights of street lamps move past the windows, and yet I have them the impression that time has stood still.

- I'm listening?

– I'm going back to Beaufort on Monday. – He clears his throat quietly. – And go home tonight.

- NO! – I blurt out. – No, James. – I want to take his hand, but he moves away. My heart stops beating for a moment. “No matter what he said, we will find a way out of this situation,” I say earnestly.

– The stakes are too high. I won't risk it.

I shake my head.

–Ruby…

- NO! No matter what he threatened you with, it's not worth your future.

We stare at each other in silence for a long moment, and then James sighs loudly.

– Yes, it is.

– What is he blackmailing you with? – I ask quietly.

James nods with a shake of his head, but I don't give up.

– We promised each other. No more secrets.

–Ruby…

– You gave me your word!

“He threatened to destroy your family,” he finally says. - Not only dreams of Oxford, but everything that is important to you.

Suddenly I can't breathe.

“You've done so much for me,” James continues. – I can't let this happen.

“We…” My voice fails me and I have to clear my throat. – We'll find a way out. He won't make it.

– Ruby, listen to me…

– I don't think so! I won't let you ruin your plans, James. Our plans.

“It's not your choice,” he says, almost painfully soft. Smoothes knuckles my cheek.

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I step away. I frown.

“How can you let him do this to you over and over again?” - I'm asking in disbelief.

James just purses his lips.

“Don't you dare stay silent now,” I say. – We are a team. You can not… You can't just leave now.

He exhales loudly.

– These moments with you and your family are the most beautiful period of my life. It was the only thing that kept me on my feet. You have to believe me, he pleads, but I have no choice.

“There's always a choice,” I argue vigorously. – I won't let you sacrifice your future for me.

His sad smile leaves me breathless. Right now I know I won't be able to convince him.

He's already made up his mind.

I feel a burning sensation under my eyelids, I blink nervously because I'm suddenly lost visual acuity.

– What did he threaten you with? – I ask in a whisper.

“I hope…” James begins hoarsely. - I hope that you will come to terms with my decision and you will not hate me.

I shake my head. His words hit me right in the heart. I want to scream, stomp, do something to get rid of the feeling of helplessness that fills me. Instead, I sit still and look at him.

A single tear rolls down my cheek. James wipes it off with his thumb.

– I couldn't hate you, James.

He pulls me closer to him and buries his face in my hair.

By the time we reach Gormsey an hour and a half later, I am physically and mentally exhausted. We spent the rest of the ride in silence, hugging each other. I tried to calm down, I told myself that I wouldn't lose him, but I found it hard to believe it when I saw the emptiness in his eyes.
Mortimer Beaufort took a piece of his soul today and I hate him all the more. I've never hated anyone so much.

With tears in my eyes, I watch James leave the living room with his duffel bag and say goodbye to his parents, who look at us anxiously, thinking we've had an argument. Only when Ember, who had reached the

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home a little after us, he whispers in their ears that James' father showed up at the party, his mother takes him in her arms.

“You'll always be welcome here,” he says.

James closes his eyes for a moment.

“Thank you,” he whispers. Then he shakes his father's hand and heads for the door.

I take him outside, through the yard, to his car.
Percy returned to the mansion in the Rolls Royce after bringing us here.
Now James opens the trunk and puts his bag in it.

And then he turns to me.

“Okay,” he whispers.

– Okay – I answer.

James bites his lower lip. Looks at me.

– I'll write tomorrow.

I'm afraid I'll start crying if I say anything else, so I just nod. James leans down and kisses me gently. He tries to pull away, but then I grab his arms and pull him towards me. A sound of surprise escapes his lips, but he doesn't break the kiss. He tangles his fingers in my hair and kisses me as desperately as I kiss him.

When we finally break apart, we are both panting heavily. James
he gently brushes my hair away from my face.

“I love you,” he says quietly, turns around and opens the door
driver and gets into the car.

I watch motionless as he drives away, as he disappears around the corner. My heart breaks with grief for him, for myself, for us.

-Ruby? – I hear Ember's quiet voice next to me.

I turn around. She stands at the gate undecided.

- Everything's all right? – he asks.

I open my mouth to answer her, but no words come out, only a sob that surprises me as much as it surprises her. His eyes widen and he runs to take me into his arms.

"Oh, Ruby," he says, stroking my back as I cry.

James

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Even though I don't exceed the speed limit, it feels like the Gormsey cottages are passing by far too quickly behind the glass. At the same time, it feels like I've been in the car forever, even though I only left the Bell house five minutes ago.

It's all in your hands, James, I keep hearing my father's words in my head. *Everything is in your hands.*

If everything is in my hands, why do I feel so helpless?
Why is the world spinning faster and faster, why is there this unbearable pressure in my chest?

My eyes are watering. I wipe them with my shirt sleeve, but it doesn't help. I slow down, pull over, turn off the engine, and rest my forehead against the steering wheel.

My father's voice in my head grows louder until I can't bear it anymore and I want to cover my ears with my hands. All this makes me very angry. I hate losing my temper, I'm furious that my father forced me to walk away from Ruby and her family.

I blindly hit the steering wheel. I can't stand it any longer. I just can't take it anymore. I punch my fist again and again until I have no strength left and I lean my head heavily against the headrest. I close my eyes, breathe deeply, until the world stops spinning so madly. I am also regaining vision, although the burning sensation under my eyelids does not stop.

I stare at the road and imagine what will happen when I return to my father, how I will feel then.

I start the engine again. I automatically join traffic, but before I know what I'm doing, I'm turning left. This route has become a part of my blood for some time, I could drive it blindly.

I park just behind Wren's car and drive the short distance between the gate and the Fitzgerald house. Without thinking, I press the bell button.

Nothing happens for a moment, then Wren opens the door. His eyes widen when he sees me. He frowns.

– You want to bash me for Ember? – he asks.

The words stick in my throat as I realize what he said.

"Why would I blame you for Ember?"

– Because she's the girl I told you about. I... I thought Ruby sent you. She saw us together.

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I have no idea how to answer this. I have hundreds of questions in my head. Wren and Ember? I wonder how Ruby reacted to that.

The thought of Ruby sends me into sharp pain, reminding me why I came here in the first place.

– No, it's not about Ember.

Wren nods slowly.

– About your father?

I repeat his gesture.

– He's expecting me at home, but I'm not able to go there yet.

- Do You want to talk? – he asks quietly.

I deny it.

– I just can't go home yet.

I haven't finished speaking yet and Wren is already moving away from the door.

– Come in.

I cross the threshold and go upstairs with him.

Every time I come here, I feel less and less out of place. Wren's old house was kind of my second home, and I wonder if it will be the same here.

- Sit down. – Wren points to his bed and takes a seat at the desk. I glance at the computer monitor. I immediately recognize the distinctive title page that I know all too well, as does the photograph in the right corner. Wren quickly closes the laptop, but it's too late - I would recognize BellBird anywhere.

– Wren? – I'm starting.

He turns to me.

- Yes?

I look him straight in the eyes.

– Over the last few weeks, Ember has become as close to me as a sister. If her If you hurt me, you will have to deal with me. You know that, right?

The corner of his mouth lifts a little, but his eyes remain serious.

- I know. Although, just so you know, I have no ill intentions towards her.

I lower my eyes and stare at my hands.

– Sometimes you don't have a choice. Sometimes others force you to hurt someone even though you don't want to.

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And then there is silence. I clench my fists and unclench them. I think about Ruby and my father, and finally my mother. I wonder what she would do if she were still alive. Would she understand that I wanted nothing to do with the company? Would she let her father threaten Ruby's family? I don't think so. But unfortunately she isn't there to stop him, and I feel as helpless as ever.

Wren brings me out of my reverie and sits down next to me. He hands me a glass full of whiskey, one of the ones he got from us. I take it gratefully and stare at the brown liquid.

– No matter what your father has planned, you can handle it. We
we'll be fine.

I cling to these words as we clink our glasses.

Ember

I don't know how long it is before I finally release Ruby and we walk home together. She avoids answering her parents' questions and dismisses them, saying that she is tired and needs to lie down. He runs away to his room and without a word throws himself on the bed. Since she didn't close the door behind her, I take it as an invitation.

I walk over to the bed. Ruby sits up, leans against the headboard and looks at me. I look back at her and wait for her to say something first.
She hurt me deeply with her behavior at Aunt Lydia's, and even though I don't want to leave her alone now, I can't forget about it.

“I'm sorry about that outburst,” he finally begins. His eyes are still red, his voice is hoarse, and he hasn't cried for some time now.
– But the last thing I expected was to see you two together. Since when do we stop saying things like that to each other, Ember?

I take a deep breath.

– First, I wanted to understand what was going on between me and Wren, and then tell someone about it. Besides, I knew exactly how you would react.

"Did you really think you couldn't trust me?" I want the best for you. Just enough.

- I know.

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– I'm sorry I looked down on you. I…” He shrugs. – I want to know what you do in your free time. And I would like us to tell each other everything. Like in the old days.

Suddenly there's a lump in my throat.

- Me too.

– I don't want to be an older sister who you can't talk to and just have to worry about what she thinks. Except…” He stops for a moment. – With Wren, it's a story from the past that really bothered me... I don't know who he is today, but at the time I thought his behavior was outrageous.

“I understand,” I reply. – And I thought it was terrible too.

– And yet you got into the car with him.

I'm looking for the right words.

– We haven't talked for a long time and we only reconciled today.
I wanted him to explain everything to me himself. And I must say right away that I got to know him from a completely different side. He admits he did the wrong thing then, right?

Ruby takes a deep breath and after a moment nods.

– Ruby, I really like him. I feel like he understands me. Something in between us… we hit it off.

“Well,” he mutters. – Maybe he changed.

- I am very careful. But this will be my experience. You can't save me from this.

Ruby is silent, tracing lines on the bed with her finger, lost in her thoughts.
Finally he sighs and says, more to himself than to me, "I can't,
it's true."

– Will you tell me what happened with James? – I ask shyly.

Ruby swallows hard. He looks around the room and finally looks at the desk.

– He's going back to his father. And to Beaufort.

I hold my breath.

- I'm listening?

Ruby is silent. Minutes pass and she just stares into space.
She seems absent in thought. The emptiness in her eyes gives me goosebumps.

- In the car, Wren commented that he wouldn't be surprised if James' father went to unfair lengths to get him back.

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– I start carefully. – Do you think that's what it's about?

The words snap her out of her stupor. Sparks appear in her eyes.
He looks at me.

– This bastard is blackmailing James.

It clogs me. So it's just like Wren said.

– With what?

Ruby swallows hard. He opens his mouth, then closes it again,
he clears his throat and finally

begins, "He threatened... He threatened to destroy our family."

I open my eyes wide.

- I'm listening?

– James only told me this much, but it's enough. We both know Mortimer Beaufort doesn't mince words. – He wipes his eyes, which are filled with tears again. – Just thinking about what he said to him sickens me.

I think hard about what she told me and wonder if any reason justifies Father James' behavior. Nothing comes to mind. Our father would never cause anyone such pain, no matter the situation.

– I don't understand how anyone could do something like that to their own children.

Ruby hugs the pillow, clinging to it almost tightly.

“He got it into his head that only James could continue to run Beaufort. He is only interested in wealth and maintaining appearances, which is why he wants James to sit by his side at board meetings.
It makes me sick to think that from now on James will have to do whatever his father wants him to do again. I would like to help him, but I have no idea how. - Her voice breaks. He clears his throat again.

I lean down and grab her hand, which is clenched on the pillow.

– You're already helping him.

– How? Sitting here and letting him go?

I squeeze her hand gently.

– He can count on you. This is what he needs most right now.

Ruby swallows hard and sniffs. I am aware that
I can't leave her alone in this condition. I have an idea.

– How about I sleep with you tonight? – I ask quietly.

He thinks for a moment. But then he moves about half a meter to the side and falls onto the bed. He hands me a pillow. I fix it and put it down

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I lie down on the empty half of the bed, turn to my side and look at Ruby.

“Thanks for being here, Ember,” he whispers.

I squeeze her hand.

- Always.

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27

Ruby

On Monday I'm still stunned. Before noon and I don't know what's going on around me because my thoughts are always with James.
It dawns on me that his moving out has left a painful hole in my family.

I wrote to him on Sunday, asked how he was feeling and if he wanted to talk. He replied that everything was fine.

Late in the evening I saw information that the first post had appeared on Beyond Beaufort.

I read his words over and over for almost the entire night. He wrote about dreams. About how important they are and that you have to dream, no matter the circumstances, no matter how hopeless the situation seems. About the need to surround yourself with people who support you and that there is nothing more beautiful than finding someone who shares their dreams with you.
He also wrote that you have to wait for some dreams, but you must not give up on them, even if believing in their fulfillment requires a gigantic effort.

His words made me cry. I thought about them constantly.

It drives me crazy that I can't do anything for him. It's true that Ember says that it's enough that she can count on me, but for me it's not enough. I'd love to go to London right away and talk to his father, but I can only imagine how James would react.

So on Monday morning I sit in class and force myself to take notes, but despite my best intentions, I don't have the energy to sort everything neatly, not to mention color coding. Even the schedule doesn't help; I feel like I'm losing control over my life.

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During my lunch break, I pick at my food with a fork without any appetite. Every now and then I raise my head and look around for James. I haven't seen him yet. I hoped he would be waiting at the bus stop again in the morning. I had to swallow the bitter pill of disappointment.

“We're lucky, Ruby,” Lin remarks quietly.

I give her a questioning look over my plate of vegetables and rice.

"Our parents don't force us to do anything." Of course, my mother and grandmother always wanted me to study, but they didn't push me to do anything I didn't want to do.

– That's the problem. Because I know what it's like to have a loving, supportive family, this situation seems even more hopeless.

“Well, you can't change that for now,” Lin remarks and takes a sip of iced tea. She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. – You have no influence over James' father. I understand that it's so damn difficult for you, that you can only watch, but you can't do anything. But you shouldn't let this affect your relationship. James is in terrible shape even without it.

- I know. – I put my fork down. I prefer not to wonder what he would do Mortimer Beaufort if James didn't come back. What he would do to my family.

At that moment, James enters the cafeteria with his friends. Wren and Cyril walk next to him, Kesh and Alistair close behind. They talk, Wren elbows James, smiles broadly. Cyril just rolls his eyes, but there's a smile on his lips. And James? James tries to smile too, but even from this distance I can see how hard he's forcing it. It's not the smile that appears on his face when my dad cracks a joke. This is not the smile that appears when talking to Lydia. And it's definitely not the smile he gives me right after the kiss.

It's then that James notices me, as if he feels my eyes on him. The boys are walking towards me, probably heading to their usual table by the window. James stops next to us. Now I see how pale he is and how dark the shadows are under his turquoise eyes.

- Hi. - He raises his hand to my cheek. Just the touch of his skin makes me shiver. He smiles shyly, as if he's not sure how I'll react to his touch.

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At this point, one thing is clear to me: James will do anything to be strong. For Lydia, for my loved ones, for me. I'm not helping him with my behavior. On the contrary, I am an additional burden for him. It's really not fair. He sacrifices himself for me and my family, and instead of supporting him, as his friends support him now, I criticize his decision and perhaps even feel guilty about it. I should support him, not make his life difficult.

-James?

- Yes?

– Do you have any plans after dinner?

"I have half an hour before Percy comes to pick me up." – He tilts his head slightly and narrows his eyes. - Why?

I smile, lean into his ear and whisper, hopefully quiet enough that no one can hear us. I pull away and see the gleam in his eyes. It's much better than being sad all the time.

Lunch break isn't over yet, so the library is pleasantly empty. Instead of approaching the printer, the library counter and finally the meeting room as usual, this time I turn right and go to the very end, to the corner where there is a small table between two shelves full of heavy volumes.

My heart is pounding like crazy, I feel like I'm doing something forbidden, and yet I'm just waiting for James.

I clearly told him where he would find me, and just five minutes later he emerged from the shelves and approached me. Even though my heart is pounding like crazy, I can't help but smile.

- You are.

He stops right in front of me.

“You don't think I'd pass up a secret date with the coolest girl at Maxton Hall.

These words make me feel hot. I hold out my hand to him. He holds her gently.

“I'm so sorry,” I start, looking at our intertwined fingers.

- Why? – That

I reacted this way. - I stroke the back of his hand with my thumb.

I look up. – Let me be clear: I support you in everything you do.

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We will deal with this too. We can't let your father tear us apart again. You understand?

I feel like James is holding his breath. He stares at me.
It reacts only after a few seconds.

He brings my hand to his mouth and kisses it.

“Thank you,” he whispers with difficulty.

I lean down and pull him towards me. I spread my legs for him to come closer. We just hug each other for a minute. I inhale his familiar scent and run my hands over his back.

– Why did you want to meet me here anyway? – he asks with his mouth next to my ear. He holds my head and pulls me towards him.
I pull back a little and take a deep breath.

– I wanted to prove to you that even on a day like today, when you have to go to London, wonderful things can happen. And that's why I decided to make one of your dreams come true. He knits his

eyebrows in thought, but then a look of understanding appears on his face and a twinkle in his eyes. He moves his hand lower and lower, reaching the base of his back. He pulls me closer until I'm sitting on the edge of the table, my hand resting on his chest.

“Ruby Bell, you have some really fantastic ideas,” he whispers.

I don't know which of us moves first. After a moment, our lips melt together, James presses against me, I feel the fire in his lips. He hugs me and I surrender to the feelings he triggers in me. I know nothing has changed between us.

And I decide that he will not change in the future, no matter what else his father comes up with.

James

It's very difficult for me to concentrate on a brainstorming session for the latest Beaufort catalog or discuss new EU trade regulations when I'm constantly thinking about Ruby.

-James? – Edward Culpepper's voice brings Ruby's vision to mine imagination bursts like a soap bubble.

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Like everyone else gathered at the supervisory board meeting, he calls me by name. Obviously, there can't be two Mr. Beauforts. The board members try to treat me as a full participant in the discussion, but I can clearly feel their skepticism, and yet two thirds of them don't even know me. Over the past weeks, my father replaced most of the board.

- Yes? – I prop myself up on my elbows and lean over the conference table to feign interest.

– I asked if you wanted to add anything.

I stare at him. My mouth goes dry when I realize that there has suddenly been silence. I look at the stern faces of women and men sitting at the table. I bet they think I have no idea what they're talking about. But my father got me into this mess when I was a child. I could even host Beaufort's budget meeting in the middle of the night. I know how the company works, although a lot has changed since my mother's death.

– Yes. I would like us to now discuss data not every six months, but once a month. This will enable a faster response should any unforeseen complications arise. And in my opinion, the presence of the management board is required, not only the heads of individual departments.

Culpepper opens his mouth in surprise, then closes it and nods.
He writes something on the tablet and looks at his father, who is sitting at the head of the table. He speaks up and talks nonsense about the measures currently in use. A slide with charts and data appears on the screen. For the next three quarters of an hour I pretend to listen and take notes, but all I see in my notebook are scribbles.
The pencil feels heavy in my hand whenever I try to write anything down. At one point I catch my grandfather on my right looking over my shoulder and grimacing with contempt. I close the notebook and from then on I stare straight ahead without touching the pencil.

Finally, the most boring hour and a half of my life is coming to an end.
Two board members approach my father and engage him in conversation, while I get up and stretch to relieve some of the stress.
My father gives me a menacing look. I straighten up. I'm waiting for him, straight as a string, with a notebook in my hand. The father signals the workers to wait. He comes to me.

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– Go home with Percival. I've arranged to have dinner with Edward and Bancroft. It'll be late, I'll spend the night in London - he announces with a short nod.

So he dismisses me. I say goodbye and take the elevator down twenty floors. I feel a tremendous sense of relief when I step outside through the revolving door and breathe in the fresh evening air. Percy leans against the Rolls-Royce. He straightens when he sees me. He holds the door open for me and I fall into the backseat. Now, behind the tinted windows of the limo, with no one in the building able to see me, I finally loosen my tie. He had been strangling me for hours.

– Is everything okay, sir? – Percy says. Our eyes meet in the rear mirror.

I just shrug in response. I have no idea how to react. It seems to me that after many months of vacation, I am returning to a life that tires me from morning to evening.

I tilt my head back and close my eyes. When I finally open them, they are dry and tired. I think I fell asleep. I rub my face with my hands and look outside. There's a turnoff for Pemwick just ahead, but Percy drives past it and keeps going.

"Percy, you missed our reunion," I say hoarsely. I lean over the minibar and reach for a bottle of water. I empty it, hoping that my throat will stop feeling like sandpaper. I look out the window again. Percy takes the next exit, but immediately turns left. He does it twice more, which takes us completely off track.

"Percy," I start and glance at the light again. She's on fire, so the chauffeur hears me.

No reaction. He turns into the parking lot in front of a small pub. I stare in amazement at the yellow light seeping from inside.

I want to ask him where the hell we are, but he beats me to it.

– Mr. Beaufort, I need to talk to you.

The restaurant is tiny, the tables are so tight that I can't really imagine waiters squeezing through with trays of food. There are only two other men inside besides us. They sit in the corner and watch a football match on a small TV on the ceiling. Percy points to a table near the wall where framed old posters hang

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film. We sit down. The waiter gives us the menu. Neither Percy nor I even look at it.

"What I do now will probably result in me losing my job," Percy begins after a few minutes. He speaks calmly, as if he has already come to terms with it.

I look at him expectantly.

Percy clears his throat and opens his mouth, but then the waiter comes to our table again and asks what we would like to drink. Without taking my eyes off the driver, I order a large mineral water and ask for two glasses.

Finally we are alone again.

"Late last year..." Percy begins. – I heard the conversation

your father's telephone number.

I want to ask something, but he beats me to it.

– The loudspeaker was on. – He pauses for a moment. – At first I didn't attach any importance to it, your father often conducts various conversations in my presence. But I couldn't stop thinking about this one.

I swallow hard. I don't take my eyes off him.

He looks at the table, is silent for a few seconds, then takes a deep breath.

“I couldn't stop thinking about her because he said, 'Cordelia is dead.

I need your help".

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

– What else did he

say? – That he would be there in twenty minutes, and asked the caller to be alone.

My mind is racing with thoughts, my heart is pounding like crazy.

– Where did you take him then? – I whisper.

– To Clive Allen.

– Why did your father secretly meet with our lawyer?

Percy opens his mouth but is interrupted by the waiter, who at that moment

comes back with a bottle of water and glasses.

- When was it? - I'm asking.

– The night after your mother died. My

stomach suddenly drops to my throat, and a terrible thought appears in my head: what if my mother's death wasn't an accident? What if

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did your father have a hand in this? But then I remember the night I saw him in the dining room, in front of the family portrait.

I will never forgive you this. Now I'm left alone with them and I'm doing everything wrong, and it's your damn fault!

He couldn't fake it. He acted like he knew he was making mistakes. And he cried, right in front of me. Although I think he is capable of many things, but he loved his mother.

– At the very beginning I was too… busy myself to think about it. But this conversation was bothering me. And this weekend, after talking to Ophelia, I decided I had to tell you this.

– What did you hear from Ophelia?

– She mentioned that there have been disturbing changes in Beaufort over the past months. Your father fired part of the board.

– He didn't fire them, they left of their own free will. They talked about it today at the meeting - I correct it, but then I start to wonder if this is just the official version and the truth is completely different. I'm getting sick.

– Ophelia claims that although she did not agree with the way your mother ran the company, she at least felt that the Beaufort spirit had been preserved and that the family tradition always came first. Now that's changing.

I had a similar impression during today's board meeting.
Back in the day, when Lydia and I came to Beaufort and watched Mom at work, I always saw the passion with which she and her team made decisions. Beaufort had a heart. Today the atmosphere was cold and tense, the conversations were emotionless and trivial.

“I know what she means,” I say quietly.

– According to Ophelia, your mother did not share Mr. Beaufort's vision. I knit my eyebrows.

– Parents always worked side by side.

– Only because your mother's word always meant more than his. She could control him because, from a formal point of view, he was her employee. – He clears his throat quietly. – I think your mother thought that this might happen if... If something happened to her.

"Percy..." I whisper. – What exactly do you want to tell me?

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Percy looks at me for a long moment, sighs loudly, reaches into the collar of his shirt and pulls out a thin silver chain. He carefully pulls it over his head and holds it up for me to look at closely; there is a tiny key hanging on a chain.

– A few years ago, your mother gave me this key and told me that I should protect it with my breast. – He stares at the tiny teeth, runs his finger along the metal. He's hypnotized. Suddenly he shakes his head as if he wants to come back to earth and takes the key off the chain. He moves it towards me. The chain disappears under the shirt again.

I turn the key in my hand.

– Why did she entrust it to you? – I ask in a whisper.

Percy swallows hard.

– We were sort of… friends.

I'm trying to gather my thoughts. The most important thing right now is that mom had a secret. A secret she didn't tell anyone in her family.

A secret to which I have the key in my hand.

“She didn't tell me what she was opening,” Percy adds. – But I think so you should have it.

I look up and suddenly see how much sadness there is in Percy.
I remember what Ruby said. That it all must have been very difficult for him, both my mother's death and Lydia's and mine moving out. He is our employee, yes, but also a member of the family.

And he meant so much to my mother that she trusted him implicitly.

– Do you think that the key and the father's strange conversation have something to do with each other?

common? – I finally ask.

Shrugs.

- I don't know. But I know your father is hiding something.

I turn the key in my hand, then reach for my wallet and open it and I hide the key behind Ruby's list. I find Percy's eyes.

– I'll find out what this is about.

– I was hoping you would say that, Mr. Beaufort.

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Ruby

I sit on the cold steps of the Beaufort mansion and check my watch.
James texted over an hour ago that he was on his way back and asked if I'd drop by. I didn't hesitate for a moment.

Today at noon I spoke honestly. I want to be a support for him, and since he already had a terrible meeting at the company today, let him have a nice evening before everything starts again.

I don't wait long and soon I see a Rolls-Royce in the driveway. I get up, smooth my skirt, brush away invisible particles of dust. Percy stops the car right at the entrance. James gets out. Even though I know he doesn't like this outfit, I can't deny that he looks fantastic in the gray Beaufort suit he wore to the meeting. It looks like it was tailor-made. I swallow hard as I move my gaze higher and see his ambiguous smirk.

The next moment he is with me. He hugs me tightly.

“Hey,” he whispers in my ear and kisses my head.

I hug him for a moment longer, then lean back to look at him.

- How was it? – I ask carefully and touch the back of his neck with my hand.

– Let's go. – He points to the house. - I will tell you everything.

He glances at Percy, who is getting out of the car, and nods at him. But then he takes my hand and we run up the stairs together. James opens the door, but before we go inside, Mary comes and looks at us expectantly.

“Mary, Ruby and I would like some privacy today,” James begins. – It's best if no one goes upstairs.

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I feel myself blushing, as does the hostess, whose face is covered with red spots. James' words completely throw me off balance, and in a daze I follow him upstairs, turning towards his room. He looks back as we enter and carefully closes the door behind him.

I expect him to push me against the wall and kiss me until I lose my breath, but he reaches into his pocket and takes out his wallet.

“I need to show you something,” he says the same words he wrote earlier in the text message.

- What's going on? - I'm asking.

– Percy was supposed to take me home after the board meeting, but on the way we stopped at a small diner. He told me something about my father. Something that could change everything.

He opens his wallet and takes something out. A tiny key. He hands it to me and I turn the key in my hand. It's nothing special, just an ordinary key.

- For what? – I ask shyly.

"Mom gave it to Percy many years ago," he says quickly, frantically. He breaks away from the door and takes off his jacket as he walks. He throws it on the couch, unties his tie, looks at me. – He also said that right after his mother's death he took his father to a lawyer. The father emphasized that it was an urgent matter and asked for discretion.

I didn't even realize when I stopped breathing.

– And what does all this mean?

James throws his tie on the couch. Cufflinks follow suit.

He rolls his sleeves up to his elbows.

– We need to find out what my mother wanted to hide from my father. Maybe this key has something to do with his secret. Maybe…” He stops, pressing his lips into a thin line.

I straighten up, walk towards him, touch his hot cheeks,
I stand on my toes and kiss him briefly. I look at him seriously.

– We'll find out what this key is for.

James swallows hard and nods. He puts it in his pants pocket.

– Father is staying in London tonight. We won't have a better opportunity, to look through mom's things than now.

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He takes my jacket. We leave his room. We go back to the stairs and go further, to a part of the house that I haven't been to before.
The corridor is at least as long as the one near James and Lydia's rooms, but there is only one door. We stop.
James breathes deeply. And then he presses the handle and the massive wooden door gives way under his pressure.

Entering this room feels forbidden, and it feels like every beat of my heart echoes. I look around breathlessly as James closes the door behind us. We are in a narrow corridor, on the right there is a dressing table and a lighted mirror, on the left there is a door, probably leading to the bathroom. James enters the bedroom.

I follow him.

“I don't remember the last time I was here,” he admits. He whispers as if, like me, he was afraid that someone would catch us at any moment. He walks to the desk by the window. – My mother always liked to look outside while working. She kept complaining that the desk in my room was against the wall. – He stares at the sheets of paper on the counter, looking through them cursorily. – Now I also prefer to look out the window. When I have my own apartment, that's what it will be like.

I walk up to him and gently stroke his back.

– Shall we begin? - I'm asking.

James freezes, his hand on the pages, then takes a deep breath and nods.

– Here we go.

“Now that we're here…” I say and lean over the drawers
desks. I look for James's eyes.

- Feel free to.

I gather my courage and open the first drawer. It includes notebooks with the Beaufort logo and company pens. I take everything out, put it away, feel the bottom of the drawer, tap on the board, but I hear a normal sound.

– It looks like you've done this hundreds of times. I should talk about something know? – James asks from the other side of the desk. He looks into the small cabinet.

“I watched movies,” I say and shake the drawer. Nothing.
I put everything back, making sure the notebooks are exactly as they were before, slide it back into place, and move on to drawer number two.

– I don't know if it's more terrifying or exciting.

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I smile to myself and take out my binder. I look through it but don't find anything suspicious, much less anything that the little key could fit.

We work with focus. We quickly looked through the entire desk. We move it to see if there's a compartment there, but there's nothing. Then we move on to the bedside tables. This is where we both feel like joking. I feel terrible as I open Mrs. Beaufort's bedside table and browse through hand creams, individual pieces of jewelry, and a classic novel. I also find an old magazine with Cordelia Beaufort on the cover. For a moment I think that she kept them in the nightstand, but I probably would have done the same. Maybe I would even hang such a cover above my desk.

“There's nothing here, nothing under the bed either,” comes James' muffled voice. Gets up. His shirt is already pretty wrinkled.

– Not here either. Wardrobe? - I propose.

- Yes.

When he opens the door to his parents' closet, it takes my breath away in the breasts. This is the whole room.

On both sides there are rails on which countless carefully ironed costumes, blouses, suits and shirts hang. The shelves are groaning under the weight of so many shoes. The left side is Mrs. Beaufort's kingdom. The sight of her stuff makes me feel hot. At the same time, the thought crosses my mind that my sister would give up a kidney to be in my position now. She is crazy about arranging her wardrobe and I know that this one is a real dream come true. At first I am ashamed of this thought and push it away to focus on the task ahead of us.

James walks into the dressing room and runs his hand over his mother's costume.

“It still smells like her,” he whispers.

I stand behind him and touch his shoulder.

– If you want us to stop, say so and…

He shakes his head vigorously.

- NO.

I go to the shelves. I slowly unfold the individual T-shirts and check if anything is hidden between them. Unfortunately. James searches through the higher shelves that I can't reach and rummages through the shoes. He also returns empty-handed.

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– Maybe there? – I point to a white cell at the back of the room. James nods. I open the little door.

And it takes my breath away again. I am literally blinded by jewelry. Everything sparkles and sparkles: brooches, necklaces, earrings, fascinators, perfect for weddings or horse races.

“Wow,” I murmur.

James stands next to me.

– I remember many of these little things. And even the specific occasions for which she wore them. Is that weird?

– Why?

We look at the compartments lined with black suede and lift them to see if there is anything under them. In the lowest drawer there are hairpins and various colorful trinkets. I recognize some of the ornaments I saw in Lydia's hair when she sat in front of me in class.

– Why is this drawer so shallow? – James asks suddenly.

I was too absorbed in admiring the silvery spider and wondering what the occasion was for wearing something like that to notice anything. James leans down, pulls the drawer out as far as it will go, and slides his hand between the bottom and back of the cabinet. He opens his eyes wide.

“There's something in there,” he says, and leans even closer until his hand disappears into the locker. I hear faint shuffling as he gropes for something. I hold my breath when he finally finds it and slowly slides his hand out. I frown.

- What is this? – I ask quietly.

James seems equally surprised. He holds a tiny box in his hand, covered with colorful beads in every possible color. It's so colorful, so kitsch, that it doesn't fit at all with the other things in Cordelia Beaufort's wardrobe.

– It looks like a jewelry box. But... I don't think she belongs We have. It looks weird somehow.

I nod. The beads are glued crookedly, as if made by a child.

– Maybe it's your creation from kindergarten? – I'm dropping it off.

James denies with a shake of his head.

– Even if it were, Father would have thrown it away long ago.

“James,” I say suddenly. – Turn it over.

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He complies with my request and freezes. There is a tiny lock in the box.

– Do you have the key? – I ask, but James is already looking in his pants pocket. He takes it out. We both seem to hold our breath as he slides it into the hole... and twists.

We look at each other knowingly, and then James lifts the lid of the box. I lean in.

There is an envelope on dark brown suede. James takes it out, sets the box on the floor, and then slowly opens the envelope.

I watch him while reading. He doesn't show anything. I'm trying
Be patient and not show how nervous I am.

After a solid two minutes, James looks up.

- And? – I ask in a whisper.

– We need to call Ophelia. – He lifts the envelope. – This is my mother's will.

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Lydia

I then bequeath my shares in the Beaufort concern to my younger sister, Ophelia Beaufort. In the event of my death, Ophelia Beaufort is to take over as both creative director and chairwoman of the board until my children graduate.

Ophelia reads aloud and I cover my mouth. Aunt rubs her eyes as if she couldn't believe the provisions in her mother's will.

- It's not everything. – Ophelia hands me the document. I tighten my fingers on Graham's thigh. He sits next to me in the conservatory, his arm around me. With trembling hands, I take the sheet of paper marked out by my mother.
I flip through the pages until I reach the part where Ophelia stopped reading. At the sight of my name, I lift it closer to my eyes.

I, Cordelia Beaufort, hereby appoint my daughter Lydia Beaufort and my son James Beaufort as equal heirs to my estate. Let them always believe in themselves and bring their visions to life.

There's a huge lump in my throat.

“I don't believe it,” I whisper. – She left me the shares. James and me.

“Because she believed in you,” Graham notes quietly.

My eyes fill with tears, covering my mother's words. I hand the will over to James, who sits to my right and remains silent in astonishment the entire time.

“I can't believe she kept it for so long,” Ophelia says quietly, thoughtfully running her fingers over the case. – She got it from me for her thirteenth birthday.

I swallow hard.

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“The fact that she hid this will so carefully means that…” I begin with an effort. “That the

other one is fake,” James finishes for me. – The one where

he writes everything down to his father.

– Cordelia's will is notarized – notes Ophelia. – I was at its reading in Clive Allen's office. Everything was as it should be.

“But this will was not confirmed by Clive Allen,” Graham suddenly interjects. He leans over the sheet of paper in my hand. – Just a man named Fergus Wright.

I glance at James and exchange knowing glances with him.

“He was our previous lawyer,” my brother replies slowly. – And also our grandparents. He died a few years ago and then Allen came along. – He laughs in disbelief. - It is impossible.

- But what? – I wipe tears from my eyes.

– The night after Mom died, Percy took Dad to Allen's. The father asked the lawyer for help and discretion. That's probably when they faked it testament.

I hold my breath.

– Do you think he knew Mom wouldn't prescribe Beaufort to him?

Ophelia straightens in the rattan chair.

– He must have suspected something.

I glance at James. He seems as overwhelmed by the situation as I am.

– But… But if my mother knew all along that she would one day hand over the company to Ophelia, why did she allow her father to marginalize her? – James wonders aloud.

“She wanted to protect me,” Ophelia says quietly. She tucks a rust-colored strand of hair behind her ear and swallows hard. – I'll contact my lawyer. Let him see to it that an authentic will is made.

James and I hold out our hands to each other at the same time. Ophelia calls the lawyer and we clasp our hands. I think we both realize that now we need to support each other even more.

James

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Lydia is wearing a black costume that looks disturbingly like her mother. We all dressed for the occasion: Ophelia in a mint green wallet dress and I in a Beaufort suit.

We have to wait a long time before my dad's assistant asks us into the office. He opens the door and we all enter one by one. When I see my father, something tightens in my chest.

– What did I do to deserve such a surprise? – he asks ironically. He doesn't even bother to get up from behind his desk.

Ophelia moves through the office with an ease I've never seen from her before. Right now, she seems to have the upper hand. Probably because he knows that this is the only way to reach his father.

“Mortimer, we need to talk,” he begins. He sits down at the desk. Lydia takes the second chair. I stand behind them and place my hands on the backrest.

Father looks between us. I can't figure out the look in his eyes. Does he know what awaits him?

– We found it. – Ophelia opens the black briefcase and takes out a copy we have the will and put it on the desk.

I watch his face very carefully. At first he just blinks in surprise, but then all the blood drains from his face. He moves the document towards himself and looks through it briefly.

– What is this supposed to be? – He raises his head.

“My sister's will,” Ophelia replies calmly. - This is why the question arises as to what was actually read in December.

Father's left eyelid begins to twitch. She raises her hand, smoothes her gelled hair, swallows hard, and presses her lips into a thin line.

And with that, he basically said everything. But I need to be sure.

– Dad, did you really forge Mom's will? – I ask, surprised by the coldness and lack of emotion in my voice.

My father looks at me, opens and closes his mouth. He was obviously speechless.

- I asked you a question. – I give him a defiant look. Beads of sweat have appeared on his forehead, although he is still pale as a wall. – Did you forge your mother's will to take over the company?

“I had no other choice,” he says finally.

Lydia gasps loudly and I grip the leather backrest so tightly that I can hear it crackling.

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- Why? – I ask with forced calm.

Father looks first at Lydia, then at me.

– I didn't work hard for this company all my life just to get it at the end
be left empty-handed.

“Cordelia would have left you some shares if she didn't know how greedy you were,” Ophelia says excitedly.

– You have no idea what you're talking about! - He clenches his fists so tightly that his knuckles are white. – We had a common plan from the very beginning.
The children study at Oxford, then James takes over the company.
We needed structure and strategy, but soon she suddenly started muttering that it would be a good idea to bring you back, even though I had managed to get rid of you many years ago. It took me ages to talk her out of it.

I can't believe he's talking about our family, about my mother.

"So it wasn't Cordelia who wanted to keep me out of the company?" – Ophelia makes sure.

- Of course not. Your sister has never been consistent.
Unlike her, I had a vision of Beaufort. And you stood in my way.

Lydia tenses more and more. I feel like she would like to get up and leave, probably because she wants to keep the remnants of good memories about her father at all costs. I feel the same way. At the same time, I know that we have to endure until the end. Otherwise we will not be able to look into the future.

– Why did you want to tie me to the company at all costs? - I'm asking.

The father snorts contemptuously.

– Because you always did what I wanted. Because all it took was a little decisiveness to put you on the right track. For the sake of myself and the company, I preferred that you take Cordelia's place, rather than someone who has an opinion and wants to push it.

Despite everything he has done to me over the past years, my heart clenches as I realize the meaning of his words.

They prove that I was never anything more than a means to him
to the destination. They prove how little he loves me and Lydia.

And even though I thought I had closed this matter a long time ago, something inside me broke.

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“Mortimer, you're a disgrace to this family,” Ophelia says quietly. - NO you are worthy of the place Cordelia occupied.

The father doesn't answer.

– Aren't you ashamed, dad? – Lydia asks with a trembling voice.

– I did what I thought was appropriate.

“So you have very strange values,” my sister replies.

“Mom would be devastated if she knew about it,” I add.

– Now all I care about is what you do with this information. - Father raises an eyebrow, but his gaze has lost its former power. It's as if the image of him in my head has fallen to pieces and I'm only now starting to see what really lies behind the façade. I see his true colors, and it's not pleasant. On the contrary. I can't understand how I could believe in him for so long.

“Well, Mortimer, we have many options,” Ophelia replies. – Option A: you withdraw from the company and hand over the reins to me, just like Cordelia wanted.

There is silence. I see my father thinking hard.

“I'm not interested in this option,” he finally replies.

– Then my lawyer will request verification of the will. He discussed everything with Clive Allen, who is willing to testify against you if we don't bring a case against him. He will say that you blackmailed him and forced him to read a forged will. The probability that you will win with this evidence is virtually zero.

Can you imagine what will happen when the press finds out about everything?

The father stares at the desk. He swallows hard, unclenches his fists, and places his hands flat on the navy blue pad. When he raises his head again, I am prepared for anything, including further fighting. But when he looks first at Lydia and then at me, I think I see something like regret in his eyes.

“I'd rather we didn't tell the media,” he says finally.

And then I know: we won.

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thirty

James

The sun floods the pitch with harsh light, but I still enjoy the weight of the pads on my body and the feel of the T-shirt with the white number seventeen on the back.
I don't wonder. Now I just have to run, catch the ball and hit the goal.

I close my eyes and concentrate on the familiar sounds: footsteps, screams of fans, the whistle of the ball...

– Beaufort! – roars Coach Freeman. – Don't sleep, damn it!

I open my eyes just in time to see Alistair playing at me. At the last moment I intercept the ball and then three players from the opposing team attack me.

I react instinctively. I break into a run without a moment's hesitation. One of the opponents rams me, I stagger, but I manage to stay on my feet. I look around for my friends and see Wren, who, like me, shot forward. I play at him with all my strength. He jumps and catches the ball with great effort. It only took three steps for the opposing team's defender to attack him. Wren quickly throws the ball back to me. I avoid defenders, run as fast as I can, jump and shoot. The ball passes the goalkeeper and lands in the net. A second later, the referee whistles a break.

Wren is the first to run up to me to congratulate me. The others appear right behind him. Adrenaline is pumping through my veins. I'm high, I hope it lasts forever.

I take off my helmet and look around for brown hair.

Ruby sits in the front row, accompanied by her sister and the entire organizing committee.

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I try to remember everything. Grass beneath my feet as I run towards the stands. The crunch of my glove as I tighten my grip on the bat.
The look in Ruby's eyes that, even from this distance, makes me more euphoric than scoring a goal. I run to her and I can't help it, I have to smile.

- Hi. – I'm leaning over her. It was supposed to be a fleeting kiss, but when I feel Ruby's lips touch mine, I suddenly can't stop.

Ember makes a strange noise and Ruby pulls away, laughing.

“When he plays like that, I can forgive him for skipping meetings once a week,” Lin says.

“True,” Ruby replies, still staring at me. – He's doing quite well, isn't he?

My heart beats even faster.

– Hello! – Wren stops next to me. – Please praise me too!

“You know, forcing compliments is weak,” Ember replies.
Although her voice sounds serious, the corners of her mouth twitch slightly. I glance at Wren, who is watching her with an expression I've never seen on his face before: carefree, open, affectionate.

I wonder if I look at Ruby that way too.

– Lydia wrote? – I ask, looking back at her.

He denies with a movement of his head.

– Since when was the last time you asked? NO. And that was only half an hour ago.

I lean over her.

– Don't make fun of me. I guess I have a right to be excited.
After all, it's not every day you become an uncle, I say so quietly that only she can hear me. Half an hour ago, Lydia wrote that she had been having irregular pain for some time, but the doctor said they should wait before going to the hospital because it may turn out to be a false alarm.

– I'll let you know if he hears from me. As we agreed, Ruby assures.
She always has that ambiguous smile on her face that makes me want to kiss her forever.

- Word? - I'm asking.

He confirms with a nod of his head and kisses me again.

– Let's go, Captain. - Wren nudges my shoulder. - End of the break.

You will surely succeed in something else.

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I smile at Ruby one last time before I return to the field with Wren. I think back to the beginning of the school year. I remember the day Lydia begged me to keep an eye on Ruby.

Since then, my life has changed one hundred and eighty degrees. The future I had imagined disappeared without a trace. Instead of going to Oxford to serve on Beaufort's board of trustees, I plucked up the courage to choose something other than what my parents had planned for me. I listened to the voice of my heart.

Ophelia took over Beaufort and began making changes to the company. Lydia will join her as soon as the twins are a little older.

I've learned that sticking to plans is pointless. This year was supposed to be the last year of carefree, but now... Now I see it as the beginning. And although in my soul I will still face what happened, my approach to life has changed completely.

I know Wren was referring to our last lacrosse game, but I smirk at him. “Just so you know,”

I say excitedly.

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Epilogue

Three months later

Ruby

My life is divided into colors: Gold
- lectures Silver -
exams Brown -
associations and extracurricular activities Green -
take care of it immediately
Turquoise - free time
Purple - family Orange
- second family Purple (call
Ember), orange (wrap it, be sure to pack it nicely, gifts for baptism for Rosie and Henry) and brown (go to first-year breakfast and talk to at least one new person) already checked off. The only things left are green (print and hang a photo from Thailand), orange (read James' new post) and turquoise (meet Lin for coffee and find the coolest cafe).

– Maybe here? – James asks.

I turn to him in my rickety office chair. He stands between the bed and a small cabinet and puts our photo against the wall. This is the first photo we took during our two weeks in Thailand. We are standing in the market, surrounded by hundreds of people, but this is only the background.
We smile at the camera, happy and carefree.

Every time I look at this photo, I go back to the most beautiful two weeks of my life. That's why I wanted it to hang in my dorm room.

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“Great,” I reply a little too late.

James nods and uses a piece of tape to tape the photo to the still empty wall.

– It doesn't make sense that you can't have frames.

- That's okay. The most important thing is that the photos will hang - I answer and check off the next point.

“I have something else for you,” James says. I hear him approach the desk. I look up at him. He holds in his hand a small package wrapped in brown paper, decorated with a white ribbon.

I take it in surprise.

- What's that…?

“Open it,” he replies with a smile.

I slowly pull the ribbon and unroll the paper. It appears before my eyes wooden frame and another photo.

My heart is doing somersaults.

– From your farewell party!

– I thought you could put them on your desk. Then we will all watch you as you study.

I can't take my eyes off the photo. It was taken at the beginning of the holidays, in our garden, the day before our trip to Thailand.
My parents are standing to the side, next to them are Ember, Wren, Alistair, Kesh and Lin. Lydia and Graham smile broadly at the camera. Cyril, standing next to them, holds little Henry in his arms. Unlike the others, instead of looking at the photographer, he stares at the baby who is squeezing his finger with all his might. On the other side there is James with little Rosie and me - I hug him around the waist and lean on his shoulder.

“I can't believe it,” I mutter and raise the photo to my eyes. – They're gone Just two months and Henry and Rosie are already twice their size.

– Yeah, Lydia says it's scary too. I think it's great. We'll be able to play lacrosse with them soon. – He tries to sound carefree, but I can see that he suddenly looks sad. – They probably won't recognize me when I come back.

– Nonsense. – I energetically place the photo on the desk, get up and walk to James. I place my hands on his hips, stand on my toes, and touch his nose with my nose. – You'll only be gone for four weeks.
Besides, they will see you on the screen, after all, there is Facetime and Skype.

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In three days, James flies to Bali, where he will take part in journalism and photography workshops. Over the past months, he has gathered a certain group of readers. Even though his blog is growing slowly, he's having a lot of fun doing it. Whenever we talk about it or edit his posts together, his eyes truly shine.

I've never seen him like this before. And although it pains me to think that we will be separated again, I am very happy that he enjoys his work so much.

I feel as if we have just returned, but at the same time we are on a constant journey - him around the world, me through Oxford. I am where I always wanted to be, exactly as I dreamed. I have even more because James is with me.

“I'll bring you something,” he promises and pulls me closer to him. – Or this time I'll carve something myself.

I'm smiling.

– But it has to have a lot of details.

“We'll see what we can do,” he mumbles, leans down and kisses me gently, and a volcano of emotions erupts inside me.

I wonder if it will be like this every time he kisses me.

When he breaks away from me, I see in his eyes the promises he will fulfill, before he sets off on his journey.

I smile just thinking about it.

“My James,” I whisper, pulling him closer and kissing him. He sighs into my mouth.

We fought for a long time to be here and now. So much has happened in the last few months: shattered dreams, days full of hope and more love than ever seemed possible.

We fought and saved each other. And it will be the same in the future. Every hour, minute, second.

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Acknowledgments

I can't believe that we've come to the end of the Maxton Hall saga.
The past year and a half of writing has been the craziest time of my career;
When I look back, I want to cry and laugh at the same time.

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Finally, I would like to thank my readers. I hope James proved that no dreams are unrealistic. I hope Ruby showed that it's worth fighting for yourself. I hope Lydia has convinced you that growing up is worth it. And above all, I hope that you will all take a piece of Ember with you, because self-confidence has never hurt anyone.

Thank you for heading out to Maxton Hall with me.

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