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SAVE YOU

MONA KASTEN

ROMAN

LYX

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MONA BOX

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novel



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To this book

Ruby thought that she and James could handle anything together. But when James' family is shaken by a severe blow of fate, they have to realize that their love never had a real chance. Because instead of trusting her, James broke her heart. Ruby has so many questions.

But she also knows that James' answers wouldn't change anything. They belong to different worlds, and the sooner Ruby returns to her old life, the better. Especially since her biggest goal - studying at Oxford - is now within reach and she can't allow herself any more distractions anyway. But forgetting James is anything but easy.

It's not just the memories of their time together that always catch up with Ruby when she least expects it. There's also James, who knows that his behavior was unforgivable, but still does everything he can to win Ruby back. But can she dare to risk her heart again?

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For Kim

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Playlist

Delicate – Damien Rice You
and Me – Niall Horan Lonely (feat.
Lil Wayne) – Demi Lovato Dress – Taylor Swift You
Are – GOT7 Never Be the
Same – Camila
Cabello Sticky Leaves – Linying Lights On –
Shawn Mendes If I Be Wrong
– Wolf Larsen No Promises (feat.
Demi Lovato) [Acoustic] – Cheat
Codes

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All the promises we made
mean nothing.

GERSEY, IT MEANS NOTHING

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1

Lydia

James is drunk. Or stoned. Or both.

He hasn't been able to speak properly for three days. He doesn't do anything except throw a kind of non-stop party in our salon, drink one bottle of alcohol after another and act as if nothing had happened. I don't understand how he can be like that. He doesn't seem to care at all that our family is now in ruins.

"I think this is his way of grieving." I look

sideways at Cyril. He's the only one who knows what happened. I told him the night James got stoned at his party and made out with Elaine in front of Ruby.

Someone had to help me get James home without Percy or Dad knowing what condition he was in. Our families are close friends, so Cy and I have known each other since we were children. And even though Dad made me promise not to tell anyone about what happened to Mum before the official press release, I know I can trust him to keep the secret - even from Wren, Keshav and Alistair.

Without his help I would not have made it through the last few days. He has Convinced Dad to leave James alone for a few days and let the other boys know not to ask any questions for now. They're sticking to it, although I feel like it's getting harder and harder for them to watch James destroy himself with each passing day.

While my brother does everything to cloud his mind,

I can only think about what I should do next.

My mum is dead. Graham's mother died seven years ago.

The little kid growing inside me won't have a grandma.

Seriously. This is what's going through my head on a constant loop. Instead of mourning, I ponder the fact that my baby will never

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will experience the embrace of a loving grandmother. What's wrong with me?

But I can't help it. The thoughts in my head take on a life of their own - one after the other, until I finally sink into horror scenarios and become so afraid of the future that I can't think of anything else. It's as if I've been in shock for three days. Something probably snapped terribly inside both James and me when Dad told us what had happened.

"I don't know how to help him," I whisper, watching James tilt his head back again and drain his glass. It hurts to watch how much he suffers. He can't go on like this forever. At some point he will have to face reality.

And in my opinion there is only one person in this world who can help him with this.

I take out my phone again and dial Ruby's number, but she doesn't answer. I want to be angry with her, but I can't. If I had caught Graham with someone else, I wouldn't want to have anything to do with him or anyone around him.

“Are you calling her again?” Cy asks with a skeptical look
my phone. When I nod, he frowns disapprovingly. I'm not surprised by his reaction.
Cyril thinks Ruby is nothing more than a gold digger who's after James' inheritance. I know that's not true, but once Cyril has formed an opinion about someone, it's hard to convince him otherwise.

And as much as it frustrates me, I can't blame him. Because it's just his way of looking after his friends.

»He doesn't listen to any of us. I think she could stop him from going completely crazy.« My voice sounds strange to my own ears. So cold and toneless - but inside me it's completely different
out of.

I can hardly stand upright because of the pain. It's as if someone had tied me up and I haven't been able to untie the ropes for days.
As if my thoughts were moving in a carousel that would not stop and from which I simply cannot jump off. Nothing

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seems to make more sense, and the harder I fight against the growing helplessness within me, the more profound it becomes.

I lost one of the most important people in my life.
I don't know how I'm going to get through this alone. I *need* my twin brother. But James does nothing but stun himself and destroy everything that gets in his way. The last time I saw my father was on Wednesday. He is traveling and meeting with lawyers and advisors to sort out the future of the *Beaufort Companies .* However, he doesn't have a minute to spare for Mum's funeral - for that he hired a planner named Julia, who has been coming in and out of our house over the last few days as if she were part of the family.

The thought of Mum's funeral makes my throat tighten. I
I can't breathe anymore, my eyes start to burn. I quickly turn away, but Cyril notices.

"Lydia…" he whispers and gently reaches for my hand.
I take it away from him and leave the room without another word.
I don't want the boys to see me cry. At some point they won't let themselves be held back anymore and will start asking questions despite Cyril's warning. None of them fell flat on their heads. James has never behaved like this before. Even if he goes overboard every now and then, he usually always knows where his limits are. The others have long since noticed that this is not the case at the moment. The fact that Keshav started disappearing one liquor bottle after another from the bar and Alistair *accidentally* flushed the few grams of cocaine James had left down the toilet speaks for itself.

I can't wait until the secrecy finally ends
has. In a few minutes, at exactly three o'clock, the news of Mum's death would go public, and then not only the boys would know about it - but the whole world. In my mind's eye I can already see the headlines and the reporters on our doorstep and at the school. Nausea hits me and I stagger down the hallway until I reach the library.

The pale glow of the lamps illuminates the countless shelves containing time-honored, leather-bound books. I support myself on the shelves as I cross the room on shaking knees.
At the back next to the window is a dark red velvet

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covered armchair. This was my favorite place in our house as a child. This is where I holed up when I wanted peace and quiet - from the boys, from my dad, from the expectations that come with the name *Beaufort .*

The sight of this little reading corner makes my tears flow even more violently. I collapse into the armchair, pull my legs up and wrap my arms around them. Then I bury my face in my knees and cry quietly.

Everything around me seems so unreal. As if it were a bad dream that I can wake up from if I try hard enough. I wish I could go back to the summer a year and a half ago, to a world where my mum is still alive and Graham can hold me when I'm feeling down.

As I wipe my eyes with one hand, I use the my cell phone out of my pocket. When I unlock the display, I discover lots of black mascara marks on the back of my hand.

I go to my contacts. Graham is still directly under James is in my favorites, even though I haven't spoken to him for months. He doesn't know anything about our baby, let alone that my mum has died. I followed his wishes and didn't call him anymore. Never in my life has anything been so difficult for me. We were in contact almost every day for over two years - and then suddenly it stopped, from one day to the next. At the time, it felt like cold turkey.

And now… I'm having a relapse. As if by myself, I dial his number and listen to the dial tone with bated breath. After a moment it disappears. I close my eyes and try hard to hear whether he picked up or not. At this moment I feel like I could drown in the lonely helplessness I've felt for days.

»No more calls. "We agreed on that," he says quietly. The sound of his soft, raspy voice finishes me off. My body is wracked by violent sobs. I press my free hand over my mouth so Graham doesn't hear.

But it's too late for that.

"Lydia?"

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I can hear the panic in his voice, but I can't say anything except shake my head. My breathing is uncontrollable and much too fast.

Graham doesn't hang up. He stays on the phone and makes quiet, soothing noises. On the one hand, hearing it completely upsets me, but on the other hand, it feels so incredibly familiar that I press the phone even tighter to my ear. I think his voice was one of the reasons I fell in love with him back then - long before I even saw him for the first time. I remember the hours of phone calls, my hot, sore ear, waking up and Graham was still on the phone. His voice soft and quiet, deep and at least as penetrating as his golden brown eyes.

I always felt safe with Graham. He was my rock for a long time. I have him to thank for being able to put things with Gregg aside at some point and move forward again.

And even though I'm completely exhausted, this feeling of security is just fighting its way back up. Just hearing his voice helps me gain some consciousness. I don't know how long I sit there like this, but little by little my tears stop.

"What's wrong?" he finally whispers.

I can not answer. All I can manage is to make a helpless sound.

He stays silent for a minute. I can hear him inhale a few times as if he's about to say something, but he always stops himself at the last moment. When he finally speaks, his voice is quiet and pained: "There is nothing I would rather do than drive to you now and be there for you."

I close my eyes and imagine him in his apartment sitting at the old wooden table that looks like it's about to fall apart. Graham calls it "antique," but in reality he just picked it up from the trash and repainted it.

“I know,” I whisper.

"But you also know that I can't, right?" Something breaks

in the lounge. I hear the clinking of glass, and then someone screams loudly. I can't tell if it's from pain or just for fun, but I immediately get up. I can't let James hurt himself physically now.

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"I'm sorry I called," I whisper brokenly.
Voice and end the conversation.

My heart pounds as I get up and leave the sheltered little corner to check on my brother.

Ember

My sister is sick.

Under normal circumstances, I would say this is nothing out of the ordinary - after all, it's December, it's sub-zero outside, and there's sniffling and coughing everywhere you go. It's actually only a matter of time before you get infected.

Except – my sister is never sick. Really never.

When Ruby came home late at night three days ago and went to bed without a single word, I didn't think anything of it.
After all, she had just completed a marathon application process at Oxford, which was certainly not only mentally but also physically exhausting. But when she claimed the next day that she had a cold and couldn't go to school, I became skeptical. Anyone who knows Ruby knows that she would drag herself to class even if she had a fever, for fear of missing something important.

Today is Saturday and now I'm really worried.
Ruby has barely left her room. She lies in her bed, reads one book after the other and acts as if a cold was to blame for her red eyes. But she can't fool me. Something bad happened and it's driving me crazy that she won't tell me what.

At the moment I'm watching her through the crack in the door as she sits in her Stirring soup without eating any of it. I can't remember ever seeing her like this before. Her face is pale, and there are bluish circles under her eyes that get darker with each passing day. Her hair is greasy and hanging uncombed on either side of her face, and she's wearing the same baggy clothes she wore yesterday and the day before. Normally, Ruby is the definition of organized. Not just when it comes to her planner or school, but also her appearance. I didn't even know she owned any baggy clothes.

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"Stop crouching in front of my door," she says suddenly, and I flinch, caught. I pretend I was going to enter her room anyway and push myself through the door.

Ruby raises an eyebrow at me. Then she makes the soup next to the bed on the tray I brought it to her on. I suppress a sigh.

"If you don't eat it, I'll eat it," I threaten, nodding at the soup, which unfortunately doesn't have the desired effect. Ruby just makes a vague gesture with her hand.

»Don't force yourself.« With a frustrated sound, I sit down on the edge of her bed sink. "I've tried my best to leave you alone these last few days because I've noticed that you're not particularly keen on talking, but Ruby pulls her blanket up to her chin so that only ⋯ I'm really worried about you."

her head is showing. Her eyes are dull and sad, as if what has happened is catching up with her in that moment with full force. But then she blinks and is back - or at least pretends to be. Since last Wednesday there's been a strange look in her eyes. It seems to me as if she is only physically present, but mentally somewhere else entirely.

"I just have a cold. It will soon be over," she says tonelessly, sounding almost like one of those dead computer voices that you know from announcements for hold music and hotlines, as if it had been replaced by a robot.

Ruby turns to face the wall and pulls the blanket up even further - a clear indication that the conversation is over for her. I sigh and am about to get up again when her glowing cell phone on the nightstand catches my attention. I lean forward a bit to see the display.

“Lin is calling you,” I murmur.

“I don’t care,” comes back muffled.

Frowning, I watch as the call breaks off and shortly afterwards the number of missed calls appears on the display. It's in the double digits. “She's called you more than ten times, Ruby. Whatever happened, you won't be able to hide forever." My sister just grumbles.

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Mum told me to give her time, but I find it harder every day watching Ruby suffer. It doesn't take a genius to put two and two together and come to the conclusion that James Beaufort and his idiot friends are probably involved in the whole thing.

However, I thought Ruby had already put the Beaufort issue behind her. So what happened? And when?

I tried to analyze the situation as Ruby would if she were me and made a list in my head: 1. Ruby was in Oxford interviewing candidates.

2. When she came back, everything was still fine.

3. In the evening Lydia Beaufort showed up at our door and Ruby disappeared with her.

4. After that everything was different: Ruby hid and has hardly spoken a word since then.

5. Why???

Okay. Ruby's list would probably be a lot more structured, but at least I put things in a logical order and know that whatever it was, it must have happened on Wednesday evening.

But where did Lydia take her?

My gaze wanders from Ruby, whose hairline is now just visible from under the covers, to the cell phone and back again. I'm pretty sure he won't miss her.

"If there's anything else, I'm next door," I say, even though I know she won't accept the offer anyway. Then I stand up with an extra loud sigh and quickly reach for my cell phone. I shove it into the sleeve of my loose knit sweater and tiptoe back to my own room.

As I close the door quietly behind me, I breathe a sigh of relief - and immediately feel guilty. My gaze darts to the wall, as if Ruby could see me from her bed. She'll probably never speak to me again if she finds out I've violated her privacy like that. At the same time, as a sister, it is also my duty to find out how I can help her. Or?

I go to my desk and sit down on the creaky chair. Then I take the cell phone out of my sleeve. My sister is making a huge secret of what is happening at her school.

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goes, but of course I know what kind of people she goes to Maxton Hall with: boys and girls whose parents are royalty, actors, politicians or businessmen and have so much influence in our country that they are often mentioned in the news. I have been following some of Ruby's classmates on Instagram for a while now and I also see the rumors that are circulating about her. Just the thought of what these people could have done to Ruby turns my stomach.

I hesitate for just a moment, then I unlock Ruby's phone and tap the call list. Not only has Lin contacted her, but a number that is not stored in her phone also appears several times.
Without further ado, I call Lin's contact - after all, she is the only person from Ruby's ominous school that I know personally. I hesitantly lift the phone to my ear. The dial tone only sounds once and then the call is picked up.

"Ruby," I hear Lin say breathlessly. "Finally. How are you?" "Lin - it's me, Ember," I interrupt her before she can continue.

"Ember? What..."

"Ruby isn't feeling very well." Lin falls silent for a moment. Then she says slowly, "That's understandable, after what happened."
"What happened?" I burst out. "What the hell happened, Lin? Ruby won't talk to me, and I'm so worried. Did Beaufort do something to her? If so, I'm going to kill that toad..."

"Ember." Now she's the one who interrupts me. "What are you talking about?" I frown. "What are you talking about?" "I'm talking about the fact that Ruby wrote to me on Wednesday that she had gotten along with James Beaufort, and today I found out that his mother died the previous Monday."

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2

Ruby

Ember is knocking on my door again.

I wish I had the energy to send her away. I understand that she's worried, but I just don't feel like I can do anything or talk to anyone right now. Even if that someone is my sister.

"Ruby, Lin is on the phone."

Frowning, I pull the blanket from my face and turn around. Ember is standing in front of my bed, holding a cell phone in her outstretched hand. I squint. It's *my* cell phone. And Lin's name is flashing at me on the screen.

“You took my cell phone?” I ask weakly. I feel outrage growing deep within me, but the feeling disappears as quickly as it came. For the past few days my body has felt like a black hole, swallowing up every emotion before it even had a chance to reach me.

Nothing really gets through to me anymore, I don't feel like doing anything. Getting out of bed every time feels like I've run a marathon, and I haven't gone down the stairs in three days. I haven't missed a day of class since I started attending Maxton Hall, but just the idea of showering, getting dressed, and being around people for six to ten hours is overwhelming. Not to mention I couldn't bear to see James.

When I saw him, I would probably collapse like a wilted flower. Or I would burst into tears.

"Tell her I'll call her back," I mumble, my voice scratchy from how little I've spoken in the last few days.

Ember doesn't move. "You should talk to her now." "I don't *want to* talk to her now." What I want is a little time to get back on my feet. Three days is not enough.

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enough to face Lin and her questions. I just wrote her a short message on Wednesday. She doesn't know exactly what happened between me and James in Oxford, and I don't have the strength to tell her about it right now. Or what happened afterward. I would like to forget the whole of last week and pretend that everything is as usual. Unfortunately, that's not possible as long as I can't even get out of bed.

»Please, Ruby,« says Ember, looking at me intently. »I know I don't know why you're so sad and why you don't talk to me about it, but Lin just told me something. And I think you guys should really talk."

I glare at Ember, but when I see the determined look on her face, I know I've lost. She won't leave my room until I talk to Lin.

In some ways we are just too similar, and stubbornness is definitely one of them.

Resigned, I stretch out my hand and take the phone.
"Lin?"

"Ruby, sweetie, we really need to talk." Her tone tells me she knows.

She knows what James did.

She knows that he ripped out my heart with both hands, only to throw it on the ground and trample on it.

And if Lin knows, the rest of the school certainly knows too.

"I don't want to talk about James," I croak. »I *never want to again* Talk about him, okay?" Lin

is quiet for a moment. Then she takes a deep breath. "Ember told me you went out with Lydia on Wednesday night." I don't say anything, just fiddle with the hem of my blanket with my free hand.

"Is that where you found out?"

I let out a toneless laugh. "What do you mean? That he's an asshole?" Lin sighs. "Did Lydia

really not tell you anything?" "What would she have told me?" I ask hesitantly.

»Ruby... Did you see my message earlier?'

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Lin's tone is so careful that I suddenly feel cold and hot at the same time. I swallow dryly. "No, I haven't looked at my phone since Wednesday."

Lin takes a deep breath. "Then you really don't know yet." "What don't I know yet?" "Ruby, are you sitting up?" I sit up in bed.

You don't ask anyone that question unless something absolutely terrible has happened. Suddenly, the image of James with Elaine, drunk in that pool, is replaced by a much more gruesome image. James, who got into an accident and injured himself. James, who is in the hospital.

"What's going on?" I croak.
"Cordelia Beaufort died last Monday." It takes me a moment to realize what Lin just said.

Cordelia Beaufort died last Monday.
An unbearable silence spreads between us.
James' mother is dead. Since Monday.
I remember our deep kisses, his hands restlessly running over my naked body, the overwhelming feeling when he was inside me.

It's impossible that James knew that that evening - that night. Even he isn't that good of an actor. No, he and Lydia must have found out on Wednesday.

I hear Lin speaking, but I can't concentrate on her words. I'm too busy wondering if it's really possible that Mortimer Beaufort kept the fact that their mother had died a secret from his children for two days. And if so, how terrible must James and Lydia have felt when they came home on Wednesday and found out?

I remember Lydia's swollen, red eyes as she stood at my door and asked if James was with me. Of the blank and emotionless look James gave me. And the moment he jumped into the pool and ruined everything that had happened between us the night before.

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A painful throbbing spreads through my body. I take the phone away from my ear and turn on the speaker. Then I click through my messages. I open the history, which is displayed under an unknown number. Three unread messages open:

Ruby. I'm so sorry. I can explain everything to you.
Please come back to Cyril or tell me where you are so Percy can pick you up.

Our mum died. James is going crazy. I don't know what to do.

"Lin," I whisper. "Is that really true?" "Yes," Lin

whispers back. "A press release went out earlier, and less than half a minute later the news was everywhere."

Silence spreads between us again. My head is spinning
Thousands of thoughts all at once. Nothing seems to make sense anymore.
Nothing but this one feeling that comes over me so suddenly and violently that the next words bubble out of me as if by themselves: "I have to go to him."

For the first time I see the gray stone wall that surrounds the Beaufort estate. A huge iron gate blocks the entrance; a dozen people mill about in front of it with cameras and microphones in their hands.

»Such rats,« Lin mutters and brings her car a few meters forward
them to stand. The reporters immediately start moving and come running towards us.

Lin leans forward and presses the button that opens the car doors of
locked inside. "Call Lydia to open the gate." I'm so grateful that she's

by my side in this moment and keeping a clear head. Without hesitating for a second, she asked me if I wanted her to drive me and was standing in front of my house less than half an hour after our phone call. Any doubts about how deep Lin's and my friendship runs vanished in that moment.

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I take my cell phone out of my pocket and call the number that contacted several times in the last few days.

It takes a few seconds for Lydia to take off.

“Hello?” Her voice sounds just as nasal as it did on Wednesday evening we went to see Cyril together.

»I'm standing in front of your house. Could you perhaps open the gate open it?" I ask, trying to cover my face with one arm. I don't know if that has the desired effect.

The reporters are now standing right next to Lin's car and shouting questions at us that I don't understand.

»Ruby? What...?"

Someone starts banging on my window. Lin and me wince violently.

"As soon as possible, perhaps?" "Wait a

minute," Lydia replies, then hangs up.

It takes about half a minute for the gate to open and someone to approach our car. Only when the person is only a few meters away from us do I recognize him.

It's Percy.

The sight of the chauffeur makes my heart skip a beat. Without warning, memories come to me. Memories of a day in London that started well but ended badly. And a night when James took loving care of me after his friends misbehaved and pushed me into a pool.

He squeezes past the reporters and motions for Lin to roll down her window.

"Drive through the gate to the front of the house, miss. Those people are committing a crime if they enter the property. They will not follow you." Lin nods, and after

Percy has got the reporters to step aside she drives the car onto the spacious property. The driveway is actually more like a country road in terms of its width and length, surrounded by a park-like, frost-covered green area. In the distance I can make out a large house: it is rectangular and consists of two floors and several gables. The gray slate hipped roof is just as dreary as the rest of the facade, which is built of brick but clad in granite. Despite the

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The desolation that the house conveys, you can see at first glance that wealthy people live in it. I think it suits Mortimer Beaufort because it looks cold and so massive. However, I can hardly imagine Lydia and James in there.

Lin drives the car across the front yard and stops behind a black sports car that is parked on the side of the house in front of a garage entrance.

“Would you like me to come in?” she asks, and I nod.

The air is icy as we get out and walk quickly towards the front steps. Just before the first step I grab Lin's arm.
My friend turns to me and looks at me questioningly.

''Thank you for bringing me here,'' I say breathlessly.
I don't know what to expect in this house. Having Lin with me takes away some of my fear and does me an incredible amount of good. Three and a half months ago, this would have been unthinkable - back then, I kept my private life strictly separate from my school life and hardly told Lin anything personal. All of that has changed. Mainly because of James.

»That goes without saying.« She reaches for my hand and squeezes it briefly.

“Thank you,” I whisper again.

Lin nods at me, then we go up the stairs. Lydia opens it door before we get a chance to ring the bell. She still looks the same through the wind as she did three days ago. And now I know why.

''I'm sorry, Lydia,'' I say.

She bites her bottom lip hard and lowers her gaze to the floor. In this second, I don't care that we don't actually know each other well or are even close in any way. I stumble up the last step and hug her. Her body starts shaking as soon as I wrap my arms around her, and I can't help but think of Wednesday. If I had known what had happened and how badly she was feeling, there was no way I would have left her alone.

''I'm so sorry,'' I whisper again.

Lydia digs her fingers into my sweater and buries her face in my collarbone. I hold her close and rub her back as I feel her tears soaking my sweater. I can mine

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I can't imagine what must be going through her mind at this moment. If my mother died, I wouldn't know how I would survive.

Meanwhile, Lin quietly closes the front door. Her eyes meet mine as she stops a few meters away from us. She looks as shocked as I feel.

At some point Lydia breaks away from me. Deep red spots have spread across her cheeks, her eyes are red and glassy. I raise my hand and brush a few strands of wet hair from her cheek.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” I ask cautiously.

She shakes her head. "Just make sure my brother becomes himself again. He's completely out of it. I..." Her voice is scratchy and hoarse from crying so much, and she has to clear her throat before she can continue. "I've never seen him like this. He's destroying himself, and I just don't know how to help him." As she says this, my heart starts pounding painfully. The need to see James and hold him in my arms

like Lydia is overwhelming - even though I'm afraid of the encounter.

"Where is he?"

"Cyril and I took him to his room. He fainted earlier." I flinch at her words.

"I can take you there if you like," she continues, nodding toward the winding staircase that leads to the upper floor. I turn to Lin, but my friend shakes her head. "I'll wait here.

Just go

ahead." "The boys are in the back of the living room if you want to sit with them. I'll be right there," says Lydia, pointing to the other side of the foyer, where a hallway leads off to the back of the house. Only now do I notice the quiet music that seems to be coming from there. Lin hesitates for a moment, but then she nods.

Lydia and I walk together up the wide, dark brown wooden staircase upstairs. I notice that the Beauforts' house looks much friendlier than it appears from the outside. The foyer is bright and inviting. There are no family photos on the walls like in ours, but at least there are no oil paintings of family members who died centuries ago in gold frames like in the Vegass'.

The pictures that have been placed here are colourful and impressionistic,

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and even if they do not make a particularly personal impression, they convey a welcoming atmosphere.

Once at the top, we turn into a corridor that is darker and so long that I can't help but wonder what's behind all the doors we pass. And how it's possible that only one family lives here.

“Here we are,” Lydia murmurs suddenly and stops in front of a large door. We both stare at it for a moment, then she turns to me. "I know it's a lot to ask, but I feel like he really needs you right now." I can barely sort out my thoughts and feelings. My body seems to know that James is

behind the door - I'm drawn to him like a magnet. And even though I'm not sure I can help him in the way Lydia hopes, I still want to be there for him.

Between James and Elaine

Lydia briefly touches my arm. »Ruby... “There was nothing but that kiss.”

I stiffen.

»James came out of the pool immediately afterwards and sat on a chair folded up. I know he can be cruel, but…”

»Lydia,« I interrupt. »... he wasn't himself.« I shake my head.

»That's not why I came here.« I can't think about that right now. Because if

I do - if I allow myself to think about James and Elaine the anger and disappointment —, will take over and then I won't be able to walk through that door.

"I can't hear that right now." For a moment

Lydia looks like she wants to argue, but finally she just sighs. "I just wanted you to know." Then she turns and walks back down the long hallway to the stairwell. I watch her

until she reaches the stairs, where a long trail of light is cast on the expensive carpet. When she has completely disappeared from my sight, I turn back to the door.

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I don't think I've ever found something as difficult in my life as reaching for that knob. It feels cool under my fingers and a shiver runs down my spine as I hesitantly turn it and open the door.

I stand on the threshold of James' room with bated breath.

The room has high ceilings and certainly encompasses the size of the entire upper floor of our tiny terraced house. To my right is a desk with a brown leather chair in front of it. To my left there are shelves along the wall, filled with book covers, notebooks, and occasionally a few fictional figures that remind me of the ones I saw back in the *Beaufort* branch. Besides the door I just came through, there are two others on either side of the room. They are made of solid wood and I suspect that one leads into the bathroom and the other - slightly smaller - leads into James' wardrobe. In the middle of the room is a seating area with a sofa, a coffee table on a Persian rug and a wing chair.

I carefully cross the room. A king-size bed is directly across from the door on the other side of the room. There are large windows on either side of the bed, but the curtains are almost completely drawn, casting only two narrow strips of light on the floor.

I spotted James immediately.

He is lying in bed, a dark grey blanket covering most of his body. I approach carefully until I can see his face.

I gasp for air.

I thought James was sleeping but his eyes were open. And his look sends an icy cold shiver down my spine.

James' eyes, normally so expressive, are lifeless.
His face is completely blank.

I take another step towards him. He doesn't react, doesn't give any sign that he has noticed my presence. Instead, he stares right through me. His pupils are unnaturally dilated and the smell of alcohol is heavy in the air. I can't help thinking about Wednesday evening, but I push the memory back. I didn't come here to think about my hurt feelings. I

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I came here because James lost his mum. Nobody should go through something like this alone. Especially not someone who, despite everything, I care so much about.

Without further ado, I bridge the last distance between us and carefully sit down on the edge of the bed.

"Hey, James," I whisper.

He flinches, as if he had fallen in a dream and now landed painfully.
The next moment he turns his head slightly in my direction. There are dark circles under his eyes and his hair hangs wispy over his forehead. His lips are dry and cracked in some places. He looks like he's been living on nothing but alcohol for days.

When he kissed Elaine, I only wished bad things on him.
I wished that someone would hurt him as much as he hurt me. I wanted revenge for my broken heart. But seeing him so broken now doesn't give me the satisfaction I was hoping for. The exact opposite is the case. Rather, it feels as if his pain is spreading to me and pulling me into the depths. Despair overcomes me because I don't know what I can do for him. All the words that come to mind at this moment seem meaningless.

I carefully raise my hand and brush the strawberry blonde strands from James' forehead. I gently run my fingertips down his cheek and place my palm against his cold face.
It feels like I'm holding something infinitely fragile in my hand.

I gather all my courage, bend down to him and press my lips to his forehead.

James' breath catches.

For a moment we are frozen in this position, no one of us dares to move.

Then I sit up again and withdraw my hand.

The next second, James grabs me by the hips. He digs his fingers into them and practically throws himself forward. I am so shocked by the sudden movement that I freeze. James wraps his arms around me and buries his face in the crook of my neck. His whole body is shaken by a deep sob.

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I put my arms around him and hold him tight. There's nothing I can say right now. I can't empathize with his loss, and I don't want to pretend I can.

What I can do is be there for him in this second. I can stroke his back and share his tears. I can feel with him and make him understand that he doesn't have to go through this alone, no matter what happened between us.

And as James cries in my arms, I realize that I have completely misjudged the situation.

I thought that after what he did to me, I could just cut him out of my life. I had hoped to get over him as quickly as possible. But now that I realize what his pain is doing to me, I know that won't happen anytime soon.

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3

James

The walls are spinning. I don't know which way is up and which way is down, I can only feel that Ruby's hands are there, anchoring me halfway in reality. She is sitting on my bed, her back leaning against the headboard, while I am half lying on top of her. Her arm is wrapped tightly around me, her hand is gently stroking my head. All I can concentrate on is the warmth of her body, her steady breathing and her touch.

I have no idea how many days have passed since then.
Whenever I try to remember anything, there is nothing but fog. Thick gray fog and two thoughts that come to me again and again in brief moments of clarity:

First of all, my mum is dead.

Second, I kissed another girl in front of Ruby.

No matter how much alcohol I drink or what I take, I will never forget the look on Ruby's face at that moment. She looked so incredulous and hurt. As if I had destroyed her world.

I bury my face in Ruby's waist again. Firstly, because I'm afraid she'll get up and leave at any moment. Secondly, because I'm afraid the tears will come back at any moment. But neither of those things happen. Ruby stays, and I obviously have no more fluids left in me that I can spare.

I feel like there's nothing left in me. Maybe my soul died with my mother. How else could I have done this to Ruby?

How could I *have* done this to Ruby?
What's wrong with me?

What the hell is wrong with me?

"James, you need to breathe," Ruby whispers suddenly.

At her words I realize that I have actually stopped breathe. I'm not sure how long.

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I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. It's not that difficult.

"What's happening to me?" Whispering those words is so tiring it feels like I've shouted them.

Ruby's hand pauses. "You're grieving," she replies just as quietly.

"But why?" I just

forgot to breathe - now my breathing is coming too quickly. I sit up abruptly. My chest hurts, as do my limbs, which feel as if I've been doing too much exercise.

In the last few days I have done nothing but suppress what is currently happening to my life.

"Why what?" Her gaze is warm and I wonder how she can look at me like that.

»Why I'm sad, I mean. I didn't even like my mum particularly."

Before I have even said the words, I freeze. Have I just really said?

Ruby grabs my hand and holds it tight. "You lost your mother. It's normal to be completely devastated when someone so important to you dies." She doesn't sound as confident and

sure as usual. I don't think Ruby herself has any idea how to behave in a situation like this. The fact that she's here and trying, however, seems almost like a dream to me.

Maybe it even is one.

“What happened here?” she suddenly whispers and carefully lifts my right hand.

I follow her gaze. My knuckles are still covered in blood where they burst, the rest of my skin is covered in red and bruised spots.

Maybe it isn't a dream after all. Or if it is, then it is a very realistic one.

"I hit my father." The words come out of my mouth without any judgment. I feel nothing as I say them. Another thing that is wrong with me. After all, every halfway normal person knows that you never raise a hand against your parents. But that moment when my father told Lydia and me the news of Mum's death

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delivered – so toneless and cold simply –, That was the moment when I could no longer.

Ruby lifts my hand to her mouth and presses her lips to the back of my hand. My heart begins to beat faster and a tremor runs through my body. Her touch feels so good, even though her gentleness is killing me. Everything about it feels wrong and right at the same time.

My parents instilled in me as a child that I I must not let my feelings show. That's how other people get to know you and can judge you at a certain point. As soon as you show weakness, you make yourself vulnerable - and as the CEO of a large company, you can't afford that. But they didn't prepare me for a situation like that. What do you do when you lose your mother at the age of eighteen? For me, there was only one answer: you try to suppress the truth with alcohol and drugs and pretend that none of it happened.

But now that Ruby is here with me, I'm not sure I can carry on like this. I let my gaze wander over her face: over her slightly tousled hair and down to her neck. I still remember exactly what it was like to press my lips to the soft skin of her throat. How overwhelming it felt to hold her. To be inside her.

Now she looks as sad as I feel. I don't know if she's just thinking about my mom or also about how much I hurt her.

But there is one thing I know for sure: Ruby has my I didn't deserve that kind of behavior. She always made me feel like I could do anything. And no matter what happened, I should never have let … I would have Elaine kiss me just to prove to myself and everyone else that I was an unfeeling asshole who couldn't care less about anything - not even the death of my own mother. Pushing Ruby away like that was cowardly. And it was the biggest mistake I've ever made in my life.

"I'm sorry," I say hoarsely. My throat feels rusty and it takes a lot of effort to speak. "I'm so sorry for what I did."

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Ruby's entire body stiffens. Minutes pass in which they
not moving. I think she has even stopped breathing.
"Ruby..." She
just shakes her head. "No. That's not why I'm here." "I know what a mistake I
made, I -" "James, stop," she whispers urgently.

»I know you have no reason to forgive me. But I…” Ruby’s hand trembles as she
removes it from mine. Then she gets up from the bed. She first smoothes down her sweater and then pushes her bangs down. It seems as if she wants to restore her neat appearance, the one I didn't notice for two years. Far too much has happened between us for that. There is nothing that can ever make her invisible to me again.

"I can't do this now, James," she murmurs. "I'm sorry." The next moment
she crosses my room. She doesn't turn around or look at me again as she leaves my room and closes the door quietly behind her.

I clench my teeth tightly at the burning sensation behind mine
My eyes return and my shoulders begin to shake again.

I don't know how long I lay in my bed staring at the wall, but eventually I get up
and go downstairs.
It's long since gotten dark outside and I wonder if the boys are even here anymore. Just before I enter the salon, I can hear their quiet voices. The door is ajar and I pause with my hand on the handle.

"This isn't normal anymore," Alistair mutters. "If he keeps going like this, he'll
drink himself into a coma. I don't understand why he doesn't talk to us."

»I wouldn't have the nerve to talk in his situation.« Keshav.
I'm not surprised that he of all people says that.
"But you know your limits. I'm not so sure about James." "We shouldn't have let it get this far," Wren
interjects. "Until yesterday, I really thought he just wanted to celebrate Oxford."

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There is silence for a moment, then Wren continues quietly: "If he doesn't want to talk about it, we have to accept that."

Alistair snorts. »And continue to watch him destroyed? Hardly likely."

“You can take the alcohol and drugs away from him,” Wren murmurs. "But his mother is dead. And as long as he doesn't accept that, we're powerless, as shitty as that is." An ice-cold shiver runs down my spine. You already know.

The thought of looking at their pitying faces turns my stomach. I do not want that. I want everything to be as before. But if Ruby's visit has shown me anything, it's that now is the time to face it.

So I crack my neck, circle the aching shoulders and enter the salon.

Alistair is about to say something back, but presses his lips tightly when he spots me. I go straight to the drinks trolley and get a bottle of whiskey. Sober, I can't stand what I'm about to do. I pour myself a glass and drink it in one go. Then I put it down and turn to the boys. All but Cyril are there. Alistair swirls the last of the liquid in his glass, his eyes fixed on the floor. Kesh looks at me expectantly, dark eyes, as does Wren. Even though they already know, it feels important to say the following words out loud: "My mum is dead." It's the first time I've said this.

And it hurts even more than I expected. Even alcohol can't do anything about it. That's exactly why I've been avoiding talking to them. Talking only causes more pain. I look away and stare at my shoes so I don't have to see their reactions. I've never felt so vulnerable as I do in that second.

Suddenly I hear footsteps coming towards me. When I look up, Wren already right in front of me. He wraps an arm around me and hugs me tightly to him.

I let my forehead fall tiredly onto his shoulder. My arms are heavy as lead and I can't return the hug. Despite it

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Wren won't let go of me. Shortly afterwards Kesh and Alistair come over and put their hands on my shoulders.

Words aren't necessary at this moment, especially since the lump in my throat would have prevented me from making a sound anyway. It takes a while until I get myself somewhat under control again. At some point Wren starts to push me towards the sofa, while Alistair gets me a glass of water and hands it to me silently.

»This is so shit,« Alistair mutters, sitting down next to me. »And I'm so sorry, James.«

I cannot return his gaze or respond to it. say, so I just nod.

“What happened?” Kesh asks after a while.

I sip my glass hesitantly. The cold water feels surprisingly good. "She had a stroke while we were in Oxford." Silence. I don't think any of the boys even take a breath.

They may have known that Mum died, but this information is obviously new to them.

»My father didn't tell us until we got back here. He wanted "Don't let us mess up the interviews." Remembering the conversation with Dad gives me a chill. I look at my blue hand, clench it into a fist and unclench it again.

Wren puts a hand on my shoulder. "We suspected something bad had happened," he murmurs after a while. "I've never seen you like this before. But Lydia didn't say anything, and you were barely responsive..." Keshav clears his throat. "There was a press release from *Beaufort*

this afternoon. That's how we found out." I swallow hard. "I just didn't want to think. About... anything." "It's okay, James," Wren says quietly.

»And I was afraid that if I said it, it would become a reality.« Finally, I look up and see the

concerned faces of my friends. Keshav's eyes are shining suspiciously, while Alistair's cheeks have lost all color. I hadn't even considered that my boys had known my mum since they were children and that the news of her death would probably affect them too. Suddenly

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I realize how selfish my reaction was. Not only did I ignore reality and hurt Ruby, but I also pushed my friends and Lydia away with my actions.

"You'll get through this. *You* 'll get through this," Wren says. I follow his gaze and see Cyril and Lydia standing in the doorway. Lydia's cheeks and eyes are red. I certainly feel the same way out of.

»No matter how it may feel at the moment, you are not alone. You have us. "Okay?" Wren continues urgently, squeezing my shoulder. The look in his brown eyes is serious and firm.

"Okay," I reply, even though I have no idea whether I can believe him.

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4

Lydia

Percy enters the hallway as I'm about to put Mum's pearl necklace around my neck. “Are you ready to go, miss?” he asks, stopping a few steps away from me. "Mr. Beaufort and your brother are already waiting in the car."

I don't answer. Instead, I hook the clasp of the chain and check my updo one last time. Then I slowly lower my hands.

I look at my reflection in the mirror. Dad's funeral planner not only took care of all the organizational details, but also arranged for Dad, James and I to be made up by a stylist this morning.
"Waterproof mascara - it'll help you get through today, sweetie," the young woman tweeted.

I briefly considered wiping my eyes, which were still damp from the make-up, with both hands to destroy the work, but my father's stern look stopped me. It's only because of him that I look presentable now. Even more than that. I have more makeup on my face than in any shoot we 've ever done for a *Beaufort* collection. The eye shadow and subtle eyeliner are neatly applied, three coats of waterproof mascara stick together my eyelashes, and my face is sharply contoured. So my cheekbones are a little more prominent than they have been recently.

My dad frowned in surprise when the stylist saw my round face commented. I would probably be able to hide the pregnancy for another month or two - but not much longer.

As soon as I imagine how my family will react, it feels like someone is choking me off. But I can't think about that now. Not today.

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"No," I answer Percy's question after what feels like an eternity, but I still turn around and walk briskly towards the exit.
Percy follows me in silence. At the cloakroom, he tries to help me put on my coat, but I turn away from him. His look is so compassionate that I can't bear it at that moment, so I pull on the sleeves myself and then step outside. The entire courtyard of our property is covered in frost, which glitters slightly in the sun. I carefully walk down the steps of the entrance staircase and to the black limousine that is parked right in front. Percy opens the door for me and I thank him before I get in and drop down onto the back seat next to James.

The mood in the car is depressed. Neither James nor my father, who is sitting on the bench next to us, take note of me.
While I'm wearing a black sheath dress with ruffles on the long sleeves, they're both dressed in black suits that were made especially for this day. The dark color of the material makes my brother look even paler than he already is. The stylist tried to put a little color on his face, but it didn't work. For Dad, however, the make-up worked wonders: the bruises around his eyes are no longer visible.

I shake my head as I look at the two of them. My family is a complete shambles.
The drive to the cemetery passes me by in a rush. I try to do what my father and brother do and mentally transport myself to another place, but that becomes impossible from the moment we stop and Percy curses quietly.

The entrance to the cemetery is besieged by reporters.
I squint at James, but his face is completely expressionless, as he puts on his sunglasses and waits for the car door to open. I swallow hard and pull my coat closer together. I then slide my own sunglasses up my nose. The sight of the jostling reporters makes me feel really sick. I try to breathe in deeply through my nose and then breathe out through my mouth.

Two of the security men hired by Julia help us get out. My knees are weak and shaky, and as we get to the chapel

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I feel like I'm in shock. The journalists and paparazzi call after us, but I don't understand a word they say except for my name and James'. I ignore them and walk quickly with my shoulders squared. When we get to the chapel, the cemetery employees open the doors for us so we can enter without having to wait.

The first thing I see is the coffin that is set up in front of the altar. It is black, and the smooth, lacquered surface reflects the light from the hanging lamps that are attached to the chapel's high ceiling.

The second is the woman standing directly in front of the coffin. Her hair is the same red as Mum's, but falls in soft curls to her shoulders.
She also wears a black coat that reaches down to her knees.

“Aunt Ophelia?” I croak, taking a step towards her.

She turns around. Ophelia is five years younger than Mum, and even though her features are softer and her expression less serious, you can tell at first glance that she is her sister.

"Lydia." I can see the same deep sadness in her eyes
I've been feeling for days.

I want to go to her and hug her, but before I do too
When I can only take one step forward, my father grabs me by the upper arm. His gaze is icy cold as he looks first at Ophelia and then at me.
He shakes his head almost imperceptibly. A painful throbbing spreads through my body. This is Mum's funeral. They may not have had the best relationship, but they were sisters. And I'm sure Mum would have wanted us to be here for Ophelia today.

Without paying attention to me or my resistance, my father puts an arm around my shoulder. It's not a loving gesture, but rather feels like an unyielding vice. As he maneuvers me into the row of seats reserved for us, I turn back to Ophelia, but she has disappeared into the sea of people dressed in black.

The funeral procession is accompanied by over a dozen security people who walk alongside us and make sure that the reporters don't get too close to us. Most people are tactful enough to stand on the side of the path

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position, but some hold the cameras so close to our faces that I only have to reach out my hand to touch them.

After a while I look at James, who is walking next to me and stoically staring at our father's back. His expression is set in stone, hard and expressionless, and I wish I could look into his eyes. Then maybe I would know what's going on with him. I wonder if he did coke or drank before we came here. In the last few days - actually since the evening Ruby was with us - he has completely withdrawn and hasn't spoken to me or the boys. I can't blame him. In many ways we tick the same way. I too could have used something to help me get through these seemingly endless, terrible days.

During the never-ending eulogy in the chapel I...
I mentally checked out. If I had listened to everything the pastor said about Mum, I probably would have collapsed. Instead, I put up an invisible wall between myself and my emotions and just concentrated on not sobbing out loud.

I can imagine how my father would have felt about that.

I try to conjure up this wall again when we finally stop in front of Mum's grave. I stare at the black hole that has been dug into the ground and push every emotion away from me. For a moment I think it's working. The pastor starts to speak again, but I don't listen and I don't think about anything.

But as the coffin is lowered into the grave, I suddenly...
the feeling of not being able to breathe. It feels like something powerful and dark is rising up inside me, choking my throat.
All the thoughts I've been trying to suppress for the past hour are fighting their way to the surface of my consciousness.

Mum's lifeless body lies in this coffin.
She won't come back.
She is dead.

I feel sick. Panting softly, I press my hand over my mouth and stagger a little to the side.

"Lydia?" James' voice sounds as if from far away.

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I can only shake my head. I try desperately to remember what Dad told us before the funeral.
Stand up straight, take off your sunglasses for half a minute at most, no tears. He didn't want to give the press any more drama than was necessary.

It takes my last strength to pull myself together. I try not to think about Mum. How I'll never be able to ask her for advice again. About how she'll never bring tea into my room again when I've sat at my desk too long studying for school. About how she'll never hug me again. About how she will never meet her grandchild. About being completely alone and afraid of losing James and Dad too because our family is falling apart a little more every day.

A quiet sob escapes from my throat. I press my
I pressed my trembling lips together so as not to make another sound.

"Lydia," James repeats, more insistently this time. He moves closer to me so that our arms touch through the thick fabric of our jackets. I slowly look up. James has taken off his sunglasses and is looking at me with dark eyes. In them I see something that I have been desperately looking for for the last week. Something that reminds me that he is my brother and will always be with me.

James hesitantly raises his hand to my face. It's ice cold, but it still feels good when he quickly strokes my cheek with his thumb.

»Fuck Dad,« he whispers to me. »If you want to cry, then
wine please. Okay?«
The familiarity in his eyes and the honesty of his words make the wall inside me finally break down. I allow the feelings inside me to turn into a whirlwind, because James is there to hold me tight. He puts an arm around my shoulder and pulls me close to his side. I bury my face in his chest. He feels like home, and my heavy heart becomes a little lighter. While my tears fall uncontrollably onto his coat,

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fall, we watch together as the coffin is lowered further and further until it reaches the bottom.

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5

Ruby

I'm going back to school on Wednesday. I've been out for over a week and am now feeling the consequences. Even though Lin gave me her notes over the weekend, I'm having trouble following the lessons. I'm called on twice in history and can't give a proper answer. While I'm staring at my planner in shock, Mr Sutton hardly seems to notice. He seems to be completely beside himself and his mind is somewhere else entirely.
I wonder if he thinks about Lydia as often as I think about James.

When the morning is over, I'm exhausted. I would prefer I sit in the library and review the material for the next few hours, but my stomach growls too much for me to skip lunch.

On the way to the cafeteria, Lin puts her arm through mine. "Is everything okay?" she asks, giving me a sideways glance.

"I will never miss a single day again," grumbled I say as we walk together towards the cafeteria. "It's the most terrible feeling in the world when you have no idea what your teachers want from you." Lin pats my arm. »You did well after all.
By next week at the latest, you'll have caught up again.«

“Mh,” I say as we turn. “Still, it was—” I pause on my heels.

We are in the main hall of Maxton Hall. To my right is the staircase that leads to the basement.

The stairs where James kissed me for the first time.

The memory of him putting his hand around my neck and pressing his lips to mine comes over me without warning.
It plays like a movie in my mind's eye: his mouth sliding over mine, his hands holding me tight, his confident movements making my knees weak. But suddenly it begins

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my face to change - it deforms until it is completely transformed. James no longer holds me but Elaine in his arms and kisses her passionately.

A violent stabbing pain shoots into my stomach and I have to make a lot of effort not to double over.

Then someone bumps into me from the side – and I am back in Maxton Hall. Instead of the kiss, I see the empty basement stairs and people moving toward the cafeteria. The cramping pain in my stomach has also subsided.

I take a deep breath. This entire school day has been nothing but a roller coaster ride so far. Every time I go up and get to the ridge - I think that everything is normal and I can somehow manage it

–, I suddenly see something that reminds me of James and am pulled back into the depths, into a whirlpool of pain.

“Ruby?” Lin says next to me, judging by her worried expression. not for the first time in the last few minutes. "Is everything okay?" I force

a smile onto my face and nod.

Lin frowns but doesn't press the issue. Instead, she does what she's been trying to do all morning: distract me.

As she leads me to the entrance of the cafeteria, she tells me about the new series by Tsugumi Ohba and Takeshi Obata that she has been devouring. She is so excited about it that I immediately pull out my bullet journal and add the manga to my reading list.

After we've finished eating, we take our trays to the dish return. A girl I don't know is leaning against the wall next to us. She's talking to a guy, but she falls silent when she sees me.

Her eyes widen and she elbows him in the side - not even very discreetly. I try to ignore them both.

“Aren’t you the girl who got thrown into the pool at Cyril Vega’s party?” she asks, taking a step towards me.

I cringe at her words. This damn pool is for

I only have terrible memories that I would like to have removed from my brain with a lobotomy.

Without answering, I wait for the tape to move on so that I can put down my tray and get out of here.

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“James Beaufort carried you outside that time. Go there
There are rumors that you're his secret girlfriend. Is that true?” she continues.

It feels like the walls of the cafeteria are slowly but surely closing in
moving safely towards me. They would definitely crush me at any second.

“If she were his girlfriend, she would have been at the funeral,” the guy
says, just loud enough for me to hear him.
"Well, that's why the emphasis is on *secret.* Maybe she's one of his dirty secrets.
You know how many he has." There's a loud clink.

I dropped the tray. There are broken

pieces all over my feet. I stare at some peas rolling across the ground and
can't manage to move to pick them up. My body is frozen.

“Stop talking such rubbish,” a dark voice comes from next to me. The next
moment an arm comes around my shoulder and I am escorted out of the cafeteria. Behind
me I can hear Lin shouting something from far away, but the dark voice continues
undeterred and takes me away from the cafeteria and into the stairwell. Only then does
the arm disappear from my shoulder and the person steps in front of me.

I look up at the beige trousers over the dark blue blazer to see Keshav Patel’s face.
…
I have to blink several times before I realize that it is actually him,
who stands in front of me. He has tied his black hair into a low bun and is
currently pushing back a strand that has come loose from it. He then turns his dark
brown, almost black eyes on me.

»Are you okay?« he asks quietly.
I think I can count on one hand how many times I have to talk to Keshav
I've heard of James. Of James' friends, he is the quietest one.
While I can now at least judge Alistair, Cyril and Wren a little, he is a closed book to me.

“Yes,” I finally croak and immediately clear my throat.
I look around and realize where we are. My first real encounter with James took
place here: under the stairs,

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hidden from the eyes of the curious. Here he tried to bribe me and I threw his stupid money at him.
I wonder if everything in this cursed school will remind me of James from now on.

“Good,” says Keshav. The next moment he turns around and buries it Hands in his pockets and leaves. I watch him until he disappears from my sight. After less than half a minute, Lin hurries out of the cafeteria with a grim expression and looks around searchingly.

“I’m here, Lin,” I say, stepping out from behind the stairs.

"I told them what I thought," she growls, as she coming towards me. "Such idiots. What was that about Keshav?"

Frowning, I look in the direction he disappeared in. "I have no idea."

The event team's first to-do this afternoon is wrapping the Secret Santa presents. In the last two weeks, the students had the opportunity to give us gifts, which are then traditionally distributed in the classes on the last day before the Christmas holidays.

I usually love tying up the letters and candy and putting them in the little Santa bags that our lower school mail carriers then carry from classroom to classroom. But despite the Christmas songs we have turned on, this time the mood is depressed.

This is probably due to the fact that an above-average number of Letters are addressed to the Beauforts and we can't initially decide what to do with them. James and Lydia are not at school at the moment so can't receive them themselves and I doubt they would be happy if we sent them to their house.
I wish I could just ask them whether they wanted the letters or not. But since that is not an option, we decide by a team vote and decide to hold her back for the time being. After all, we don't know what they say and whether anyone might have made a tasteless joke.

For the rest of the meeting, I find myself staring at the empty chair where James sat when he received his punishment.

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worked through with us. From now on, everything seems to remind me of him, but I would prefer to just forget him and everything we experienced together. Every time I think of him, it feels like someone is pushing a hand into my chest, wrapping their fingers around my heart and squeezing tightly.

I am so incredibly angry with him.
How could he do this to me?
How?

While I think about it, someone else so close to me
When someone like him gets really sick, he kisses someone else without hesitation.

And the worst part is that it's not just anger that I feel for James right now, but also sadness and pity. He lost his mum and every time I'm filled with white-hot anger towards him I feel bad. I know that I actually have no reason for this.

It is unfair and exhausting, and when I come home in the evening,
I am completely exhausted by the battle that all these contradictory feelings are waging inside me. The school day has drained all my energy and I can't bring myself to put on a happy facade for my family. Ever since Mum found out about Cordelia Beaufort's death, she's been treating me like a raw egg. I haven't told her what happened between James and me, but like any mother, she has that instinct that tells her certain things. For example, if your own daughter is lovesick.

I'm glad when I can finally fall into bed in the evening.
But even though I'm incredibly tired, I toss and turn from side to side for over an hour.
There's nothing here to distract me.
There is nothing left to do, nothing that can come between me and my thoughts of James. I put an arm over my face and squint my eyes. I want to summon darkness, but the only thing I see is James' face. His hint of a mocking smile, the lively sparkle in his eyes, the beautiful curve of his lips.

With a curse I throw the blanket aside and stand up. It is so
cold that goose bumps crawl down my arms as I walk to the desk and grab my laptop. I go back to the

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Bed and pull the covers up as high as possible. With the pillows adjusted behind me, I open the laptop and open the browser.

It almost feels forbidden to me to enter the letters in the search field.

James Beaufort.
Enter.

1 930 760 results appear in 0.50 seconds.
Oh man.

Images are displayed directly below the search field. Pictures of James in tailored Beaufort suits and of James golfing with his father and his friends. In them he looks neat and put together, as if he had the world at his feet.

But when I look at the full image results, another, less perfect side of him is also visible. There are a number of blurry cell phone photos of a younger version of James leaning close over a table and a line of white powder. Photos of him entering and leaving clubs with women who are certainly older than him on his arm. Photos of him completely distraught and obviously drunk.
The difference between this James and the one standing next to his parents and Lydia at galas couldn't be greater.

I click back to the normal search results. Directly below the row of pictures are countless new articles, most of them about Cordelia Beaufort's sudden death. I don't want to read them. They don't concern me and there has already been enough coverage of them in the news. I scroll further until James' Instagram account appears among the results. I open the page as if by itself.

His profile is a colorful mix of different photos. It shows
Books, the reflective facade of a skyscraper, a close-up of a stucco wall, benches, winding steps, London photographed from above from an airplane, his feet in leather shoes on a train platform, a window through which the morning sun shines. If there weren't always photos of him with
his friends or Lydia to see, I would never have assigned this profile to James.

In the pictures with the boys, James has the grin on his face that always drove me crazy - the grin that was so unbelievable

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arrogant, but at the same time so effortlessly attractive that it just makes your stomach tingle.

One photo in particular catches my eye. It's of James and Lydia, both of them laughing. A rare sight. I can't remember ever having heard Lydia laugh. With James, however, I only have to look at the picture to hear the familiar sound in my ears. The butterflies in my stomach are replaced by a wistful tug. I miss James' laughter. I miss his manner, his voice, our conversations... everything.

I quickly save the picture to my desktop. I know how stupid this is, but I don't care. I always act thoughtfully and rationally in all areas of my life. For once, I allow myself to be guided by my feelings.

The top photos on James' profile are condolence messages flooded. I scan the comments and swallow hard.
Some are not only tactless, but downright cruel. I wonder if James even reads all of this? What does he think about it? If I find it terrible, then I don't even want to know what must be going through his mind.

One comment in particular caught my eye because it was almost impossible to beat in terms of tastelessness. **xnzlg:** if

you want photos of the Beaufort funeral, take a look at my profile. My finger pauses over the touchpad

and an angry heat spreads across my cheeks. I click on the profile to report it - and freeze.

xnzlg 's entire Instagram feed consists of pictures of James and Lydia. The two of them, dressed in black, in the cemetery. They are leaning against each other and supporting each other. James has one arm wrapped around Lydia and is holding her close to his side, his chin resting on her head.

Tears well up in my eyes.

Why would you do something like that? Why would you photograph this terrible moment in the life of a family that is already broken, only to post these pictures on the Internet? No one has the right to invade their privacy like that.

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I wipe my eyes with one hand. I try to find my way around *xnzlg* 's page and report the profile. Immediately after that, I mark the comments under James' pictures as spam until they disappear.

It's the only thing I can do right now, but it's not enough. The photos have stirred up all the feelings that have been building up inside me over the last week, so much so that I can barely control them. The compassion I feel for James and Lydia is overwhelming.

I close my laptop and slide it back into its padded sleeve, then I reach for my phone and open a new message. I decide to write to Lydia.

I don't know if she has told her family about her pregnancy yet, but I want her to know that nothing has changed and that I am still here for her if she needs me. I open a new message and type:

Lydia, my offer stands. If you want to talk, let me know.

After some hesitation, I send the message. Afterwards, I stare at the phone in my hand. I know the sensible decision would be to put it away again. But I can't help it. As if by myself, I open James's and my message history.

It's hard to believe that his first message to me was a little over three months ago. It feels like years have passed since the evening James invited me to *Beaufort's* in London. I remember the moment we were trying on the Victorian costumes and his parents showed up unexpectedly.

My first thought when I saw Cordelia Beaufort was "I want to be like her."

I was impressed by the way they decorated the entire room with her personality and exuded authority and competence without having to do or say anything. Despite Mortimer Beaufort's hard face and physical presence, there was no doubt as to which of the two was in charge at *Beaufort .* Although I never really got to know her, I still mourn the loss of James' mother.

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And I grieve with James. When I was with him, he said he didn't even really like his mother, but I know that's not true.
He loved her, I could tell that clearly when he cried in my arms.

My eyes dart to my closet. I go over to open the door without further ado. Then I bend down. Right at the bottom, in the last compartment, hidden behind an old gym bag, is James's sweater. The one he put on me after Cyril's party. I carefully take it out and bury my face in it for a moment. It hardly smells of James's detergent anymore, but the soft fabric still brings back memories. I close the closet door and go back to bed.

As I walk, I put the sweater on and pull the sleeves over my fingers.

I don't understand how it can be that the anger at him is affecting me inside consumed, but at the same time I suffer so much for James that in some moments I have the feeling that I can't stand it for a second longer.

Like now.

I pick up my phone again, uncertain. I turn it over and over. I want to write to James, but at the same time I don't want to. I want to comfort him and scream at him at the same time, hug him and hit him at the same time.

Finally, I type a short message.

I think of you.

I look at the words and take a deep breath. Then I press “Send”.
Then I put the phone aside. My eyes fall on the alarm clock on my nightstand. It is now after midnight and I am still wide awake. Even if I turn off the light now, I will not be able to sleep, I know that for sure.

I pull my backpack to my bed and pull out my notes from this morning. Just as I lean back against my pillows and start reading, my phone vibrates. I open the message with bated breath.

I miss you.

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Goosebumps spread across my body. I don't know what I was expecting. Certainly not such an answer. While I'm still staring at the three words, a second message arrives.

I wanna see you.

The words blur before my eyes, and even though I'm lying under the covers and wearing James' thick sweater, I feel cold. Inside me, different feelings are fighting against each other: the longing for James, this unspeakable anger at him and at the same time a deep sadness, as if I had lost someone too.

I would like to write that I feel exactly the same way. That I miss him too and that I would love nothing more than to go to him and be there for him.

But that doesn't work. Deep down I feel that there is no way I am going to do this am ready. Not after what happened. After what he did to me. It just hurts too much.

It takes all the strength I can muster to type the next answer.

I can't.

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6

Ruby

Christmas is my favorite holiday.

I love the lavish decorations that turn the whole world into a wonderland. I love the good food, the music, the movies - and of course the Christmas cookies. I love choosing or making presents for my family and then lovingly wrapping them. Usually the time before Christmas feels magical - as if Santa Claus, Jack Frost or some other figure had sprinkled magic dust on the world.

This year everything is different.

But no. This year everything is exactly the same as always. Only *I* am different.

I don't enjoy the preparations at all because my mind is constantly on James. I try to distract myself and not think about him, but it doesn't work. Everything that happened during the past term plays over and over in my head like a sad movie, until I have to go for a walk to clear my head.

There are days when I wish I could stay in bed and travel through time. I want to live in a world again where no one at Maxton Hall knows my name, least of all James. Sometimes I lie in bed at night and look at the picture of him laughing, or the invitation to the Halloween party where we are pictured together. I remember the feeling of his fingers around my hand. His kisses. His soft voice whispering my name.

The holidays are more than convenient for me. At least that's what I have Opportunity to put some distance between me and Maxton Hall. Because even if James doesn't return to school until the next term, every corner I turn and every room I go into, I'm still gripped by the panic that he might be standing there. And I wouldn't have been able to cope with that. Not yet.

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Luckily, my family is very good at distraction. Mum and Dad bicker in the kitchen and need me to be the judge at least once a day, deciding whether the cookies Mum bakes taste better with or without the exotic spice Dad added. In previous years I've been on Mum's side most of the time, but I'm surprised to find that this time around I also like Dad's creations.

The rest of the time, Ember uses me for all sorts of other tasks. We do what feels like two thousand shoots for her blog, although I'm sure half of the photos turned out bad because my fingers were shaking too much in the cold. She also thought up the presents for our family this year, which is normally my favorite thing to do before Christmas. Her ideas were great: our grandparents are getting a calendar that we've stuck family photos on, and Mum is getting a wellness basket that we've put together ourselves. For Dad, Ember found a nice new spice rack from the sixties in the classifieds, which the previous owner let us have for just ten pounds after a bit of haggling.

“You’re tough when it comes to dealing,” Ember says as we do a makeshift cleaning in our small garage. Wrinkling her nose, she removes the cobwebs from the back of the shelf. »Maybe you should change your career again.«

I'm laying newspaper on the floor so we can start painting right away, and I force a grin.

A small, thoughtful wrinkle forms between her brows as she looks at me scrutinizingly.

»Don't you want to finally talk to me?« »About what?« I reply tonelessly.

She lets out a short laugh. »About the fact why you behave like a robot? About everything that’s bothering you?”

I flinch at her words. Up until this point, Ember hadn't spoken to me about my behavior, but had acted as if it was normal for me to only leave my room in extreme emergencies and barely speak a word to anyone. She didn't pressure me or ask any questions, for which I am incredibly grateful.

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Apparently this grace period is now over.

She doesn't know what happened between James and me at Oxford, let alone that he kissed Elaine afterward. I felt like I needed to sort this whole thing out on my own before I could talk to anyone about it. Getting through the days at school was already draining me enough. But Ember is not only my sister, she's also my best friend. I know I can trust her. And maybe it's time I stopped carrying this burden all by myself.

I take a deep breath. "I slept with James." That wasn't actually the first thing I wanted to say, but okay.

Ember drops the dust catcher. “You have *what?”* Without looking at her, I start taking the face masks out of the packaging to take and arrange them. I tug at the elastic bands that attach behind my ears.

"The next day he made out with another girl," I say with a cracking voice. I'm staring at the white ribbons of the face mask when Ember comes over and kneels next to me on the newspaper. "Ruby," she says quietly. She carefully places a hand between my shoulder blades and I feel my last resistance crumble.

Ember and I haven't always been as close as we are now. We only became close after Dad's accident, when we supported each other when he was feeling bad and angry at the whole world. Even though we could understand him, this time was not easy for us. We only got through it together.

What has bonded us since then is nothing I will ever have with another person, and when Ember squeezes my shoulder, the words just burst out of me. I tell her everything: about the Halloween party, about James' father and the expectations he has of his son, about how much James is suffering under this pressure, about Oxford and everything he and I shared together. About that evening when Lydia came to us and went with me to see Cyril. About James, who did coke and then jumped into the pool. And by Elaine Ellington.

As I tell the story, a wide variety of emotions flash across Ember's face: compassion, outrage, skepticism, excitement and...

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Ending terrible anger. After I'm done, she just looks at me with wide eyes for a minute, then, without saying a word, she takes me in her arms and holds me tight. For the first time in days, I no longer feel the impulse to cry. Instead, something warm spreads inside me and settles over my stormy feelings and seems to calm them down at least a little bit.

"I just don't know what to do now," I mumble into Ember's shoulder. "On the one hand, I think it's so terrible that this happened to him. I wish I could be there for him. But on the other hand, I never want to see him again. Not after what he did to me. I'd love to drive to him and scream at him, but I can't because I know how bad he is."

Ember lets go of me and takes a deep breath. She strokes my hair from the cheek and behind the ear. She then gently runs her warm hand over my head. "I'm so sorry, Ruby."

I swallow hard and gather all my courage to say the following words. "I hate him for it." Ember's green eyes are full of compassion and affection.

“Me too.” “At the same time, I’m wondering whether I’m even allowed to do that.”

She shakes her head, frowning. »It is your right to do so feel, Ruby. You act as if there were set rules for such situations, but there aren't. You feel what you feel." I grumble uncertainly.

"And if you want to punch James some days, that's perfectly legitimate - no matter how he's feeling at the moment," Ember continues in an urgent tone. "You can't make your feelings dependent on his just because he's going through a bad situation. He acted like an asshole and I think you can tell him that. What am I saying - you should tell the whole world."

I need a moment to process Ember's words. "I have I just have the feeling," I finally begin slowly, "that nothing will change, no matter what feelings I allow myself to have. Either it hurts because of his mum or because he cheated on me. That's why I try..." "...not to feel anything at all," Ember finishes my sentence quietly.

I nod.

"That doesn't sound particularly healthy, Ruby."

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I stare at my hands as silence spreads between us.

After a long while, Ember sighs. »I just can't believe that he really did that. I mean, I know his reputation, but…" She shakes her head.

"I really thought I'd come to the wrong movie. He was like a different person." … "That sounds just awful." "I don't understand why he didn't just come to me. He could have talked to me about anything. We could have…' I shrug my shoulders helplessly. I have no idea what I would have done if James had come to me. In any case, none of this would have happened. I'm sure of it.

"I think talking probably wasn't what he wanted to do that night," Ember begins hesitantly. "It sounds to me more like he was trying to destroy his life even further, regardless of the consequences." I take a halting breath.

»I definitely understand why you feel this way. It's completely fine how you feel. I hate him too for doing this to you.« Ember wraps her arms around me again, and this time I squeeze her back just as firmly. "Thank you, Ember," I whisper.

After a long moment she pushes me back and smiles at me warm. »Shall we get started?« She points to the spice rack.

Glad that I don't have to talk about my feelings any more, I nod. We put on our face masks and then look for suitable music. Ember chooses the Michael Bublé Christmas album and together we start painting the shelf.

"By the way, I've now cracked six hundred," Ember says at some point.

I cheer and bow to her. "You're a queen." "I'm thinking about applying to various fashion companies in London during the summer holidays." Ember doesn't look at me when she says that, but concentrates on the top corner of the shelf, which is actually long finished is painted. I can barely see her face because of the face mask, but I'm pretty sure she's blushing.

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“Would you like me to help you with the
application?” Ember pauses and now dares to look in my direction.
“So you think this is a good idea?”

I nod in agreement. "You've known for years that you want to do something with fashion. I'd say the sooner you start, the better." She continues painting in silence.

I look at her thoughtfully. "What's wrong?" I ask.

Ember hesitates for a moment. »I would love to have a
Do an internship at a company that produces socially and environmentally
friendly and at the same time stylish plus-size fashion," she finally explains.
»Unfortunately it is so difficult to find something that meets all of these criteria. So, for better or for worse, I will have to apply to everyone who offers internships. But I
wonder what's the point of working for a company that doesn't even make clothes in my size? Do you know what I mean?” I nod. »Yes, but it is also important to get professional experience.

And at least you can look at everything and think about how you're going to do it differently." "It still gives me a

stomach ache," she says with a sigh. “I keep wondering if my instincts are telling me not to do this?” “Maybe it's just the excitement. Just remember that there are a lot of

people behind you. Your blog has so many readers. They all believe in you and your vision." "It's nice of you to say that." "I'm not just saying that to be nice. I'm serious. I firmly believe that you will later
found your own fashion empire and
get started with it.«

Ember is beaming from ear to ear – I can do that despite that
face mask by their sparkling eyes.

“We could use the holidays and make a list of English companies that
would be considered, or what do you think?” I ask as I run my brush along the inside of the shelf.

"That's a great idea. I've even started because I'm coming soon
wanted to write a guide to ethically produced plus-size fashion.«

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I am just about to reply that our agreement stands when there is a knock the side garage door.

"Ruby?"

Ember and I freeze. Mum mustn't see what we're doing here. She can't keep secrets, especially when it comes to presents for Dad. We've found that out more than once over the past few years.

"Don't come in!" Ember shouts in panic and takes a quick step in front of the spice rack so that Mum won't see it if she sticks her head through the door.

“I didn’t mean to do that,” we hear her shout muffledly. "Ruby, you have company." Ember and

I exchange a confused look.

“Lin, maybe?” she asks.

I shake my head. "No, she's spending the Christmas holidays with her mother in China visiting relatives." Ember's eyes widen. "Do you think

it's...?" She speaks his
I don't know the name, but my heart still skips a beat.

"Who is it, Mum?" I ask out loud.

“Can you maybe just come out? I don't feel like me
to talk to you through the door.”

I roll my eyes and pull the loop of the mask from my ear so that it hangs halfway down, making me feel like a doctor taking a break from an important operation. I open the door a crack and push myself through. Mum looks at me and the mask with raised eyebrows, and I catch her standing on tiptoe to get a glimpse through the crack in the door. I slam the door shut behind me as quickly as I can.

“Who is it?” I ask quietly.

From one moment to the next, Mum’s expression becomes serious again. “The Beaufort girl.” My heart

sinks. I have déjà vu from the night Lydia was here looking for James. Something bad can't have happened again.

Not again. Please, not again.

"Where is she?" I ask.

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Mum points towards the hallway. "In the living room. Your father and I are in the kitchen if you need us." I nod and take off my face mask

completely. Cautious step

I walk through the hallway towards the living room. This time I brace myself, Ember's wise words still fresh in my mind.

Lydia is sitting on our old flowery sofa, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes glued to the living room table. She wears a loosely fitting chiffon blouse with a black pleated skirt and has her hair tied up in her typical ponytail. Not a single one of her curly hairs stands out, as always, Lydia gives the impression that everything about her is in perfect order.

However, the apathetic look in her eyes says otherwise.

"Hi," I say quietly because I don't want to scare her.

Lydia raises her head and sees me in the doorway. She forces a tired smile. "Hi, Ruby." For a moment I am undecided about what

to do, but decide to go over and sit next to her on the sofa. I suppress the urge to make small talk and ask her how she is or if everything is OK. Instead, I wait.

After a while, Lydia swallows hard. “You said to let me know if I needed anything.” I look at her perplexed for a moment, then nod

quickly.

"Yes, of course. No matter what it is."

She looks uncertainly towards the living room door, as if she were looking for someone. She's probably afraid my parents or Ember will come in or overhear us. I move a little closer to her.

“What’s it about?” I ask quietly.

Lydia exhales audibly. Then she arches her back until she sits completely upright. »I have an appointment with the gynecologist tomorrow and need someone to accompany me.«

It takes me a few seconds to realize what she just

said. “You want me to come with you?” I ask, taken aback.

She takes a shaky breath, presses her lips together tightly and finally nods. "You're the only one who knows about this."

"Is something wrong? Do you have any complaints or anything?"

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Lydia shakes her head. »No, it's just a check-up.
But I want to … don't go there alone."

I wonder how much courage it took for her to come here and say that. Until this moment, I didn't realize how lonely Lydia must really feel. I'm the only one who can ask her to go with her to a doctor's appointment that she's sure to be anxious and nervous about.

For me there is only one answer to her question, and she comes out of me as if it were natural: “Of course I’ll

accompany you.”

The treatment room is one thing above all: sterile. The walls are white and devoid of pictures except for a single painting. Behind the desk in the left part of the room there is a wide window with closed blinds, and to the right of it is a corner with a light blue curtain in front of it, behind which Lydia will definitely have to change right away.

We sit on the two chairs at the desk and watch the
Doctor Dr. Hearst typing something into her computer at the speed of light.

At first it was a bit strange coming here with Lydia. But by the time a doctor's assistant asked her to pee in a cup, I realized that we had both missed the right time for shame.

Now Lydia is fiddling with her checkered scarf next to me, glancing at the door every now and then. Maybe she's thinking about jumping up and running away. When her eyes catch mine, I smile at her confidently - or at least try to. I don't know what my job is here, so I do what I would want my companion to do in this situation. It seems to be working, because Lydia's shoulders relax a little bit.

After Dr. When Hearst is finished with the entry on the PC, she places her hands folded on the table in front of her and leans forward a bit. Her face appears friendly, although her dark hair is tied back in a strict bun. She has lots of smile lines, warm brown eyes and a pleasant, calm voice.

“Ms Beaufort, how are you?” she asks.
I look at Lydia, who in turn looks at the doctor.

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Suddenly she lets out a hysterical sound that is probably meant to be something like a laugh. But she quickly pulls herself together and clears her throat as if nothing had happened. »It's OK, I guess.« Dr. Hearst nods understandingly.

»During your last examination,
She complained of severe nausea. How are things today?'

"It got better. I haven't had it for a week
have to spit. However, I sometimes experience quite a bit of pain when I stand up after sitting for a long time. Is that normal?"

Dr. Hearst smiles. »That's nothing to worry about. Your maternal ligaments are currently stretching enormously because they have to make room for the baby. I can prescribe you magnesium for the pain." "Okay, that sounds good,"

Lydia replies with relief.

After the conversation, Dr. Hears her behind the curtain to free herself. I remain seated in my chair and look at the painting hanging above the desk during the examination. I try to figure out what all the shapes and colors could represent - but no chance. It's a wild bunch of yellow, red and blue and probably one of the strangest images I've ever seen. I wonder if a child perhaps painted it.

“Everything is exactly as it should be,” I hear Dr. Hearst say. "The
The cervix is tightly closed and as long as you haven't had any cramps or bleeding you should be fine."

Lydia mumbles something that I don't understand, then she's allowed to get dressed again. I breathe a sigh of relief. We would have done this part.

“You are welcome to come to us now, Ms. Bell.” Lydia has
now laid down on the couch next to the treatment chair and pushed up her blouse. Her fingers rest on her bare stomach, and I notice that I can now see a noticeable bulge.

I return Lydia's nervous smile as I sit down next to her on a
Sit down chair. The doctor rolls an apparatus towards us, which I assume is an ultrasound machine.

“So, do you want to see your baby, Ms. Beaufort?” Lydia
nods, visibly tense, and I move a little closer to her.

The doctor applies a transparent gel to Lydia's stomach and then presses the head of the ultrasound machine onto it. I stare at the

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Screen, but I can't see anything in the confusion of black and white. But Dr. Hearst continues to move his hand over Lydia's skin, and at some point the image changes. Little by little it becomes clearer, and my breath catches. Lydia lets out a quiet "Oh" next to me.

…

I'm pretty sure that's a little head on the right of the screen.

“There it is,” says Dr. Hearst and points his finger at the picture. As she moves the device further, the baby becomes more and more visible. Now I can even see tiny arms and legs. This is so, so cool and by far the most fascinating thing I've ever seen in my life.

“Wow,” I whisper, and the doctor gives me a smile.

I dare to look at Lydia. Her eyes are huge as she disbelieves staring at the screen.

"Wait a minute," says Dr. Hearst suddenly, leaning closer to the screen. For a moment, all we can see is black and white chaos, then the little bubble reappears.

"Is everything OK?" Lydia asks uncertainly. I put my hand on her shoulder. The doctor's hesitation is making me nervous too. The child moved, I saw that very clearly. She can't give us bad news now - not now. Lydia won't be able to cope with it.

"Ms. Beaufort, may I introduce you?" Dr. Hearst beams at Lydia. "Baby number two!" She points to a spot on the screen. "It's a little hidden next to its sibling, so you can't see it very well yet."

Lydia gasps. She stares at the monitor in shock as Dr. Hearst zooms in on the second small bubble and enlarges the image. Even though I don't recognize anything, I know she's telling the truth.

Twins.

Lydia is expecting not just one child, but two.

I can't imagine what's going on in her head right now. I pat her shoulder a little awkwardly and search desperately for something to say - when Lydia suddenly throws her head back and starts laughing.

Dr. Hearst and I exchange a look that says we can't blame her for this reaction. Lydia is probably in shock.

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After everything she's been through in the last few weeks, I wouldn't be surprised if she goes crazy at some point.

"This is crazy," she gasps after a while and turns her head, I'm at a loss for words." in my direction. »That's just … Dr. Hearst presses a few

buttons on the device and first smiles at Lydia,

then at me. »They are fraternal twins. They are well developed, everything looks wonderful. Have there ever been twin pregnancies in your family, Ms Beaufort?" Lydia nods and

shakes her head at the same time as she continues to stare at the display.

"She's a twin herself," I chime in quietly, trying to push the image of Lydia's brother out of my mind. James has absolutely no place in my head now.

"You don't have to be afraid," Dr. Hearst tries to reassure Lydia, but it doesn't seem to me that any of the words are getting through to her. "We'll keep a closer eye on you, and I recommend a glucose tolerance test to prevent gestational diabetes. Just make an appointment for that up front..." She gives a short lecture about healthy eating and upcoming tests, but it's clear to me that Lydia is no longer listening.

I look at her pale face. She urgently needs something now she calmed down a little again. And I already have a rough idea of how I can accomplish this.

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7

Ruby

Smith's Bakery doesn't look like much from the outside . The bakery is in the basement of a townhouse, between my favorite thrift store and an Italian delivery service that's closed every time I walk by. The facade of the bakery is repainted every year, but due to the English weather, the paint peels off again weeks later and then it looks as if the outside of the building hasn't been cleaned in years. The bakery's cursive green and gold lettering is plastered directly above the large window, through which you can catch a glimpse of the treats that are made fresh every day as you walk by. From home-baked white bread to scones and rolls to Bakewell pudding and pies, you can find everything your heart desires here.

"Whenever I'm feeling bad, I come here," I say to Lydia, who eyes the entrance to the bakery skeptically. I go up the stairs in front of her and then hold the door open for her. Already here the cozy air of the oven flows towards us and the smell of freshly baked bread and cinnamon hits my nose.

»That is my favorite smell,« I say to Lydia. »If it
If there was a perfume that smelled like warm bread and cinnamon, I would buy up the entire stock and bathe in it until I never smelled of anything else again."

Lydia's mouth corners twitch slightly. At least a small movement – the first since we started Dr. Hearst left.

Phil, my mum's colleague, is serving a customer as we approach the counter. On the wall behind him are a row of wooden shelves stacked with loaves of bread and baguettes. On the counter are two small baskets containing buttered pieces of bread for customers to try. I take two out as I pass, and as I pop one into my mouth I hand the other to Lydia.

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“Try it,” I say with my mouth full. “The bread is really delicious.” Lydia hesitantly follows

my request.

The bakery is small and cramped. Actually, the space is not designed for Designed to make yourself comfortable with a coffee, but there are still two tables with seating. One next to the door to the kitchen where the dough is prepared, and one so close to the counter that customers inevitably bump into it when it gets a little crowded.

I point to the small bench and battered wooden table at the back of the room. As Lydia slides onto the bench, she looks around the bakery. She doesn't seem to really know what to think of the store. Her almost skeptical look reminds me of her mother and the way she examined me when we first met.

I shake the memory from my head. “Do you already know what you want?” I ask.

Lydia looks past me, cocking her head at the various cakes. "What can you recommend?" "My favorite is the Bakewell pudding." "Then I'll take that." I nod with a

smile and walk forward to the counter, just as Mum
comes out of the kitchen. She

beams when she sees me and wipes her hands on her apron, which she wears over the striped shirt with the bakery's lettering.

»Hi, Mum, I'm here with Lydia,« I say quickly and point with the Thumb over our shoulder at our table. "She's had a hard day and I thought Bakewell pudding and a hot chocolate would definitely cheer her up," I whisper, hoping Lydia doesn't hear me.

"There's nothing that Bakewell pudding and a hot chocolate can't help with," Mum replies, giving me a conspiratorial look
to.

"Thanks, Mum." I go

back to Lydia and sit down on the wobbly chair opposite her. She has her chin resting on her hand. "How long has your Mum been working here?"

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"For as long as I can remember. She started right after school." She smiles slightly. "That must have been cool as a kid." "There were always cookies," I say, wiggling my eyebrows.

Lydia's smile widens a little.

“Do you already know what you want to do later?” I ask a while.

Now her gaze darkens. “What do you think?” “Lydia, just because you're having a baby doesn't mean yours entire future is fucked."

She lowers her eyes and runs her finger over the flaws in them Table top. "Babies," she murmurs after a long while.

“What?” I ask, confused.

»My future is not ruined just because I 'm having *babies .* Plural.” The smile is back, narrower, but I still can't help but return it.

I don't know what happens next, but suddenly we both start laughing, hesitantly at first, then louder. Lydia puts a hand over her mouth, as if she couldn't quite believe what she was doing. This in turn causes her laughter to mutate into a half-stifled snort, and we have to laugh even harder.

At that very moment, my mum comes over with a tray and places the steaming cups and then the two plates of cake in front of us. "What's so funny?" she asks.

Lydia presses her lips together and closes her eyes until they are under control again. Then she looks at Mum and says in a completely calm voice: "Ruby and I are just laughing at the oddities of life, Mrs Bell." She leans forward and puts her nose over the steaming mug. "That smells wonderful, by the way."

Mum blinks, perplexed. Then she raises her hand and strokes Lydia's arm. She knows that Lydia recently lost her mother, and knowing her, she would like to do more for her than bring her hot chocolate and cake. "Enjoy it." Lydia watches my mum go back to the counter to serve the next customer. Then she sighs quietly, pulls the mug of hot chocolate closer to her and puts both hands around it.

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»I always wanted to be a designer at *Beaufort ,«* replies she still answered my question.

“You can…” I *still* want to say, but one look from Lydia is enough to silence me.

She takes the spoon and stirs for a few seconds in the hot chocolate around. "Before, I couldn't have imagined anything better than bringing my creativity to *Beaufort ,* but Mum and Dad thought my ideas were too modern and not traditional enough," she finally continues. »I constantly clashed with them because I wanted to play a bigger role than they had planned for me. Unlike James, I would really like to take over the company. But for her there was always only him. This has been clear since we were born. No matter what we both want.” She takes the spoon out of the cup and puts it in her mouth.

Then she sighs with pleasure.

»I hate that you were subjected to this pressure. And still I imagine it's so difficult," I murmur and turn to my own chocolate. The warmth feels incredibly good and my cold fingers gradually thaw out again.

Lydia looks so sad and hopeless that I want to hug her. »Looking at our family from the outside, it seems as if Mum and Dad love us more than anything and always want the best for us. Wanted to. Whatever.” She clears her throat.

"I can't complain about growing up like this. I don't deserve to. I don't know how much James told you, but there are some things that just went wrong and can't be undone." I can't help but wonder if she means her father. And if he just

becomes violent towards James whenever something doesn't suit him, or towards Lydia. If the latter is the case, I'm even more worried about her.

“He just told me a few things,” I say evasively.

Even though I know that Lydia knows him better than anyone else in the world, I cannot say what he has told me. Even after everything that has happened, I cannot betray him like this.

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»He is doing better, by the way. He hasn't had any problems since the funeral. drunk. Instead, he now trains like a madman."

I remember the blank look in his eyes. Of James' tears. The way he clung to me. Of the bruises and abrasions on his hand.

"And what about him and your dad?" I ask cautiously.

"You know about the fight?" I nod.

»Dad acts as if nothing happened. He is hardly ever at home, and when he's there, he calls James into his office to prepare him for the meetings with the Beaufort board." On the one hand, I'm glad that the

relationship between James and his father hasn't escalated any further, but on the other hand, I know how James feels about the company and what a burden working at *Beaufort* must be for him. I feel sorry for him that the whole thing is starting sooner than he expected.

"Maybe you can get over it, Ruby." I look into Lydia's turquoise

eyes. The eyes that look exactly like James's.

I shake my head tiredly. "I do not believe that. To be honest, I don't want to do that at all." It's the first time I've said that. But

it is the truth.

I don't think that what James and I have been through can ever be put aside. And I don't want it at all. Especially not when I think about everything that will happen to me in the future.

It seems like there is a shadow over all my dreams, all because I confided them to James and was hurt so much by him afterwards.

"You could try," Lydia suggests gently, but again I shake my head.

“I understand that the news of your mum's death is unsettling him threw, but…” I raise my shoulders helplessly. "It does not change anything. I hate him for what he did.”

»But you were there when he needed you. That means something, doesn't it?« I stir the chocolate and

take a deep breath. »I still have something about him, yes. But at the same time, I've never been so angry at anyone. And I don’t think this anger will just go away.”

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We are silent. The beeping of the oven seems much louder than it had been just a few minutes before, as does the little bell on the door that announces the comings and goings of customers.

“Should I have gone to the doctor alone?” Lydia asks suddenly.

I jerk my head up. "No!" A blush appears on

Lydia's cheeks, and suddenly she seems almost shy. I wonder what's going on in her head right now. »If I had known how you felt about it, I wouldn't have taken you up on your offer. I …"

"Lydia," I interrupt her in a soft voice, reaching across the table for her hand. Her eyes widen and she stares at our entwined fingers. "I meant what I said to you. I want to be there for you. Our friendship has nothing to do with James.

Clear?«

She looks at me again, and I think she sees a suspicious gleam in to see in their eyes. She doesn't respond to my words, but she squeezes my hand briefly. And that is more than enough.

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8th

James

The harsh guitar sounds of Rage Against The Machine have been blaring in my ears for over an hour, and it feels like my whole body is on fire. But it's still not enough.

I stand in front of the multi-gym and clutch the short bar that is attached to the top with carabiners. I keep my elbows close to my body and bring my forearms up, then stretch them down, over and over again. Sweat drips from my forehead onto my T-shirt and my arm muscles are shaking, but I don't care. I just carry on. There will come a point when I'll be so exhausted that my head will be nothing but a loud, meaningless noise and thoughts of *Beaufort,* my mum or Ruby will have stopped.

After I have completed the arm unit, I sit on the cushion of the multi-gym. I grab the rod and slowly push it forward. As I leave it at a slow pace, a tightening in my chest muscles becomes noticeable.

I only realize that the door to the gym has opened when Lydia stands in front of me with her arms crossed. My sister stares down at me and says something, but I can't hear her over the noise in my ears. Undeterred, I continue the exercise. Lydia leans down so I have no choice but to look at her. Slowly her lips form another word - and I don't need to hear it to understand it.

Idiot.

I wonder what I have done wrong now. Since the funeral, I have hardly left the house and have not touched a drop of alcohol. This was particularly difficult in moments when I could not stop the dark thoughts. But I persevered, also because of Lydia, whose trembling body at Mum's funeral reminded me that it is my job as a brother to be there for her. Why she is looking at me with red cheeks at the moment

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I can't explain why she's standing in front of me and talking to me so forcefully.
Although I have to admit that her opening and closing her mouth, together with the blaring music in my ears, actually makes for a pretty amusing picture. It almost looks like she's lip-syncing.

Suddenly Lydia takes a step forward and jerks me off
Earplugs out of ear. »James!«

“What’s wrong?” I ask her and also take out the second plug.
The sudden silence seems threatening to me. Lately I always need noise around me, otherwise I start to think.

"I wanted to talk to you about Ruby." I take my
hands off the bars and grab my towel. I wipe my face and then the back of my neck where the sweat has collected. I avoid looking at Lydia.

"I don't know what you-" "Come
on, James." It feels like I'm
wearing a tie tied too tight,
tightening around my neck. I clear my throat. "I don't feel like talking about it."

Lydia looks at me shaking her head. The corners of her mouth are down grimaced and she has her arms crossed over her chest. At this moment she reminds me so much of Mum that I have to look away for a moment. I look at the towel and wipe my hands on it, even though they are long dry.

»I would love to help you. You.” I can only
laugh bitterly at that. “There is no *us,* Lydia. And that never happened. I messed up." "If you explain to her-" Lydia starts again,
but I interrupt her.

"She doesn't want to hear my explanation. And I can't blame her at all."

Lydia sighs. "I still think you have a chance. I wish you would take it instead of holed up here feeling sorry for yourself." I remember Ruby's message: *I can't.*

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Of course she can't. I kissed another girl and that is unforgivable. I've lost Ruby forever. And the fact that Lydia is coming here now and trying to convince me otherwise is killing me. I wanted to switch off and distract myself, but that's no longer possible. Slowly but surely the anger returns to my body. Anger at Mum's death, anger at my father, anger at myself - and the whole world.

"What do you care?" I ask. My fingers clench into the terry cloth of the towel.

"You are important to me. I don't want to see you suffer, damn it.
Is that so hard to imagine?'

"Ruby doesn't want me back, and I'm definitely not going to force myself on her. You shouldn't either, by the way." I get up and go to the two treadmills that are set up in front of a large picture window that looks out onto the back of our property. But I
don't get very far - Lydia pulls me back by the elbow. I turn around and glare at her angrily.

"Do not look at me like that. It's time for you to finally be yourself again
"You will," she hisses. Then she stabs me hard in the chest with a finger. "You can't
push everyone and everything away from you." "I'm not pushing you away,"
I interrupt
clenched teeth.
"James…" I
try to conjure up the mask of aloofness that was always my second face at school and in public meetings with my family. But that is Lydia standing in front of me. I've never had to hide anything from her, and that's why I just can't do it. I throw the towel aside in frustration.

"What do you want to hear from me, Lydia?" I ask weakly.
»That we will get through this together. You and me. Just like always." She swallows and touches my arm lightly. "But if you can't speak honestly to me and withdraw like that, it won't work." I snort disdainfully. "You act like you care about me about everything

talk. As if *you* were the most open person of the two of us. I always had to squeeze everything out of you. I only found out about your affair with Sutton because you got caught.« I push her hand away and look at her

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cold in the eyes. “Just because Mum's dead doesn't mean we have to conspire together against the rest of the world. Don’t make us something we never were, Lydia.”

She flinches and staggers back a step. Without giving her another look, I turn around and push the earplugs back into my ears as I walk away. If my sister says anything else, I won't hear it. The loud guitar riff drowns out the ugly reality of my world.

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9

Ruby

Even after weeks of radio silence, the memory of James is still so present that I feel as if it all happened yesterday. I don't sleep well. I delete his pictures from my laptop, only to save them again a day later and run my finger over James' smiling mouth like a psychopath. At the same time, I feel like a liar because I told Lydia that I didn't want him back, but my body clearly disagrees.

I miss James.

It's absurd.

Absurd and insane.

And I could slap myself for it. He broke my heart, damn it. I definitely shouldn't miss someone who does something like that.

Christmas comes and goes, and for the first time in my life I can't enjoy the holidays at all. The films we watch seem colorless to me and the songs we hear all sound the same. Even though I know Mum and Dad have put a lot of effort into cooking, the food tastes bland. And to make matters worse, my relatives keep asking me why I'm so depressed and if it has something to do with the boy who gave me that pretty bag on my birthday. At some point I can't take it anymore and hide in my room alone.

As New Year's Eve approaches, I decide that I can't go on like this for another minute. I'm sick of feeling like this. I've always been a positive person who looks forward to new beginnings. I refuse to let James take that attitude away from me.

So I jump in the shower, put on one of my favorite outfits—a tight plaid skirt and a loose-fitting cream blouse—grab my new bullet journal, and head downstairs, determined to tell Ember and my parents my New Year's resolutions.

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But when I enter the living room, I freeze.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, surprised.

Ember turns around to me in shock, as does Lin, who was just handing out colorful umbrellas in glasses. Lydia also stops moving abruptly - but the streamer in her hand becomes independent and rolls away on its own. We watch in silence as she ends up in a sad little heap on the floor.

Then Ember stands in front of me. “Why are you coming out of your shell today of all days?” she asks angrily. »You can set the clock according to when you leave your room - and right now, when I'm planning a surprise girls' night out for you, you'll come down earlier.
That's just... man, Ruby!« I look back

and forth between the three. Then a slow
Smile on my lips.

“We’re celebrating New Year’s Eve together?” I ask cautiously.
Lin returns my smile. »That was the plan.« When the

realization really sinks in, I arrest Ember
in the arm. “Thank you,” I murmur against her shoulder. "I think this is exactly what I need right now." And the fact that Ember knew this shows me once again that she knows me better than anyone else in the world.

»I thought maybe I could make you a little happy with this
"Do it," my sister whispers, stroking my back.

I nod. For the first time since everything happened with James, I feel
I sincere joy. “Thank you,” I also say to Lin and Lydia and hug them tightly to me, one after the other. "I'm so happy."

Then I help spread out the remaining streamers and
to scatter rose gold confetti. Ember connects the two ancient speakers that we bought at a flea market to her laptop and, while she looks for a suitable playlist, tells me what the plan for the evening is. She has obviously put a lot of thought into it and planned everything down to the smallest detail, which makes me want to throw my arms around her a second time. But I hold back and listen to her from the couch instead.

»I thought we would first write down our most beautiful moments from the last year and share them with each other. Then we watch a film – which we decide straight away – and eat it

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“This mountain of popcorn.” She points to a huge bowl that’s on the living room table. Dad usually uses them to make layered salad that he always brings to large family gatherings. Now it's filled to the brim with popcorn, whose buttery, sweet scent fills the entire living room. The water in my mouth runs down.

»Then we eat the main course,« Ember continues. »Dad has
Made quiche for all of us. Afterwards there's dessert, and then we're at what I assume is Ruby's favorite part." Lin holds up a semi-transparent bag in
which I can see small books and some pens.

I don’t even pretend to have to think about it. »We write our
Resolutions for 2018!«

Ember nods, laughing. “As soon as it's midnight, we probably will
either be in a food coma or have a dance party.«

"One of the two for sure," says Lydia, taking a handful of popcorn. She flicks the first small ball into her mouth and a slight smile appears on her lips. "That sounds like a great plan, doesn't it, Ruby?" "Great plan? That's the best thing I've heard in a long time.

Thanks, guys.«

Then we make ourselves comfortable on the floor around the living room table. Lin has brought a few large sheets of paper that we usually use in the event committee for our brainstorming sessions and that she secretly smuggled out of school. While a Keaton Henson playlist plays in the background, we spread them out in front of us.

»Okay,« Ember begins. »One of my biggest highlights
This year has been about working on my blog and having so many new people join it." She writes the whole thing down on her piece of paper.

"One of my highlights was seeing my mum's gallery finally turn a profit. We're doing really well at the moment and I hope it stays that way next year," says Lin, her eyes not on us but on the pen in her hand. I'm surprised she's sharing something so private with us.

She and Lydia don't know each other very well, and I could understand if they were uncomfortable with this situation. However, neither of them seems to be, which makes me very happy.

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"I've been to your gallery before," Lydia says suddenly. "Together with my mum."

Lin looks up in surprise. “Really?” Lydia

nods. »She's really beautiful and totally stylish. I'm keeping my fingers crossed that things go even better next year. I know how hard that can be, especially when you have to start from scratch." The two exchange a smile before Lydia

clears her throat. »I took a short trip to the Alps with my mum in January. We stayed at a wellness hotel and had a really good time – just the two of us. We hadn't done that in ages. I think that's my best memory from this year." "That sounds really nice," I say quietly and put my hand briefly

on her knee. I don't know what else to say, but I want to show her how much I appreciate her openness.

"And you, Ruby?" asks Lin.

For a moment my mind is blank and I have no idea what to write on my note. But then I look back on the year month by month and realise how wonderful it was overall. Although I have been sad since the James thing, a lot has happened since September alone that I can be grateful for.

I became head of the event team, got great grades in

from school and was invited to Oxford. I got to know Lin better, grew closer with Ember, and even gained a new friend. And for the first time in my life I fell in love.

No matter how badly things ended with James and me, if … if I think about our conversations, the phone calls and our shared memories - then I don't regret anything. On the contrary, this experience is also one of the highlights of my year. Even if it's all over now.

I swallow hard and stare at the white paper lying on the table in front of me.

"I do not know where to start. I think the trip to

Oxford was the most beautiful. I've dreamed of going for a walk there with my family for so long. And then being there I'll remember that forever," I say hoarsely and then force a smile.

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"It looked like a fairy tale there," adds Ember.

I nod, draw a little bubble and write *“Trip to Oxford”* in it.

After that the ice seems to have been broken. We tell ourselves these smallest and strangest events that we remember from this year. For example, Lin won a bunch of flowers in a supermarket because she was the thousandth customer, or Lydia was given a pound by an old lady so that she could buy herself something sweet.

At some point the mood is no longer as depressed as it was at the beginning. On the contrary, we laugh together and it seems to me as if the four of us have been spending time together like this for ages. At around eight o'clock, Dad and Mum say goodbye to us to go to their friends. I can see how relieved they are that I have ventured out of my room for the evening and am spending it with my friends.

Then we look at *How to Be Single .* Ember wanted the film for Christmas because she thinks Rebel Wilson is so great, and when the credits start rolling two hours later, I understand why. Even Lydia had to laugh out loud at some points - even though she always looked as if she could hardly believe she had made that sound.

While the credits are still rolling, we dig into Dad's quiche.

"You're doing well, Ruby." Lin holds out a fork loaded with quiche her face and looks at her closely. "Your mom works in a bakery and your dad is a chef. If I were you, I would be in seventh heaven. I miss our cook." "You used to have a cook?" asks Ember with wide eyes.

“Yes,” says Lin, shrugging his shoulders as if it were a given. »But then everything changed for us and I had to learn all the basics. Mum's cooking skills were also a bit rusty, but she still taught me a lot of great Chinese recipes that she knew from her grandmother. We're really enjoying cooking together now." I take a bite of the quiche and let it melt in my mouth.

»The only thing I can make is scrambled eggs,« says Lydia thoughtfully. »That must have been an incredible change for you

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For a moment, Lin seems surprised by Lydia's words, then she smiles slightly. "I've learned not to look back, but only forward." She places her fork on the empty plate and picks up the last crumbs on her plate with her fingers. Then she takes one of the bags and lifts it up. »By the way, we should do that now. It's almost ten."

"Oh, how pretty," I say as Lin hands out the little books to us. They are simple and have a black cover with subtle gold accents, dotted cream white pages and two ribbon bookmarks - just how I like it best.

"This will be my first bullet journal," says Lydia, noticing her first book and then looked at us somewhat perplexed. "What do I have to do?"

Ember stacks our empty plates on top of each other and pushes them to the side, then places her laptop in the middle of the living room table so that we can all see the screen. "It's actually quite simple," she says. "Every year on New Year's Eve we write down our resolutions." She opens her book and points to the first page. "And to do this, we as

First create the headline.«

Together we search the Internet for fonts that we like, and try to trace them or orient ourselves by them. We work mostly in silence, the only sounds being our pens on paper and the quiet music in the background.

But while I'm working on the final details of my heading and outline the number of the coming year in light grey, my heart suddenly feels heavy again. Next year at this time everything will be different:

In just seven months I will – hopefully – graduate from Maxton Hall College in your pocket. And then I will – hopefully – study at Oxford. I will have new lecturers and new fellow students. A dorm room in a new environment and new friends.

A new, exciting life.
A life without James Beaufort.

The thought comes suddenly and hurts more than I thought possible, but I try to push it aside. I grab a pen and start writing:

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Resolutions:

- Completing school
- Oxford
- Keep in close contact with Mum, Dad and Ember
- Find at least one new friend
- No longer worry so much about what others might think of me

But as I jot down one point after another, I realize that it doesn't feel right. This list isn't honest enough, and when I listen to myself, I know why.

Last year I fell in love for the first time - and had my heart broken in the worst possible way. This matter cannot simply be wiped away. It's going to take me a while to process this. Because heartbreak doesn't go away just because you've rung in a new year.

Until now I didn't want to see James. I hoped that at some point I would just be able to forget about him. But now I realize that I can't write down my resolutions while this matter between us is still unresolved. There's far too much I want to say to him. And I think that until I do that, I won't be able to start the new year. I won't be able to start over if James continues to occupy such a large place in my thoughts, my feelings and my life.

“Ruby?” Lin’s voice reaches my ears as if from far away.
I look at her and make a decision.

But before I implement this, I will celebrate the New Year with my friends.

James

New Year's Eve is usually legendary for us. In previous years we have either rented a villa on a lake or had parties in London that were booked out months in advance. We drank until the early hours and forgot everything around us.

This year I'm spending New Year's Eve alone at home.

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Where is my dad? No idea. Our employees are off tonight and Lydia is with a friend. She didn't tell me who. Since our argument a few days ago, she has been ignoring me and only speaking to me when she has to.

Wren tried several times to persuade me to go away with him and the boys this year, but I couldn't bring myself to do it.
Just imagining sitting in a London club with deafening music and champagne makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I can no longer carry on as before. Not after my life has turned one hundred and eighty degrees in the last quarter. Not when things inside me look completely different than before.

I spend the evening watching documentaries about wild animals in the Kenyan savannah on my laptop and eating chips and kebabs from cardboard delivery boxes. Sometimes I manage to distract myself for five minutes at a time. But most of the time I'm thinking about Ruby.

In the last few weeks I have realized how frustrating it is that
we haven't made enough memories together. There are no photos of the two of us, nothing to remind me of what we experienced together. The only thing left is the bag I had made for her birthday. It still sits next to my desk and taunts me every day. I've lost count of the number of times I've picked it up and checked to see if Ruby has left something in it. A note or anything that would indicate that she actually used it and enjoyed it.

I feel like my memories are slowly starting to fade. The feel of Ruby's skin against mine, our conversations, her laughter. Everything becomes more and more vague and intangible, even the day she was here and comforted me. The only thing that's still clearly in my mind, what keeps playing over and over in my head, is the look on her face when she saw me with Elaine. I will never forget him. And I will never forget what he did to me, even through the cloud of alcohol and drugs. In that moment, but also all the days afterwards.

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The plan was actually to sleep into the new year, but now
It's after one o'clock and I'm getting more and more awake. I decide to go to the gym again. Maybe an hour on the treadmill will not only tire my body but also silence my head.

I put on my sports clothes, slip into my running shoes and
I grab my iPhone, which has been lying unattended on my desk since this afternoon. The headphones are still plugged in and, as always, I have to untangle them. Just as I'm about to put them in my ears, I hear someone walking down the hall.

Lydia is probably back home.

I open the door to wish her a Happy New Year – and freeze.

My sister is not alone in the hallway.

I rub my eyes because I think I'm dreaming - but no.
After I lower my hand again, I still see two people.

Ruby is standing in our hallway.

She has a dark blue ball of yarn tucked under her arm. I don't have to think long to figure out what it is. It's my sweater. The one I put on her after Cyril's party. The one I didn't miss in my closet because it made me feel good to know that it was with Ruby.

Ruby speaks quietly to my sister, to which she nods. She
gives me a quick look, but immediately looks away and disappears into her room. Good to know that I scared my sister away so much that she can't even bring herself to wish me a happy new year.

"Can we talk?" Ruby finally asks.

I swallow hard. I haven't seen or heard from her in so long, and now she's only ten feet away from me. Her closeness makes my heart pound wildly; I would like to bridge the distance between us and hold her in my arms. Finally I just nod, turn around and go back to my room. Ruby follows me hesitantly. I turn on the light and sigh. Things definitely looked better in here. In the middle of the floor lie the checkered pajama bottoms

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I just took off my clothes, there are magazines everywhere, the bed is unmade, and it probably smells of greasy delivery food.

Also, Ruby's bag is sitting very conspicuously on my desk.

Ruby looks around and seems undecided. Ultimately she records the smaller of the two sofas. My sweater is on her lap.

Why does the room suddenly seem so damn warm to me?

I think I really need a drink of water.

“Would you like something to drink?” I ask.

"No, thank

you." I pour myself a glass of water, but when I try to pick it up, I notice my hand is shaking. So I leave it on the desk and look at Ruby instead.

She is silent.

"Did you have a nice evening?" I ask after a few minutes, trying desperately to break the silence between us.

Ruby furrows her brows. “Yes,” is all she says.

Not more.

I've never had such a hard time finding the right words right this second. I feel like I've forgotten how to form proper sentences. After thinking so much about what I want to say to Ruby, there's now a black hole in my head that gets bigger the longer we sit across from each other in silence. All I can do is look at Ruby. The desire to sit next to her is overwhelming. But I fight it and instead pull the desk chair over to the couch so I'm sitting across from her and we can look at each other.

“We wrote down our resolutions earlier,” Ruby says at some point.

I wait until she continues.

»It occurred to me that there are still too many things that are unresolved between us. I can't start the new year with a good feeling like that." My pulse goes up. I definitely wasn't

prepared for that.

I have to clear my throat. »Okay.«

Ruby lowers her gaze to the sweater in her lap. She strokes hand over the fabric, a thoughtful gesture. Then she takes it

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He takes it in his hand and places it on the small round table that stands between us.

She looks up and our eyes meet. I can see a variety of emotions in her eyes: sadness. Pain. And last but not least, a spark of anger that grows the longer her gaze lingers on me.

"I'm so incredibly disappointed in you, James," she suddenly whispers.
My chest tightens painfully. "I know," I whisper back.

She shakes her head. "No. You don't know what that felt like You ripped my damn heart out. And I *hate* you for it." "I know," I repeat in a hoarse voice.

Ruby takes a deep breath. »But I love you too, and that makes the The whole thing is so much harder."

"I..." It takes a few seconds for me to realize what she just said. I stare at her, speechless.

But Ruby just continues speaking as if her words had no meaning. »I don't think that would have ever worked with us. It was nice, even though we only had this short time together, but now I have to…" "You love me?" I whisper.

Ruby winces. Then she sits bolt upright. "This changes nothing. The way you treated me. You kissed someone else the day after we slept together."

"I'm so sorry, Ruby," I say urgently, even though I know that my words are not enough.

"And it doesn't change my plan to start the coming year without you," Ruby continues.

The pain her words cause me almost takes my breath away. I know Ruby. When she sets herself a goal, she pursues it and doesn't let anyone stop her. She's here to finish with me.

"This will never come out … "I'll never do anything like that again," I say breathless again.

"I really hope so for your next girlfriend."

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I feel panic rising within me. »There will be no other damned!"

She just shakes her head. "It would never have worked out between us anyway, James. Let's be honest."

"Why do you say that?" My voice trembles with desperation. "Of course it would have."

Ruby stands up and runs her hands over her checked skirt several times. "I have to go home, my parents are waiting." She walks to the door, and the knowledge that I can't stop her from leaving almost kills me. I stare at her, unable to move. This moment feels like a final goodbye, and I'm not ready for that.

»I need a clear cut. Can you understand that?" she asks, looking over my shoulder with her hand on the doorknob

to.

I nod, even though everything in my body is screaming the opposite. "Yes, I understand." Ruby

has already given me so many chances. I know I have no right to another one.

"I … I wish you a happy new year, James." Ruby's eyes reflect the same pain that paralyzes my body.

"Ruby, please..." I say.

But she opens the door and leaves.

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10

Lydia

James and I have to go back to school on the Monday after the Christmas holidays. Dad says that after almost a month it's time to get back to everyday life. The situation at home is anything but everyday. Without Mum, who used to build bridge after bridge between us, dinners with Dad are pure torture.

And the atmosphere between James and me is still tense. We hardly talk and avoid each other most of the time.
He is usually the person in whose company I feel most comfortable.

Now we both look out the window without saying a word while Percy looks at us school goes. Having to go there again feels like a colossal waste of time. After all, I already know that I won't study, even if I can still write the final exams. So what's the point of all this?

After stopping in front of the entrance to Maxton Hall, Percy drives
He lowers the partition and turns to us. "Are you OK?" I nod without saying a word and try to smile. I sometimes wonder if I still look the same as I did before all this happened.

"If anything were to happen," he says in a deep, calm voice, "me I'm on call. And if reporters show up, report to the principal. He'll know and will make sure you're not bothered." His words almost sound as if he's learned them by heart.

I've had a suspicion for a while that Percy is dealing with Mum didn't take it as easily as he would have us believe.
After all, he had known her for over twenty years. He rarely cracks jokes anymore, and sometimes, when he feels unattended, he looks so sad and lost that it hurts my own heart.

"All right," I say, saluting with two fingers to my forehead.

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At least Percy gives me a tired smile before turning to James
"Take good care of your sister, Mr Beaufort."
James blinks and looks around. His expression immediately turns to stone
when he realizes that we are already standing in front of the school. Without another word, he takes his bag and opens the door. I give Percy an apologetic look before following James out. He's already halfway across the parking lot when I catch up with him. Cyril, Alistair, Kesh and Wren are waiting on the stairs to the main entrance.

“Beaufort!” Wren holds out his fist and grins broadly. "It's about time you finally showed up here again." James raises one corner of his mouth slightly
and bumps his fist against Wren's.

"It's not the same without you," Kesh says, taking James' face in both hands and giving his cheek a friendly pat.

Meanwhile, Cyril comes to me and hugs me. “Lydia,” he murmurs into my hair. I swallow hard. His smell is so familiar that I want to stay like that with him for the rest of the school day. But since that's not an option, I carefully break away from him.

"Good morning," I say wearily.
Cyril's ice-blue gaze slides questioningly across my face. Finally, he puts an arm around my shoulders and together with the others we walk up the stairs and through the massive double doors of Maxton Hall.

Our friends have a strange formation around us
educated, probably to protect us from questions from our classmates, but that is not necessary. No one will speak to us. James glances over his shoulder at me and we react in exactly the same way.
We arch our backs and walk through the school like we always have.

The assembly drags on as usual, and at some point it does
My neck hurts from straining to stare straight ahead. We're sitting in the last row, and not a minute goes by without someone turning around to look at us and starting to whisper to the person next to them.
I ignore them all. Only when Lexington declares the meeting over and we leave Boyd Hall can I breathe a sigh of relief.

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»Did you hear?« Alistair asks as we climb the stairs in the main building go upstairs. "George wrecked his car the day after he turned eighteen." "Which George?" I ask.

“Evans,” Wren and Alistair answer at the same time. "You already know: the captain of the soccer team?" "Ah.

Did something happen to him?"

"He only had a scratch on his forehead. This damn idiot did more luck than sense.« »Oh,

and Jessalyn had something with Henry at Cyril's party. He is apparently fell asleep in the middle of it," Wren continues with the report.

"Then the sex wasn't that great," James says dryly.

Everyone looked at him in surprise. He sounded just like he always did - bored, with a hint of arrogance in his voice. Almost like the old James.

"Well, to be honest," Cyril interrupts our silence. "I almost fell asleep once too." "Cyril." I grimace in slight disgust. Even though

I've ended up in bed with him more than once in the past, I really don't want to think about it. "Too much information."

"I hope for your sake that you were drunk," says James.

Cyril grins. “Not only that.” “Guys,

we're at school. “Could we maybe keep the conversations a little more youth-friendly?” I suggest.

Alistair turns to me with a raised eyebrow. He shakes his golden curls from his forehead and takes the next few steps backwards. "Lydia Beaufort and X-rated? You're worse than all of us put together." "Well, I wouldn't say worse than James," Kesh thinks aloud.

"Or than me." Wren wiggles her eyebrows.

“You share second place on the list.” Alistair elbows him in the side and Wren bursts out laughing.

I shake my head with a grin. I love the boys for behaving completely normally. It almost makes me feel like

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nothing has changed. It also distracts me, and that's exactly what I need right now. My first lesson on Mondays this term is with Graham, and the thought of what it will be like between us makes me nervous. I haven't spoken to him since that terrible phone call we had shortly after Mum died.

I hoped that my longing for him would diminish over time, but the opposite is true. It hurts more every day, and the only consolation I've had over the last few weeks has been that I didn't have to see Graham as well. That grace period is over now.

Before we say goodbye outside the classroom, James looks at me closely. I still find it difficult to judge what he is thinking, but I can't miss the spark of concern in his eyes.
Even though we haven't spoken in days, he knows how much I dread the moment of facing Graham again.

“It’s okay now,” I croak.

James studies me for a moment, then nods. “Let me know if you need anything,” Cyril murmurs and hugs me again. “See you at lunch break.” I close my eyes and allow myself a few seconds to enjoy the feeling of being held and not alone. He breaks away from me and takes a step to the side.

And then I see Graham.

He's standing right behind the boys blocking the way to the classroom. His hair is slightly wavy and a little longer than I remember. He's wearing a checked shirt under a cardigan and he's holding a huge stack of papers. He's looking through the gap between Cyril's and James' heads, and his golden-brown gaze, which has always fascinated me, is right on me.

A shiver runs through my body. The moment seems frozen and I dare not move for fear of losing my composure. But suddenly Graham tears his gaze away from me and looks at Cyril instead. The expression that then comes over his face is one I have never seen before. It is a mixture of relief and coldness that I do not understand and cannot classify.

“Come on now,” says James, who has been looking between me and Graham. He nods towards the hallway where he and the others are about to have class. The boys raise their hands in farewell, then leave.

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Now I'm standing alone with Graham in the hallway. He's moving the papers back and forth on his arm as if he wanted to arrange them, but the stack couldn't be more accurate. Our eyes meet again.

"Lydia..." he says hoarsely, sounding so sad that it makes my throat tighten.

I shake my head. "No." Then I turn

around, walk into the classroom, and sit down in my seat. I stare at the grained wooden table in front of me for the entire ninety minutes, just so I don't have to look ahead.

James

The school day just doesn't want to end. If I weren't worried about Lydia, I would have disappeared long ago. The lessons go by at a snail's pace and I couldn't care less about what the teachers say at the front. During recess, one classmate after another expresses their sympathy for me, which is certainly well-meaning, but eventually gets on my nerves so much that I tell poor Roger Cree to shut up and leave me alone. After that, word gets around that it's better not to get too close to me for a while.

The day reaches its lowest point, however, at the beginning of the first block, when I pass Ruby in the hallway. We both freeze—she on one side, me on the other—and look at each other.

I hate *you for that. But I love you too, and that does that*
It's so much harder, I remember her words.

She is the first to look away. Without saying a word, she walks past me and disappears into her classroom. The entire encounter lasts ten seconds at most, but it feels like an eternity.

From then on, all I can think about is Ruby and what she said to me on New Year's Eve.

She loves Me.

She fucking *loves* me.

It feels like there's a wound in my chest that just won't close. I want to respect her decision, but seeing her and knowing that I've lost her just kills me.

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After school ends, I can't get out of the building fast enough disappear. With my hands buried in my pockets, I hurry outside, staring straight ahead.

Percy opens the car door for me and I mumble a "thank you" as I get in.

Lydia is already here and she looks exactly the way I feel.

I lean back, close my eyes and lean my head against the back seat.

“That was tiring, wasn’t it?” I hear Lydia say quietly.

I hate the caution in her voice. Like she was afraid to even talk to me. I know it's my own fault, but at the same time I know how wrong it is that my own sister no longer dares to talk to me. I eye the minibar. I've gone a long time without a drink, but right now, after this terrible day, I feel the need to numb myself - no matter how.

Without answering Lydia, I reach forward and open the small door. But before I can reach for the glass bottle with brown liquid, Lydia grabs my wrist.

»You are not going to get drunk just because you have a shitty day "You had," she says, trying to be calm.

She's right, I know that. Nevertheless, I ignore her and try to gently but firmly free myself from her grip - but without success.
She gripped my arm tightly with her fingers. I pull him away from her with a jerk. Lydia slides forward, sending her bag catapulting to the floor of the car.

"You idiot," she hisses and immediately starts collecting her things, which are now scattered everywhere.

Sighing, I lean down and help her. »Sorry. I did not want."

While Lydia shuffles her things together with her lips pressed together, I collect a few pens and hold them out to her.
She takes it from me without looking at me. Then I pick up her planner, a few tampons and a round white plastic container that looks like a chewing gum wrapper. The lid has come loose and I'm about to screw it tight when I see the writing.

Prenatal Vitamins: DHA, Omega-3s, Cholines and Vitamin D
Lemon, Raspberry and Orange flavor

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Right next to the lettering is the silhouette of a woman,
who holds her rounded belly.

It feels like Percy is steering the car straight over a pothole, and we're still in the parking lot. The blood is rushing in my ears.

“What is that?” I croak, looking from my sister to the package and back again.

All blood drains from Lydia's cheeks and she stares at me with wide eyes.

“What is that, Lydia?” I repeat, this time in a firmer voice.

»I...« Lydia just shakes her head.

I read the writing again, then one more time. I understand the words, but they don't make sense. I look at Lydia again and open my mouth to ask the same question again, when "They're not mine," she blurts out. …

I exhale sharply. "Then who do they belong to?" Now she

presses her lips together until they are bloodless. She just shakes her head, the shock in her eyes is unbelievable. I definitely don't want to put her under any pressure, but I want her to know that she can trust me.

"No matter what happened, you know you can tell me anything, Lydia. I'm here for you," I say urgently.

Tears gather in her eyes. She puts her hands over her face and starts to sob. At that moment I know. I know the truth without Lydia having to say anything. Deep inside me I feel shock, panic and fear rising simultaneously, but I push them back and take a deep breath.

Then I sit next to Lydia again. “It’s your vitamins, right?” I murmur.

Her shoulders are shaking so much that I can barely hear her stammered “Yes.” can understand. And then I do the only thing that seems sensible to me in this situation: I take her in my arms and just hold her tight.

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11

James

Lydia is sitting on her bed and fiddling with the pillow that is on her lap. Once again I try to get a glimpse of her belly as discreetly as possible. After walking up and down the room for half an hour and trying to calm my pulse, I eventually collapsed into one of her armchairs.

Now I'm looking for the right words, but the thoughts in my head are swirling around and I can't manage to get a single sentence out.

How?

How the hell are we supposed to take care of a baby?
How can we hide this from Dad?

Can you study at Oxford if you have a baby?

"I didn't want you to find out like that." I look up.

The tension Lydia is under is obvious. Her cheeks are flushed, her shoulders are stiff. I don't know

"I … what to say."

feel so incredibly stupid. At the same time, I realise how selfish I have been in the past few weeks. I have only been bemoaning my own fate, my loss, my guilty conscience, my broken heart. My sister knew the whole time that she was pregnant and thought that she couldn't tell me. Of course there are things that we keep from each other, but not something like this.

Not something that is so overly big and life changing.

"You don't have to say anything," Lydia whispers.

I shake my head. "I'm sorry…" "No," she

interrupts me. "I don't want any pity, James. Not from you." I claw my fingers into the arms

of the chair to keep myself from jumping up again and marching across the room.

The fabric crunches under my unyielding grip.

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The gap that arose between Lydia and me when I told her this
The unforgivable words I have thrown at her seem insurmountable. I am unsure
what I can and cannot ask her.
In addition, I know nothing at all about pregnancy.

I close my eyes and rub my face with both hands.
My limbs feel tired, as if I had aged in the last few hours and am no longer eighteen but
eighty years old.

Finally I clear my throat. »How did you find out?« Lydia looks up in
surprise. She hesitates for a moment, then no regular cycle begins anyway,
to tell them. »That's why I … um …
didn't think anything of it at the beginning when my period stopped. But after a while
I became suspicious because I was also feeling very strange. Overall." She shrugs her
shoulders.
»So I bought a test. We were in London then. I took it in the toilet of a restaurant and
almost fell over when it was positive." I look at her, shaking my head. "When was that?"
"In November." I
swallow hard. Two months ago. Been guarding for two
months

Lydia tells this secret, probably completely afraid and believing that she is completely
alone. If this revelation is already throwing me off course, how has it been for her in the
last few weeks?
In addition to everything else that happened?

Suddenly I want nothing more than to reduce the distance between
to overcome us. "I can't imagine what that must have been like for you." "I

⋯ I've never felt so alone. Not even after the Gregg thing. I never thought
things could be worse with Graham."

"Does he know about it?" I ask cautiously.
»No.«

Lydia is visibly trying not to collapse, but I see
her hopelessness. She's probably done nothing but pull herself together over the
last two months, constantly trying to keep her secret to herself and not tell anyone hers

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to show feelings. I hate myself for letting her down like that. Instead, I only thought about myself.

That's over now. I have no idea what Lydia will face in the coming months. But right now I know one hundred percent that she won't go through this alone.

I take a deep breath and stand up.

As I sit down on the bed next to her, I push everything aside - the sadness, the pain, the anger that I felt. I carefully reach for her hand.

"You're not alone," I assure her.

Lydia swallows hard. "You're just saying that. And next time when you're angry, you're just throwing mean words at me again." Tears are streaming down her cheeks and her body is shaking as she fights back a sob. It's killing me to see her like this.

"I mean it, Lydia. I'll be here for you." I take a deep breath. "The person I was after Dad told us what happened - that's not me. I do n't *want* to be that person. That was just a lot for me. I wasn't strong enough, and I'm sorry." "You're … It was too crushing my hand," Lydia murmurs.

For a moment I'm at a loss. But when I follow Lydia's gaze, I switch off and let her go immediately. "I'm sorry about that too." I smile at her apologetically.

“Oh, James.” Suddenly Lydia leans to the side, her head on my shoulder. I breathe a sigh of relief. “You really hurt me with what you said.” I gently stroke the

back of her head.

We used to sit like that a lot. When she was five, Lydia came to me She came to my bed when it was thundering and lightning outside, when she was ten years old when Dad yelled at us because our grades weren't good enough for him, and even when she was fifteen, after the incident with Gregg, she would knock on my door some nights and then lie down in bed next to me without saying a word. I always stroked her head and told her that everything would be OK, even though I was never convinced of it myself.

I wonder if she still remembers these moments or whether this is a part of our past that she has repressed. We Beauforts are actually pretty good at repressing things.

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»What I said was a lie. You're the most important person in my life."

Lydia freezes next to me, and with every second that she doesn't respond, I feel more exposed. I try to think of something I could say to lighten the mood, but nothing comes to mind. So I decide on one of the questions that have been swirling around in my head for over an hour.

"Have you been to the doctor yet? I have no idea how this works. Is everything OK? And what are these vitamins for - does that mean you have a deficiency or something?" I notice how the

tension gradually leaves Lydia's body. She takes a deep breath and then turns her head to look at me from the side. I return her gaze. The moment a slight smile begins to spread across her face, I know that we have made it. The gap between us has been bridged.

»I received the vitamins directly at the first examination, I think almost every pregnant woman gets them at the beginning. And at the last check-up everything was fine." She hesitates. "There was just a little surprise." I raise an eyebrow. "Another one?" "It's

going to be twins." I stare at Lydia in disbelief.

"You're kidding." She shakes

her head and takes out her phone. She opens the gallery

and shows me a picture in which the light outline of a small body can be seen on a dark background. Then she calls up the next picture.

Actually, it looks exactly the same - except that I can clearly see a second outline right next to the first one.

Something jumps in my stomach and suddenly I feel very strange. At the same time I let out an incredulous laugh. "That's too crazy to be true." Lydia grins. »I had to laugh at first because I did

couldn't believe. Well, although...actually I laughed and cried at the same time. Ruby must have thought I was having a nervous breakdown."

At Ruby's name I automatically sit up a little. »Ruby went to the doctor with you?«

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Lydia avoids my gaze and instead looks intensely at the
Cell phone in her hand. "Yes. She's known for a while."

I rub my hand over my chin. My throat feels too
dry at one time.

"I asked her to keep it to herself. Please don't be mad at her." I can only shake my head.

Then I sink back and cover my face with my arms.

Ruby knew.

Ruby was there for my sister. After everything I've done
She didn't leave Lydia alone. Unlike me.

I can not breath.

"James?" Lydia whispers.

My arms are shaking, but I can't let them fall. I'm so ashamed. Of everything. All the mistakes I've made as a friend and brother are falling on me with the weight of a ten-ton truck until I can hardly bear it anymore.

My sister pulls my arms away and looks at me worriedly.
Understanding spreads across her face. She then falls down next to me and together we look up at the chandelier hanging in the middle of her room.

"Lydia," I whisper into the silence. "I screwed up." Lydia

I've never seen my brother like this before.

I knew that he was upset about Ruby, but I
had no idea how much he was really suffering.

Now that he's dropped his mask, I can see the shame in his eyes, but also the deep sadness and pain that his separation from Ruby has caused him. It's the first time he's openly shown me what he's feeling inside.

I feel a strong desire to be able to do something for him and Ruby. Because it's obvious that they both still have feelings for each other and are suffering from the situation.

"Why haven't you done anything to show her how sorry you are?" I ask cautiously after a while.

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James turns his head to me. "I tried to apologize to her," he says in a hoarse voice. "She said she can't." We are silent for a moment.

“I can understand her,” I finally begin, and James flinches almost imperceptibly. “But at the same time… I don’t know. I just wish you guys would get over it.”

"Ruby doesn't want this, and I have to respect that." He sounds so resigned when he says this that I suddenly feel the urge to shake him.

"Since when are you the kind of person who just gives up?"
James snorts.
“What?”

“I didn't *just* give up. I think about her constantly and I'm sure I'll never have feelings for anyone else again, damn it. But if she doesn't want me anymore, then..."

I grab one of the sketch pads on my nightstand and smack James with it.

He sits up abruptly. “Ouch, what’s that supposed to mean?”

I do the same and ignore the black dots that appear in front of my eyes. »You have to show her this too, James! Show her how important she is to you and how much you regret it." "You didn't notice the way she looked at me on New Year's Eve.

And what she said…” He shakes his head. “She is determined to start this year without me – I can’t burden her again with how I feel about her. She thinks we have nothing in common and that it would never have worked out between us.”

"You shouldn't go to her and bombard her with declarations of love. But as long as she doesn't know how sorry you are for what you did, she can't forgive you." I see the thoughts behind his eyes starting to work and

I go one step further. "You have to show her. Not just with words. But with your behavior. If she says you have nothing in common, convince her otherwise."

He swallows hard and exhales heavily. He is currently fighting a battle against yourself, I see that very clearly.

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I remember our journey back from Oxford together. The
Tomorrow, before everything changed. James looked so happy.
He also radiated an inner calm that I didn't know from him. As if he was at peace with himself for the first time. As if the invisible burden that he usually carries around
with him had disappeared.
I want him to get that back.

Nonetheless, there is one thing he should know. “James,” I say, waiting patiently for him to look at me. "If you kiss anyone who isn't Ruby again, I'll personally cut out your tongue." James blinks in surprise. Then he slowly shakes his head. "I don't know why I didn't

realize before that you spend a lot of time with Ruby." I'm briefly tempted to smile, but I hold it back. "I mean that

serious. I really want you to get this back on track."

James exhales audibly. "I want that too. More than anything." "Then fight for her,

damn it." He says nothing for a long time,

just stares with a strange
distant look at the ceiling. I wish I could read his mind and know what he was thinking at that moment.

“I will,” he finally says quietly.

I put my hand on his shoulder and squeeze briefly. “Good.” One corner of his mouth

turns up slightly. The movement is so minimal that anyone else probably wouldn't have noticed it.

"But first I need a plan."

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12

Ruby

"I wonder if Beaufort was crying" is the first thing I hear as I enter the library's work area on Wednesday afternoon. The events committee meeting doesn't start for another half hour, and I wanted to use the time to borrow a book that has been on my Oxford reading list for months.

However, I regret the decision when I hear a loud giggle.

»Well, he can cry to me any time.« I stand on tiptoe to look over the row of books peeking through the gap in the shelf. I see two girls sitting next to each other at one of the work tables, their heads together over a book. It is obvious that they are not studying. They are not even trying to be quiet.

"Apparently he's more than open to offers of comfort." The first girl grins meaningfully.

“He's been hotter since he inherited the company's shares "I've become a bit of a liar," sighs the other. "Maybe I'll try my luck." Anger boils up inside me. Aside from the fact that they're in a library and I'm disgusted by the disrespectful way they talk about James, it drives me crazy that I can't go anywhere in this school without hearing James' name.

On the way here I passed three groups of students talking about him, and it's been like that all week.

There are a whole host of other rumors that my classmates could just as eagerly pounce on. Alistair was caught making out in the men's bathroom again - with a guy who doesn't even go to our school. And Jessalyn is now actually dating the guy who supposedly fell asleep on her on their first night together. I still don't know if I should believe that, especially when I see Jessalyn's happy smile, which

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she has had on her face nonstop ever since. There is also a rumor going around that Lydia threw herself into Cyril's arms after her mum died and is on a friends with benefits basis with him. Apart from the fact that Lydia is clearly busy with more important things, I seriously doubt that she has more than friendly feelings for him. But when the rumor makes the rounds in biology and I turn to Cyril, he has his arms folded behind his head with a satisfied grin, so for a moment I don't know what to believe.

But it is James that people want to talk about the most.
and always.

Have you seen the photos of James Beaufort?
The poor guy.

Is there still something going on between him and this Ruby?

Every single time my throat tightens and my heart ache. I
I wonder how I will ever forget him when his name is on everyone's lips and I can't even switch off in the library.

I pull the book out with a jerk and walk around the shelf into the work area. The girls flinch when they realize they are not alone. As I march toward them, I consider whether I should say something, but then I feel like my energy is too precious. I give them a disdainful look and walk past them in the direction of our group room.

Once there, I push myself through the door as quickly as possible and
I lean my back against it. I close my eyes, let my head fall against the door and try for a moment to just breathe in and out deeply.

"Hey." I
open my eyes wide.

James is sitting on the other side of the room. On the chair he is sitting
was always sitting in the last term when he was forced by Principal Lexington
to take part in the events committee.

He looks changed. There are dark circles under his eyes and I can see a slight shadow on his jaw that shows he hasn't shaved. His hair is more disheveled than usual, probably because it has grown.

I wonder if I look different in his eyes too.

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The seconds pass and neither of us moves. I don't know how to behave around him. I simply ignored him in the hallway between classes, but now we are the only ones in this room. "What are you doing here?"

My voice sounds hoarse. I definitely don't want to give the impression that he still has an effect on me.
On the contrary, I want him to think that I don't mind being in the same room as him at all.

"I'm reading." He holds up a book - no, a manga. I frown as I look at the writing, even though I already recognize the picture on the cover.

James reads *Death Note.* Volume three.

I once told him that it was my favorite series.
I look at him, confused.

»We have our team meeting soon. So if you were to find a new place to read…" I push myself away from the door and walk to my seat as if my pulse isn't pounding loudly in my ears.

I slowly get my things out and spread them out on the table, then I go to the whiteboard and write the date in the top right corner. I wish there was something else for me to do, but Lin has both the laptop and our notes for the agenda in her bag, so I sit down and pretend to be intently reading an entry in my bullet journal.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see James putting the manga down on the table in front of him. His movements are slow. It almost seems as if he's afraid of scaring me. I feel his eyes on me and automatically hold my breath.

"I would like to take part in the events committee meetings again this term." I freeze. Without looking up from my
planner, I ask, "What?" "If that's okay with you and Lin, I'll let Lexington approve it,"
James continues.

I look up in disbelief. "You can't be serious." James returns my gaze
calmly. Now I know what is so different about
appears to him. Although he seems tired, there is no longer that
hopelessness in his eyes that I saw on New Year's Eve. At

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It has been replaced by a calmness that is totally upsetting me at this very moment. When he's feeling bad, I can be strong. When he's quiet it makes me nervous. Is this what everyone means by “complementing each other”? Or are we simply unbalancing each other?

»I enjoyed working here, even if I didn't at first wouldn't have expected. I want to continue to get involved.«

I can't stop staring at him. "I just don't believe that." "You said yourself that I like

organizing and that I'm... team. We also got a new training schedule. Lacrosse and the meetings only coincide once a week. Coach Freeman is OK with that." I pick up my backpack from the floor and start rummaging through it just to avoid having

to look at James. I have no idea what that means.

I'm not stupid - James is not here because he loves Maxton-Hall events. He's definitely here because of me.
However, he is also right in what he says. When I think about last term and how he went all out for the Halloween party, I have to admit that the team definitely wouldn't be disadvantaged by James' presence. On the contrary, the party was a complete success also because of his ideas and hard work.

If I send him away now, I will have to reconcile it with my conscience for the rest of the school year, whenever we are short a helping hand or a thinking head.

As the leader of the team, I have a clear mandate – not to mention the fact that I have to justify to Lexington why I turned James down.

“The others have to vote on it,” I finally say.

"Okay." I

swallow hard. Even if James joins the team again, that doesn't mean that I didn't mean what I said on New Year's Eve. Separating my private life from my school life has always been my specialty. And even though I've blurred some boundaries in the last few months, that won't happen again in the future.

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“I will vote against it,” I continue, looking at him steadily.

He rests his arms on the table and looks back at me resolutely. "I know."

It doesn't take five minutes and the others have voted to reinstate James as an old-new team member.
Meanwhile, I sit in the front seat with hot cheeks and try not to let on how much the idea of spending three days a week in the same room with him from now on upsets me.

Lin distributes the handouts and starts straight away with the first point.

»Can anyone give Beaufort a summary of the previous
preparations for the charity gala?" she asks the group.
I let my eyes wander over my team. These meetings are usually routine for me, but that's history now. James's mere presence is enough to throw me completely off track and trigger an avalanche of memories that makes my whole body tingle. I remember the feeling of his hands on my legs, stomach and breasts. The way he whispered my name. His mouth and the way it felt on my lips and skin.

I feel my face getting even redder and I try desperately to push the thoughts away. They have no place here. For two years I was a master at separating my private life from school life - it's time I started doing that again.

"The charity gala is in February," Jessalyn answers Lin's question. "The parent board has decided that we will collect money for the Pemwick Family Center this year. They want to expand their psychoanalytic services and they are still missing a large sum."

“Like every year, the party should be opulent,” adds Kieran. "The
Dress code is black tie and we have a large budget available.
Lexington is counting on us to get the guests excited and encourage them to donate." I write down *lavish party* and *high budget* on my notepad. It doesn't make sense because I already know all of that, but at least it gives me an excuse to keep my eyes down and not look in James' direction.

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"The event will be held at Boyd Hall. There will be drinks beforehand, finger food and a banquet by a five-star chef who used the family center's services in the past and is doing it all for free. This means we have been able to spend a little more money on decorations and entertainment," explains Lin. "We have hired a pianist from London to accompany the evening and the climax will be a performance by an acrobatic group that Camille's parents recommended to us."

"Some of them have been to Cirque du Soleil," Camille's self-satisfied voice rings out. I'm just about to write down *Cirque du Soleil* when I realize how stupid I'm being. I can't sit here for the whole hour and a half and stare at my piece of paper just because James is there. I put my pen down and look at Camille, who continues. "They're supposed to create a mystical atmosphere." Lin next to me sighs. "We still have the problem of finding sponsors who want to come to the gala and are also willing to

make a donation. We can't just invite Maxton Hall parents. We also need speakers to speak to the guests. The best would be people who the family center has helped in the past. That seems particularly authentic." "We said last week that we'd keep asking around,"

I finally speak up. “Have any of you made any progress?” All I have to do is look at the disgruntled

faces of my team members see to know what their answers will be.

"My emails are ignored, and on the phone they either tell me to wait until next year or tell me, sometimes more clearly, sometimes less clearly, that I should finally leave them alone," says Kieran. "Nobody wants to make their story of suffering public. Especially not at Maxton Hall." The others nod in agreement.

»Maybe we need to expand our radius a bit,« suggests Jessalyn in front. "And also contact people who have not visited this family center, but also another one."

“Good idea,” I say. »We could also ask universities whether there is anyone in the relevant departments who would be willing

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to give a speech.” My smile is more confident than I feel. "We can do it. And there’s still a bit of time.” There is a murmur of agreement.

"Now that you're back on the team, you're welcome to take over the handling of the decoration studio and also clarify everything with caretaker Jones," Lin suddenly says, turning to James. "He's always happy when someone helps him prepare Boyd Hall."

I dare a look in James' direction.

He blinks in irritation, but then says a toneless “Sure.”

It takes all my effort to suppress the grin that breaks out trying to fight my face. Cleaning and preparing the hall is a task that no one ever does voluntarily.

Lin just delegating it to James is funny. And it shows me once again what a magical person she is.

The rest of the meeting goes according to plan, but I am still happy when the ninety minutes have passed. Lin and I distribute the to-dos among ourselves while the others say goodbye and leave the room - everyone except James and Camille, who seem to be packing up their things extra slowly. I try not to pay attention to her, but I can't. I hear every word of Camille's murmured condolences. My stomach cramps and I immediately remind myself. I didn't want to feel any more pain because of James or for James. In fact, I didn't want to feel anything when it came to James Beaufort.

“I’m going to leave,” I murmur to Lin.

She nods and shoos me away with her hand. I shoulder my backpack and walk to the door, staring straight ahead. Just as I reach for the knob, a hand closes around it - and mine lands right on top of it. I look up into James' face.

We stand only a few centimeters apart. I can smell its familiar smell, spicy and a bit like honey, and also the warmth it radiates.

"Ruby," he whispers.

I pull my hand back like I've been burned. Then I look at him expectantly for him to either take his away or open the door. He hesitates for a moment, but finally turns the knob.

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I breathe a sigh of relief. “See you then, Lin,” I say hastily and leave the room.

I walk to the school bus faster than ever before, the echo of his voice reverberating in my head and throughout my entire body.

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13

Lydia

“Unbelievable,” James groans in frustration. He suddenly pushes the laptop away and turns to me in the desk chair. “Two people canceled on me again.” I look at my brother from the couch. When he told me about his

plan to join the event committee again, I was initially surprised. But the more I think about it, the better I like his decision.

Ruby loves working in this team. Showing her that he not only understands her passion, but also shares it, is a good first step. In addition, in the last term James realized how much fun he enjoyed organizing these parties - even if he would never admit it out loud.

»You have to be more persistent. Appeal to their conscience, not theirs Wallet. Then they'll come to the gala," I say, sipping the cup of tea that I'm holding in my cold fingers. I think our housekeeper knows about my pregnancy. She put the pot down in front of me without asking and whispered to me with a conspiratorial look that it would surely do me good.

James nods absently and pulls the laptop a little closer At the same moment, a quiet *ping* announces a new email. While James reads it with his eyes narrowed, I reach for a cookie. As I take a bite, a few crumbs fall onto the couch, but James is too busy typing a reply to notice. Luckily, he hates crumbs.

"Have you talked to Ruby yet?" I ask after a while.

The sound confirming a message has been sent sounds, and James turns back to me. "No." He rubs his hand over his face. "She hasn't been able to look at me properly this week."

»You can't force it, that's clear. But at some point you have to talk to each other,« I say gently. »The more time passes, the greater

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will be the gap between you. Believe me.« My

brother gives me a long look. Obviously he has one
and added one together. "So you still haven't spoken to Sutton?" I shrug. »What is there to discuss?

We both know it's better this way." "Yes, but he doesn't know about the pregnancy. That changes everything." "He

doesn't want anything to do with me anymore." I push the rest

Cookie into my mouth and chew leisurely. “He told me that more than once. First of all, I’m too proud to talk to him.”

“And secondly?” I

look back at James. “Secondly, I'm afraid to tell him. I don't want to know how he reacts. I just have to deal with this myself now, and then I can worry about what I'll do if his reaction isn't the way I wanted it to be." "Lydia..." James' cell phone rings. He doesn't make any moves

to answer it, but continues to look at me intensely.

“Answer it!” I say urgently. “That’s definitely one of the sponsors.” He hesitates for a

moment. Then he takes the cell phone and takes a look at the display. “Owen,” he says loudly after he answers the phone.
"It's great to hear from you." I pretend

to gag silently. Owen Murray is the CEO of a telecommunications company and a close friend of Dad's. Neither James nor I like him, and I'm pretty sure the feeling is mutual.

»Under the circumstances, yes,« says James. Suddenly his
Tone firm and cool. “No, I didn't call on behalf of *Beaufort ,* I called on behalf of Maxton Hall College. We're having a charity gala for the Pemwick Family Center at the beginning of February and we're still looking for sponsors."

I can hear quiet murmurs on the other end of the line.

»Of course, I'll send you the details. That would be fantastic, Owen,
Thank you."

James ends the call and types something into his phone. Then he turns back to me. "Unless you tell Sutton, you won't know how he'll react."

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"So you advise me to tell him." He nods.

"Yes. And I also think he has a right to know." I stare into my cup. Through the rest of

the pink liquid
I try to recognize a pattern in the tea leaves.

No more calls. We had agreed on that.

Even if he decides that he will be there for me and the babies from now on, what does that mean? It just means that he feels guilty, nothing more. And yet I want nothing more than to be with Graham because he *wants to be with him.* Of his own free will, and not because he is forced to be with him by a pregnancy.

James' cell phone rings again. He holds out a finger to indicate that our conversation isn't over yet, then picks up.

I drink the rest of my tea and place the empty cup on the table

Then I take my own phone and open my messages.
Graham's number is still there. I just couldn't bring myself to delete it. Just having it there and knowing I could text him if I wanted to is enough for me.

I scroll up our history. It contains not only everyday messages and photos, but also those in which we confided our deepest fears and worries. Any normal person would have deleted these messages instead of keeping them and flipping through them again and again like an old photo album.

Apparently I'm not a normal person.

This is all I have left of him. And I'm just not ready to let go of him for good. To be honest, I don't know if I ever will be. I miss him so much. I miss our phone calls, his laughter at bad action comedies, our fingers entwined under the table at a cafe. Knowing I can't have this back is driving me crazy.

“That sounds wonderful,” James’s voice reaches my ears. He's listening
He looks so enthusiastic that I raise my eyebrow at him. "Yes, of course. Thank you, Alice, see you later." James exhales audibly and stretches both arms above his head.

"Alice? Alice Campbell?" I ask.

He turns in my direction. “She still owes me a favor.”

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"I'd rather not know why." He smiles boldly. “Ruby
thinks Alice is great.” No wonder. Alice Campbell studied
at Oxford and founded her own cultural foundation while still studying.

"You're really trying hard," I comment. I immediately regret it when James's expression turns serious.

“Back to the topic,” he says, but I shake my head.

»I can't tell him. How am I supposed to sit in his class then?”

"You can switch to my history class."

"That's totally obvious." James
shrugs. "People change all the time for all sorts of reasons. I don't think it's particularly obvious. We could say that you'd rather study with me."

"I don't know," I murmur.

“No matter what you do,” says James. "I'll help you." He looks at me seriously for a moment, then turns back to his laptop.

I feel a slight tingling in my stomach and put my hand on it to feel if it is one of the little ones. I can now feel slight movements from them - almost as if I had butterflies in my stomach.

Now that James knows, I feel much better than before, but that doesn't change the fact that I'm expecting two children, will be a single mother, and will probably have to drop out of school.
Although... maybe I'll be able to finish my final exams before this all comes to light.

I force myself to take three deep, calm breaths. I can't get lost in thoughts about an already uncertain future. I have to take it one day at a time. Because if I worry from morning to evening, it doesn't do anyone any good - especially not the little worms that absolutely have to be my priority now.

“Fuck,” James suddenly says. He has both arms behind his head
crossed and staring at his screen with wide eyes.

»What is it?«

James is frozen. I get up, restless, and walk
over to his desk. I stand behind his chair and grasp the leather backrest. Then I lean forward a little.

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The first thing I see is the word Oxford.

The second is congratulations, James Beaufort.

“You were taken!” I blurt out.

Since James still doesn’t react, I turn his chair towards me
Pure shock is written all over his face.

“James, you have been taken. This is great!” I grab his shoulders and pull him up to hug him. He stumbles and it takes him a moment to return the hug.

"Fuck," he repeats.

I don't know if he's happy or if he's just freaking out inside.
As I hold it, I wonder if there's an email waiting for me in my inbox. Old Lydia would now run like a woman possessed to her cell phone and see if she had been taken too. The new Lydia, on the other hand, doesn't want to know whether she's just been offered a future that she can't
pursue anyway.

I squeeze James a little tighter and I'm happy about that
at least one of us can realize his plans.

James

"We've had a difficult time, I don't really need to say that. But from now on we can look forward again. Because that's what Cordelia would have wanted." I suppress the urge to roll my eyes or make any noise. My father

has no idea what my mother would have really wanted. Certainly not this drama he's putting on up there.

It's the first official speech he's given as managing director to the *Beaufort board* and department heads, and they're already eating out of his hands. The twelve men and women in total hang on his every word with hopeful expressions, while I sit at the side of the long conference table and think about how I can get my cell phone out as inconspicuously as possible.

»If we pull together, we can get *Beaufort* out of its emotional slump and move the company forward. There will be some changes coming your way in the coming period for which I will need your support. In this

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I would like to take this opportunity to thank you in advance - you are our most important asset. In the coming period, it will therefore be important to me to make greater use of your expertise than ever before."

I slip my hand into my pocket and grab my phone out. Over the past few hours, the guys have been sending me countless messages trying to convince me to go out and celebrate tonight. It's my first day in my new role on the *Beaufort Board of Directors,* and in their world, that's something we definitely need to toast to.

Unfortunately, I'm not in the mood to party at all. I know that the opportunities to meet up with my friends will become fewer and fewer in the future and I should take advantage of the time we have left. They're already mad at me because I only come to training twice a week.

Nevertheless, there is only one person I would like to see today.
And this person has been ignoring me for weeks because I pushed him away.

Even though I see Ruby regularly at school, I miss her.
I want her to be able to look at me again without wincing in pain.

I want to be able to talk to her, anytime, anywhere.
I would like to know if she was accepted into Oxford.
“Despite my wife’s death, nothing will change in *Beaufort* ’s corporate culture ,” my father continues, undeterred. »It is the foundation of our success. Cordelia told me what it meant to join this company when we first met, and I plan to honor her memory." Applause erupts. I clap my hands twice, then discreetly read the message Cyril just wrote to me. Are you with Wren, when are you finally coming? He sends a photo of them raising their middle fingers.

I guess I have no choice. I'll have to go to them after this appointment. I've offended them enough recently, and it won't hurt to let them distract me. From this meeting. But mostly from Ruby. No matter what I do, she's always on my mind. She's the only person who would understand how cruel it is to sit here and watch my dad...

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to listen to him manage my mum's life's work. That night in Oxford I confided everything to her. It was the first time I had said out loud the thoughts I had always forbidden myself to think.

Ruby understood me. She didn't appeal to my sense of duty or the meaning of my name. She listened to me and encouraged me. Courage for a future that is my own.

The longer I sit here, the stronger my desire to see Ruby becomes. And the more often I tell myself that this isn't possible, the stronger the longing that grows within me.

I have to see her.

I need to.

»This project will not only come from me, but also from my son James, who is now being prepared for his future position at *Beaufort* and who, incidentally, received his acceptance letter from Oxford this week."

When I hear my name and the applause that follows, I look I stand up. Some of my colleagues nod at me in a friendly manner, while others notice that I am holding my mobile phone under the table and twist their mouths in disapproval. I return their gaze coolly without putting the phone away.

“Would you like to say a few words, James?” my father asks.

I look at him, trying not to show my surprise. He didn't mention anything about me giving a speech before the meeting.
His gaze is ice cold and persistent. If I don't speak up now, my father will give me hell.

That damn bastard. He knew that if he had told me beforehand that he wanted to parade me like a racehorse, I wouldn't have come with him. Instead, he's letting me walk into a trap.

I slowly get up and push the phone back into the Pocket. I glance briefly at my untouched glass of water and regret not having drunk anything before. My throat feels tight as I look around. Some of these people I have known since I was a child, others I saw for the first time at my mum's memorial service.

I have to clear my throat. It feels like my mind has moved on separated from my body as words come out of my mouth that belong to me

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mean nothing at all.

»My mother would have been proud to be here today and see how much courage and commitment you put your energy into our company." *I have no idea if Mum would have really thought that.*

I didn't even really know her.

Something tightens in my chest. I briefly consider just running out without saying another word, but that's not possible. The only way out is to survive the next hour. No matter how.

»I am happy to be able to do in the future what my mother did and loved all her life. The shoes I will fill can never be filled - but I can at least try."

My eyes meet my father's. I wonder if he can see the lie in my eyes and if he realizes that I'm just putting on a show. Because that's all it is. A show in which everything is rehearsed and nothing is real.

There doesn't seem to be enough room for oxygen in my chest, it suddenly feels so tight, it's so hard for me to breathe. I think of Ruby again. Ruby, who tells me I can do whatever I want. Ruby, who planted in me the belief in a self-determined life full of possibilities.

“I can say with complete conviction: with you as colleagues, the future can only be crowned with success.” I nod to the employees before sitting down again. A few of the disapproving faces softened as I spoke, and there was another round of applause.

I dare a look at my father and my body runs through a shower. He nods at me, obviously pleased with my speech. I have never felt more like a puppet.

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14

Ruby

I read the email once.

Once again.

Then a third time.

I read them over and over until the letters blur in front of my eyes and I have to squint.

"Mom," I say.

My mother makes a questioning noise. She sits next to me at the kitchen table, absentmindedly leafing through a home furnishings catalogue.

“Mum,” I repeat, more forcefully this time, and push the laptop with the open email in her direction.

Now she looks up. “What?” I hold

my breath as I point forcefully at my laptop. Mums Her gaze follows my finger. Her eyes dart across the screen. She pauses and looks at me, then back again. The next moment she puts her hand over her mouth. "No," she says muffledly.

I nod. »Yes, I think so.« »No!« »Yes!« Mum jumps up

and throws

her arms around my neck. »I'm so proud of you!« I wrap my arms around my mother and close my eyes. I

I try to do what I always did as a child: I concentrate very hard on remembering this moment forever. I memorize the smell of Mum, the sound of the oven, the smell of freshly baked scones and the immense joy that floods through me as I realize that my ultimate dream is just within reach.

“I’m so happy,” I murmur against her shoulder.

Mum rubs my back. "You deserve it, Ruby." "I need to look for scholarships,"

I say, not letting go of her.

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Their hug becomes even tighter. »These are thoughts for later. Not for now. Now-" She

is interrupted by the doorbell ringing.

»Will you open it?« she asks and lets go of me. »Ember must have forgotten her key. Then you can tell her the great news straight away.
betrayed."

I nod and turn into the hallway so quickly that the carpet slides across the wooden floor and I hit my shoulder on the coat rack. But even that can't stop me from throwing

the door open with a beam

…

⋯ which instantly freezes into ice.

James is standing on my doorstep. He's about to run a hand through his hair and, like me, freezes in mid-motion.
His cheeks are slightly flushed and his breath forms little clouds in the icy winter air. He wears a gray checkered suit with a black tie. Apparently he has just come from an important appointment or is on the way there.

I want to slam the door in his face.

At the same time I want to throw my arms around his neck.

Maybe it's a good thing I'm incapable of doing anything
do. I just stare at him, feeling my heartbeat speed up at the sight of him.

"I…" he starts, but his voice dies out.

I remember the day he came here under the pretense of bringing me the dress for the Halloween party. Back then, he was fighting a similar battle with himself in front of my eyes - the feelings inside him want to be let out, but somehow he never manages to let that happen.

"I can't take it anymore, Ruby," he suddenly blurts out.
He looks up at me, shaking his head. "I can not anymore."

He sounds broken and tired. Sad and shattered. As if something happens from which there is no turning back.

It's clear he can't be alone right now. But at the same time I'm annoyed that he's here. I'm the last person he should go to when he has problems. Why is he ruining this moment for me? I just got accepted to Oxford, damn it.
I should be running around the house dancing instead of being so overwhelmed by his pain

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to let it drag you down. Things are over between us - *he* ended them. And we shouldn't take two steps back again and cling desperately to something that no longer exists.

"What can you no longer do?" "I

just came from a meeting at *Beaufort.* Lydia is pregnant. And I was accepted into Oxford. I'm through." James's chest rises and falls quickly, ⋯ I'm filming right now as if he's

running a marathon. It probably feels that way to him too. I know how terribly he is suffering under the pressure his father is putting on him, and at this moment it looks like he's going to buckle under it at any moment.

I take a deep breath. »I understand how bad this must be for you. But I'm not the person you should turn to when you're feeling bad," I reply as gently as I can.

He takes the steps of the front steps quickly until he is directly in front of me. His eyes are dark, his look desperate. I've never seen him like this before.

"I can't stay away from you anymore. You're the only person who really understands me. I need you. And I want to fight for us because I belong to you. I will always belong to you, Ruby." I cling to the door frame and stare at it, completely

stunned. My body is gripped by hope, pain and anger all at once, a chaotic mix that makes my heart race and my thoughts swirl wildly.

I can't believe he just said that.

I can't believe he's trying to ruin my life again.

Suddenly I feel incredibly angry. How dare he join the event committee again? How dare he ruin this moment for me?

"No," I say with difficulty. At the same time I shake my head. "No."

"Please, Ruby, I..." "Do

you know what *I* need, James?" I interrupt him. "I need Peace. I need time for myself to get over you. I hope that one day you will be happy and realize that you

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you don't have to let your father dictate your life. But I can't help you with that."

He shakes his head. »I feel better when you are with me. Then I'll just be... happy." "It's not my job to make you happy, damn

it!" I scream.

James flinches and takes a step back. He slips

the top step, and for a moment it looks as if he will lose his balance, but at

the last moment he is able to catch himself. He stares at me, the unspeakable shock in his eyes taking my breath away.

“James,” I croak.

He shakes his head. »No, you're right. "You want me to … I wouldn't have come here." Without

another word, he turns around and runs down the stairs. He quickly crosses our front garden until he reaches the small wooden gate. He opens it, steps through and then looks at me again. His eyes are glassy, as if there are tears in them - I don't know whether that's because of my words or because of the biting wind. Before I can say anything, he turns and leaves.

James

The colorful lights of the club dance in time across my friends' faces while the bass of the song booms in my ears and shakes my entire body.

I'm sitting in the lounge on one of the comfy couches watching Alistair, Kesh and Cyril dancing with a group of girls not far from me. Wren has also stayed seated. I think the guys took one look at my face and decided I wasn't to be left alone that night.

Like I'm a fucking toddler.

“You got it, man?” Wren suddenly yells in my ear.

I raise an eyebrow. Wren is usually the last person who wants to talk about feelings. Quite the opposite. We've both perfected the denial of problems for years. It's one of the reasons we're best friends.

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"Don't look like that. I'm just worried about you." I can hardly understand him, but his look says it all. When I entered the club earlier, it was clear to everyone that something must have happened. Without saying a word, Cyril pressed a glass of gin and tonic into my hand, which I still haven't touched now, a good hour later. The urge to drink it all in one go is great. Maybe then Ruby's words, which are repeating themselves like a loop in my head, would finally stop.

It's not my job to make you happy, damn it!

I can understand her anger - she has every right to shout at me. Driving to her was a kind of knee-jerk reaction that I can't explain in retrospect.

I hate this situation. I hate that I didn't go to see her that Wednesday, but to see Cyril, and not a day goes by that I don't wish for a time machine to undo everything that happened. Because while I could have talked to Ruby, my friends and I always lived by one motto: forget as quickly as possible, no matter the cost.

I look away from Wren and stare at my glass. The blaring music isn't enough to silence my thoughts, and for a moment I struggle with myself. I look at the others. Cyril and Alistair are dancing with two girls, while Kesh leans against a wall next to them, sipping his drink. I briefly consider getting up and going to them, but it feels like lead weights are hanging from my body. It takes almost all the strength I have to bend forward and place the glass untouched on the small wooden table in front of me.

"My whole damn life is going to hell," I finally say. I don't know if Wren heard me. Aside from the deafening music, he's also had a lot of alcohol. But his dark brown eyes are on me watchfully as I continue. "And there's nothing I can do about it."

Apparently he heard me because he leans towards me, grabs my shoulder and squeezes briefly. "You're doing what you've been doing all your life, man." "What?"

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The corners of Wren's mouth turn into a grim smile. "You keep going. If there's one thing I've learned from you over the last few years, it's that." I swallow hard.

»Whenever I am about to give up, I think about it. In the
“It has helped me over the last few days,” he continues.

Again my gaze falls on the full glass of gin and tonic. I wonder what “carrying on” means in my case. Forget Ruby and pretend this never happened? Or fight for them?

"I know you're going through a lot right now, but it's actually your job to ask what's been going on with me over the last few days," he says.

Wren's words make me look up. “What?” I ask, confused.

He returns my gaze with a frown. Finally, he exhales sharply and rubs the back of his neck. "It's okay. Forget it.” He stands and nods toward the dance floor, toward our friends, bathed in blue and purple light. Their movements are exuberant, as if they don't have a single care in the world.

For as long as I can remember, this has been our specialty. Acting as if nothing and no one can harm us. As if life is just a game in which nothing lasts or has any meaning. In the last few weeks, I have learned that we have surrendered to an illusion. Everyone is vulnerable and everyone has something to lose.

I shake my head, but Wren won't take no for an answer. He grabs my hand, pulls me up from the sofa and onto the dance floor. The boys cheer when they see us and open the circle so we can join them. I try to move to the beat for a while, but it doesn't work.

I'm just about to apologize to the others and announce that I'm leaving when someone comes up behind me and wraps an arm around my stomach. Frowning, I turn around - and see Elaine Ellington's face.

»James!« she calls over the music and smiles at me. Her honey-blonde hair is curly and frames her face, which is slightly flushed from dancing. As quickly as I can, I push her arm away from me and leave the dance floor to go back to our lounge. When I get there,

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When I arrive, I feel strangely out of breath. I order a water and collapse onto the sofa.

The sight of Elaine felt like a punch to my stomach. The memories of the evening in Cyril's pool, which I already carry with me twenty-four hours a day, were so present again from one moment to the next that a wave of nausea overwhelmed me.

But I did the math without Elaine. After a while she comes to me and sits next to me with her legs crossed.

“What kind of greeting was that?” she asks, running her hand through her hair. Her eyes sparkle with amusement. She sits so close to me that we are almost touching. She slides a little closer to me. My whole body freezes as the smell of her perfume hits my nose.

“I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am about what happened to your mom. If you want to talk or something - I'm always open to listening to you." She places her hand on my leg and slowly moves it up the fabric of my pants.

“Elaine, stop,” I say firmly, pushing her hand away. At the same time, I slide to the side and look at her seriously.

“Did I do something wrong?” she asks, surprised.

I shake my head. »No. I'm the one who did everything wrong made," I reply.

Elaine raises an eyebrow. "What's wrong with you?" I shrug, but don't respond.

She just looks at me for a moment, then shakes her head. »You've been in a better mood before.«

"I'm sorry," I say. "But I can't do this anymore." She slides away from me a little. "Too bad," she says and then stands on. »It was always really fun with you.«

She remains in place for a moment, as if she were waiting that I hold her back. When I don't move and stare straight ahead, she goes back onto the dance floor without another word.

I lean back and stare at the ceiling of the club. For the first time, I notice that there are small lights there that are supposed to represent stars. I reach into my pocket to get my wallet out. I open it nervously and reach for the piece of paper that is hidden behind my ID card.

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is. For the past few weeks, I've avoided looking at the list for fear that I'll feel even more exhausted than before. I hold the piece of paper up so that the little lights from the ceiling almost shine through it. I read point by point what Ruby has written down with me. I swallow hard and notice how scratchy my throat suddenly is.

There has never been anyone in my life who has been as interested in me as Ruby. I've never had someone who's the first thing I think about in the morning and whose face I see when I go to sleep. And there has never been anyone who wanted to make my dreams come true.

Everything that has happened has changed me. I am not the same person I was before. But if there is one thing I want to fight for, it is Ruby.

With that thought, I fold the list back up and hold it tightly in my hand as I leave the club.

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15

Ruby

“To Ruby!” Dad shouts loudly.

»And Lin,« I add, smiling broadly at my friend.

“And Lin!” Mum, Dad and Ember repeat in unison.

It was Dad's idea to have a little Oxford party at our house and toast our success with Lin. When Mum and I told him, he didn't believe a word we said and finally demanded that we show him the email. As he read it, he kept muttering "no" and then hugged me so tightly that even four hours later my ribs still hurt a little.

"I can't believe we were taken," I whisper to Lin over the rim of my champagne glass.

"Me neither." The thought of being able to spend the next three years with my girlfriend releases a bunch of excited butterflies in my stomach. I'm so happy it feels unreal.

“We have to work harder now, Lin,” I say.

“Can’t you just enjoy yourself for at least one evening?” Ember asks.

Mum and Dad laugh while Lin and I smile ruefully exchange. "You're right," I say. “But so much can go wrong!” asks Ember.

Lin places her champagne glass on the living room table and takes one Nacho, the only finger food we could conjure up in a hurry. “We have to pass all of our subjects with an A, only then will we get a firm acceptance.”

»And then I have to be selected for one of the scholarships,« I add quietly, trying to suppress the panic that is rising in me at the thought. The student advisor at Maxton Hall has assured me more than once that my chances

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are above average and if she were in my position she wouldn't worry at all. But that's easier said than done.

Lin's cheeks turn pale and she puts the half-eaten nacho down next to her glass. "What if I get a lower grade in one of my subjects? My grandmother will definitely take back her offer to support me with my studies." "Girls, you should celebrate and not worry yourselves to death!" Mum sits opposite Lin and me on our flowered armchair and looks at us, shaking her head.

Lin and I exchange a worried look before we simultaneously take the champagne glasses and take a long sip.

“You probably wouldn’t have been accepted if you were different, right?” says Ember, grinning. She wasn't surprised by the acceptance and tried to be happy for me, but I also noticed how sad it made her that I was moving out. Because even though Oxford isn't far away, it still makes a difference whether we're separated by half a hallway or a two-hour train ride. Ember hates change, and I'm pretty sure that if she had her way, we would always live at home for the rest of our lives.

But even if her mood during the day has a bit of an effect on me has rubbed off and I feel nostalgic at the thought of moving out, the joy of being accepted far outweighs the joy. And since James was here, I have decided that today I will not let anyone or anything take away this joy from me.

After the champagne bottle is empty, Lin and I leave it to my parents the television program and go upstairs to my room.

“Oh shit,” Lin mutters as I close the door behind us. She has her eyes glued to her cell phone and sits down on my desk chair without looking up.

"What?" I ask.
"Nothing."

Her answer comes so quickly that I prick up my ears. "What's going on?" She shrugs. "It seems Cyril was taken too." I hesitate for a moment, then whisper, "James too."

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"Really? Then half the Beaufort gang is in Oxford. Alistair and Wren posted on Instagram too." Lin is still tapping away on her phone. I catch a glimpse of the screen and see a picture of a half-naked guy who I'm pretty sure is Cyril.

Okay, I can't stand it for a second longer. For months now, I've suspected that there's something going on between Lin and Cyril that nobody knows about. The way the two of them interact speaks volumes. For a long time, I thought they despised each other - but now I'm sure that these are sparks flying between them when they argue.

“What are you doing?” I ask cautiously as I sit inside
I sit cross-legged on my bed.

Caught, she looks up. "Nothing."

"You've said 'nothing' twice now so quickly that I don't believe a word you're saying." Lin bites her

lower lip and looks back at her phone. Her cheeks are bright red.

"Lin, come here," I say and tap the spot next to me vigorously. She looks skeptically at the spot where my hand is resting, but then slowly stands up and walks towards me. While she leans her back against the headboard of the bed, pulls her knees up and wraps both arms around her, I turn to her and look at her expectantly. She tucks one of her black strands of hair behind her ear. It seems to me as if she doesn't know how to begin.

"I know you don't like to talk about things like that," I say gently. “But you can always tell me if there’s something on your mind.” Lin swallows hard. “There’s not much to tell,”

she whispers.

She looks almost shy - an expression I don't recognize from her at all. Lin is such a strong, confident person who always stands up for herself and her opinions without worrying about what others might think. Seeing her like this now suddenly makes me uneasy.

"I've liked Cyril since I was thirteen." My eyes widen.

"Really?"

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She nods slowly. 'When I got to Maxton Hall, Cyril and I were sitting next to each other in a couple of cubicles. He wasn't always like he is today. Back then he was attentive and sweet. He could really make me laugh. I can't explain what it was exactly that fascinated me so much, but I liked him from the start." She's silent for a brief moment, staring at her knees. I want to say something encouraging to her, but I hold

back. This is the first time she's telling me about her love life and I need to give her the time she needs without interrupting her.

»However, Cyril has been in love with Lydia ever since I've known him, so it was clear to me back then that things couldn't work out between us. Still, I was devastated when she started something with him. They never made it official, but you know how quickly things like this get around the school. After she dumped him, I comforted him. One thing led to another and…" She shrugs awkwardly, the grip on her knees tightening.

She looks so sad I wonder how I could have missed it.

"Was it just a one-time thing or more?" I ask cautiously.

Lin shakes his head and lets out a breathless laugh. »We have been sleeping together every few weeks for two

years." My mouth drops open. And closed again. I can't believe she kept this from me for so long. "I...Does *anyone* know about this?" Lin shakes his

head again. "No. I realize that for Cy there is only Lydia. That's fine too, but that's why I don't want it to come out. I want to at least keep some dignity, and we were never together or anything like that." She hesitates for a moment.

"Besides, it's probably over now anyway."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"He hasn't been in touch since Cordelia Beaufort died.

"Probably because he's too busy consoling Lydia." She shrugs. "He's ignoring my texts and hanging out with her at school now."

"I…" I cut myself off and shook my head. "Was it

"It's weird for you to spend New Year's Eve with

Lydia?" Lin smiles narrowly. »I like Lydia. And it's not her fault that I like the guy who's hopelessly in love with her

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is.«

»I don't know what to say.« »It's not bad, Ruby,

really. I just wish he would have been honest with me. I don't think I deserve this radio silence. He could have just told me that Lydia is giving him another chance. » »I don't think that's the reason.« She shrugs again. »I shouldn't care. It's

"It's not like I'm madly in love with him." Her tone may be

carefree, but her sad look belies it.

"Cyril is a pig if he doesn't contact you and you don't know where you stand," I say angrily.

»I know it must sound like that. But we both knew what we were getting ourselves into. He never promised me anything, just as I never promised him. And he can be really great – confident, funny.
And tenderly…" Lin turns bright red and buries his face in his hands.

"That definitely sounds like more than just something physical, Lin." "I know!" she

moans, peeking between her slightly spread fingers. »I only noticed that now that I haven't seen him outside of school for ages. I *miss* him." She sounds so disgusted at the last words that I have to grin.

»Have you ever talked about it? Really, I mean?" I ask gently.

She shakes her head and turns bright red. "Cyril and I never talk much to each other when we see each other." Oh man.

»We have been friends for so long and I knew nothing
of it. I feel like an incredibly bad friend right now."

"You're a great friend. I just didn't want to tell anyone because... oh, I don't know. There was something about the secrecy. But now that it's all over for him, it's killing me." She sighs deeply. "We're totally the same, Ruby. Neither of us wanted to start anything serious before we went to Oxford."

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Also one of the many things that connect Lin and me.

"And now both James and Cyril have been accepted into Oxford," I mutter.

"Yes."

We are silent for a while, lost in our own thoughts.
When I transferred to Maxton Hall, I lost all my friends from my old high school. After that, I decided to only maintain superficial acquaintances and not get involved with anything more. I didn't want to put energy into something that would then be taken away from me.

But that changed when I met Lin. I'm still afraid that this friendship will also be fleeting, but I'm willing to take the risk - this conversation made that clear to me once again.

I reach for Lin's hand and squeeze it gently. »You can
about everything, Lin. Always. I want you to know that."

I've never said that to her before, and I find it surprisingly difficult to get the words out of my mouth. Not because they aren't sincere, but because they mean so much to me.

"Thank you. Same to you," croaks Lin, visibly touched. She turns her hand
so that we can intertwine our fingers. "I mean that seriously, by the way. You can also talk
to me about James anytime.
Or about anything else.«

I chew the inside of my cheek and think about that moment this afternoon when James stood at the door and said all those things to me.

I will always be yours, Ruby.

His words shook the ground beneath my feet. He looked so determined, like there was nothing more important in his life than winning me back.

“James was here at lunchtime today,” I begin after a while.

Lin continues to hold my hand and looks at me questioningly. “What did he want?” I shrug. »He

said he needed me. That I'm the only person who understands him. And that he could be happy with me.”

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Lin takes a sharp breath. "And?" I

shrug.

I meant what I said. It's not my job to make sure James is happy. Still, I regret yelling at him like that. He was clearly unwell, and I'm probably the only person who can understand why. At Oxford he told me that he had never spoken to anyone before about his fears for the future, and I can imagine what must have been going through his mind after accepting Oxford and seeing *Beaufort .* However, I cannot be burdened with this. I can't be the only thing in his life that makes sense to him. That's not the purpose of a relationship.

… we are not together anymore. He

"I want to be there for him, but at the same time I don't know if I can," I whisper.

"I understand that," Lin replies. "But he looks at ⋯ I also see how he sees you us at our meetings. I think he's determined to win you back." I shake my head. "That's what he wants

now . James is so volatile - in two weeks something will happen that will throw his life into disarray and then he'll disappear or go crazy or do something that sabotages us and I'm just not ready for that.

I won't let him hurt me like that again." The last words come out

of me so forcefully that Lin looks at me in surprise.

»That's exactly what I admire you for.« I blink, irritated.
»What?« She gives me a small

smile. »I notice exactly how exhausted you did that to James. How much you suffer for him and his family. You were there for him after he hurt you deeply - and now you stay strong and focus on yourself. I think that's admirable." From her mouth it all sounds much more heroic than I feel.

I let out a shaky breath. “I said some really bad things to him earlier.”

“Do you still have feelings for him?” Lin asks suddenly.

Now I'm the one cringing.

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I think about what I said to him on New Year's Eve. I can't help but
I can't just stop loving. These feelings won't go away, no matter how much I want them to.

“Yes,” I whisper.

Lin smiles sadly at me. “It's stupid that you can't just turn it off, right?” I hum in agreement.

"Doesn't matter. I think it's time we got back to the real purpose of this evening: we wanted to celebrate." She nods vigorously and squeezes my hand one last time before

giving it to her
lets go. "You're right."

I grab my laptop and open the Oxford site. For the next hour, we'll look at the dorms, browse forums, and make a list of things we want to do together once we're enrolled at Oxford.

But no matter how hard I try to distract myself, James'
Words echo in my head throughout the evening.

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16

Ruby

I spent the entire weekend alternating between being happy about my acceptance to Oxford and wondering whether James would be coming to the events team meeting on Monday - and how I should behave if he did turn up. I've now reached the point where I have to accept that my New Year's resolution to make a clean break has failed. James is everywhere. If not as a person, then in my thoughts, and I don't see how that will change in the future, especially since the memory of James' words still sends a tingling sensation of excitement through my body two days later.

I feel exactly the same tingling sensation when Lin and I enter the room after the lunch break and James sits in his usual seat, with a book in his hand, as he always has lately. This time it's John Green's latest novel, I note curiously, before I quickly look away and ask Lin to go over the agenda with me until the others arrive.

The minutes drag on like chewing gum, but eventually it will come Camille strolls through the door and we can begin the meeting.

»Doug,« Lin begins. »The posters are going down really well. We have already received a lot of praise.«

Doug gives Lin the slightest smile, which is at least more than that every other one of us has received during the last few meetings.

»Maybe we can even attract the attention of one or two sponsors.« I nod. »Otherwise, the guest list is looking really good

out of. The only thing that gives me a bit of a stomach ache is that we are still missing eulogists. We don't have much longer left," I say. "Kieran, has the professor you wanted to ask answered?"

"Yes," says Kieran, although he looks quite contrite. I know what's coming next. »Unfortunately he doesn't have time. But at least

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He agreed to make a generous donation." "Okay, then that's it. At least something." I smile encouragingly at him. "Has anyone else had any success?" The others are silent.

"Okay, then—"

James clears his throat.

I struggle with myself for a moment. I don't want to look at him. But I can't ignore it either. That would only raise questions for the others that I don't want to answer. Or can't.

"Yes, Beaufort?" Lin chimes in.

"Alice Campbell has agreed to give the commencement speech." I jerk my head up.

James catches my eye. Only now do I see how pale his face is There are also dark circles under his eyes, as if he hadn't slept since Saturday.

I still regret saying those words to him. He didn't deserve that and I wish I could talk to him again in peace and explain why I got so angry when he showed up at my door.

The guilty conscience must be written all over my face, because... James' eyes narrow before he continues as if nothing had happened. »The family center helped her and her family a lot to get back on their feet a few years ago. She would be happy to support us at the gala. I told her you would contact her to discuss the details."

I stare at him in disbelief. When a small but satisfied smile spreads across his face, I know that this can't be a coincidence. He actually remembered that I once mentioned in a sentence how much I admire Alice Campbell and her work.

I don't know what to do with this information. The more I think about it, the more I want to talk to him in peace again.

I'm frantically thinking about how I could hold him back for a moment after the meeting.

"Really great, Beaufort," says Lin after I've been silent for too long. "Thanks. If you have any more people we can

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If you can contact me, please let me know."

James clears his throat again. "Boyd Hall is also prepared. Janitor Jones knows that the decorating company is coming next Friday at 4 p.m." For a moment, the group room is completely silent.

“For the fact that you initially hated working here so much, you’re putting in a lot of effort,” Jessalyn interjects.

James doesn't answer, just gives me a look that sends goosebumps all over my arms.

“This is right after our meeting,” says Lin. “I’d say we’ll just go over there together then, right?”

A murmur of agreement goes through the room.

»The next point is the photo booth,« says Lin, and draws me in from my thoughts.

Suddenly an idea flashes through my mind. It seems risky, but also exciting. It would give me the opportunity to talk to James and apologize to him. Far away from Lin's critical gaze and Camille's curious ears.

"Exactly." I clear my throat. "I can have my parents' car on Saturday and would pick them up then. But the individual parts are supposed to be pretty heavy."

I gather all my courage and look at James again.

“James,” I say firmly. “Would you please come with me to pick up the photo booth?” For a split second, surprise

flashes in his eyes.

But then he nods and says, “Yes, of course,” as if my question was nothing special.

Ignoring both the small noise Camille makes and the meaningful look Lin gives me, I spend the rest of the session staring at my planner, wondering what the hell I just did.

When I drive into the Maxton Hall car park on Saturday, James is already waiting for me. He wears jeans, a black coat and a gray scarf. He's blowing on his hands to warm them up and I automatically wonder how long he's been standing there.

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When he sees me, he lowers his hands and smiles uncertainly at me. I have no idea what that smile means.
It's a new smile. One where his posture is rigid and his eyes are sad. One that came after we separated - after his mother died and everything that has happened since.

I miss his old smile.

I push the thought away as I come to a stop in front of James.
If I want to get through this day with any degree of success, I have to pull myself together.

"Good morning," he says, plopping down in the passenger seat of our minivan. Our car is old and pretty rickety, but it runs, and that's the most important thing. Luckily I cleaned it again last night with Ember, because now I notice there's something oddly intimate about the way James looks around inside the car.

As he takes in the Yankee Candle scented tree dangling from the rearview mirror After taking a closer look, I finally start the engine again.

"My mom loves these things," I explain. "She's really into floral scents, which always drives my sister crazy. Ember hates the smell of roses, but Mom loves it."

I should stop saying nonsense. After all, it was not without reason that I asked James to go on this trip with me today.
However, I also find it difficult to steer the conversation straight to our failed relationship. Especially considering how long we will be sitting in this car together.

“My mom always liked flowery smells, too.” It takes a lot of effort

to keep my eyes on the road instead of turning my head abruptly towards him. Apparently James has no problem skipping the small talk.

“Do you miss her?” I ask quietly.

It takes him a moment to hum in agreement. »Somehow already. It's different without her."

"How?" Out of

the corner of my eye I see him shrug his shoulder. "There are no more buffer between my father and me. Lydia wants to take the position now, but I'm trying everything to prevent that from happening.
She shouldn't be caught between two stools - especially not now." "How is she?

I've hardly seen her this week."

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»Very well. I think.« He hesitates briefly. »I would like

she finally tells Sutton. At the same time, I understand why she doesn't."

"The whole situation is just totally shitty." "Yeah."

He's silent for a moment, then clears his throat. "So, how are you?" I have no idea

how a conversation can feel so normal and strange at the same time.

»Good. I… erm. I got into Oxford too.« »I knew it. They would have

been pretty stupid to

reject it," he replies. "Congratulations, Ruby."

I look at him in surprise. He returns it seriously.

I don't understand how he always does this. One day he's devastated and standing on my doorstep shaking, the next he's at Maxton Hall summoning the strength to act as if nothing had happened. And even now he seems completely composed, even though I know that last Saturday didn't leave him unscathed.

»Thank you,« I murmur. For a moment I search for the right words for what I want to say to him next. Even though I've had time to think about it since Monday, my head is now completely blank. "I'm sorry for what I said to you last weekend," I finally begin. "That was-" "Ruby," James tries to interrupt me, but I shake my

head.

»I want to get over you,« I say quietly. »But that will It doesn't get any easier when I'm mean to you. I'm really sorry. And it was important to me that you knew that."

I feel his gaze on me. "There's nothing to apologize for," he says quietly.

I don't know how to answer that. The words sound bitter, when he says it, and I would like to contradict him, but on the other hand I'm also afraid that the conversation will then go in a direction that I'm not ready for yet. I wanted to apologize and I did. I don't think I have the strength for more at the moment.

So I remain silent and step on the accelerator. The silence between us becomes more oppressive the longer it lasts, and at some point I can't stand it anymore and turn up the radio. The cheerful pop music that plays on the station that Mum always listens to is a stark contrast to the

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charged atmosphere between James and me. Although we spend the rest of the fifteen-minute drive in silence, I am aware of James' presence every second. I hear his soft breathing and feel him moving next to me. And even though the heating is not on high, I feel warm when I think that all I have to do is reach out and touch him.

I am so happy when we arrive at the old industrial site and I can finally get out of the car. The cold air feels like a relief on my hot cheeks.

"We have to go in over there," I say, pointing to a garage above which there is a colorful sign with the name of the rental company.
James steps next to me and as we walk off together, I brush his arm once.

We both wear thick coats.
Still, the touch feels like an electric shock.
As inconspicuously as possible, I take a step to the side and rush towards it Side entrance to the garage. I push through the door and enter the small hall.

I look around. On the website, this store looked much more inviting. Dim yellow lights barely illuminate the bare essentials, and the ceilings are low and covered in cobwebs. A variety of electronic devices are standing and lying around, but most of the space is taken up by the photo booths, of which there are at least twenty.
Soft electro beats are playing from small speakers, to which a half-bald man sitting at a desk behind a narrow counter moves his head back and forth to the beat.

“You found a nice shop there,” James whispers, but before I can reply, the man spots us and stands up, smiling.
"You must be Ruby," he says as he approaches us.
"Exactly," I answer with a nod and take his outstretched hand. "And this is James." The two of them also shake hands.

»I'm Hank and I'll give you a quick introduction to the photo booth.
Can you come around?' He makes a circular gesture around the counter and then points to one of the boxes.
“You chose this one, right?” he asks as we stop in front of it.

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I examine the model. The walls are black, that
Entrance is covered with a red curtain. There is a narrow opening on one side, above which is an illuminated sign that says "Photos." Directly next to the entrance there is a small board with some information about the filters that can be used when taking photos written in white marker. The handlettering font that was used is beautifully squiggly.

»I would like to write something about our gala here. Is
“Is that possible, Hank?” I ask, pointing to the small board.

He nods. "I have a marker somewhere that I can give you." I smile at him. "Perfect, thank you
very much." "So, and now for the explanation:

There is a SLR camera built into this that is triggered via the touchscreen. It's actually quite easy, you just have to press the camera symbol to trigger the photo.

Then you have three seconds and the picture is taken. After that you can edit it with the filters or - if it doesn't work - delete it and take a new one."

I push the red curtain aside and look at the touchscreen. "It really looks like it's child's play." "Want to try it out?" asks Hank with an almost
boyish grin.

Before I can say no, James replies, "Yes, please." I raise an
eyebrow, but he ignores me and goes into the room
Box. He holds the curtain open and looks at me expectantly.

"What are you waiting for? Get in!” says Hank next to me.

Without further ado, I go into the small cabin and look at James skeptically. He, in turn, looks intently at the touchscreen. "We have to check whether everything is intact, don't we?" he asks quietly.

It irritates me that I didn't think about it myself, but was too busy trying to keep at least an arm's length away from James.

"Ruby, you're covering the camera." I
push my back against the wall until I'm behind James, who has sat down on the small stool in front of the camera.

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“Take a look in there,” James says suddenly, pointing to the little one
black hole above the touchscreen.

I lean down until I can look over his shoulder and into the camera. Now I appear on the screen, but I can hardly concentrate on the blurry image of our faces.

One of James's strands of hair tickles my cheek, and his familiar
A smell penetrates my nose. I suddenly feel much warmer in my coat. James next to me seems frozen, I even think he has stopped breathing. I slowly turn my head and look at him. I am so close to him that I could touch his skin with my mouth if I wanted to.

At that moment, James presses the shutter button.

The quiet click tears me out of my trance and I flinch.
Suddenly I realize again why we are actually here – and what I almost did just now.

"Everything seems to be working," says James, as if he hadn't noticed the sparks that flew between us a few seconds ago.

Did I just imagine the heat between us?

As quickly as I can, I push myself outside where Hank is already
waiting for us with the photo strip in hand.

"It's a strange pose, but at least you seem to have managed to get the shutter button right," he says, pressing the four small photos into my hand.

No, I definitely didn't imagine the heat.

In the photo I turned my head towards James while he was directly
looks into the camera. And his look I …

swallow dryly.

I know that look. And also that line around his mouth.

James must have felt it too. I'm absolutely sure of that at this very second.

“Very nice,” I croak and want to give the pictures back to Hank, but I do
Before I can do that, James takes it from my hand. Without even looking at it, he shoves it into his coat pocket.

“Where do we have to sign?” he asks in the same businesslike tone
Tone that he also used when we were at *Beaufort* back then .

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Hank leads us back to the counter, where I sign three forms and get a small manual for operating the box and refilling the pictures. Then the three of us heave the parts of the box into the trunk of my car. I'm glad to be outside in the fresh air again. It's a welcome relief for me and my hot cheeks.

On the way back I turn the radio on again, a little louder than before. Why on earth did I think asking James to come here with me was a good idea? I should have realized how difficult it would be to be so close to him for such a long period of time.

Out of the corner of my eye I see James untying his coat and then unwinds the scarf from his neck.

“If you’re too warm, I can set the ventilation a little colder,” I say with difficulty.

“Ruby.” The way he whispers my name is so familiar.

I grip the steering wheel tightly as I try with all my might to concentrate on the road. The air between us is becoming more and more charged, but I try with all my might to push it away.

The traffic light in front of us turns red and I brake slowly and let Roll the car to the stop line. Then I risk a look in his direction. James looks at me and in his eyes I see a myriad of emotions that make me want to reach out and hug him and hold him tight.

“I just wanted to say that it was…”

“Please don’t,” I interrupt him pleadingly, shaking my head.

He clenches his teeth so hard that a muscle in his jaw begins to twitch. We look at each other for a moment and there are so many unspoken words between us.

But I can't talk to him now. It just does not work. Not when I feel like I'm going to cave at any moment.

The next moment James looks away and looks again front. "It is green."

I step on the accelerator. The way to school has never seemed so long to me.

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17

Ruby

"I think I'd like it to be a little more minty," Ember says thoughtfully.

I drag the cursor further to the top left of the color swatch until this Moss green becomes lighter and goes in a bluer direction. "So?"

My sister makes an approving noise. I save the color and go to the preview view in Wordpress so that we can see our work.

Ember's blog *Bellbird* has been rebranded with a new logo, a more modern WordPress theme, and a fresh color palette.
The most recent post is displayed at the top - a guide to ethical plus size fashion windows thumbnails of the _, Directly below are three smaller most popular posts. On the right she has included the links to her social media profiles as well as a picture I took of her last summer. In it she stands in a field with flowers and wears a summery maxi dress with a floral pattern and a deep neckline. I still remember the moment a grasshopper jumped on her and I photographed her trying to get rid of it - it was hilarious. Unfortunately, she didn't use the picture of her screaming as a display picture, but rather one in which she laughs heartily and pushes a strand of hair out of her face. Directly below the picture it says:

Hi, I'm Ember! Plus size fashion blogger, lover of words and cakes, and inspired by all things beautiful. Enjoy my blog!

“It looks great,” I say in awe. »Really professional.«

"You say that every time," Ember replies, scanning the page with narrowed eyes. When it comes to her blog, she is as much of a perfectionist as I am with my bullet journal.

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"I know, but it's the truth." I browse through her latest outfit posts. Even though I was the one who took the pictures, I could look at them again and again. Ember looks beautiful in them. Once again, I wish Mum and Dad weren't so critical of the topic of social media. They are concerned that Ember might reveal too much of her private life, but she approaches *Bellbird* in an impressively professional manner. She now even has a few brands that she regularly works with and who send her things.

"By the way, I saw a dress that was made for you," my sister says suddenly. "You needed one for the gala, didn't you?" I nod. "Show me." She pulls the laptop a little towards

her and her tiny desk

wobbles dangerously. I quickly grab my glass of orange juice so it doesn't fall over. We've been sitting here for two hours now, side by side, working on her blog while Frank Ocean's melodic voice sounds from the laptop's small speakers.

Ember opens one of her bookmarks and together we watch as the page slowly opens up and finally a dress is displayed that makes me sigh softly. It has a V-neck, is black and is made from a flowy fabric that is tight at the waist and falls in soft waves from the hips.

»Are there any more pictures of this?« I ask, but in this
My look at the price now. "Oh God. It costs over two hundred pounds," I manage, lifting a finger to close the window immediately. "Why are you showing me something like that?" Ember catches my hand with hers and says with a

grin: "Not for us.
The company offered me cooperation.«

I hesitate. I know that Ember is now getting a lot of requests for collaborations with shops, but that doesn't mean that she has to accept every single one of them.

"You've been looking for ages," my sister continues.
»And this would be perfect for such a fancy occasion, wouldn't it? I could ask for it.« I immediately shake my

head. »No, I can't accept that.« »Why not?«

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I shrug my shoulders uncertainly. "No idea. Isn't it kind of strange to get something for free?" "Do you think actors pay for the clothes they wear?

Borrow from designers for premieres and awards shows?"

“To be honest, I’ve never thought about it,” I admit.

“Then you know now,” says my sister. »They gave me three
Offered dresses to try on and even payment if I wrote an honest review, as far as fits and such. I'd just like to take a picture of the two of us wearing and showing off the dresses - if that's okay with you." I look at the dress again. I click through the next pictures

and with every photo I fall more in love with the flowing skirt, the soft-looking fabric and the small appliqués that line the neckline. I have never worn such an elegant dress - apart from the one the Beauforts lent me for Halloween last October.

"I don't need to ask, do I?" Ember says suddenly, and as
When I turn my head to her in confusion, she avoids my gaze. She smiles resignedly. "You probably don't want to take me with you again, right?" "Ember," I sigh, taking a breath to

give my automatic response. Then I pause.

Over the last few weeks, Ember has been there for me day and night. She looked after me and never said a word to Mum and Dad about what happened to James - no matter how persistent they were.

I know how much Ember wants to go to one of our parties. And when I think about it, the charity gala is probably a better occasion than any of the other parties thrown at Maxton Hall. It is the one event of the year where the students, without exception, put their best foot forward. There are too many big names and influential people in attendance for anyone to allow themselves to attract negative attention. That's why the mood is solid and the chance that something could happen is relatively low.

Ember watches me carefully. She is completely motionless,
as if she didn't dare move a muscle

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Fear of provoking a negative response.

"I'll take you with me," I finally say.

Ember's eyes widen. “Are you serious?” she asks incredulously.

I take a deep breath. These are our last months together and I want to spend them with her as much as possible. Soon we won't see each other every day and even though I'm really excited about Oxford, the thought scares me.

"There will be some conditions," I add firmly, because I want Ember to know that I'm serious. She gestures for me to continue. "You will stay with me for the evening. And you will only talk to people I know and approve of. I really don't want you to meet anyone weird.

Agreed?« Ember

throws her arms around my neck so hard that I almost fall off my chair slip and have to cling to her desk.

"You're the best! “I won’t leave your side for a second,” she shouts. I return her hug and close my eyes for a moment. A pang of worry comes over me and I wonder if I made the right decision. After all, I know best what can happen at these parties. On the other hand, Ember is about to turn seventeen. She is smart and confident and knows what she wants. I probably just need to have more faith in them.

I am convinced that I made the right decision when Ember pulls away from me and beams at me with shining eyes. “That means we can officially go dress shopping now. And I even have an occasion to wear it for! Plus, this will be the best blog post ever. I'm so excited!"

I return her smile and feel her excitement and genuine joy spilling over into me. It's the first time in a long time that I feel so carefree. "I'm happy when you're happy."

At my words, my sister's smile suddenly fades.

“What?” I ask.

Ember avoids my gaze. She begins to browse pages in her internet browser, but doesn't seem to really know what she's doing. "It's not that important. I just can't believe that these are actually our last months together."

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"Just because I'm moving out doesn't mean we won't see each other anymore, Ember," I say gently.

Ember continues to stare at her laptop screen. "Yes, and you know it." I shake my head

vigorously. "Things will change a little, but that doesn't mean we won't see each other at all.
I'll come home every weekend, and I'll continue to work with you on your blog. We'll talk on the phone and Skype, and I'll send you embarrassing pictures of my lunch and tell you what books I'm reading and...«

She interrupts me with a laugh. "You have to promise me, Ruby," she says seriously.

I put an arm around my little sister's shoulder and pull
she was by my side. "Promise."

James

The week before the gala is one of the most stressful in my life.

I still have to catch up on all the school work that Lydia and I missed before Christmas, and there's so much to prepare for the party that I'm at a loss for what to do. On Monday, Ruby and Camille decide to replace the lightbulbs in Boyd Hall with dim ones that create a more atmospheric atmosphere, so I have to get some lightbulbs. On Tuesday, the pianist decides he suddenly wants a much higher salary for a ridiculously small amount of music, so I have to drive over to him with Kieran and haggle him down. On the way, Kieran convinces me to listen to the school choir rehearsals on Wednesday and check out their song list, because Ruby doesn't have time
and Lin doesn't understand the intricacies of classical music (his words). The highlight, however, is on Thursday, when the team is called together to polish the silverware (not my favorite task) and fold napkins into bishop's miters (pure hatred). I've always considered myself to be a very dexterous person - but apparently not when it comes to following instructions on how to fold napkins.

The boys look at me strangely when I am completely ready for lacrosse training or even have to cancel it altogether, but

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no questions. I wouldn't know how to explain what's going on with me right now.

It feels like I'm clutching at straws and refusing to let go. Ruby made it clear to me on the drive back to school that she wasn't ready for what I had to say. And I respect that too. But that moment in the photo booth - when we were so close, Ruby's lips just a few inches from my jaw, and I could feel her hitching breath on my skin. In that moment, I realized that I wasn't fighting in vain.

…

And as long as there is even a glimmer of hope for us, I won't give up. I've never been a particularly patient person, but when it comes to Ruby, I have all the time in the world - or will take it. Ruby is worth it.

Nevertheless, I breathe deeply when I can put on my sports clothes on Friday and finally go back to the field. The circuit course that the coach makes us go through is hard, but the physical exertion is good and distracts me. Right now we have to carry each other piggyback around the sports field. Alistair is pretty strong, but after ten minutes he fails under my weight and we both go down.

"Damn," I grumble and roll onto my back. Even though it's now February and the start of spring is just around the corner, it's still freezing cold outside and the ground is damn hard. I'm pretty sure I just scraped both of my knees.

“Keep going!” barks Coach Freeman, blowing his whistle loudly.

"And here we go," says Alistair, clapping his hands.
He positions himself in front of me again while Kesh and Wren rush past us in pairs.

“It’s my turn,” I say, pointing to my back. Alistair rolls his eyes, but obeys my request and jumps up.
The next moment I start sprinting, past my teammates, as fast as I can until every muscle in my body burns and the distance to Kesh and Wren becomes smaller and smaller.
When we are level, Wren groans. "Not again!"
He punches Kesh in the side to make him go faster. "Hit it, man."

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With a grim expression on his face, Kesh picks up the pace and I follow suit, receiving a shout from Alistair. Because I miss one training session a week, I am under surveillance anyway. Not just from my friends, but also from Coach Freeman. I can't allow myself to let up now, even though my chest burns like hell with every breath.

Kesh and I end up arriving almost at the same time. I'm so out of breath that I barely manage to keep myself from falling to all fours. Kesh holds out his fist and I punch him away while Wren pushes me. »You are a beast. How did you catch up so quickly, Beaufort?"

I shrug, still too exhausted to even say a word.

"You guys did a really good job today!" shouts Coach Freeman and claps his hands several times. He lets his gaze wander over each of us, then a smile spreads across his lips. "To celebrate, I'll let you jump a round."

We cheer. The coach does give us a hard time during circuit training, but that only happens twice a term, and most of the time he invites us to a pub near the school afterwards and treats us to burgers and fries - which always makes us forget how much he made us suffer in the hours before.

"What does Lexington want here?" Cyril asks suddenly, his eyes fixed on the entrance to the sports field.

The entire team turns around. I don't think I've ever seen Principal Lexington on the training field.

"Have you done something stupid again?" I hear someone say behind me as the coach approaches Lexington and has a quick chat with him. Of course the question is directed at me and my boys, but none of us answers. Instead, my thoughts are racing. Something must have happened if the principal is coming to us. I just wonder what.

A little later, Coach Freeman jogs back to us and claps Hands. "Change of plans, boys! Go to Boyd Hall. The event committee needs help setting up for the gala tomorrow night."

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I freeze. It's six o'clock. The decorating company should be with the

Construction has long been finished.

An annoyed murmur goes through the group and Coach Freeman's expression darkens. "Didn't I make myself clear enough? Off to Boyd Hall, now."

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18

Ruby

I don't think Lin and I have ever been as close to a nervous breakdown as we are today. As discussed with James and the others, we went to Boyd Hall at 4 p.m. to get the hall ready for tomorrow evening with the decorating company. But we found no one there except caretaker Jones, who swore loudly and in an adult-friendly manner into a telephone, only to then inform us that the company had accidentally double-booked and chosen the more lucrative of the two contracts.

For a few minutes I was just in shock, then I turned to Lin. One look into her eyes was enough to see that she was mentally going through all the options that were left to us.

Caretaker Jones said that after some back and forth, the company settled Her at least agreed to bring us the decoration material that we had ordered from them within the next hour. Nevertheless, there were far too few of us to prepare everything properly in such a short time.

When Principal Lexington suddenly stood next to us and looked around the empty and undecorated hall in complete disbelief, I wanted to sink into the ground. Contritely, I explained what had happened, expecting him to shake his head in disappointment and find new leadership for the event team, but to my surprise he just looked at me determinedly and announced that he would get help would.

A short while later, the doors to Boyd Hall opened and the entire lacrosse team entered the room. James, without even looking in our direction, marched straight to Janitor Jones with a grim expression on his face, while I watched in fascination as Principal Lexington stood in front of the rest of the team, pointed to me and Lin, and announced that all further instructions from now on would come from us.

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After that, I switched to autopilot and tried to distribute the various tasks to the boys in as structured a way as possible. That was an hour and a half ago, and now I'm back from the brink of a nervous breakdown - just like Lin.

“It's taking more and more shape, don't you think?” she says next to me as we unroll a cable from the stage across the hall to the technical desk.

I look up and look at Boyd Hall. Much of the decoration is already attached to the walls, the stage is almost completely set up, and Alistair and Wren have set up all the tables in the open space in front of it.

“Just a little bit to the right, Ellington,” I suddenly hear Coach Freeman say and take a closer look at the arrangement.

Oh no. There is far too little space between the tables. I'm going to Coach Freeman and smile diplomatically at him. “Thank you for your help, Coach Freeman, but when the tables are so close together, no one can get through.”

He blinks, perplexed. Then he clears his throat and pulls his cap further over his forehead. He takes a step back and lets me go first with his other hand.

"Alistair," I say. “Wait a minute.” I go to him and explain what the minimum distance between the tables needs to be so that the guests have enough space. »The front row shouldn't be too close to the stage either. We can’t expect people to donate a lot when they’re sitting so close to the speakers and probably won’t hear anything after the event.”

Alistair stares at me while Wren groans. "Does that mean we have to move all thirty tables? Do you know what kind of training we've already had today? I can't feel my arms anymore." I smile kindly but firmly and look at her expectantly until Alistair sighs and

shakes his head. "You're really tough, Ruby." While Wren and Alistair move the tables to the right places,

Lin and I start checking the connections on the technical desk.

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“If this continues, we will actually be finished,” says Lin, but I barely hear her because at that moment James comes in through the large front door.

He carries a table and glances briefly at the plan Jessalyn holds out to him. He looks around and then walks purposefully to the outer edge of the hall, where he puts the table in exactly the right place. Then he wipes his forehead with the back of his hand.

Alistair wasn't exaggerating when he said he didn't have his arms feels more – all the lacrosse players look really exhausted now. Today it was Coach Freeman's infamous circuit training session. Since training with our PE teacher already gives me terrible muscle soreness, I don't want to know how the boys will be tomorrow.

I watch James take a bottle of water from Doug and take a few sips. A strange fluttering starts to spread in my stomach. With his damp hair, workout clothes and flushed cheeks, James is not a bad sight. Quite the opposite. I swallow hard. Suddenly I remember the last time I saw him, breathless, sweaty and red-faced. Back then, he was naked, whispering familiar things in my ear and kissing me senseless.

“Earth to Ruby,” Lin interrupts my trance. “Can you give me the cable?” “Yes.” I quickly look away

and try to steer my thoughts back into innocent territory.

We didn't finish setting up until late in the evening. It took what felt like an eternity to stretch the fabric panels along the windows and set up the illuminated columns next to the stage, which took us several attempts. There was an incident when part of the stage broke away and almost killed Doug - but luckily he escaped with a shock and a scratch on his arm, which Camille treated with surprising care.

We had to make a few compromises - for example, we couldn't decorate the ceiling - but all in all, the result is impressive. Especially now that it's dark and the chandeliers are lighting up the room with their warm glow.

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The round tables are all set: we have laid out silver table runners on the white tablecloth, and on them we have arranged tall silver candlesticks, neatly folded napkins and the finest china. Each table has a sign with the table number that Jessalyn made. Two screens hang on the sides of the stage. While the presentation about the family center that Doug has put together is running on the left one, the right one doesn't seem to be working yet. But I'll take a look at that later and, if necessary, arrange a meeting with the Maxton Hall technician for tomorrow morning. The lightbulbs that James arranged at the beginning of the week bathe the room in bluish-purple light in places, and the projector spotlight throws small glowing circles on the walls.

The whole thing took twice as long as if the employees
The company installed and set it up and it doesn't look as professional as I would have liked, but I'm still proud of our result.

I can already imagine what the atmosphere will be like tomorrow evening - the elegantly dressed guests, the good smelling food, the classical music and the smiling face of our happy headmaster.

I look around at the guys who are currently at it, in greedy ones
Swallowing water. We would never have managed it without them. I walk over to them with determination and clear my throat. Twenty heads turn in my direction. The tingling in the back of my neck tells me that James is also looking at me.

"Thanks for your help," I begin, looking each of them in the eye. I skip James. I'm still shocked by the thoughts he evoked in me earlier and don't want to risk turning bright red in front of the assembled lacrosse team. "You owe us a debt."

“How about buying us one tomorrow? Here at the gala,” suggests Cyril with a grin. “That would be… fun.” “My offer from before still stands,” Coach Freeman interjects. “We wanted to end the successful training in a pub,” he says to me.

“Great suggestion, Coach,” Alistair interjects, clapping his hands. »So we stick with our original plan? *Black Fox?”*

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A murmur of approval goes through the ranks of the lacrosse boys.

“And the first round is still on me,” says Coach Freeman, adjusting his cap. “The events committee is also invited, Ms. Bell. After all, you worked just as hard." "I wouldn't necessarily describe it that way. Without us they would have

been screwed…” mutters a guy I’ve never seen in my life.

“Shut up, Kenton,” James says in an ominous voice.

Kenton presses his lips tightly together.

“Come on now,” calls Coach Freeman, nodding his head toward the exit.

The others set off, and Doug, Camille and the rest of my team follow them. I never thought I would see the lacrosse team and event committee go out for drinks together - voluntarily.

Lin nudges me lightly in the side with her elbow. »I'm going to introduce Cyril "I'll finally talk to you," she whispers with a determined look in her eyes. "Then at least I'll have clarity." I nod.

"Good idea." "You're not

coming with me, are you?" I shake

my head and the determination in Lin's eyes disappears.

“Then I won’t go either,” she says, nodding at my clipboard. "I'll help you."

"Nonsense," I reply, pressing the clipboard to my chest so she can't see the points that haven't been checked off yet. "You won't get another chance like this anytime soon. Go and try to find out what his silence is all about. And if he's stupid, give him a

piece of your mind."

Lin hesitates for a moment, but when I point forcefully towards the exit, she finally turns on her heel and runs after the others. The clacking of her soles echoes through the hall, followed by a loud bang as the door slams shut behind her.

Then I turn back to my list. I sigh quietly as I

I feel that this feeling that I have been carrying around with me for weeks - in my chest, in my stomach and throughout my entire body - has already become heavier instead of easier. I wonder if that

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will stop at some point. I shake the thought away and start working through the items on my list.

First I go to the grand piano that was set up on the right of the stage, and gradually remove the fingerprints of the helpers that are visible on the shiny black surface. Then I turn on some quiet music on my phone and put it in my back pocket.

As I listen to the soothing voice of Vancouver Sleep Clinic, I check each table to make sure the name tags and number of place settings are correct.

“You didn’t come with me,” a voice suddenly comes from behind me.

I turn around and see James standing on the threshold of Boyd Hall. He's still wearing his training clothes and has both hands buried in his black sweatpants. His gaze is unfathomable.

"I still have a little bit of work to do," I answer, picking up the clipboard.

James enters the hall and my heart skips a beat, even though he is still a few meters away from me. "May I help you?"

I shake my head as if by magic. "No, you don't need to. Thank you." Then I turn to the table next to me, even though I'm pretty sure I already checked it.

“You don’t have to do the rest alone.” His voice resonates a little closer than before. "I feel bad about the company anyway." "It wasn't your fault," I

murmur.

I don’t know if I can be alone with him in a room. If James stands in front of me and looks at me with his dark gaze, even the large Boyd Hall suddenly seems tiny. As if there were not five meters between us, but only millimeters. My entire body feels drawn to him, without me being able to do anything about it.

I suppress the urge to turn around and go to him, even though I know how much better that would make me feel. Even now, after all these weeks and after everything that has happened. I take a deep breath and look at my clipboard. If James has his mind set on helping me, he won't be leaving anytime soon. He has proven that in the last few weeks.

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»The projector needs to be checked again. There's no picture on the right screen," I say after a while, risking a look in his direction.

He still looks at me with that look that I can't interpret can. Finally he nods. "OK."

He goes to the technical desk in the middle of the hall and I follow him into some distance. God, why am I so tense? It shouldn't be like this between us. Although I don't know what exactly should be between us.

This is over with us.

Over. Over. Over.

I just have to convince my heart. And my body.

James steps behind the technology desk and looks at the many plugs that are connected to several distributors. He looks at each cable with a focused gaze and then begins to trace each one with his hand to see where it belongs. Then he checks the back of the right projector. He pulls out a cable and plugs it back in, presses the on/off button and frowns when nothing happens.

Then he looks at me again.

"Ruby, I have something to tell you," he murmurs.

My heart skips a beat again. “What?” I say, barely audible.

James lifts the cable and wiggles it. “The cable is broken.” I blink several times and then look at the cable in his hand.

In fact, it broke in one place. Small colorful wires stick out of the rubber jacket. "Oh."

James slowly lowers the cable. "It almost sounds like you expected me to say something different."

That tone of voice. So deep and velvety and pleasantly calm. I get goosebumps, but at the same time I shake my head. But before I can say anything, James continues. "Because if you're willing to listen to me now, I'll finally say it." I hold my breath. I can just stare at James - for more

I am unable to do so at this moment.

"I'm sorry," he says suddenly.

“James…” I whisper.

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"There is so much I want to tell you," he replies just as quietly and closes the distance between us a little. I don't think he's even really aware of it, his body moves towards mine as if I were attracting him like a magnet.

That's exactly how I feel too, I want to say. James fills all my senses just by standing in front of me and looking at me like that. My knees suddenly feel very weak and the ground beneath my feet liquefies.

There are also so many things I want to say to him, so many words, but I can't say a single one when he looks at me like that. My throat goes dry and I have to clear my throat. »We're here for the gala. Because of the event committee. Not to talk."

»But I *have to* talk to you. Damn, Ruby, I can't take this another second." His words are passionate, but his voice is still infinitely gentle. As if he was afraid of scaring me away with every louder sound.

I can see thoughts swirling around behind his blue-green eyes. He's about to form them into words. I can feel it - the air around us is electrified.

"Please, Ruby. You don't have to say anything. Please just listen to me," he begs.

I can not move. I just stand there, shoulders stiff and hands shaking, as he comes a little closer. Now I have to tilt my head back to look up at him.

His dark gaze slides over my face and it feels like he's running his fingers over my skin. His skin on my skin, his fingertips tracing my cheek, my nose and my mouth. My body still remembers his touches.

"I'm sorry," he whispers.

"What exactly?" I answer hoarsely after a few seconds.

On New Year's Eve I decided to read the chapter "James Beaufort" to close, but now... now it feels like we're about to open a new one.

"Everything." The answer comes straight away. "Just everything." My breathing quickens. How does James make me feel lost and found at the same time? His words turn my world upside down

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the head. At the same time, I feel like I'm in a fairy tale - the hall is so beautifully decorated, and in front of me is the boy who means so much to me.

Instead I should concentrate on the gala. Not on these feelings. Not the fact that I feel like I'm in a fairy tale because the hall is so beautifully decorated and in front of me is the boy who means so much to me.

"I'm sorry," James repeats. Although his eyes are wistful and full of pain, they are also completely open for the first time since all this happened. In this moment, James holds nothing back - I see hope and affection in his eyes and something that makes me suck in a sharp breath.

This is my James.

My James.

No matter what happens between us, he will always be a part of me, as I am of him.

The thought shocks me and shakes my closed hearts.

"I acted like an idiot," he whispers, raising his hand to my face.

All the words on the tip of my tongue disappear when I feel the warmth of his hand on my cheek. I have to close my eyes because the moment is so overwhelming.

»When my father told me about Mum's death, it felt like like the world was collapsing on me and burying me. I couldn't think straight anymore and I ruined what was between us, and *I'm so sorry."*

Something is breaking open deep inside me – a wave of feelings is washing over me that I actually thought I had overcome long ago.

I slowly open my eyes again.

“You hurt me so much,” I whisper.

James looks at me desperately. “I'm so sorry I hurt you, Ruby. I wish I could undo that.” I shake my head. "I don't know if I can ever forget that." "You don't have to.

And I won't either. What I like about that one

What I did last night was the biggest mistake of my life.« He shakily

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Air. "I understand if you can't forgive me. But I want you to know that I'm sorry, with all my heart." He presses his lips together and looks down briefly. Then he blinks several times. I can see that he's fighting back tears. My eyes have also started to burn at his words.

James needs a moment to regain his composure. »I realize that it's not your responsibility to make me happy, Ruby.
I did not mean it like that. I don't see you as a panacea for my grief. “It all came out completely wrong.” He runs his hand over his face. »You don't have to forgive me. And we don't have to get back together. I just want you to know how much you mean to me. I don't want to live a life that you aren't a part of. No matter which way.”
James' chest rises and falls quickly, his eyes are glassy. “The person you met in Oxford would like more days with you so I can prove that to you.”

… *that* 's me. And I would have

Our night in Oxford was the best night of my life, but I...
Since then I haven't allowed myself to even think about it because I was afraid it would break me. But now I allow myself to remember. I remember our conversations. The way he told me about his fears and dreams. How we held each other.

Seeing James like this reminds me of Oxford. At this moment he is again the man he showed me there for the first time. The man I fell in love with.

I carefully take a step forward and wrap my arms around him his waist.

James stiffens as if that was the last thing he expected.
I'm completely still as he carefully wraps his trembling arms around me, as if he's forgotten how to hold me properly. I close my eyes as he gently runs his hands down my back and whispers another apology.

After a while, I let my hands fall to his hips and close my fists around the fabric of his jersey. The fabric rustles slightly under my fingers as James moves his mouth to my temple.
"I'm so sorry," he murmurs again.

"I know," I whisper.

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So we stand under the chandelier in the middle of Boyd Hall, right in front of the technology desk. James holds me gently so that I could have freed myself from his embrace at any moment if I wanted to. But that doesn't happen, because nothing has felt right for ages - as if I had finally arrived home after a long journey.

James' hands on my back are gentle, his breath tickles my hair, and his chest rises and falls in time with mine as his whispered words make me feel like there might still be hope for us after all.

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19

Ember

Maxton Hall is fucking amazing.

Of course, when Ruby applied for the scholarship, I did
has looked at photos of the school on the Internet, but seeing the impressive building in real life, with the towers, the high facade and the soft window arches, is something completely different.

Ruby hadn't even gotten out of the car yet when I
almost crossed the parking lot. I'm barely able to keep the long hem of my dark green dress out of the mud. It rained last night and the traces of it are still
everywhere. Even though we've already taken the photos for the blog post, I don't want to go to my first Maxton Hall party in a dirty dress.

"Wait a minute, Ember," I hear Ruby call as I reach the large wrought iron gate that leads into the forecourt of Maxton Hall. It features ornate decorative elements that form the school's initials at the highest point of the arch.

The view is breathtaking.

I take out my phone, turn on the front camera and hold it up. I try to get as much of myself, the gate and the school in the background in the picture as possible, but I don't manage to get it the way I wanted.

"Can you take another picture of me?" I ask Ruby as she stands by
comes to me. Without waiting for her answer, I slip out of my jacket and hold it out to her along with my cell phone. "It would be perfect if the school was in the background. It is so beautifully lit."

"A photo," Ruby says, getting into position. "Then let's go in." I nod. "Yes." Ruby counts
to three and I beam into
the camera.

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Then Ruby gives me the jacket back, waits until I put it back on, and then hands me the cell phone.

“You look so beautiful,” my sister says.

"And you too," I reply automatically. Then I pick up the phone, turn the front camera back on and pull Ruby close to my side. "Say 'cheese'!"

We grin together into the camera. After I press the shutter button at least ten times, Ruby lets go of me and I quickly go through the pictures.

The photos of me in front of school make me smile.

Just three years ago, it was torture for me to find clothes that not only fit but also looked good. Plus size things are often oddly cut because even though I'm fat, I have a waist, and most designers seem to think that all overweight people have the same body type. But that doesn't correspond to reality. That's why I'm even happier with the progress I'm making with my blog. Because it allows me to wear a dress like this on a night like today and feel more glamorous than ever before.

If I had to describe my feelings in letters, it would look something like this: KDJGDHUSGÜAOHBS!

Which makes me think that I probably spend a little too much time on my laptop.

»Ember? Are you coming?”

I quickly catch up with Ruby, who is looking at the clock on her phone. We They're well on time, probably even too early, but my sister is still really excited. She is always like this before the events she organizes for Maxton Hall. I wonder where she gets the energy reserves to prepare these parties. I'm already busy with my homework and my blog around the clock and don't have to also prepare for final exams and studying at Oxford. Sometimes it feels like she's a machine - a machine that occasionally has really dark circles under her eyes. Mum often asks her if it's all a bit much at once, but Ruby insists that she enjoys the work. And I believe her too.

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"It'll be okay," I say, but I'm afraid my voice isn't having the calming effect I wanted. I'm too distracted and fidgety for that.

»Thank you.« Ruby gives me an uneasy look from the side. »You Remember our agreement, right?"

"I'll stay close to you and only talk to people you've met beforehand you approve," I quote her.

Ruby nods happily.

I roll my eyes. Ruby is terrified that I might

Making friends with people she doesn't approve of. This is what I'm looking forward to the most. The school is attended by sons and daughters of politicians, actors, royalty and bankers and it's the perfect opportunity to make contacts. I'm good at making small talk and making friends with people as soon as they're ready to see *me* and don't pigeonhole me because of my weight.

As we enter Boyd Hall, Ruby puts her arm through mine.

"Whoa," I mutter, looking around.

The entrance to the hall is more magnificent than any building I have ever been in. It's hard to believe that this is part of a school. While my high school's events take place in a gymnasium, the floor here is not puke-green linoleum, but shiny marble. The white walls are at least five meters high and decorated with white stucco and fine gold accents. In the middle, a wide staircase with a curved wooden railing leads to an upper floor with a gallery.

I don't know where to look first. My field of vision is full of expensive suits and haute couture dresses made of chiffon, silk and tulle, and my heart is beating faster and faster. But this is just the entrance.

We leave our jackets in the cloakroom and then I put Ruby on the actual event hall, where it completely takes my breath away.

Boyd Hall looks like it came out of a fairy tale.
On the way here, Ruby told me how much work they had done yesterday and everything they had set up and decorated, but I never would have expected it to be so wonderful.

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Waiters weave between tables with trays bearing flutes of champagne and orange juice, and at a black grand piano on the stage sits a pianist in tails who plays a classical melody that fills the entire hall.

"I can't believe you organized all this," I whisper, giving Ruby a light nudge in the side with my elbow.

“It was the whole team,” she replies spontaneously. She pinches
He closes his eyes and looks at the round tables in the middle of the hall, where a few guests have already taken a seat, then at the long tables on the left side, where the buffet will probably be set up later. I know that look exactly – Ruby checking to make sure everything is exactly as she imagined it.

“Ruby!” says a voice I definitely don’t recognize.

I turn my head and see a pale boy
medium-long, dark hair and pretty onyx-colored eyes framed by thick eyelashes. He has a strong jaw and high cheekbones that somehow don't match his boyish grin and bright, cheerful eyes.

»Kieran, hi,« Ruby replies, putting on a smile that I
I've never seen it before. It's polite, professional, but at the same time somewhat reserved. Definitely not my sister's smile.

“The caterers came ten minutes ago and are already setting up in the next room,” says Kieran, before his eyes fall on me.
"Hi. I'm Kieran. "You must be Ember." He holds out his hand and I take it automatically. I look at Ruby, perplexed.
I had actually assumed that no one at this school knew anything about me or our family, after all, Ruby always kept Maxton Hall such a huge secret at home. I thought that she strictly enforced this separation between private and school matters on both sides. So the fact that this boy here knows my name irritates me a little.

“Nice to meet you, Kieran,” I say.

When Kieran lets go of my hand, he smiles at Ruby, his cheeks turning noticeably red.

Aha.

Apparently Ruby has another admirer at this school. I'm not surprised she hasn't told me about it. Ruby speaks so

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hardly ever talk about her feelings. I sometimes wonder how Ruby can be like that without exploding. I could never hold back what I feel like that - neither the good nor the bad. If I don't like something, I say it loudly. If I'm happy, I automatically express it. Ruby is more controlled than I am and much less impulsive.

I'm so lost in thought that I don't notice Ruby and Kieran walking towards the stage. I quickly follow them, only to spend ten minutes listening to everything that needs to be thought about for the evening. I glance around furtively, but Ruby keeps looking at me, as if she's afraid that I'll take the first opportunity to flee and throw myself into the arms of some random Maxton Hall student. I wonder how long it will be before she loosens up a bit, or at least is too busy to watch my every move like a hawk.

When the gala finally officially begins, I'm sitting at a half-empty table at the back, so I can barely see what's happening on the stage. These are the seats for the event committee, as Kieran explains to me a little later, and indeed a handful of students come over at irregular intervals, sit down for a moment and have a drink, only to jump up again three minutes later and disappear.

At the moment a young man is giving a talk about his depression and explains how he only got back on his feet with the help of the family center. It is a very moving speech that captivates the entire room. I can see some guests dabbing their eyes with tissues or nodding with frowns furrowed in concentration. Kieran next to me also seems absolutely captivated.

"Hey," I whisper to him. »I'm going to grab something to drink. Would you like something

too?' 'I can come with you,' he says immediately and makes a move to get up.

“Nonsense,” I wave him off. »I can do this on my own. Do you want something?" Kieran

hesitates for a moment, his eyes darting between me and back and forth with the speaker, then he shakes his head. "No thanks."

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I nod and go to the bar, where one of the waiters smiles at me and asks what I would like to drink.

“A glass of champagne please,” I say, as if it were completely obvious, but either you can tell I’m sixteen – almost seventeen! – Years ago, or he has instructions not to serve any students alcohol, because he slowly shakes his head.

I sigh. Then I have no choice but to try the children's punch that is set up on the buffet next to the bar. I take one of the pretty crystal glasses, hold it up to the light and look at the kaleidoscopic colorful points of light that bathe the room in soft colors.

The moment I start pouring punch from the large bowl into my glass, thunderous applause erupts in the hall.
Apparently the speech is over.

I take a few steps to the side so as not to disturb the other guests Blocking the way to the buffet.

“Hello, beauty,” a voice calls out from close to me.
I freeze. Then I grit my teeth.

It is not the first time that I have been addressed in this way. Some In the past, boys at my school have made bets on who could get me the fastest with which pick-up line - just for fun, of course.

I close the door automatically and turn around with the glass in my hand around.

A young man is standing in front of me. He has an attractive face, a beautiful full mouth, dark brown skin and almost black-looking eyes with eyelashes that I'm a little jealous of because they're so curved. He's a little taller than me, his hair is short and curly and he has a slight stubble. He's also wearing a suit, but he looks a lot less polished than the other guests. His tie is a little too loose and his tailored black jacket is open. It looks as if he's made a special effort to look as disheveled as possible. As if he attends too many of these events and has grown tired of them over time.

He's probably talking to me because he's bored.

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I look around as inconspicuously as possible. Normally there are
In a situation there is always a group of boys waiting for their boyfriend a few meters away and having a lot of fun with me.

Now, however, no one seems to be watching us, which almost makes me more skeptical.

“Hello,” I reply. My voice sounds hard and dismissive and
is the reflection of my emotions.

The guy lets his gaze wander over my entire body, only to linger a little too long on the low neckline of my dress.

"I've never seen you here before," he continues, looking me in the eyes again.
And as his mouth slowly turns into a smile, something clicks.

I know this guy.

Okay, I don't know him, but I follow him on Instagram. His username there is *kingfitz,* but I know his real name is Wren Fitzgerald. His feed is full of pictures of luxury items, parties, and girls, and in his stories he uploads videos and photos of himself half naked, pretending to be still sleepy. I never believe him, though. No one can look that good when they just woke up.

»That’s probably because I don’t go to Maxton Hall,«
I answer and take a sip from the glass. My mouth feels dry and my heart is beating pretty fast.

Why the hell am I excited about being flirted with by this guy?

"I thought so," Wren murmurs, and I see a hint of a smile at the corner of his mouth. The gesture seems casual, almost as if he's too lazy to force himself to smile properly. As if it would waste too much of the energy he'd rather save for something else, dirtier. The thought warms my skin.

"I'm Wren," he finally says, holding out his hand.

I hesitate for a moment. I look around again – his friends must be somewhere. I don't think this is a joke. I mean, yes, I am confident. And the idea of being approached at a party doesn't seem completely absurd to me. But not from a guy like him.

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“Where are they?” I ask.
He blinks irritably and drops his hand. "Where's who?" "The friends who instigated you to attack me." "Why do you think I have to be incited to talk to you?" I raise a mocking eyebrow. “Come on.” We look at each other and both frown. On stage again

the pianist has started to play, but the melody isn't really getting through to me. I'm too busy trying to figure out Wren's intentions.

“Believe me, I can talk to a beautiful girl on my own,” he finally says.

I open my mouth and close it again. Then I'll see Wren take a closer look. The corners of his mouth don't twitch like those of the boys who spoke to me at school parties, and there's no malicious twinkle in his eyes.

Maybe he really wants to flirt with me. Not because anyone egged him on, not because it's a stupid joke, but simply because he finds me as attractive as I find him.

I'm pretty sure he's the last person I should be talking to tonight. I don't know what to make of this and I don't know what to make of him at all - but that's exactly what makes me curious.

"My name is Ember," I say belatedly.
"Nice to meet you, Ember." I like the way he says my name. Almost a little unsure, as if he wanted to practice it first.

"Same, Wren." I'm actually good at small talk. But at this moment I have absolutely no idea what to say. I know what image Wren has online, and at the same time I also know how *I* appear to my followers - always happy, optimistic and having fun for everyone. There are countless evenings when I'm just depressed and secretly crying in my room. Nobody knows about this, not even my sister. That's why I'm hesitant to judge people based on what they share about themselves online. And it makes me

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curious about what Wren is really like – and whether there is more behind this facade.

Maybe I should give myself a push and put my reservations
push back a little. A conversation with him probably can't hurt.

“What school do you go to?” Wren asks, at the same moment grabbing a glass of orange juice from a tray that a waiter is carrying past us. “Maybe on Eastview?”

I shake my head. “I go to high school in Gormsey.” For a split second, Wren
seems to freeze. He stops mid-drinking and looks at me with wide eyes, then he blinks and the moment is gone. “That sounds exotic.”

I wonder if I imagined his strange reaction. “Nobody knows the village,” I say slowly. "You're definitely not the only one." "So you're here as Plus One with someone?" he asks

watches me with interest.
»I am here with my sister. She has been attending Maxton Hall since
over two years." "I'm
really happy about that," says Wren.
I briefly consider what he means by that. “Why?” Now Wren
is really smiling—a smile with teeth and little notches around his mouth. »Well, if your sister didn't go to school, we would never have met. And that would really be a shame. Or not?"

He whispers the last two words and sounds so familiar that
I get goosebumps. All I can do is nod as if he's hypnotized me, even though alarm bells are ringing in my head warning me to be careful.

“Why are you looking at me, Ember?” he asks quietly, and the smile slowly fades and turns into something else. He takes a step towards me until we are almost touching. I would only have to extend my hand ever so slightly to grab his. I wonder what that would feel like. Whether his skin is warm.

I have to clear my throat. “I…” Wren
comes even closer. So close that I can feel his breath on my temple. Again I have the impulse to look around, but

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I suppress him.

“Maybe we want to get away somewhere where we can feel a little better…” “Wren,” a deep voice

interrupts him, breaking me out of my stupor. I immediately take a step back and turn around.

It's James Beaufort.

The James who broke my big sister's heart.

The James who kissed another girl and made Ruby act like a lovesick zombie over Christmas.

A wave of anger washes over me as he continues speaking.

"I see you've met Ruby's sister," he says, his Voice without any intonation.

A strange look comes into Wren's eyes. "Ruby's sister, huh?" I nod slowly, looking

between the two in confusion.

“Apparently I have good taste,” he says in one voice almost teasing tone that has nothing to do with the familiar murmuring from before. "If you still want to..."

"I don't think Ember wants to do anything. Go away, Wren," James interrupts again. His tone is authoritative and allows no argument. I wonder if he always speaks like this to his friends, and if so, how it is that he still has so many of them.

The smile disappears from Wren’s face, and suddenly he looked pretty pissed off. He shakes his head and mutters an X-rated curse. Then he looks at me again. "I really wish we could have continued our conversation, Ember." The next moment he leans forward and presses his lips to my cheek. When

he pulls away from me, he doesn't look at me, but at James.

Before I can say anything else, he turns around and disappears into the crowd. I touch my cheek where his lips touched as James Wren glares after me. Why do I feel like Wren just kissed me to get back at James?

"I'm sorry, Ember," James murmurs.

Then he runs after Wren and I'm left alone at the bar.

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James

I find Wren outside in the lobby with the boys. As I approach their little circle, Cyril raises his hand.

»Beaufort! What gives us the honor?” I ignore him

and fix my gaze on Wren.

“What were you thinking?” I snap at him.

He does not answer my question, but takes a big
Sip from a hip flask.

»Wren.«

He rolls his eyes. »I was just talking to her. Don't make a big deal out of it.« »She's Ruby's sister, damn it. Keep your

hands off her.« Wren lets out a contemptuous snort. »I'm really starting to

I'm tired of having to take you into consideration all the time."

I raise an eyebrow mockingly. »Consideration? Where have you ever Consideration?'

“You know what, Beaufort? “Fuck you,” he replies, downing it
He drinks the remaining contents of the flask in one gulp and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Wren," Kesh says warningly.

»No, Kesh. I'm tired of taking James' feelings into consideration
take it." Wren turns to me again. "Everything you preached to us over the summer was just empty talk. Now you're skipping practice because you're on the fucking event committee, you're leaving parties to visit your girlfriend, and you're acting like a prude when I try to pick up someone. I get the feeling you don't give a shit about us anymore. You don't even listen when people try to tell you something." "Such *bullshit,"* I retort.

He just shakes his head. »You know what? Take care of your
own stuff. After all, that's what you do best right now." I look at him, confused. "I have no

idea what you're talking about." Wren turns around, takes two steps, only to turn on her heel again and point her finger at me vigorously.

»That's exactly what I mean,« he hisses. »I've been trying for a

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I've been trying to have a normal conversation with you for ages, but you don't care at all." "Come on,

Wren." Deep down, I know

he's right. The last time we were at a party together he made a suggestion that I just ignored because I was too preoccupied with Ruby.

Now I'm starting to feel guilty.

"What, come on? I'm right and you know it. The only thing on your mind is Ruby. There's nothing else in your life," he says angrily.

“I…” My voice trails off. At the same time, anger flares up in my stomach. "I have a lot on my mind right now, but it has nothing to do with her." I wish there was some other way to explain this to him.

"You've only been like this since you met her, so don't try to defend her. This is just sickening, I don't know you like this at all." "Now calm down, Wren," Kesh interrupts, but Wren shoves him

out of the way and takes an angry step toward me.

“You act like Ruby is a cure for your oh-so-bad thing Life. Something like a saint. But she’s not,” he hisses.

I frown at him. "I understand that you're angry. I was a shitty boyfriend and I'm sorry - but keep Ruby out of this.
You don't know her."

Wren shakes her head dismissively. "I actually know Ruby pretty well. If you had listened to me for more than two seconds recently, I would have told you *how* well I know her." I open my mouth, but the

words get stuck in my throat.

I know that tone. And I know what it means.

Wren also seems to understand that he just said too much. He clenches his teeth so hard that his jawbones protrude.

“What are you

saying?” “This might not be the right place for this kind of conversation,” Alistair murmurs, but I shake my head.

“What were you just talking about?” I ask.

Wren hesitates, but my gaze is unyielding. After a few seconds he clears his throat. "Ruby and I hooked up at a back-to-school party once."

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My heart starts racing and my throat feels tight.

“Well, that’s a surprise,” says Cyril, almost sounding like he is pleased. "Ruby has been hiding from you the whole time that she was making out with your best friend." "Shut up, Cy," I growl.

“Apparently she’s not just the lovely girl next door,” he continues undeterred. "Maybe you'll finally stop idealizing her so much." "One more word, Cy, and I

swear -" "He's right," Wren interrupts me. "If you

were as important to her as she is to you, she would have told you about it long ago."

I wheel over to him and grab him tightly by his lapels. He doesn't resist my grip, just sees me with dark eyes at.

»You know I'm telling the truth. Otherwise you wouldn't be like this freak out."

His words repeat in my head, my breathing is ragged. Any moment, the fabric of Wren's suit will tear, I'm holding him so tightly.

I was really just thinking about Ruby. All this time I have tried to win her back and neglected everything else around me. Not just Lydia - but also my friends. And for what?

For what, damn it?

“What are you doing?” comes an energetic whisper next to us.

Ruby.

I turn my head towards her and feel a painful stab in my chest. I am completely overwhelmed by the situation. I only vaguely notice that there are a few gala visitors standing behind Ruby, watching the events with dismayed expressions.

Ruby stands right next to us. “What are you doing?” she whispers urgently, looking from me to Wren and back.

"James just found out about our little secret, Ruby." All color drains from Ruby's face.

I briefly feel the urge to punch Wren. But then I see my father's clenched fist. I tear my hands away from Wren. I can't stand being in this hall for another second.

“James…” Ruby whispers.

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I just shake my head, turn around and leave.

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20

Ember

I'm a little disappointed.

Ruby has always made such a secret about these parties that
I prepared myself for everything except standing around alone for most of the
evening and being bored to death.
While Ruby runs from one corner of the room to the other, discussing who knows what
with who knows who, I've managed to engage someone in conversation with me
exactly twice. One person was the daughter of an entrepreneur who owns his own
chain of cafes. I was so fascinated by her dress that I had to ask her about the designer
and take a picture of her. The other person was the student representative of Maxton
Hall, who gave a great opening speech, for which I wanted to congratulate her. However,
she didn't seem to care much about my opinion, because throughout our conversation
her eyes kept darting to the people standing around us, as if she were looking for
someone more important to talk to.

Kieran hardly leaves my side the entire evening. Ruby made him look after me, I'm
100% sure of that. He's nice and attentive, but at some point we've exhausted all small
talk topics and are both staring silently at the stage or into our glasses. I feel a little
sorry for him. He probably has better things to do than babysit his team leader's little
sister.

While on stage the last speaker made a passionate plea
thinks it's more charitable, I discreetly look around for Wren again. He's the
only one of all the people here who looked at me with genuine interest that evening.
And the interest is mutual. There was something about him that fascinated me and I would
have liked the chance to talk to him longer and learn more about him.

The audience's applause breaks me out of my thoughts. The laudator thanks
you and finally leaves the stage. Ruby stands

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already at the foot of the small stairs and welcomes her. I stop when I look at her face – something is different. The glow doesn't reach her eyes and seems fake to me. Come to think of it, I haven't seen her once in the last hour. Whether anything happened? It can't have anything to do with the gala, everything is going according to script in here. I'm just wondering whether I should go to her when she and the eulogist disappear together into an adjoining room.

I sigh.

And that's when I see Wren.

He leans against the wall next to the large entrance door. And he smiles over at me. I'm briefly tempted to turn around to make sure he's really looking at me, but... no, he's looking straight at me. Like before.

I think about it for exactly two seconds. Then I apologize to Kieran and, ignoring his protests, go to Wren. His gaze doesn't leave me as I slowly approach him, and suddenly the path seems much longer than it actually is.

"You're back," I say as I stand some distance away from him.

He nods and smiles. "We weren't finished with each other yet. Were we?" I don't know if he's intentionally making it sound ambiguous. Did I give him the wrong impression by going to him? Because while he was clearly flirting with me, I just wanted to talk to him - nothing more.

“No, we weren’t,” I answer anyway. The attention and interest in Wren's gaze is a welcome change from the indifferent expressions of the rest of the guests. Maybe this evening won't be a total failure after all.

Be careful though, a voice in the back of my head whispers.

The next moment Wren reaches for my hand. Surprised, I look first at our intertwined fingers and then up at his face. He raises an eyebrow and at the same time squeezes my hand as if it were the most natural thing in the world. I find it incredibly difficult to assess him.

Wren nods toward the exit.

I think for a moment and look over my shoulder. Ruby is has not reappeared yet, and Kieran has also disappeared.

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Wren gently squeezes my hand again. I don't think I've ever seen a boy as interesting as him. I don't think his Instagram account does him justice. His pictures seem intentional - intentionally happy, intentionally cool, engaging. And quite mysterious. I really want to know what that thing –, In reality, his personality is much from before was all about. Why he fakes this casual smile, but his eyes are dark at the same time.

Finally, I nod and we walk together into the entrance area of Boyd Hall. A woman in a stunning burgundy dress walks past us and I turn to look at her. When I see the back lined with fine lace, I sigh quietly.

Wren gives me a sideways glance.

»I have a weakness for fashion. And all the clothes that people wear here... I would love to get everyone's patterns so I can sew them."

I look at Wren to see if he finds this strange, but his eyes are sparkling. He points to the curved staircase that leads to the upper floor. "I have an idea." I follow him, trying not to step on the hem of my dress as we climb the wide

steps. Once at the top, Wren turns left and leads me down a long, dark hallway.

The hallways in my school are dirty, the white paint on the walls has long since yellowed. The dark green paint has been peeling off the lockers for years, and students have painted the few pictures between the doors to the classrooms with Sharpie. The difference in this hallway couldn't be greater. There are expensive-looking paintings in heavy frames, as well as photos of well-known Maxton Hall graduates. There are glass cases containing jewelry sponsored by the school, as well as a few sculptures built in art class.

I'm so busy looking around that I almost run into Wren running in when he suddenly stops. He looks around briefly and then sits down on a wooden bench. He pats the empty seat next to him and I sit down.

"Look," he says, nodding at the railing directly in front of us.
I look curiously through the gap between the wooden bars.

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A smile spreads across my face. From here you have a great view of the entrance area of Boyd Hall and can watch people without them noticing. I doubt that anyone would recognize us if they looked up from below. This part of the gallery is too dark for that.

“You’re a genius,” I say, beaming.

Wren grins. "No one has ever called me that before." "Then I hereby solemnly bestow this title on you." I pretend to knight him by suggesting a sword strike on his shoulders. At the same moment, Wren reaches for my hand again and holds it tightly. His grin gives way to a completely different expression. Suddenly his eyes are serious and his gaze is meaningful. It awakens a tingling sensation in my stomach that spreads in all directions.

No one has ever looked at me like that before. Really, never.

Where I come from, there are no guys like Wren. In the eyes To my classmates I'm just Ember. Most of them have known me since kindergarten or preschool, and none of them look at me like I'm valuable or desirable. I'm having serious trouble breathing evenly.

Wren's gaze moves to my mouth, back to my eyes and back down. He still holds my hand in his. With the other hand he pushes a strand of hair out of my face. His thumb brushes my temple and a shiver runs through my body.

There is a spark between us, and it gets more intense with every second. I have never experienced anything like it. Every second - every breath - feels forbiddenly good and exciting at the same time.

“Sorry I disappeared so suddenly earlier,” he says quietly. “Some people seem to think they have to protect you from me.”

“Why do you think that?” I whisper back.

He doesn't take his eyes off my face. "Because they know me." That's all he says

before he moves closer and presses his lips to mine. I make a surprised noise and Wren puts an arm around my back, pulling me closer to her.

His lips soften and open slightly. And then I taste it.

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Alcohol.

I immediately push him away with both hands and slide a little to the side. Then I shake my head. "Wren." He looks at me confused. "What?" My heart is pounding like crazy. Even though that was probably the shortest kiss in human history, I can still feel his lips on mine.

“This is not how I imagined my first kiss,” I reply quietly. My hands are shaking. I fold them in my lap and look away so as not to see Wren's reaction to my words.

Instead, I look down through the railing again. There, a young woman is coming through the entrance door, her dark blue dress almost looking like the night sky. Small glitter particles are worked into the train, so that it sparkles in the light with every step.

"Your first kiss, huh?" Wren's tone is suddenly very gentle.

The man at the woman's side places his hand on her lower back and I watch them enter the hall together.

“Yes.”

He says nothing for a moment. Then The couple … "I'm sorry." disappears among the other people and I look back at Wren.

»My week was pretty crappy. I thought we could cheer each other up a little.«

“If you want, we can talk about it,” I say. "But I'm not open to anything more. Especially not if you're drunk."

»I'm not drunk. At most a little tipsy. I know exactly what I just did. And I would want to do it without having had a single sip of alcohol," he says, his brows furrowed. "Just so you know."

“Okay.”

Wren nods once and then sinks back onto the bench. He folds his arms over his chest and looks at the chandelier that lights the entrance hall.

"Why was your week so stupid?" I ask him after a while.

He holds his breath. From the way his body suddenly tenses, I notice that he was not expecting the question and that he

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He has to decide for himself whether he wants to answer it for me or not.

The quiet singing of the school choir reaches us, but I only peripherally notice the gentle harmonies.

Finally, Wren takes a deep breath and closes her eyes. »My parents went bankrupt a while ago.« »What happened?« Wren shrugs her shoulders almost imperceptibly. »My dad

He speculated on stocks. He lost almost his entire fortune."

Oh man. I can imagine what it must be like for someone at Maxton Hall to lose almost everything from one day to the next.

"I'm sorry." Wren presses her lips together tightly and stares at the railing.

“What does that mean for you?” I ask cautiously.

"We are moving. I don't know what happens after that. I've got an acceptance letter from Oxford - no idea how I'm going to pay the tuition fees." "There are scholarships and stuff like that. My sister is applying

for some too. Maybe that would be an option for you?' I suggest.

He nods absently. "Yes. Maybe.” For a few minutes we listen to the choir singing a cover of a pop song downstairs. The moment between us feels almost peaceful - as if Wren hadn't just confided in me something so sad.

Suddenly he turns his upper body towards me and looks at me again.
I don't know how much strength it cost him, but from one second to the next his gaze is no longer lost, but is as curious as it was at the beginning of the evening.

"It's your turn," he says. "Tell me something about yourself. So far, all I know is that Ruby is your sister and that you're interested in fashion."

I smile at him, unsure of what I want to tell him. »I have

I've been running a plus-size fashion blog for a year and a half. His name is *Bellbird,"*
I begin with the most important and harmless thing at the same time. Because of me, the whole world can know about my blog.
I'm proud of what I do, especially now after the rebrand.

The smile returns to Wren's face. "That sounds cool. How did you get into this?” His question surprises me, but in a pleasant way. I moisten my lips. "I've been fat all my life." Me

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I pause for a moment, curious to see if Wren will react to this statement in some way, but he surprises me a second time by just looking at me intently and waiting for me to continue. »It's not because I eat too much, as people always think. It just is. And I have huge problems finding nice fashion for my body type. So at some point I started sewing my own clothes. I've been sharing them on my blog ever since.

In addition, I write articles in which I want to encourage people to accept themselves as they are.« Wren's smile does not slip in the slightest. In fact, it even becomes a little wider. "You sound like a superhero, Ember." I feel heat creeping into my cheeks. But false modesty isn't really my thing, so I say, "I *'m* a superhero." Now he laughs. The sound is rough and beautiful, and I think I

I'll remember it all night long. For a moment I regret breaking the kiss. But deep down I know it was the right decision. If I hadn't done it, I would have regretted it a lot more, I'm sure.

"I already know what I'm going to do tonight," Wren says after a while.

“What?” A sparkle comes into his dark eyes. »I will read through all the posts. Each."

Now I have to smile too. »You've really planned something. I've been posting at least two posts a week for over a year and a half." "Okay," he says, drawing out the word. "Then I'll probably need a little longer." The choir ends at that moment and I break out into a mini applause. A man below stops abruptly and turns his head in our direction. I quickly duck down and hope he doesn't spot us. I have no idea if it's even allowed to be up here.

Wren laughs softly. "You seem like you don't want to get caught with me."

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"If my sister finds out I've been spending time in a dark corner with a boy, she'll go mad." Any amusement disappears from Wren's eyes. He opens his mouth and closes it again. Whatever he wants to say, he can't bring himself to say it. Finally, he sighs.

“Then I should probably take you back downstairs. I hope Ruby hasn't noticed that you've disappeared yet." I feel a brief feeling of disappointment, but he's probably right.

Wren stands up and offers me her hand. As if by myself, I put mine in his and accompany him down the hallway and down the stairs until we are face to face in front of the entrance to the hall.

"Thanks for saving my evening, Ember," says Wren, and his words sound sincere.

As he smiles at me one last time, I am overcome by the sudden Desire to stop him from leaving. But by then he had already turned around.

Something in my stomach twists with longing. I sincerely hope that this is not my last encounter with Wren Fitzgerald.

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21

Ruby

I didn't sleep a minute.

Instead, I spend the whole night thinking about what happened at the party. Just now, when James and I have cautiously gotten closer again, this setback happens. What frustrates me most is that I can't tell James in my own words what happened between me and Wren back then.

At the party I wrote to him that I would like to explain it to him, but he hasn't replied yet. I can understand that he is disappointed in me. On the other hand, his silence drives me crazy.

As I lie in bed, I stare absentmindedly at the Oxford acceptance letter that I have printed out on the bulletin board above my desk. As always, my stomach does a little happy somersault, but I also think about what James said to me two days ago.

The person you met in Oxford would like to … that *'s me. And I have more days with you so I can prove this to you.*

The thought that it might now be too late makes my throat. With a frustrated groan, I get up and get dressed. I urgently need to leave this room and distract myself, otherwise I'll go crazy.

I sneak over to Ember, and when I see a light under the door, I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Ember?" I ask.

“Come in,” I hear her call and open the door.

My sister is lying on her stomach in her bed, smiling at her phone. When she notices my curious gaze, her cheeks turn red and she hastily tucks it under the covers.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

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"I'm reading comments on my new post." Her reply comes immediately. If it weren't for the blush on her face, I would have believed her without batting an eyelid.

"You look like I just caught you doing something very naughty," I say, sitting on the edge of the bed.

»Well, I'm wearing my pajamas. So it can be that indecent couldn't have been," she replies, wiggling her eyebrows.

I return her grin. Then I nod toward the hallway.

»Are you coming down to have breakfast? I don't want to face Mum and Dad's prying eyes alone. You probably still have a thousand questions about yesterday." Ember sighs, but climbs out of

bed and slips on her slippers. She doesn't bother to change. Instead, she goes downstairs in her pajamas, which have cute squirrels and nuts on them. She's clutching her phone tightly in one hand, and I can see it flashing every now and then. I wonder if it's Kieran writing to her. The two seemed to get along well last night.

"Good morning," says Dad when he sees us coming through the kitchen door, pushing his reading glasses up his nose. He's reading a book on the Kindle that we all share and which therefore has all kinds of books on it. A mix of contemporary novels, thrillers, fantasy and English classics.

"Morning," Ember and I say and sit down with him at the kitchen table.

"Hey," Mom calls as she comes out of the kitchen. "You're already awake." Her eyes narrow when she sees me. "Have you even slept a wink, Ruby?" Dad and Ember look at me curiously.

I look away and take a toast. "Sure." "Well, I can understand that you're

done," Ember says suddenly.

I look up in surprise. »I would never have imagined how much work goes into a party like this and what you have to take into account. This is really crazy." I smile gratefully at her.

"Feel free to continue with the compliments." Mum pushes the butter over to me and then the

Apple jam. "Tell me about your evening."

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“Everything went according to plan,” I say as I begin my toast to smear. "I am happy."

Mum is used to my short answers about Maxton Hall and immediately turns her gaze to Ember. However, she is busy typing a message on her cell phone under the table and doesn't notice that Mum has spoken to her.

"Why are you grinning like that, Ember?" Dad suddenly asks, a second before I can even ask the question.

She looks up, caught. "I'm not grinning at all." Dad just raises an eyebrow while Mum - a little more forcefully - and follows up with: “Tell me what happened yesterday.”

I bite into my toast with a shrug and look at Ember just as expectantly as Mum and Dad.

»It was really nice,« she finally begins, sounding honest enthusiastic "The school is so pretty - it doesn't really come across properly on the internet. And the clothes the people were wearing! Each one was more beautiful than the last."

Sighing, she pours herself a cup of tea.

"That's it? I can't get any more?" asks Mum.

I wonder why she is so persistent. Is it just because that she sensed her chance to finally get someone to talk to her about a Maxton Hall party? Or is she worried about Ember? It took a lot of convincing this week before she allowed her to come with me. But maybe there's a completely different reason behind it.

Ember doesn't let it bother her. She calmly butters a piece of toast before raising her head. "I met a boy. Is that what you wanted to hear, Mum?" I turn abruptly to her and stare. "Is it Kieran?

Please say it's Kieran." "Who the hell is Kieran?" Dad interjects, putting the Kindle aside. He looks between Ember and me.

»A nice boy from the event committee.« Mum breathes a sigh of relief. »Thank God. And I thought soon We would have the next lovesick beetle lying on the couch." "Ey! I wasn’t a lovesick bug.”

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Mum and Dad exchange a long look that says more than a thousand words.

"If that's what you mean, darling," Mum finally says, but without her usual smile. "So, Ember, tell us about the boy."

“Guys!” Ember exclaims, looking angrily first at Mum and then at me. “First of all, it's none of your business. Secondly, I am not accountable to any of you. And thirdly, 'getting to know' doesn't mean that I have a boyfriend. By the way, I turned him down and want to see how he's doing. So don't make such a big deal out of it." I stare at my sister. “Who is it, Ember?” Ember looks back at me with raised eyebrows. "I'm not telling you." "Ember, I..." "Forget it, Ruby. Now
can we please continue to eat breakfast in peace?” She
demonstratively takes a bite of her toast.

The rest of breakfast passes in agonizing slowness. After a few minutes, Dad tries to lighten the mood, but he doesn't really succeed. The thoughts are swirling around in my head. I replay the last evening in my memory, wondering when Ember would have had the opportunity to talk to a boy who wasn't Kieran for more than five minutes. It *could* actually only have been him. But then she wouldn't make such a secret about it, would she?

After breakfast, Ember and I load the dishwasher in silence and then go upstairs together. Before she disappears into her room, she gives me a small smile, which I return tiredly. We don't actually snap at each other like that, but I can't shake the feeling that something happened last night that I should have protected Ember from.

Sighing, I open my bedroom door just as my phone *pings .* I immediately grab it from the bedside table. With trembling fingers I open the message.

Can we talk?

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I type my answer so quickly that the phone's touchscreen can't keep up, spells all the words wrong and I have to start all over again.

Naturally. When and where?

I count the seconds until James answers, holding my breath as my phone pings softly again.

I would leave right now. Can I come to you?

I hesitate for a moment. I haven't even invited James into our house yet. Introducing him to my parents now would be a huge step.

But I feel deep down that I am ready for this. I can be in his presence again without falling apart. And his desire to talk to me shows that, despite everything that happened yesterday, he feels the same way I do.

So I start with an answer:

In order.

Then I walk back downstairs with my phone in my hand. Mum and Dad are now sitting in the living room. Dad is already engrossed in his Kindle again, while Mum has started sorting the week's mail. I carefully approach them and clear my throat.

"Is it okay if James comes here right now?" I ask.

Mum pauses with the letter opener in her hand and exchanges one surprised look with Dad. Her words about heartbreak still echo in my head, and it takes a lot of effort to withstand her critical gaze.

“Honey, we only want the best for you,” Dad begins slowly. "And we couldn't help but notice how miserable you were throughout December." "That wasn't

my Ruby," Mum agrees quietly. "I would like I don't really want you to meet that boy again." I open my mouth and close it again.

My parents have never forbidden me anything. Probably This is because there hasn't been much to prohibit for me so far.

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My life has always revolved around my family and Oxford.
Something flares up inside me. I think it's a mixture of irritation and anger because they said that.

“James is…” I search for the right words. I have no idea how to explain to my parents what happened between James and me.

Maybe someday I can make them understand how much James means to me. And that my heart will always be with him. But until that happens, I need more time. I don't know what's about to happen myself.

“Please just trust me,” I finally say, looking at her pleadingly.

Again the two exchange glances.

Mom sighs. "You're eighteen, Ruby. We can hardly forbid it. If this boy comes here, we would also like to have the chance to get to know him.

I nod. At the same time, I wonder if Mum has researched James and the Beauforts on the Internet. The thought had never occurred to me before, but I wouldn't be surprised if that was the reason for her scepticism - after all, I know what you can find about James online.

“Is the boy vegetarian?” Dad suddenly asks, looking up at me questioningly.

I have to think about that for a moment. »I don't think so.« »Good.
I wanted to make spaghetti bolognese today. James is invited.” That’s all Dad says. Then he turns back to the Kindle.

"That's a great idea," Mum agrees, smiling broadly at me. She tries hard not to look as tense as before, but a flicker of skepticism remains in her eyes. She quickly strokes Dad's arm, then grabs the next letter and opens it.

I think the conversation is over, so I sneak backwards again from the living room. Then I go to the kitchen because from there you can watch the cars turning onto our street. As children, Ember and I used to sit on the counter and look for our relatives when they announced they were coming.

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It takes ten minutes for the Rolls-Royce to come around the corner.
I immediately sprint off. I definitely don't want James to be greeted first by Dad, who would surely be watching him like a hawk.

I open the door before James even gets out of the car
The air is still fresh and I shift my feet to warm myself up, but it's no use. I stop when James appears in my field of vision. He opens the small wooden gate with practice and then looks up. When he sees me, he pauses almost imperceptibly. His steps slow for just a moment, then he walks through the front garden and up the stairs to our house until he's standing in front of me.

"Hey," he says in a scratchy voice.

I would love to hug him for that one puny word. There was a time when it drove me crazy that he greeted everyone like that, but now that word sounds familiar coming from his mouth. And it almost seems normal.

“Good morning,” I say and hold the door open for him. With a
I nod and invite him in.

The moment when he steps over the threshold of our house with a
quiet clearing of his throat seems incredibly significant to me.
I wonder if he knows he's the first boy I'm bringing home. The first one that means so much to me and that I trust enough – even now – to introduce him to my parents.

The sight of James in our small hallway is unusual, but at the same time I wonder how it could be that I was so afraid of this moment. Everything about this feels right.

James wears a gray coat that is subtly checked, underneath black trousers made of a soft fabric and a simple wool sweater of the same color. His leather shoes are also black. His strawberry-blond hair is messy as always and slightly wavy, as if he had just taken a shower and let it air dry. I would love to touch it.

“Would you mind giving me your coat?” I ask instead.

James nods thoughtfully as he looks around. His gaze lingers on, of all things, the embarrassing childhood photos of Ember and me. In one we are dancing in the garden, in another we are picking apples, and in yet another we are sitting in our aunt's paddling pool, beaming and toothless. James looks at them all while in one

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With a smooth movement he lets the coat slide from his shoulders and then hands it to me.

I have to seriously concentrate not to stare at him too much.
Since I've forbidden myself so strictly in the last few weeks, it now seems even more tempting.

I concentrate on keeping his jacket neatly in the coat rack
hang it up, and then go to the living room. James follows me, but before I open the door I turn around and look up at him.

“Are you vegetarian?”

James blinks several times. One corner of his mouth twitches as he slowly shakes his head. "No, I'm not." I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Good." As I push the
handle down with James close behind me
As I enter the living room, my stomach flutters nervously.

"Mum, Dad, this is James," I say, pointing to my companion.

James takes an audible breath before walking over to my mum and offering her his hand. "Nice to meet you, Mrs Bell." "Hello, James," says Mum,

giving him a warm smile. "Call me Helen." There is no sign of her previous scepticism anymore,

and I wonder if she really is such a great actress, or if she is being lenient with James because she knows how much his mum's death must have affected him and she feels sorry for him.

“All right,” says James. "Helen." Dad isn't

great at hiding his suspicions. His gaze is cold and appraising, and by the looks of it, he's crushing James' hand as he shakes it. James doesn't bat an eyelid.

Luckily, Mum interrupts the awkward moment. "We'd like to invite you to dinner today, James," says Mum. "So we can all get to know each other a little."

I close my eyes and resist the urge to put my fingers on
to press the bridge of my nose. I hope James isn't already overwhelmed by my family.

“Very much,” he replies without hesitating for a second. "I don't have anything else to do today." "Fabulous," Dad says, no emphasis

in his voice.

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After that, there is a brief, awkward silence, and I quickly grab James by the arm to pull him upstairs and to freedom. But as soon as I'm on the stairs, I realize what I've just done: I just touched James, as if it were nothing special. As if we do it all the time because we're familiar with each other.

I quickly let him go again.

“I didn’t clean up or anything,” I explain as we come to a stop in front of my room.

James shakes his head. "Not bad. I basically have you too ambushed.”

I nod and then open the door. I let James go first and go after him. It's somehow strange to be in this space with him that is so familiar and safe. I automatically feel comfortable, but at the same time there's this tingly uncertainty inside me about what this conversation - this whole day - would entail.

A quiet noise interrupts my thoughts.

More precisely, a scratchy laugh.

I turn to James. His laugh sounds a bit rusty, as if he hadn't had anything he found funny in ages. When he sees my surprised look, he makes a gesture that encompasses the entire room. "How does your room look tidy if this is messy, Ruby Bell?" A warm feeling starts in my stomach and then in all over my body until I have to smile.

I really like seeing James here.

Seeing him laugh makes me *happy.*

A wave of longing overcomes me. She wants to drive me to him, but I stay where I am and slowly pull the door shut behind me. James's smile dies at the soft click.

For a moment we just stand face to face and look us.

“I’m sorry about yesterday,” I finally begin.

James shakes his head slowly.

"I should have told you that before. That..." "Ruby," he interrupts me quietly. "You don't owe me an explanation."

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He is right. I know that. Still, I wish I could
turn back to avoid a situation like yesterday.

"Why did you run away so quickly?" I ask cautiously.

He swallows hard. »I was simply overwhelmed by the entire situation. Wren
and I haven't argued like this in a long time." "I know your friendship with Wren means
a lot to you," I say
quiet. "I'm sorry."

James walks over to my desk and runs his finger over it
the spines of the stack that has been piling up there since last week. "You do not
have to apologize. I didn't actually come here to talk to you about Wren." "Then
what?" I whisper. I have no idea where my voice went.

He glances at me briefly, then returns to concentrating on the chaos on
my desk. “Do you know why Wren got so angry?” he asks.

I shake my head and take the two steps it takes,
so that I stand next to him. "No."

"He was angry because he felt like you had become more important to me than
anything else." James
pauses for a moment before continuing. "And he's right." He's still standing in front
of my desk.

And he doesn't see me
when he says these important words.

"James," I whisper, making him turn to me.

He follows my wish, and the look in his eyes overwhelms
me. I recognize in it all the emotions that also flow through my body.

At that moment, I am overcome by such a strong wave of affection for him
that I almost have to look away. I carefully raise my hand and brush the tangled
strands of hair from his forehead. Then I put my hand on his cheek. His face feels warm
under my touch, and as I gently run my fingers over his skin, James encloses them
in his hand.

It was not long ago that we were in the same situation. I have
touching his cheek, gathering all my courage and James

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confessed that I didn't want to lose him. At that time he took my hand away from his face and turned away from me.

Now the opposite is the case.

James holds my hand tightly and closes his eyes. As I stroke his skin with my thumb, a tremor runs through his entire body. He opens his eyes again and I hold my breath.

"I don't want anything to stand between us anymore, Ruby,"
he whispers.

I can hardly breathe because James is so close to me. His meaningful words hang in the air, and in that second I realize that I feel exactly the same way.

I don't want to be separated from him any longer.

I can no longer be angry or sad.

I want to finally feel that rush again that James and I transfer each other. I finally want to talk to him again, write to him, share my fears and worries with him.

I want *to love him.*

Even after two months, the all-encompassing longing for him is not there disappeared. On the contrary, it is getting stronger day by day. And there's nothing I can do about it.

“I feel the same way,” I whisper.

He makes a small, desperate sound, and the next moment he's pulling me close. He wraps his arms around me tightly as my eyes start to burn and tears run down my cheeks. James mumbles something into my hair. And even though I don't understand him, deep down I know the meaning of his words.

James

I don't know how long we stand there like that. At some point I'm half-sitting on the counter while Ruby leans against me. My heart is pounding so hard in my chest that I'm sure she must hear it. She has her arms wrapped tightly around my waist and her face buried in my collarbone. Her tears have slowly dried up over time, but I can still feel the wetness they left behind.

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I take a deep breath and Ruby's familiar sweet scent hits my nose. I can't believe this is really happening. In this second my life is no longer a shambles. Everything just feels right.

I could stay like this forever.

»I missed you so much,« I murmur after a while, my
Lips brushing her hairline. I would love to let her wander somewhere else - but I've forbidden myself to do so. I won't kiss her. Not now, not today. That's not why I came here.

“You too,” she answers just as quietly, and my heart skips a beat.

I stroke Ruby's back, a large circle, then a smaller one. The light fabric of her blouse feels so delicate. And so after *her.*

“I'm sorry for what I said when I was here. I definitely didn't want to burden you with that." I feel like I need to repeat that again.

»I'm sorry too. I shouldn't have been so mean.« I immediately shake my
head. »You weren't mean. You were right
with what you said. I shouldn't be a burden to you. That’s not how a relationship works,” I reply.

At the word “relationship,” Ruby lifts her head and makes a move from me. Her watchful gaze is on me, and the next words come as if by themselves.

going right. It ... When I look at you, I feel like "It's just that everything in my life is feels like I'm home - really home, I mean. I've never felt anything like this before, Ruby. With anyone. You make me feel like I'm not alone. And that's what I've missed most. That feeling of being whole." Ruby takes a halting breath.

…

“I don’t even know if that makes any sense,” I add.

"It makes sense," Ruby replies. "Of course it makes sense." "I don't want you
to feel pressured." Ruby lets her gaze slide over my face. I'm sure that

my cheeks are as red as hers. I'm warm, and so am I

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I was just fighting back tears. But Ruby doesn't look at me like she thinks I'm stupid or embarrassing.

Instead, there is a warmth in her green eyes that goes through my bones. She looks straight into me and I know she understands everything.

That's how Ruby is: she finds solutions to the most difficult tasks. She finds meaning where there shouldn't be any. And now she finds something in me that makes her want to wrap her arms around me.

"I'm not doing that," she whispers. “Not anymore.” The next

moment she stands on her tiptoes. She sees me

into my eyes for a heartbeat. And then she kisses me.

I let out a surprised sound. For a moment I don't know what's happening to me, and I grab hold of the desk with one hand, while my fingers dig deeper into her back as if by themselves.

Ruby comes even closer until there is no space left between us.

That wasn't my goal when I came here. But now she's kissing me and her hands are on my body and her closeness is driving me crazy...

"James?" Ruby leans back a little and looks at me uncertainly.

Only then did I realize that I was too overwhelmed by the situation to return

the kiss.

"I..."

Suddenly Ruby's eyes widen and she moves away from me. She swallows

hard and shakes her head. "I'm sorry.

I thought … I shouldn't have been so..."

“Ruby,” I manage. Awakening from my paralysis, I pull her back towards me with both hands. Then I lean in, banishing all thoughts from my mind, and kiss the girl I love for the first time in over two months.

I slide one hand behind her neck and wrap the other arm around her waist, pulling her tightly against me. Ruby sighs into my mouth.

Oh man.

I missed this so much.

The way Ruby moves. Her beautiful mouth. The quiet sound she makes as our tongues meet.

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I stroke her neck, over her hairline, further down to
to her neck. Her skin is so warm and soft. I would love to run my mouth all over her body. Ruby gasps as if she had had the exact same thought.

The sound breaks me out of my trance. Breathing heavily, I pull away from her.

Even though we're closer than we've been in a long time, we're not ready for anything more. There's still a boundary that can't be crossed overnight, and when Ruby buries her face in my neck and just holds me, I know she's thinking the same thing I am.

I stroke her back and hold her tight - seconds, minutes, hours. It's as if in this moment there is only her and me.
Just the two of us in the whole world.

I don't know how long we stand there like that, but when we finally let go, it feels like an eternity has passed.

We look at each other and smile. Ruby smooths her bangs, I smooth my sweater. It's obvious that neither of us knows what's coming next.

I clear my throat. "I should -" "How are
you -" Ruby starts at the same moment, and we both laugh quietly.

"You first," I say.

Ruby smiles. “I just wanted to ask how Lydia is doing. I have them
didn't see you last night."

"She's fine. She still struggles with nausea from time to time, which is why she skipped the gala."

Ruby frowns worriedly. »But otherwise everything is fine, right?« I nod. »Yes, that is probably quite normal.« It is good to know that I
do not have to be careful with Ruby,
what I say and what not. She knows all our secrets, there's nothing I can't talk to her about. I don't know if I'll ever be able to truly show her how much this means to me.

Suddenly Ruby grabs my hand and pulls me to her bed.
My stomach does a nervous somersault because for a moment I have no idea what this means. But then

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Ruby falls cross-legged on the bed and points to the spot next to her. A strange mix of disappointment and relief washes over me and I sit down next to her.

"How are you feeling about your acceptance to Oxford?" she finally asks.

The warmth inside me is replaced by icy cold.

I look at Ruby, shocked.

“Okay, that would be the answer then,” she says and pours me a drink understanding smile.

"You know how I feel about Oxford." "It sounds like you

have a relationship with the university." I raise an eyebrow. »Just

said the right thing. Don't think I had

"Didn't see the hearts you drew on the printed promise," I say, pointing to the bulletin board above the desk.

Ruby looks at me, caught. Then she smiles. "Yeah, good. Caught. You still didn't answer the question correctly." I think for a moment. "I'm

glad you're happy about the acceptance. You're just happy for both of us," I say as diplomatically as possible.

Ruby rolls her eyes. Before I can react, she has one

She grabbed one of her pillows and hit me with it. At first I just blink in perplexity, then I turn to Ruby.

»Lydia does that all the time. I can't defend myself with her for fear of breaking something. But with you…” I quickly grab a pillow and throw it at Ruby. "It's different for you." She reacts faster than I would have thought possible. She grabs the pillow I threw

at her and hits me with it twice. When she tries to do it a third time, I grab her wrist and hold her tight.

Ruby's cheeks are flushed, her breathing is quickening, and her hair is disheveled. Everything in me wants to lean over and kiss her again.

Without further ado, I let her go. I clear my throat and take some distance again.

“Are you going to accept the offer?” Ruby asks after a while.

I nod once. »Yes. I don't even need to ask you, do I?« I risk a glance at her

when the heat that had crept up my neck has subsided a little. Ruby

sees me warmly

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and even though she's obviously holding back, the sparkle in her eyes clearly tells me how happy she is.

“Of course I accept it.” She hesitates. »But I'm worried about what will happen if I don't get a scholarship. I've already gathered all sorts of information about funding opportunities, but an incredible number of students apply for the programs every year - I have no idea what my chances are. Without it, I can't afford to go to college." It's almost painful to see how the joy gradually disappears from her eyes and is replaced by fear. "And then I don't know what to do." "I'm sure your chances are good," I say confidently.

"I'll definitely fight until the end," she says determinedly, and in that moment I have no doubt that Ruby can do *anything* she sets her mind to.

»Mum has always been committed to ensuring that *Beaufort* supports various projects throughout the year. There are definitely scholarships there too. I can ask around if you like,” I suggest cautiously. I'm not sure if I'm crossing a line with this. Hopefully not.

Ruby hesitates for a moment, but I'm relieved to see that she looks thoughtful rather than as if she finds the suggestion impertinent.

»That would be nice,« she finally says. »What is the situation like at home?« Her eyes softened when

I told her about my mum.

so I'm not surprised by your sudden change of subject.

I think for a moment. "Everything is fine with Lydia, and my dad. I don't … is my see him much, and we haven't spoken much since December." "That doesn't sound so good," Ruby

mutters.

Now I shrug my shoulders. "It's better this way. I'm still

so angry at him. Lydia and I will remember him for the rest of our lives that he didn't tell us what happened to Mum.'

"I've never been in a fight before, but I think I would have attacked him too."

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The idea almost makes me grin. Unfortunately, the impulse passes quickly again. "The way he treats Lydia annoys me," I say seriously. “Especially now when she has to deal with so many things at once.”

“What is he doing?” she asks, frowning.

“He always makes her feel stupid, which really upsets me. He didn’t even really notice that she was also taken to Oxford.”

Ruby twists the corners of her mouth in disapproval. “Everything you tell me about him drives me crazy. No wonder you’re happy when he’s not home.”

Normally I hate conversations like this. I usually deflect or avoid the topic, but with Ruby it feels completely normal to sit on the bed and talk about my family problems.

I think I could get used to this.

“What do you think?” Ruby asks suddenly.

I can only shake my head. There's a lump in my throat that doesn't wants to disappear no matter how many times I try to clear my voice.

“James?” Ruby sounds unsure.

"I'm just happy to be here," I croak.

The next moment, Ruby slides a little closer to me. She puts her hand on mine and I intertwine our fingers.

"I'm glad you're here too," she whispers, and warmth floods my entire body.

“I won’t be leaving any time soon,” I explain, looking at me aimed at our hands. “Get ready for it.”

Ruby

James and I have about ten more uninterrupted minutes before Ember knocks on the door with an exaggerated loudness and brings us cookies from downstairs that Mum sent up with. James jumps up from the bed as if he had been stung by a tarantula. When she disappears again, my sister leaves the door wide open with a meaningful look, to which I just roll my eyes. James and I were just talking and not attacking each other naked.

If Mum seriously thinks that, then that's what I … I don't know what should think.

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James, who remains indecisive in the middle of the room after Ember's departure, points to the books on my desk. “When do you have to finish these by?” he asks.

I sigh. »Actually, I should have read almost all of it already.
I'm really behind on the gala." "Okay," James mutters,
holding up *Utilitarianism* by John Stuart Mill. "This one is just over a hundred pages long, and I've already read it. We could go through it together if you like." I blink. "You want to do school stuff with me?" "Sure," he says, pointing to the desk. "Do you have a second
chair?" I'm so perplexed that I'm lost for words for a moment.

Finally I nod and slide off the bed. "I'll be right back. Stir
Don't move from the spot.«

I sprint into Ember's room. She sits on the floor in front of her bed, her back leaning against the frame and her laptop on her lap. When she sees me, a meaningful grin appears on her lips and she pulls the headphones off her head.

"Naaa?" she asks slowly. Apparently she has mentally moved on from our discussion from this morning - or is simply too curious to give me the cold shoulder at this moment.

“Can I borrow your chair?” I ask.
Ember's grin gets even wider. "Of course you can borrow my chair." I ignore her suggestive tone
and push the desk chair into my room. James has now taken a seat
in front of my desk, *Utilitarianism* is open in front of him.

"Are you sure you want to do some reading with me?" I ask as I sit down next to him.
He looks up and a small smile spreads across his lips. "I want to do everything to you that you let me do, Ruby." Almost as soon as the words left his mouth, he somehow pulled out a grimace. "The
…
A blush spreads across James' face, and my cheeks too
are getting warm. I look away and turn to the first page of the book, then clear my throat.
"Do you need a notepad?"
James next to me nods immediately. "Yes. Thank you."

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And in the next two hours we actually take *The Utilitarianism* together. I find it difficult to concentrate at first - partly because James is sitting next to me and partly because my thoughts are raging wildly in my head. After a while I understand the theory and begin to form my own opinion –, but after one on the topic. James and I discuss each other's theories, and once again I'm struck by how damn intelligent he is. Even if he doesn't want to go to Oxford, I think when he starts studying he'll show everyone.

When we're finished and I've highlighted one last keyword in my new booklet, I lean back with a sigh.

“And now?” asks James.

I frown. “What do you mean?” “Well, yeah.

When my head is so full, I always have to distract myself with something before I can move on," he explains.

“What are you doing then?” I ask curiously. How strange that I know James's darkest secrets, but know next to nothing about his everyday life.

“Exercise mostly.” James shrugs his shoulders. “Sometimes I also watch videos from travel bloggers.” When I don’t reply, he raises his eyebrows at me.

»Surely you have something to clear your head.« I hesitate for a moment. »Yes, I do. But it's really strange.

You can’t think I’m weird.” The corners of James’ mouth twitch. "I'm so excited to see what's next." "You have to promise me, James." James raises two fingers in honor and nods.

Finally, I reach for my laptop and open the favorites bar in the browser. I go to my Relaxation folder and click on the first saved video there.

A blonde girl appears on the screen, whispering a greeting. The video starts with her opening a package and slowly stroking the paper in which the individual items are wrapped. I risk a sideways glance at James, since I know the video by heart anyway. He looks at the screen and then at me.

»What the hell is that? Why is she speaking so quietly?« His gaze twitches

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back again. In the video, the girl is scratching a sponge with her long nails. "Why is she doing that?" "This is an ASMR video." James' face is one big question mark.

"It's an internet phenomenon," I explain. "I really have no idea how to describe it. They're videos of people speaking quietly and making certain noises like crackling or rustling." "But why?" It's almost a little cute how confused he is. I've never seen him like this before.

“This is supposed to calm you down,” I explain. “My brain really reacts to it.” “Does that mean you watch it to relax?” he asks with a skeptical look.

I nod. »I get a kind of goosebumps on my head. Sometimes I watch it before I go to sleep.«

James grins. »I think you have to really get into it so that it works. Right now I find it far too crazy to give me goosebumps. It is ⋯ really a bit strange.«

"There are hundreds of videos about this," I say, and click on the next favorite on my list. Now a doctor appears on the screen, quietly instructing a patient to raise his arm and close his eyes.

It doesn't take long before a tingling sensation spreads across my scalp out of.

James shakes his head. "It's so fascinating. In a really twisted way."

“Watch one before you go to sleep tonight. And then you tell me if it worked,” I say with a knowing grin.

»It would be cool if that worked. I've been sleeping badly for weeks." The grin slips from my face.

Actually, I want the vibe not kill me, but when he says something like that, I just can't get over it. I have to ask the question, even if it's sad.

"Is it because of your mum?" I ask cautiously.

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James holds his breath. He is completely still for a moment, then he exhales audibly and finally nods. "Yes. I sometimes talk about her." "Do … dreams you want to talk about

it?" The doctor is still doing his exams

in the video and I press the spacebar to pause the video.

James is quiet for a while, as if searching for the right words. I carefully grab his hand again, like before we were interrupted by Ember. James turns his palm up so we can intertwine our fingers.

"I didn't think it would feel like this," he finally begins.

"What do you mean?" I ask quietly.
He swallows hard. “Without my mom.” I

squeeze his hand to encourage him to continue talking. And that he does.

James begins to tell me about the last two months. First haltingly, then a little more fluently, until he is in a proper flow of speech. He tells me about feeling guilty towards his mother because he feels like he's grieving in the wrong way. About the fear for Lydia that accompanies him every day when he wakes up and goes to sleep. About the meetings at *Beaufort,* where he feels as if his soul is separated from his body and as if he sees everything like an outsider. He tells me that his father forbade him and Lydia from visiting their Aunt Ophelia. That Lydia urgently needs to look for a midwife, but is afraid that her secret could be exposed. And that he is sorry for neglecting his friends in the last few months.

We sit in my room and talk all day. Not just about James' family, but about everything. School, Ember's blog, my conversation with Alice Campbell the night before, which I couldn't quite process yet.

At just after five, Dad calls me on my cell phone. He prefers this method to yelling through the house like Mum does or sending Ember into my room.

"The food is ready," I say.

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Hand in hand we walk to the door. Just as I'm about to open it, it pulls James me back again. He hugs me and hugs me briefly.

“Thank you,” he whispers close to my ear.

I don't need to ask why.

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22

James

Mr Bell's Bolognese fantastic.

The spaghetti is al dente, and the interplay of different Herbs, tomatoes, garlic and a hint of red wine in the sauce tastes so good that I can't help but moan of pleasure that escapes my lips.

As I swallow my first bite, four pairs of eyes are on me. Ruby's entire family is looking at me. Mr Bell's look in particular makes me nervous. Ever since I laid the cutlery the wrong way round when setting the table, he has been watching me with narrowed eyes, as if he is just waiting for my next mistake that will show him that I am not good enough for his daughter. But I actually know exactly how to lay out cutlery correctly. At our house, we sometimes have business dinners where there are three different sets of cutlery on the tables. The fact that I couldn't get it right earlier is certainly not because I'm stupid, but simply because I was nervous.

I clear my throat, sit up straight and say with complete conviction: "This is the best Bolognese I've ever eaten." Ruby's mother smiles at me. Ember mutters something behind her hand that sounds like "slime." At least Mr. Bell's face looks a little friendlier afterwards. Now I can also see that Ruby and Ember clearly inherited their eyes from him, not just the color but also the intensity that lies in their gazes.

"James," says Mrs. Bell - Helen, I mentally correct myself - as I just shoved another bite of pasta into my mouth. "Do you know what you're going to do after school?" I automatically stiffen. But then I see Ruby's expectant look and it reminds me that these people are Ruby's family and I don't have to pretend.

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"I've been accepted by Oxford," I answer hesitantly, without the usual hardness in my voice. "And I'm already a partner in *Beaufort."* "Have you always wanted to do this?" Helen asks.

Okay. Maybe I don't have to pretend, but I can't reveal my entire inner life to these virtual strangers. It's just not possible. I slowly chew the pasta and pretend to think so I don't have to answer right away.

»Ruby knew from an early age that she wanted to go to Oxford. Sometimes I wonder if all Maxton Hall students are like this," she adds, smiling at her daughter, who is sitting to my left and shifting restlessly in her chair.

I swallow and take a sip of water. "Not everyone is like Ruby, I can assure you."

“What does that mean?” Ruby asks indignantly.

“I don't know anyone who has wanted Oxford as much as you. My friends and I worked towards it too, but I'm sure no one worked as hard as you." I think for a moment about whether this sounds too much like I'm trying to curry favor with her family by praising Ruby in front of everyone. "But I might be a little biased." Everyone at the table laughs at that. They seem to really find it funny. I frown. Everything I said was completely sincere. I didn't think they would laugh at it. An unfamiliar feeling spreads in my stomach and I take another forkful of pasta to try to push it away.

After dinner I help to clear the table. But something like this I would never do that at home – we have staff for that and everyone pitches –, in as a matter of course, so I don't hesitate for a second.

Plus, I really want Ruby's parents to like me.

I can understand that they are skeptical of me. I would be the same if I were you.

»Would you two like to come into the living room for a moment?« Helen asks when we are finished. »Or do you have to go home, James?« I shake my head. »No. No, I don't have to go home.« »If they ask you questions you don't want to answer, just don't say anything,« Ruby whispers in my ear as we leave her mother with something

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distance from the kitchen. »I'm sorry that it was so unpleasant
was.«

»It's okay,« I reply just as quietly. »Don't worry
Thoughts. I like your parents. And Ember too.« That makes
a smile appear on Ruby's lips. I would have loved to take her hand or touch her in some other way, but at that moment we enter the living room, where the rest of the family has already made themselves comfortable.

I notice how spacious the room seems and how minimalist it is decorated. Unlike Ruby's, it is not cluttered, but rather open with lots of free space. I understand why this has to be so as Mr Bell maneuvers his wheelchair back and forth until it is parallel to the sofa.
He then picks up some kind of remote control and suddenly the sofa is raised until it is the same height as the wheelchair seat.
Mr. Bell slides from one seat to the other. When he sees me watching him, I hastily want to look away at first, but I resist the impulse. I don't want him to think that I find it unpleasant to see him like this - after all, it's a completely normal thing for him.
So I hold his gaze and point to the sofa, which begins to lower itself again.

"I've never seen anything like it," I say honestly. "Is it built into the sofa or...?" Mr Bell nods. If
he's surprised by my question, he doesn't show it.
“More precisely, under the sofa.”
Ember falls down next to her father. She leans against it for a moment his shoulder, and suddenly a loving expression spreads across his face, softening his entire expression. This is what a father looks like who sees his child as more than just a business partner that he can use for his own ends.

“Sit down,” says Helen. Undecided, I turn to Ruby, who makes the decision for me and points to the armchair opposite the sofa.
She sits down next to Ember.

»Have you ever played Jenga, James?« Ember asks suddenly, as her mum places a game in the middle of the living room table that looks like it's made entirely of wooden blocks. I eye it skeptically and shake my head. "No."

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Ember's mouth falls open briefly. "OK. That's…" She clears her throat.
»I don't know how to feel about this.« I shrug.

»Sorry.« »It's okay,« Ruby jumps in

and looks at Ember

which clearly states that she should keep quiet now.

"Exactly," Helen agrees. "It's child's play." Mr Bell snorts.

"You say that because you always win." "What nonsense." She smiles

at me confidently and points to the tower she has just built out of the wooden blocks.
"We have to take turns moving a piece from this tower and then putting it back on top. You can only use one hand to move at a time, and at least one piece of wood must remain

in each row."

I nod once. "Got it." "And the great

thing is," she continues, looking at her husband, "there are always several winners and only one loser." "That's not true," Ruby interjects. "If you add up the

last eighteen years, we're all losers because Mum never knocks over the tower."
Helen just smiles to herself in response, and at that moment

I realize that I shouldn't let myself be deceived by her warm nature, but rather that I have to be careful of her.

The game begins. It's my turn right after Helen and I pull a small wooden block out from the side. After me comes Mr Bell, then Ember and finally Ruby. When it's my second turn, the tower collapses. I jump back in shock as wooden blocks fall in all directions.
"Damn," I mutter.

"No offense, James, but you're really bad," says Ember.

"He just needs a little practice." Ruby sounds much more confident than I feel.

I hold on better in the next round, but this time too I'm the one who causes the tower to fall. And also in the round after that.
At least Ember and Mr Bell seem to be happy about it, so that's OK with me. Round four is going better. I tried to copy Helen's technique, and the trick seems to be to use only the fingertips and not the whole hand. After that, I take my time, even though I can feel everyone's eyes on me. I

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I try to pull the blocks out as slowly as possible and this time it works really well.

In the end, the tower is so wobbly that Ruby shakes her head in despair when it's her turn. With slightly flushed cheeks and a concentrated look, she leans forward and pulls out a block of wood. The tower sways back and forth as she leans back and we all wait, spellbound. When the swaying subsides and it finally actually stops, I breathe a sigh of relief. Ruby hears it and looks over the tower at me.

I will never forget the smile that spread across her face. Really, never. It fills my whole body, and for a moment I'm so caught up in the sight of her that I don't even realize how Helen holds out her hand and the tower collapses with a crash. Ember jumps up with …

a triumphant scream and points her finger at her mother.

"Ha!"

"James made Mum lose," Ruby shouts, clapping her hands.

Mr. Bell also laughs quietly and looks at his wife with amusement.

"I think we'll have to check that again now," says Helen and looks at me. Then she nods towards the collapsed blocks of wood. “Help me set it up, James.” This family

fascinates me. Her enthusiasm is contagious and makes me feel more carefree than I have in a long time.

“With pleasure, Helen,” I answer far too late and get up to rebuild the tower. Block by block, piece by piece. Just like with Ruby and me. And everything else.

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23

Ruby

I've never been as excited before a Monday as I am today. The school bus ride feels twice as long as usual, and although I normally enjoy it, I'm far too jittery for it this morning.
As we cover the last few meters to school and the bus finally comes to a stop, I remind myself to pull myself together.

This is a normal school day.
Everything is as usual.

Please shift down a gear, pulse.
I'm the last one to get off the bus. And as I walk down the stairs, I see him.

James leans against the fence at the sports field, directly opposite the bus stop. The smile with which he looks at me seems almost shy, even if nothing about his posture gives that impression.
I remember the morning more than three months ago when he also surprised me so much. At that time we were at a party at Cyril's and he wanted to isolate me from our curious classmates so that they wouldn't ask me too many stupid questions.

This time he doesn't wait until I'm with him, but comes to meet me. His smile doesn't slip - quite the opposite. Last night I noticed how often and genuinely he smiled when he was playing with my family. I can hardly believe that this is the same boy who lay crying in my arms in December. It's good to see him like this.

"Hi," I greet him, smoothing down my bangs. It's windy and I'm afraid my hair is sticking out in all directions. James still looks at me like I'm the best thing that ever happened to him.

“Good morning.” He raises his hand and strokes one of the stray ones Strands behind the ear. He stands so close to me that I can smell him

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can perceive. So familiar. Warm. A bit like honey. At some point I definitely have to ask him what perfume he uses.

“Shall we?” he asks with a nod towards the main entrance.

My heart skips a beat. It all feels exciting and new
- he picked me up and took me to the classroom.

“Yes,” I say and briefly consider whether I can reach for his hand.
I don't know if we're there yet. Whether I'm allowed to do that - and how that might affect others. James makes the decision for me and clasps my hand in his. A tingling sensation spreads from my fingers throughout my body.

“Is that okay?” he asks.

“More than okay,” I say, squeezing his hand.

Then we walk together towards Boyd Hall. On the way there I hardly meet anyone I know - but everyone knows James. And each of them seems interested in the fact that he's holding my hand. I hear a few of them whispering, some heads turning in our direction as they pass. For a moment I am unsettled and feel a sinking feeling in my stomach. I give James a sideways glance – and the feeling fades a little.

Because James looks like it's the most normal thing in the world to walk across the schoolyard holding hands with me.

“By the way, I would like to invite you on a date,” he whispers to me briefly before we enter Boyd Hall.

I suppress the smile that spreads across my face
want. I raise an eyebrow, feignedly unimpressed. “Oh yeah?” James nods. »Mmm.

Next Saturday. If you have time.” I pretend to think about it and James
starts to smile.
"You're teasing me, Ruby Bell." Now I allow myself to
smile.

"I would love to go out with you, James Beaufort," I say and
look him in the eyes so he knows how serious I am about what I am saying.

As we walk through the front door of the hall, he whispers to me:
"I was hoping you would say that."

After assembly, James takes me to my classroom. We
reach the door at the moment when Alistair, Cyril and Wren are behind

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We enter the hallway. Wren takes one look at our intertwined hands, turns around and disappears into one of the rooms. I notice James stiffening and automatically want to let go of his hand, but he keeps holding mine.

"Morning, you two," Alistair says, giving me a tiny smile.

Cyril gives me a brief nod. I nod just as briefly back. I haven't forgotten what he said to me in December and how much his words hurt me. If James is friends with him, that's his business. But that doesn't mean I have to like him.

"Morning," James replies, his tone calm and devoid of any emotion.

“Does that mean you’re not so obnoxious anymore?” Alistair asks, looking at our entwined hands.

James raises his free hand and gives his friend the middle finger. Then he turns to me. "See you later."

It sounds more like a question than a statement, so I nod.

“See you later,” he whispers, stroking the back of my hand with his thumb. The small touch sends a tingling sensation through my entire body.

"See you later."

He lets go of my hand and starts walking towards the room, in which he and his friends are about to have lessons. Cyril and Alistair follow him and I watch them until James glances over his shoulder and smiles at me. I'm supposed to go to my own classroom, but I'm frozen in place.

When I think back to when we started, I can't believe that we have now arrived here: holding hands at school, in front of all the Maxton Hall students.

But it feels good.

And not only that: it feels right.

“It doesn’t matter where I went today,” says Lin in the afternoon, plopping down next to me on one of the chairs we’ve set up in a small circle over the last fifteen minutes. "There was no other topic of conversation than you and James."

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I take a quick look at the door, but it is still
closed. There is no one else in the group room except us. "Really?"

Lin nods. "Yes. When I got a coffee during the break, pretty much everyone in the cafeteria was talking about it." I feel a slight twinge
of unease at her words, but decide not to let it bother me. I knew that I could forget about my invisibility cloak once and for all when I was walking through the school holding hands with James Beaufort. So much has changed since the start of the school year that I no longer care whether people know me or talk about me. Almost, anyway.

"By the way, I'm bursting with curiosity," Lin adds.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you," I say. »But I don't really know what actually happened yet. He came to my house yesterday and…" I allow myself a small smile. "It was great."

»Have you talked to each other? About everything?«

I nod. »Yes. It was really hard. And I don't think we can pretend like nothing happened. But...« I breathe in and out slowly. »I still have some hope that we can work this out.« Things are far from back to normal between me and James.

Too much has happened for that, and I'm still too afraid that he'll hurt me again. But yesterday I just felt happy - and I want to hold on to that feeling for as long as I can.

Lin sighs. "That sounds good. I'm really happy for you, Ruby." Her wistful tone
makes me pause. Then I remember that Lin went to the pub with the others on Friday night to confront Cyril. I immediately feel guilty.

Because I had so much going on, I completely forgot to ask her about it on Saturday.

“Do you have any news?” I ask cautiously.

Lin presses his lips together. For a moment it looks like she's trying to dismiss the topic, but then she finally lets out a sharp breath. "Yes. The news is that from now on I will only be concentrating on Oxford.'

I look at her sympathetically. "What happened?"

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She shrugs her shoulders. “Cyril dumped me.” I inhale sharply. “Shit.” “It's exactly as I suspected. He's in love with

Lydia," she says quietly. "And now he's got his hopes up again with her." "He said that?" I

ask, stunned.

She nods slowly. “Pretty clear, yes.” “I'm so sorry,

Lin. If there's anything I can do for you..." "No, but thanks. I think it's good that he's finally telling me this

said. Otherwise I would probably have chased him all the way to Oxford and that would have ruined my start there. I just read too much into it." I tentatively put a hand on her back.

»It's all good. *Really.* I'm just relieved,

that I am finally free of this uncertainty.« I look at her

uncertainly for a moment, then I briefly stroke her back and let her go again. »We should have a girls' night on

Friday, what do you think?« Lin seems undecided, but manages

to smile. »I

I'll let you know again, OK?«

We sit next to each other in silence for a while and look at the tables that we have pushed to the back wall of the room to make room for our group of people.

»Do you think the others will be happy?« Lin finally asks,

and her tone sounds forced to be cheerful.

“Sure,” I say. “After the hectic pace of Friday, I think we can all take a day to breathe.”

Just as Lin is about to reply, the door opens and Jessalyn and Kieran enter the room.

“What’s going on here?” Jessalyn asks, irritated, and looks around.

Kieran, on the other hand, just mumbles "Hi" and quickly sits down on one of the chairs. I wonder if I'm imagining it or if he really is even paler than usual today. He avoids looking at me and rummages around in his bag with concentration.

I notice Lin looking at me, then at him, then back at me, but I don't know what I can do to make this moment between us less awkward.

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Luckily, Camille and Doug also come through the door at that moment and are also taken aback by the changed seating arrangement. The last person to walk into the room is James. He raises an eyebrow and looks around, then walks across the circle of chairs and drops into the chair opposite mine with a wry smile.

Next to me, Lin clears his throat. »For today, Ruby and I have decided
“We thought about a little surprise,” she says. "I'm sure everyone of you knows this - at some point in the school year there's that slump where everything suddenly becomes very difficult." A murmur of agreement goes through the small group. “I feel like we're close to that point right now, especially after the chaos of last week.

Unfortunately, we can't afford a proper break because the spring ball is practically just around the corner."

"We thought we could hold the meeting a little differently today, though," I add. "You've all worked so hard, and the charity gala was a huge success. I think we all deserve to take it a little easier today." Lin bends down and pulls a large bag out from under her chair. She opens it to reveal two large thermos

flasks and several mugs. "We thought we'd hold our meeting over coffee, tea, and cake today."

"Ohhh," says Camille, and Jessalyn cheers next to her. "How cool are you guys?"

While Lin hands out the drinks, I get up to get the cardboard boxes that I hid in the corner of the room under Lin's and my jackets. "I brought muffins from my mom's bakery," I announce.

When I place it in the middle of our small circle of chairs and lift the lid, Jessa immediately leans over the box. »Mhh. They smell wonderful.”

“Help yourself.”

While the others grab it, James leans a little closer to me.
“You didn’t have it with you this morning.” “My mom drove it here

during her lunch break,” I say with a smile. "They're still very fresh." "These are the most delicious muffins I've tried in a long time,"

says Camille, and next to her Doug nods in agreement.

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“Where is this bakery?” she continues to ask. »My mum has been looking for someone to make the cake for her birthday for weeks. Maybe she should take a look around there.”

“In Gormsey,” I answer. »It's quite small, but everything they make there is simply delicious and made with a lot of love. I'd be happy to give you the card.' 'That would be great,' says Camille,

and I'm surprised at how honest she is

her words sound. During the last few meetings I noticed that something had changed about her. She was more involved than usual and no longer gave the impression that she found everything and everyone in the room unbearable. I wonder what triggered this.

»That was a really great idea from you,« says Jessa. »Last week

was just stressful. Apart from all the organizational stuff for the gala, I also had to give a presentation in English." "And how did it go?" asks Lin.

»I totally messed it up. In the middle of it I lost the thread

lost that at some point nothing made sense anymore.«

"I know how it is," says Kieran. "I had a complete blackout recently. My head was completely blank." "What was your presentation

about?" "The Cold War." Kieran's

mouth twists in displeasure.

»And yours?«

»A Midsummer Night's Dream by Shakespeare.«

»Poor you,« says Camille. »I hate Shakespeare.« Jessa

shrugs. »The play wasn't that bad, I thought. By the way, I also watched the film and thought that it would actually be a really good motto for the spring ball.«

I pause with the muffin in front of my mouth. »That would really be

“It’s a great motto,” I say slowly and turn my head to Lin.

»Yes...« She looks as if she is thinking. »We have decided on the

Halloween celebration in October received several offers from decoration companies. One had a kind of magical forest on offer. With fake trees and spotlights, a smoke machine and so on.”

“Were those the ones with the wooden swing that you can have your photo taken on?” “Yes,

exactly.”

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“I could really imagine that,” says Jessa, while Camille sighs.

»That sounds really nice. What would the dress code be?«
»Everyone could dress up as elves,« says Doug immediately.

We pause for a second and stare at him. Who would have thought that the taciturn Doug had a fondness for the fairies?
“Yes,” I say, but quickly add, “Or maybe just clothes
with a floral pattern for the women and black tie with pastel-colored shirts for the men?" Jessa nods. “Perfect.”
Lin and I exchange a look.
Did we just decide the theme for our next event by chance?

“What does our budget look like?” asks Kieran, frowning slightly. For the first time that afternoon he looks directly at me. "That sounds pretty expensive." "That's true, but we didn't have to pay the
decoration company at the charity gala."

Across from me, James snorts contemptuously. This is obviously a sore spot for him. I don't know why, but I find it kind of cute.

»So with the money that Lexington has promised us, we have a
lavish budget. That should actually be enough.”
“Well, I’d be there,” says Camille. “And you?” “Shall we
vote again just to be on the safe side?” Lin suggests.
"All those who support the motto 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' raise their cups." Not a single cup remains down.
As I look at the relaxed faces of my team members, a warm feeling spreads through me. I don't know why, but it seems to me as if we have grown a lot closer together in the last half hour.

James

The week flies by and it is the best five days I have ever had at Maxton Hall. Ruby and I spend as much time together as possible, which is not possible given our schedules.

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simple, but in the end it works better than either of us would have thought.

I pick her up from the bus every morning and walk her to her classroom. That means that on Wednesday, Ruby insists on walking me to *my* classroom, which happens to be in the east wing, and results in her having to sprint across the school to get to her own seat in time for first period. Twice our free periods overlap, and we spend them together in the library, where I try to concentrate on the material we need to learn despite Ruby's hand in mine. On Thursday, we manage to meet in the cafeteria for lunch, although I get the feeling that Lin is less than thrilled to have me there. At times, I fear she might ram her spoon into my eye, but she seems to have herself under control.

For the first time since my mum died, everything doesn't feel hopeless. It feels like a huge weight has been lifted off my shoulders, even though I could do without the gossip and overtly curious looks from my classmates.

My boys, however, are more suspicious of Ruby than ever, and the mood remains tense after the incident with Wren. On Friday evening, Alistair invites us to his house, a clear attempt to smooth things over between us all. Although I would have liked to spend the evening with Ruby, I know that I urgently need to talk to Wren. Apart from the fact that we haven't spoken since last Saturday and I want to put our argument to rest, I also want to know what's going on at his house. And how I can help him.

Unfortunately, Alistair's brother Frederick invited himself to our little party and has been chatting to me non-stop for half an hour. He is the Ellingtons' twenty-two-year-old model son: engaged, a student at Oxford and - unlike Elaine and Alistair - willing to maintain family traditions. We all can't stand him, largely due to the fact that Frederick is adored by his parents, while at the same time they pretend that Alistair doesn't exist.

“Is it actually true that you’ve already joined *Beaufort ?”* Frederick asks, swirling his half-full glass of whiskey

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the hand.

“Yep,” I say without looking at him. I take out my cell phone and see that I have a message from Ruby.

JAMES! Alice Campbell invited me to her office in London!

I feel Frederick's curious gaze on me and so I suppress the grin that wants to fight its way onto my face.

How did that happen?

“And how is it like that?” asks Frederick, who seems to have overlooked my clear indication that I don’t want to face his inquisition.

"Exciting," I mutter my standard response as I wait for Ruby's response. "A great honor." I can hear Cyril snort, although he tries to keep the sound out his hand. He understood the real meaning of my answer - *please shut up* - in contrast to Frederick, who asked again.

»Now chat a bit, Beaufort!« At that moment my iPhone lights up. Ruby has sent me a Screenshot sent from Alice's email. Directly above it says:

Ahhh!

Dear Ruby, I found our conversation at the gala last Saturday very inspiring. If you are in London in the near future, I would be happy to have you visit my office.

Best regards, Alice

My answer almost types itself.

When do we leave?

Suddenly Frederick bumps into my shoulder. I turn my head in his direction and raise an eyebrow at him. He immediately notices his mistake and takes a step back. Then he clears his throat.

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“I mean, we two are the only two in this room who have something to show for it and have achieved something in our lives.
We have to stick together." He laughs as if he had said something particularly funny.

None of us agree.

“Only dirt comes out of your mouth, Frederick,” Kesh says quietly.

Frederick lets out an indignant gasp.

“Let it go, Kesh.” Alistair’s voice is monotone. If his brother is there, I don't know him any differently. Then he is cold and distant - the complete opposite of the Alistair we usually spend time with.
If he had known that Frederick was coming home for the weekend, he would never have invited us over and instead would have tried to stay with one of us.

"What have you accomplished?" asks Kesh, and his voice is so deep and so calm that an ice-cold shiver runs down my spine.
"You got into Oxford - congratulations. And you're engaged - double congratulations. But that doesn't make you a high-flyer. It makes you a useless puppet with no backbone." Keshav slowly takes a sip from the long drink glass, without taking his dark brown eyes off Frederick for even a moment.

“If you had even an ounce of decency, you would
"Don't say something like that," Frederick contradicts in a cutting voice. He tries to look bored, but I can see one eyelid twitching nervously.

“You don’t have to tell me about decency. Unlike you, I know that you don't treat your family like scum. The fact that you're not siding with your brother tells me everything I need to know about you, you lousy..."

"Keshav, damn it, shut up!" Alistair jumps up with his fists clenched. His face is bright red.

»You have great friends there, Alistair. Mum and Dad have every reason
“To be proud of you,” says Frederick, pulling his cell phone out of his pocket. He stands up. »If you would please excuse me.
My fiancee."

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We hear him answer the phone and greet his girlfriend with a cheesy nickname before he rushes out of the salon and leaves us behind.

“What the hell was that about, man?” Alistair hisses, still stock still and with his fists clenched.

"He acted like an asshole," Kesh retorts.

"And? If your family says something stupid to you - I'll interfere a? No!"

»That’s because my family would never treat me like that, like yours does. Just be happy that I have your back.”

Alistair snorts contemptuously. »You only stand behind me when it suits you. I can do without that, you damned hypocrite."

Kesh flinches as if Alistair had hit him. His gaze flicks briefly to Wren, Cyril and me, then back to Alistair. Frowning, I look back and forth between the two of them, but before I can interpret the situation or even get the chance to, Alistair turns around and disappears through the same door that Frederick rushed through.

“What the…” Wren starts, but at that moment Keshav also starts moving and runs after Alistair. The door slams loudly behind him.

“… Executioner was that?” Wren,

Cyril and I exchange a perplexed look.

Then Cyril groans and lets his head fall against the back of the chair. “This is not how I imagined the evening would be.” He taps away on his cell phone and turns up the music in the salon.

"I hope they don't kill themselves," I say after a while.

Cyril shakes his head with a grin. "I do not think so. And if so, then I would bet on Alistair.«

I barely listen and keep looking at the door through which the two of them just disappeared. I have never seen Alistair and Kesh argue as intensely as they did just now.

When Alistair admitted his homosexuality and his

After his parents treated him like a leper, he spent a lot of time with each of us because he couldn't stand being at home any longer. This brought us all closer together, Alistair and

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But Kesh is very special. Kesh's parents are open and warm-hearted, and they took Alistair in like another son.

“There’s something wrong with them,” Wren notes.

"I've noticed that too." Wren raises an

eyebrow, and for a brief moment it looks like

looks like he wants to say something, but then he stops himself and takes a big sip of his whiskey and coke instead.

I sigh. “Wren,” I begin.

He returns my gaze cautiously.

»I really haven't been a good friend in the last few weeks,« I say. »It

I'm really sorry for just minding my own shit and not being there for you." "You

had reason to mind yourself," Wren replies

quiet. He exhales audibly. »Your mum died. I misbehaved. I'm sorry."

“I should have noticed something was going on with you.” Wren shrugs.

“Now would be a good time to tell me,” I say.

I. “That’s actually why I came here tonight.”

Wren seems undecided. He looks at me over the rim of his glass. Then he closes his eyes briefly, as if he needs to summon his courage.

»We ... we're moving.« I lean

a little closer to him. Did I just misunderstand him? »What?« »My parents

lost their fortune. Last

week we

found a buyer for the house. We're moving into a semi-detached house in

March." I stare

at Wren. The words repeat in my head, but

they don't want to make sense.

“Why the hell didn’t you tell us about this?” asks Cyril. He gets up from his chair, comes over to us and collapses onto the sofa next to Wren. "We could have helped."

That snaps me out of my state of shock. "Cy is right," I say.

"There certainly would have been a way to keep the house."

Cyril nods. "My parents would have bought it immediately and let you continue living there."

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Wren raises his hands in a placating gesture. "You know how proud my parents are. They would never accept charity. Besides, it would have been weird if your parents were our landlords," Wren says to Cyril. But he just shrugs his shoulders.

“How did this come about?” I ask.

Wren sighs and rubs his chin with his free hand. “Dad did speculated in stocks. He put everything on one card - and lost." "Fuck," I say. I don't know how much the Fitzgeralds' fortune was, but I know the house they live in and all of their vacation homes. I know which companies they have invested in. The fact that they actually lost all of that - and in such a short time is unimaginable to me.

–,

"Is there anything we can do?" I ask after a while.

Wren shrugs indifferently. »Everything is a bit messed up at the moment. And my dad ⋯ "He's feeling pretty bad." "Just let us know if there's anything," I say, and Cyril hums in agreement.

“There's so much going on right now that I can't handle school stuff anymore get behind it. And now I also have to think about scholarships for Oxford. I should manage.” Wren buries her face in both ⋯ I have no idea how I do that hands, and Cyril and I exchange a look. I'm sure we think the same thing. If push came to shove, we would all pool together and give Wren a loan. Any of us would probably have given him the money without batting an eyelid, but we know him well enough to know that he would never accept it.

"You can do it. And we'll help you," I assure you, bumping my shoulder into Wren's. Wren slowly lowers his hands from his face.

“James, the thing with Ruby

—” “It was a long time ago,” I interrupt him.

This moment isn't about me or Ruby, it's about the fact that Wren has been carrying these worries the whole time, without

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that his best friend knew about it. It shouldn't be like that, especially not with us.

Our argument no longer matters. All that matters to me now is that I want to help Wren. Even though I have no idea how.

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24

Ruby

My heart beats in my throat as I open the door. Percy stands in front of me and tilts his head slightly, a smile on his lips.

"Ms. Bell, it's nice to see you again." "Likewise,

Percy," I reply and follow him to the car, clutching my silver clutch tightly to me. James didn't want to tell me anything about our date all week, so I was pretty much in the dark about what to wear. But with Ember's help, I put together an outfit that would work for any occasion: a simple black dress, mini-heeled shoes, and the small silver bag. I've pinned my hair halfway back and used plenty of hairspray to fix my bangs in case we spend time outside and it's windy.

»We'll meet Mr Beaufort on site,« explains Percy as he opens the door for me. opens it and helps me into the Rolls-Royce. I smile and look up at him to thank him, but I'm hesitant. Percy has dark circles under his eyes and his skin is colorless and pale. He also looks as if his thoughts are not here, but somewhere else entirely.

"How are you, Percy?" I ask.

“I'm fine, miss, thanks for asking,” comes the mechanical reply. With a polite smile, Percy closes the door behind me and walks around the car. The partition isn't up and I frown as he sits behind the wheel. Is it just me, or have the white streaks in his hair increased significantly since Cordelia Beaufort's death?

»How long have you been working for the Beauforts?« I ask and slide forward a little in my seat.

"For over twenty-five years, miss." I nod

sympathetically. "That's quite a long time." "I drove Mrs

Beaufort when she was in her early twenties." "What was she like?"

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For a moment, Percy seems to be searching for the right words.
»Intrepid and courageous. She turned the company upside down while she was studying, much to the dismay of her parents. But it was worth it.” In the rearview mirror I see his eyes shrink, as if he were smiling. »She always had a feel for trends. Even when she was heavily pregnant, she still went to work and got everything started. Nothing has the company's logo on it that hasn't been approved by her personally. She…” Percy interrupts himself. “She was a great woman,” he finally finishes in a hoarse voice.

A wave of compassion hits me. Percy seems like Mrs. Beaufort meant a lot to him. If I interpret the look in his eyes correctly, maybe even more than that.

"Are you really okay, Percy?" I whisper.
The chauffeur has to clear his throat. »I'll be fine someday go, miss. I just need a little time.”
"Naturally. If there's anything I can do for you..." I know I don't know how I could help Percy, but at this moment it feels right to offer it to him.

"There is actually something you could do for me." Our eyes meet in the rearview mirror. "Please take good care of James." My breath catches and I have to swallow.
"I will," I say after a moment. "I promise."

After twenty minutes the ride is over. While Percy parks the car, I look out the window and see the facade of the restaurant we have stopped in front of through the darkened window of the car. The route we took was definitely towards Pemwick. Still, the surroundings don't seem familiar to me.

Percy opens the door and helps me get out. The sun is just setting and bathes the gray building in front of me in an orange-red light.
The intricate lettering *The Golden Cuisine* is already glowing, and when Percy points to the entrance, my heart suddenly beats a little faster.

“Mr Beaufort is waiting for you inside. Have fun, Ms. Bell.”

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I thank Percy, then I nervously walk towards the entrance.
When I walk through the door, James is already waiting for me. A smile spreads across my face as if by itself. I'm so relieved that I'm feeling the same way with him now.

He wears a black shirt and a blue, rough-checked *Beaufort* suit that fits him like a glove. On the right breast pocket I can see the tiny monogram with his initials.

James returns my smile hesitantly and takes me in just as
See how I see him. My throat goes dry as his gaze slides down my body.

“You look beautiful,” he whispers.
I get goosebumps. "Thank you. You too." He offers
me his arm and then leads me further into the
Restaurants. It's full and I can only see a single free table. I automatically assume it's ours, but James goes through a side door to a staircase that leads to the upper floor.

When we get to the top, my breath catches in my throat. We are in a glazed winter garden. In the middle of the room there is a tree with brightly colored lanterns dangling from its branches. String lights are attached to the ceiling and along the windows, giving off a warm glow and giving the winter garden a magical atmosphere. Only one of the small round tables is set.

James leads me to our table. Acting like a gentleman, he pulls my chair back and slides it under my knees so I can sit down.

As he sits down opposite me, I glance through the windows. The view is breathtaking. You can still see the large fields around Pemwick, but I'm sure that the green hills will be in darkness within the next half hour.

A waiter appears out of nowhere and puts out a carafe of water
on the table before he puts the menus in front of us. I leaf through them, glancing up every now and then to see James. I wonder if I'm so nervous because this is my first official date with a boy - or because it's *James* sitting across from me, smiling at me over his glass.

I return the smile. "It's really beautiful here."

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»I think so too. Mum sometimes comes here to eat with Lydia and me gone. I have many fond memories of this winter garden," he replies.

These words make me feel so much affection for James that I feel warm inside. The fact that he wants to share this place with me touches me - especially because I know how difficult his relationship with his family is for him.

“Thank you for inviting me here.” I reach across the table for his hand and stroke it soft. James's gaze darkens.

"I want to show you that spending time with me is not just a burden. It can be more." "James -" I begin, but then the waiter comes back to our table and takes our orders. I decide on gnocchi with goat cheese, while James chooses stuffed chicken thigh. After that we are alone again and I try hard to think of how I can continue the conversation we just had. Sometimes I wish I were a small talk genius like Ember. She can think of an icebreaker in every situation, no matter how charged.

“By the way, I created an account on Goodreads,” James says suddenly.

I listen up. “Really?” He nods. »I want to tackle the list. The ones we did in Oxford.” He clears his throat and I can practically see the memory of that night flickering behind his eyes. »The books seemed like a good first step to me.«

"I think that's so great!" I burst out. "What's on your reading list?" James' mouth twitches suspiciously.

Then he takes out his phone and opens the app. He taps around for a moment and then looks up again.

“Okay, so: I read *Death Note ,”* he says.

"I saw it," I say. "And what do you say?" "It was brilliant. There was just one thing that really bothered me," he says seriously.

"I think I know what it is too," I reply.

"That was easy … I couldn't believe it. I almost gave up on the series after that." James shrugs. "But you were right about what you said."

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I look at him questioningly.

"So that you're missing an important part of your general education if you haven't read it."

I pause. “You remember that?” He tilts his head. »Of

course I still remember it. I remember everything, Ruby.” I swallow hard. “Me too,” I say quietly.

There's something in James' turquoise eyes that I haven't seen in ages, and a desire rises within me so suddenly and intensely that I have to clear my throat and reach for my glass of water.

“Show me your reading list,” I croak.

James blinks a few times, as if he, too, needs a moment to compose himself. Then he pushes his cell phone across the table to me. I look at his "read" list and am surprised at what is already listed there - some manga, but also a whole series of classic children's and young adult books such as *Harry Potter, Percy Jackson* or the works of John Green and Stephen Chbosky.

“When did you read all of them?” I ask him, surprised.

He raises one shoulder indecisively. »Mostly at night, when I'm not could sleep. Or during breaks at school. I've been looking for something to distract

myself with, and books work well. And now I've kind of gotten into the habit of reading before bed." "It's a great new habit." I continue scrolling through his account. “Can I put a few books on your “Want to

Read” list?” “Don’t force yourself. I'm already following a few now

Book bloggers whose recommendations I sometimes look at.«

I shake my head and smile. James and his blogs. He must really sit down with Ember, I think as I gradually fill out his list.

“You never stop,” James remarks amusedly.

»You said I shouldn't force myself.« James laughs. When the

food arrives, I am surprised to see that we have been sitting here talking for an hour without a single awkward moment or

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we were desperately looking for a new topic of conversation. On the contrary, we are speaking to each other more openly than we have in a long time. Perhaps even more openly than ever before.

The time in the winter garden is wonderful - and over far too quickly.
James says that he wants to make a good impression on my parents and that's why he wants to bring me back before midnight, which I accept with gritted teeth. If it had been up to me, we could have sat under the lanterns and talked forever.

Before I put my jacket on, I go to the window again
Side of the winter garden. It's pitch black now, but the view is still beautiful. The sky is clear of clouds and I can see stars in the firmament.

I've never experienced such a magical evening, and I want it
I definitely want to capture it for myself. So I take out my phone and take a photo. When I examine the result, however, I realize that you can't really see anything on it.

James steps behind me – so close that the hairs on my arms stand up. It's still not enough. I lean back and against him. James hesitantly lifts an arm and wraps it around me. He hugs me to him as I let my head fall back.

The moment is so beautiful, so intimate that I have to close my eyes for a moment.
I listen to his breathing and the music that echoes softly through the winter garden.
Suddenly I have an idea.

“Can I take a picture?” I ask quietly.

I can feel him nodding as his strands of hair brush my cheek
tickle. I pick up my phone and adjust the front camera.

“Smile,” I tell James.

Together we smile into the camera, he with his arms around my body, behind us the tree decorated with lanterns in this magical winter garden.

From now on, I decide, this image will replace the one I stole from Instagram and secretly saved on my laptop. But the thought fades as James buries his face in my neck. He takes a deep breath and presses his lips to the crook of my neck.

My breath catches and at the same time a violent tingling runs through my body. I put my hand over his and hold it tight, at the same time

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I have an insatiable desire to be closer to him. I lean back further, almost pressing myself against him, until I can hear him inhale sharply.

Suddenly James stops moving. My own breath goes much too fast. When I squeeze his hand briefly, we don't need any more words. James turns me around to face him, and in the next moment our lips find each other as if by themselves.

James wraps both arms around me and holds me tight. My hands are on his chest and I let them move further down until they touch his stomach, eliciting a groan from him. It sounds as desperate as I feel. At this moment I don't feel like there's a boundary between us anymore. We are just us.

Just like before and yet changed. Everything feels more meaningful.

Feeling James' lips on mine is still as exciting as it was when we first kissed, but at the same time I know him now. I know that movement he makes with his tongue, the feeling of his teeth on my bottom lip. As his hand slides to my ass and he pulls me even closer to him, I can feel his erection against my hip.

My knees go weak. I press myself against him until he almost stumbles behind me, I kiss him more forcefully, letting myself be guided completely by my feelings and the hot burning inside me.

But then he suddenly tears his lips away from mine. I'm still so drunk that I feel dizzy. James presses his forehead against mine, breathing heavily. His hand disappears from my butt, instead he puts it on the back of my head and strokes it gently.

“We have to stop.” It takes

me a moment to understand what he just said.

“Why?” I whisper.

He just shakes his head.

“Mr. Beaufort?” the waiter’s voice suddenly calls out.

James doesn't let go of me, he just makes a hum.

"I just wanted to let you know that your driver is ready now," the waiter continues, visibly embarrassed.

James lets go of me and our hands find each other without me doing anything. As if it were the most normal thing in the world, we leave the restaurant hand in hand, both with flushed cheeks and a murmured

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Farewell greeting to the waiter, who no longer dares to look at us.

A rush of cold air hits me outside. Percy is already standing in front of the limousine and holds the door open for us. I thank him and get in, James close behind me. I sit down in the seat I sat on the way there. James falls down next to me.

His eyes are dark and his lips are as red and swollen as mine feel. I can still feel the slight throbbing in my lower lip - and not just there. I feel electrified, my whole body is electrified. I can hardly sit still, the impulse to continue exactly where we left off is so great.

The city lights of Pemwick pass us by as Percy pulls the car onto the country road. The partition is raised and I look up to see if the red light on the intercom is flashing.

Do not do it.

I turn my head to James, who has followed my gaze. His lips are slightly parted and his chest rises and falls quickly. The kiss affected him just as much as it affected me, that's obvious.

"James," I whisper.

He holds his breath.

I move on my own. The attraction that comes from James is so complete that I can't possibly sit in this seat for twenty minutes without doing something. Surprise flashes in his eyes as I move closer to him.

"Kiss me, James," I whisper.

He just shakes his head, but takes my face in the same breath in his hands and presses his lips firmly to mine. We let out a simultaneous sigh, and the sounds mingle and vibrate in my body. The world around me fades. There is only James and me - no past, no future. Just us and the lights of the night rushing past.

"I missed you," I whisper.

He makes an almost desperate sound and kisses me deeper.

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I'm not prepared for what he does to me. I wouldn't have thought it might feel like this. No matter how often James and I are together, it just gets more and more overwhelming. The longing in me grows with each of his kisses, an insatiable desire for him and his closeness that I don't think will ever go away.

I grab his hair and pull him closer to me. It's all happening too fast, but I can't help it. James' hard body is pressed against mine, and I need him. Right now, I need him like I've never needed anyone before.

I'm just about to say the words when James pulls away from me. He looks at me with a veiled expression and strokes my cheek with one hand before letting his mouth wander down my neck.

“I missed you too,” he whispers against my throat. He sucks on the skin, and my breath catches. »Whenever I saw you at school, I wanted to do this.« I sigh and close my eyes. »Next time you can

make. “You have my permission,” I say breathlessly.

He lets out a harsh laugh. “Good to know.” James slowly

works his way down, but I want to feel his mouth on mine again, so I pull him up and hold him tight.

His tongue swirls around mine and I explore his body with my other hand. All that clothing is clearly getting in the way, no matter how good he looks in that damn suit. I open the first button of his shirt.

"Ruby," he interrupts me quietly.

I keep going. At the third button, James grabs my wrist and holds it tight. I look up and look into his dark eyes. James stares at me, breathing heavily.

I can see him swallowing. »You can usually do me move out at any time. Really. As far as I'm concerned, everywhere. But…” He stops himself and looks around the car. Then he looks at me again. »I actually wanted our next time to be something very special. And if we don't stop now, then I don't know...” I feel the heat rushing to my face. He's right. "I wasn't thinking."··

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My cheeks are still hot as I begin his
Slowly button the shirt back up. But even after I close the last button, I can't look at his face again.

“Ruby,” James suddenly whispers.

I pretend to want to fix the collar, but there's nothing wrong with it. "Mh?"
"Ruby," he repeats quietly. "Please look at me." I
breathe in and look up again. The first thing I notice is that
James' face is just as red as mine feels. The second is the look in his eyes. It's incredibly tender. "I'm not ready either

⋯ I think we should take it slow.”

“Because we have time,” I say harshly.

“All the time in the world,” James confirms.

I nod and exhale haltingly. Then I lean back with a
Sigh back into the seat and close your eyes. We are silent for a few seconds.

At some point James reaches for my hand. "Thank you for saying yes. To this date, I mean," he whispers.

I squeeze his hand. »It was a nice date.« »I thought so too.«

There is something
in his tone that makes me want to
to watch. His eyes sparkle wickedly and his smile is so hot that for a moment I feel disarmed.

Just two weeks ago I wouldn't have thought it possible that he
I would never look at him like that again, let alone experience something like that moment with him again. I would love to say so much more to him - but I can't. Not enough time has passed for that, the wounds are still too fresh to heal.

James seems serious, but the fear that he might turn away from me again is still there.

I'll try to imagine him in a few years. Adult, more mature. More confident in his decisions, without the unpredictability that I have come to know over the past six months. What kind of person would it make me if I only allowed him to take a place in my life again? Do I even have the certainty that we will still be there for each other?

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Although – who am I kidding here? For me it will always just be James. I could never love anyone else the way I love him - in that all-consuming, devouring, passionate way.

“What are you thinking about?” he suddenly whispers, running his fingers over my skin.

Because I'm in love with you.

Because you are the only one for me.

Because it scares me.

"I was just thinking that we need to talk to each other more in the future. About our problems. So that nothing bad happens again," I answer hesitantly.

something …

James looks at me intently. There's a determination in his eyes that I've never seen before. "We'll get it done, Ruby." I swallow hard. “Are you sure?” He nods briefly. Only once. “Yes, I am.” Relief washes over me. Hearing James say that with such certainty makes my doubts lessen.

We just sit next to each other for a while and look at our intertwined fingers. Then James leans back and grins at me.

"Best date ever," he murmurs, raising our hands to kiss my fingers.

I nod. “I think so too.” Suddenly his eyes light up. “Come visit us tomorrow evening,” he says. »Me and Lydia. I know she would be happy to see you too.” I hesitate. “Your father…” “Dad is in London all weekend. We could do sushi order."

James looks so happy and so nervous at the same time that his excitement passes straight over to me. I've only been to his house once, and I only have sad memories of that visit.

I am ready to replace them with new – more beautiful – ones.

"Sure. Tomorrow night. I'll bring Ben & Jerry's." "Perfect. Percy will pick you up." Suddenly James frowns.

“Speaking of which…” He leans forward towards the speakerphone button

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"Shouldn't we be in Gormsey by now, Percy?"

For a brief moment we only hear a faint hissing noise. Then "I thought you might need ⋯ a little more... privacy, sir." I look at James with wide eyes. He looks back at me just as perplexed. Then I start snorting.

James joins me in laughing and buries his face in my neck.

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25

Ruby

I see Lydia's messages just as Percy turns onto the Beauforts' property.

Change of plans!
Our dad just came home.
You better tell Percy to turn around.
Ruby?

She sent me the first one about fifteen minutes ago, the last one three minutes ago, and I also have three missed calls from James on my cell phone. Panic rises in me as I stare at my cell phone and think about what I should do.
But before I even have a chance to think clearly, Percy stops the Rolls-Royce in front of the Beaufort house.

I watch with increasing alarm as he gets out to go
Car goes around and opens the door. Swallowing hard, I take the small bag in which I have stored the three packs of Ben & Jerry's, take the hand that Percy is holding out to me and let him help me out. There I take a deep breath of the cool evening air and look around carefully.

At the top of the massive door I can see James and Lydia standing on the threshold, already waiting for me. James has both arms crossed over his chest, while Lydia gives me a quick wave. I turn to Percy. »I don't know how long I can stay. Are you here for a while?”

A thin smile spreads across the chauffeur’s lips.
“I'm always here, Ms. Bell. Just let Mr. Beaufort let me know and I'll drive you home." He lifts his cap slightly, then gets back into the car, presumably to drive it to the wide garages on the side of the house.

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I quickly climb the stairs to the entrance.

"Hey," I whisper when they're both within earshot. "I have the News just a minute ago. Your dad is here?"

James and Lydia nod. Although they both look anything but happy, James pulls me into a quick hug. “Hey,” he murmurs into the crook of my neck, and I get goosebumps all over my body.

After we have separated, Lydia sighs. »Dad is He came home specifically because he wanted to have dinner with us.”

"Then I'd better go, right?" I ask uncertainly. I don't want to give them the impression that I'm going to run away as soon as things get complicated. After all, James has also endured an entire evening in the company of my family. But they look so unhappy about having to spend time with their father that I don't want to complicate the situation with my presence.

James smiles at me crookedly. »I just want to give you this torture Spare.” Just

then Mortimer Beaufort appears in the hallway.

When he sees me, his eyes widen for a split second.

I stiffen.

»Invite your guest in and close the door, damn it, where do we live “Here?” comes his booming voice. Lydia and James open their eyes and turn around.

We stare at each other for a second. Lydia is the first to react and gently pulls me into the house by the arm. She closes the door behind me and then I'm suddenly standing just a few meters away from Mortimer Beaufort, who looks me up and down.

I do the same. He is wearing a tailored dark blue suit and his sandy hair is combed neatly to the side and held there with gel. It has lightened a little since we last saw each other, but the look in his eyes is unchanged - ice cold, without a single emotion. I swallow hard. My throat feels like I've swallowed sand.

The next moment I ask myself why I allow this Man intimidates me so much. I don't care what he thinks of me, after all, I only feel anger, contempt and dislike for him - and no respect whatsoever.

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So I straighten my back and meet his gaze. "Good Evening, Mr. Beaufort," I say.

"Dad, I'm sure you remember Ruby," James adds.

Mr Beaufort nods briefly at me. Then he turns to James. "The food is ready. Yours." He doesn't look at me or ⋯ Girlfriend is invited.«

Lydia again before turning around and disappearing into a room at the other end of the entrance hall.

Beside me, I can hear Lydia exhale sharply. "Oh God, Ruby," she says. "I am so sorry. We wanted to have a nice evening, and now we have to deal with Dad. Instead of sushi, we'll probably have coq au vin now." She grimaces.

James's gaze is intense as he looks at me. "You can still disappear." "Your father has already

seen me." "It doesn't matter." "Would you

rather I

disappear?" James doesn't hesitate for a second. "No, of

course not. The sooner Dad become comfortable with the idea that you belong to us, the better."

Warmth spreads through my body at his words. I reach for James' arm and give it a quick squeeze. "I'm not going to disappear. I also like coq au vin.« I lift up my bag. »And I have ice cream with me.« »I'll take it to the kitchen quickly,«

says Lydia. »You guys go before."

James' hand is on my lower back as we enter the dining room enter. The room is huge, with high walls and wide windows that look out onto the back of the Beaufort estate.

The dark green of the walls is echoed in the upholstery of the chairs, and the long dining table, made of glossy dark wood, is topped by an imposing chandelier that could easily rival those in the ballrooms of Maxton Hall. The table is professionally set, with several sets of cutlery, pretty china and wine glasses with gold accents.

But it is not only the furnishings and decoration that distinguishes this dining room – if you can even call it that – from our home. First and foremost, it is the atmosphere that

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It is tense and cold and no comparison to the warm, relaxed atmosphere in which I grew up.

Just like in the tailor shop in London, Mortimer fills

Here, too, Beaufort fills the entire room with his presence. His aloof manner and the coldness in his gaze ensure that there is no chance of feeling even remotely comfortable. It is astonishing.

I could never imagine living in a house with this man.

We take our seats one after the other, Mr Beaufort at the head of the table, James on his left, me next to him and Lydia opposite us. Two kitchen assistants enter the room and place a deep bowl of soup in front of each of us, which gives off a delicious smell.
I follow James and Lydia's example and spread the folded cloth napkin on my lap.

“To a lovely evening,” says Mr Beaufort, raising his glass.

James and Lydia murmur something in agreement and I raise my glass too.

This is already the most unpleasant evening I have had in a long time.

We spend the first ten minutes in silence. The room is so quiet that it seems unnaturally loud when I swallow or put my glass down on the table. I try hard to think of anything I could say - or should say. But no matter how hard I try, I can't think of anything.

I dare a look at James, who gives me a small smile.

Finally, Lydia speaks up. »The charity gala went well, right, Ruby? I only hear positive things.«

I am relieved that she has chosen a topic with which I I know about it and can talk about it. "Absolutely. We raised over two hundred thousand pounds, which far exceeded our expectations." "Wow," says Lydia. "Was Lexington happy?" I nod. "Yes,

luckily he's mostly happy with us." "With a few exceptions,"
murmurs James.

When I turn my head to him, he smiles into his glass.

I know what he's thinking about right now. The day we were next to each other sitting in front of Lexington's desk and James was sent to the punishment work in the

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The event committee is still as present in my memory as if it had only happened yesterday. I return his grin.

»Well, maybe with one exception. But that hardly had anything to do with me and my team." "Ruby," Mr. Beaufort interrupts our

conversation, and I notice how
The grin instantly slips from my face. "I hear you are very active at school."

"Yes. I've been on the event committee for two years." He nods briefly.
The emotion is barely noticeable. "I see." "Ruby *heads* the event
committee," says James, without looking up from his soup.

His father ignores him. »And do you want to study too?« »I'm going to Oxford in
the autumn.« Mr Beaufort looks up with
interest, and for the first time that
In the evening I have the feeling that he really notices me.

I hold my breath. Everything in me is reluctant to talk to this man about Oxford. This is something that is sacred to me and I don't want to let it be ruined by someone who has no idea what being able to study at this university really means to me.

»Oh, really? Which course did you choose?« »PPE«, I reply.

»This is a solid course of study. And which college are you going to?' 'St Hilda's, sir.' He nods.

“So the same college
that accepted James.
How convenient." I
ignore his insinuation. "It's a great college. The interviews there..." I fall silent.
Mrs Beaufort died during the days of the interviews. I look at Lydia, who has stopped with the spoon halfway to her mouth and is now staring thoughtfully into her soup. "I really liked everything there and I can't wait to finally get started," I finish quickly. I can hardly imagine how painful it must be for James and Lydia to think back to that time. I risk a glance at James, but he doesn't show any reaction and just carries on spooning his soup.

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The appetizer alone takes over an hour. During the main course
Lydia and I try to make the best of the situation and talk about everything from films and music to books and blogs. When Lydia tells us that she used to dance ballet, even Mr Beaufort manages a tiny smile. It disappears at least as quickly as it appeared, and afterwards I'm not sure whether I've just imagined it after all.

"I once had the smallest supporting role in the world in The *Nutcracker ,* but I was so proud," remembers Lydia. She is just cutting up her chicken, which has been beautifully decorated with grilled vegetables. The chef has put so much effort into arranging the plates that I almost don't dare to destroy his little work of art.

»I'd like to see photos, please.« »You
don't want to,« James murmurs next to me. »She was one of the little rats. The pictures are creepy.« »Why don't you tell Ruby
that you also had ballet lessons back then?
"What did you take?" Lydia asks across the table. When James shoots her a withering look, she sticks a large fork in her mouth and shrugs.

"Did you really?" I ask, surprised.
A muscle in James' jaw bulges. "Lydia acted like it was really hard. She complained every day. I just told her not to make such a fuss, after all, everyone could jump around in the air a little." "So he took part in three trial lessons," Lydia bursts out
laughing. "You

you should have seen him. He really wasn't good." "How
long did you last?" I ask, grinning.
"Until Lydia promises me not to complain about the lessons at home anymore."

»You were a really nice brother,« I remark.
“You do what you can,” replies James.
»Fortunately, he only did that for those three hours. Otherwise
I probably would have stopped immediately and not lasted another two years,"
says Lydia.
"Why did you stop?" I ask.
»Lack of discipline,« Mr Beaufort replies, as if I had asked him the question and not Lydia. »My daughter generally only does things

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that are easy for her. As soon as she is faced with a challenge, she gives up. An

uncomfortable, heavy silence settles over us like a dark cloud that will thunder away at any moment.

Lydia's lips have turned into a pale line. James next to me is gripping his cutlery so tightly that his knuckles are clearly visible. The only one who continues to eat in peace is Mr. Beaufort. He doesn't even seem to notice that he has ruined the mood at the table with his nasty comment.

How can you be so insensitive to everything that's happening around you? So ignorant of your own children?

The Lydia I have become friends with is ready to face any challenge. I have the feeling that Mr Beaufort doesn't know his own daughter when he speaks of her like that.

"I'd still like to see the photos," I finally say, breaking the oppressive silence in a tone that I try to sound cheerful. "I'm sure you looked lovely, even as a little rat." I've never had to act as a mood bridge between several people before - at least not like I am now - and I have no idea if it's working or if I'm just making things worse. All I know is that I want to take some of the tension away from James and Lydia.

"I'll show you after dinner," Lydia replies with a forced smile. She raises her head and for a moment it looks as if she is looking at her father. But then I see that she is looking past him at the huge family portrait that hangs on the wall above the old fireplace. The oil painting shows the whole Beaufort family, including Mrs Beaufort with her fox-red hair. When it was painted, James and Lydia were perhaps six, seven at the most.

"Well," says Mr Beaufort suddenly, dabbing his mouth with the cloth napkin and standing up. "I have a conference call today.
Good evening." He nods to us, then leaves the room.

I look back and forth between James and Lydia in shock, but neither of them seems particularly surprised by their dad's sudden departure.

»He just left,« I whisper, looking over the
Shoulder to the door through which Mr Beaufort just disappeared.

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“That’s normal, don’t worry,” explains Lydia, leaning back in her chair. She strokes her stomach with a smile.

The fact that she can do this in our presence without thinking fills me with a warmth that is very welcome after the icy stares from Mr. Beaufort.

"He always finds an excuse to get out of uncomfortable situations," James notes, taking a long drink from his water glass. "Even if he forced us to do it in the first place. I can't remember seeing him for more than two hours at a time." He snorts. "Not that I'm unhappy about it." "I doubt he's even having a conference. Mum would never have allowed it," Lydia mutters.

James holds his breath. After a moment he lets it out audibly escape. “If you want, you’re saved from this,” he says, looking sideways at me.

I frown. “What do you think?” “We can end this depressing evening here and catch up with him next week.”

Lydia nods. "Yes, no one will mind if you'd rather leave."

I look back and forth between the two indignantly. »I'm wasting away not this delicious food." I point with my fork first at my half-eaten chicken, then at Lydia. "And I'm not leaving until I've seen your ballet pictures." Lydia laughs, and James shakes his head, smiling.

I go back to my food and try not to let on how much the encounter with Mortimer Beaufort has disturbed me.

The rest of the meal is much more relaxed, but I'm still happy when we can go into Lydia's room after dessert and close the door behind us. Now we're sitting on her big, comfortable sofa and looking through old photo albums.

“You were adorable,” I sigh, pointing to a picture of James and Lydia hug each other, their little chubby cheeks pressed tightly together.

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»There are three of us in the picture. “Look at the curls I used to have,” says Lydia, pointing to the little curls on her head.

“Aren’t they like that anymore?” I ask.

She shakes her head and runs a hand over her ponytail. "No. Although I'm glad about that. Having to tame them every morning would probably drive me crazy." "But they looked so cute. James didn't have any curls." I look at James, who is sitting in

one of the two armchairs opposite the couch, leafing through a travel magazine.

“His hair has always looked like this,” Lydia interrupts my thoughts.

I lean forward to take a closer look at the photo. “He had that serious look before,” I note.

Lydia snorts and turns the page. On the next page, a picture of a sulking Mini James appears, holding an empty ice cream cone.

“The ice cream fell out of his cone,” Lydia explains with a grin.

"Poor baby James," I murmur and grin as well. When I look over at James, he just raises an eyebrow.

"Lydia, you don't have to pretend to feel sorry for me. I can still hear your malicious laughter," he says dryly.

»That's not true at all!« »Oh no? So you

didn't laugh?« he replies mockingly.

“Yes, but after a short while I offered to share my ice cream with you.” “You had banana ice cream.

What kind of person likes banana ice cream?” “Not me,” I interject.

James points at me. "See." "You're both a

bit crazy," says Lydia, shaking her head and turning the page. In the next pictures, the twins are probably six or seven, and now Alistair, Wren, Cyril and Keshav are appearing alongside them more and more often.

»It's crazy that you've all known each other for so long,« I say with Admiration in his voice.

"Yes or? Sometimes it feels like we’re all siblings.”

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I nod and look at a picture of a chubby Alistair, his golden blonde curls sticking out in all directions. Then my eyes shift to a small version of James holding Mini-Wren in a headlock.

"Have you and Wren actually talked to each other?" I ask James quietly.

»We talked about a few things.« He hesitates. »At the moment There's a lot going on with him.«

“Is it something bad?” Lydia asks immediately.

James shrugs. "I promised him I wouldn't tell him." Lydia frowns worriedly. I can see that

she struggles with herself for a few seconds and actually wants to ask, but then she just nods. "All right. But do you think it's something that can be fixed?" James nods confidently. "Wren can get through this. After all, he has

us."

Lydia and I exchange a skeptical look.

At the same time, I feel relief that the argument between Wren and James seems to be over. When James and I spoke on the phone on the night of my birthday, he confided in me how important it was to him to enjoy this last year at school with his friends. He wanted to spend it carefree and not worry about what would come after.

His lightheartedness has been taken away by his mum's death, but that makes it all the more important that he still has friends he can count on. And vice versa.

A little later I say goodbye to Lydia and James takes me home. That means Percy will take me home, but James will get in the Rolls-Royce with me. We are quiet as we leave the property towards Gormsey.

Even if I don't want it, it feels like the encounter is happening with Mortimer Beaufort like a shadow over us. I've seen the man three times in my life, and each time he's tried to drive a wedge between James and me. I really hope James won't let this happen again. That what is emerging between us is stronger than his father's influence.

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»What are you thinking about?« James asks suddenly, his voice deep and warm.

I look up and meet his turquoise gaze. A tingling
spreads in my stomach.

I take a deep breath. "That I would like to have more weekends like this with you."

James' gaze slides back to my eyes and down again, as if he doesn't know how to resist.

»At the same time, I ask myself...« I pause.

James waits and continues to look at me. “What are you wondering?” he asks after a while.

»I wonder how this will continue. For you,” I whisper. “With you and your dad, I mean. That he tells you how to live your life and you let him push you into a corner you don't want to be in?"

James lowers his gaze and stares at the footwell of the Rolls-Royce as if there were something exciting to discover there. He takes a deep breath. Again. Finally, he slowly shakes his head.

"It's not just about him," he begins after a while, his voice scratchy. "Everything depends on *Beaufort ,* Ruby. This is not my father's life's work that I'm about to take over." I swallow hard as he looks up again and looks directly at me. "I disappoint." I inhale sharply. … I don't want my mom

I never thought about that. Of course, a lot changed with his mother's death. I always thought everything would be okay as long as James pursued his dreams and not his father's. But now I realize that it's no longer about that.

James is not only tied to *Beaufort* through his father . Now, first and foremost, it is his mother who keeps him there.

“You won’t disappoint your mom,” I whisper.

»What if I do? What if I can’t do it?« I realise
an emotion in his eyes that I've never seen there before: fear. It flickers in his gaze and suddenly seems to fill the entire limousine.

"I'm with you," I say. It's just four little words, but in this one
Second I put everything I can give into those few syllables.

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James looks at me for a long time. He seems to understand what else I want to say with these words. Little by little, the pure panic disappears from his eyes and is replaced by confidence and the warmth with which he has looked at me all evening.

The next moment James reaches for my hand. He laces his fingers with mine and squeezes gently.

"And I am with you. No matter what happens." I sink back and lean my head against his shoulder.

My next breath is a little easier.
We will do it.

James

It's after half past one when a loud bang makes me jump up. I jump up so quickly that the e-reader slips off my bed and lands on the floor, but I don't care. I run like a madman across the hall to Lydia's room. But when I open the door, she's just sitting in her bed, rubbing her tired eyes.

"Are you okay?" I ask.
She nods. "What was that?"

"Dad, probably," I say, feeling my pulse speed increases.

I don't want to go down.

I don't want to know what he's broken again.

I don't want to worry about him, damn it.

Although everything in me is screaming that I should go back to my room I make my way downstairs. Something clinks again.
Whatever Dad does, he does it in the dining room.

I sneak quietly through the hallway. The closer I get, the more clearly I can hear him. He mumbles something, sounding annoyed, like he's talking to someone. Mary or Percy maybe?

Shortly before the dining room I make a slight turn and finally press myself against the wall to the left of the door.

"Bitch," my father slurs. "You shouldn't have done that." I move closer, frowning. Who the hell is he talking to?

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»I will never forgive you. Now I'm alone with the two of them
do everything wrong and it's *your damn fault!'* He screams the last two words. I lean
out of my hiding place and just see him fire a decanter of whiskey at the family portrait
above the dining room table. I gasp dryly as the carafe crashes loudly, the
clink echoing in my ears. The brown liquid runs down Mum and over Lydia and me.
The colors look like they are dissolving. Mum's face melts like a melting wax figure,
gradually turning into a monster. A grotesque grimace that looks down on my father from
above and mocks him.

The anger towards him that has always slumbered within me comes to life
again at this moment, and a heat that only he can trigger in me runs through my veins. I
clench my hands into fists and am just about to go into the room and confront him when
he suddenly makes a different noise.

From behind I can see his shoulders shaking. He gasps for air several
times, then suddenly his knees give way and he sinks to the ground. Right in the middle
of the broken glass. He puts his hands over his face, and then I hear it again.

My father is sobbing.

I can't move, I'm frozen in place as I watch him cry. I think of all the times he made
me cry. I think of the beatings and his shouting, his insults and the coldness with which
he always looks at me. I think of the day of the funeral, when he gave us instructions
on how to behave. His silence after Mum died.

And I notice that I don't feel the satisfaction that I actually want to feel. On the
contrary – my dad is suffering. What kind of person would it make me if I turned
around and disappeared into my room right now?

It's not easy for me to take the first step, but I do it.
I go into the dining room, careful not to step on the broken pieces of his temper tantrum,
and stand behind him. Instinctively, I put a hand on Dad's shoulder and squeeze
briefly. The sobs stop abruptly and he holds his breath.

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Just as I'm about to pull my hand away, he grabs it. He clings to it almost desperately, and I let him. A strange feeling comes over me. Something I haven't felt for my father in ages.

I look up at our picture. Dad has both hands on Lydia's shoulders as I stand in front of Mum and she holds me with both arms. Although the colors are mostly blurred, I still remember exactly how it was back then. I still remember exactly how it felt to be part of a family.

The feeling that is arising in me right now is only a shadow of it, but I'm holding on to it.

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26

Lydia

I have to order a dress online for the first time in my life.

Instead of walking down Bond Street in London and checking out each shop at least once, I now sit on Ruby's bed and click through one online shop after another. It's fun, especially because I don't have to do it alone, but I'm already looking forward to going back to my favorite shops and being able to touch and look at the clothes up close.

However, that won't be an option for me in the next few months
Most of the shopkeepers there know me, and the chances of them taking
one look at my belly and putting two and two together are far too high for me. Because then it would only be a matter of time before Dad found out about it.

The thought sends an ice-cold shiver through my body.

No, online shopping will have to do for now.

“What do you think of that?” Ruby asks, turning the laptop towards me.

I just wrinkle my nose. "It looks like someone slipped with the scissors," I say, tracing the hem of the dress with my index finger, which is quite a bit longer at the back than at the front. "My mum would have been really upset about that cut. And the color.

And the unmotivated lace trim on the cleavage." "Okay, okay,"

says Ruby, laughing and closing the page. »Then take a look
we here again. We only got to page twelve of twenty-seven.”

She begins to scroll down and together we watch as dresses in a variety of colors and cuts appear on the display.

»Maybe I should just skip the spring ball,«
I suggest after a while.

Ruby immediately shakes her head. »It's your last
Spring ball, Lydia. You *have to* come."

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“I'm starting to think it's impossible to find a dress to hide this belly in. What if someone's penny drops?" I ask, pointing to the small ball hidden under my oversized sweatshirt.

»We'll find another dress. Don't worry.” Ruby sounds a lot more confident than I feel.

Although Dr. Hearst told me that my belly is growing rather slowly compared to other women expecting twins, I already feel huge. In the last few weeks I have gotten into the habit of holding my bag in front of me at school and I am also wearing all my blouses two sizes larger. James stole them from the sewing room without noticing after one of his meetings at *Beaufort .* For the first time I am happy about the fact that our school uniforms were designed by Mum and are produced in our sewing room.

I wish I could do the same with the spring prom dress. I already regret letting Ruby and James persuade me to go. The dress isn't even my biggest problem. First and foremost, I want to avoid having to see Graham outside of class.

But I can't tell Ruby that - and certainly not James. I I wouldn't be able to bear it if he looked at me with pity one more time. Not after last Wednesday, when I pinched a nerve in my back and lay helpless in bed like a bug. The pain was so bad that I couldn't move and had to wait until James heard my cries for help. And then he had to help me get *dressed .*

It was humiliating and I would like to erase the entire morning from my mind. Forever. If I tell him now that I can't bear to see Graham at a party, he will definitely think I'm completely unstable. And I don't want that.

"What about this?" asks Ruby.

I don't like this dress either. It's too young, not glamorous enough and reminds me of a uniform. "I would actually like a dress that doesn't make me stand out completely."

»I never thought it would be so difficult to find a dress that fits *you Midsummer Night's Dream .* I already regret having suggested the motto."

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»It's a beautiful motto. And a dress by Elie Saab would be perfect
fit in with that," I sigh.

Ruby types the name into the search bar of her browser and then exclaims
enthusiastically: »That would be a perfect fit.
The flower appliqués look absolutely beautiful and oh god, they cost a fortune." "Oh, well.
That is not the

problem. But you have to have a dress like that
always try things on on site, and that's just not possible right now.«

Apart from the fact that it would be totally exaggerated to
a school dance. I'm going to save the Elie Saab dream for my wedding. Or any
wedding - because it's likely that all my friends will get married before me. My
love life still consists of reading old messages from Graham and bursting into tears,
preferably in a way that nobody notices.

It is a complete tragedy.

"We could ask Ember for help," Ruby says hesitantly. "She finds
Always the best things online." She gives me a cautious look. "We don't need to tell her
more than she needs to know." "Don't you think she'll figure it out on her own?" I ask

cautiously.

"That could be. Ember has a sense of mystery," Ruby muses. "But even if she
finds out, I hope you know she would never say anything." I take a deep breath. Over
the last few weeks and months,

Ruby has proven to me that she is a good friend. Maybe even the best I've ever had.
I can't imagine that she would betray me. And if she trusts her sister, I can too.

"If you think Ember can solve my clothing problem, then I'd be happy if we asked
her." Ruby beams. Then she stands up. »When did

Percy and James want to come and pick you up? Do we still have time?" "Training
won't be over for half an hour," I say after a quick

look at the clock. "It'll probably be a quarter past seven by the time he gets here."
"Perfect." Ruby opens the door and waves me over. I follow her into the hallway. Ember's
room is

right next to Ruby's, and her door is open

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Ajar. Ruby knocks twice.

»Ember, do you have a moment? We have a little clothing emergency.” “Sure, come in,” she calls to us.

We enter Ember's room together. It's just as big as Ruby's and pretty cluttered. A bed, a desk, another, narrower table with a sewing machine on it, and right next to it a dressmaker's dummy with a dress hanging on it. My eyes widen.

"Is that your dress?" I ask Ruby, stunned.

I actually want to look at it up close immediately, but I remember my manners in time. "Hi, Ember," I say and raise my hand.

Ruby's sister sits on the floor in front of her bed, in front of her a few Rolls of fabric and swatches of fabric samples. She has a big, messy bun on her head, from which a few dark strands have come loose. A pen is stuck between her lips.

»Hi,« she mumbles and puts the swatches aside to take the pen out of the to take mouth. “What's the emergency?” “Lydia needs a

dress for the spring ball. She would love to have one from Elie Saab, but unfortunately that won't happen this time. Do you have any other ideas about where we could find something that fits the motto? We’ve already gone through the internet shops you showed me.”

»Elie Saab would be really perfect. The clothes are so beautiful.” Ember sighs. “I have tons of them on my dress board on Pinterest.” “Or?” I ask, stepping closer to

the dress form. About the

I throw a questioning look at Ember over my shoulder. "May I?" She nods.

"Sure." I look closely

at the dress. It is a soft pink color, has a tulle skirt and a top embroidered with flowers. Upon closer inspection, I notice that there are two pieces that Ember probably wants to sew together with a wide silk ribbon and that are now held together with small pins.

“Did you sew this yourself?”

Ember nods.

"It's beautiful," I say sincerely.

Ember's cheeks gain a bit of color. »We were really lucky, I actually just ordered the tulle for fun. The quality isn't particularly good, but a layperson won't notice that once everything is finished.«

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Suddenly I hear Mum's voice in my ear.

Talent. Pure talent.

Lately I've been thinking about her all the time. In the strangest situations and in the strangest places I see her face or hear her voice, and although it still hurts beyond belief to think about her, I find these moments beautiful and calming at the same time. As if part of Mum was still with me.

»You're really talented, Ember. I wish I could sew that well." "Isn't that something you learn

when you grow up in a family like yours?" she asks cautiously.

I shrug my shoulders.

I still remember begging my parents when I was thirteen to hire a seamstress to teach me.
I wanted to implement the designs I had drawn, but I had no idea about the basics. Dad wanted to see my sketches and designs first to know if it was worth paying for my lessons.

But when he realized that I had designed clothes for young women, he immediately rejected me with a dismissive snort.

After that, I more or less taught myself how to sew.
But even the finished skirts and blouses didn't convince my parents that a women's collection at *Beaufort* would be a good and important step. And at some point it became too depressing for me to sit at the sewing machine for hours and put my heart and soul into a piece of clothing that no one would ever wear. “Not anymore,” I answer after one

»I used to be able to sew. Now for …
a while.

"How come?" It

feels nice that Ember just asks. Most people are rather self-conscious when talking to me, as if they don't know what they can and can't ask me. This leads to them only talking to me about trivial things. Ember is one of the few exceptions: she makes me feel like she's really interested in what I have to say.

»I always wanted to bring out my own collection under *Beaufort ,*
but my parents have categorically ruled out women’s fashion in

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range. So I eventually gave up sewing." Ember looks at me thoughtfully. "So you don't design

anything anymore?" "Yes, but..." I shrug my shoulders. "Only for myself, not for

Beaufort." "I'm sorry," Ruby says quietly next to me, and Ember nods in agreement. "I could say something

like 'Never give up!', but I can imagine how depressing it must be to keep getting rejected. At some point I would get fed up with it."

"Yes." I feel these dark clouds gathering inside me contractions that always drag me into a whirlpool of dark thoughts that I only find my way out of after hours. As quickly as I can, I try to distract myself and concentrate on something else. »Whatever, change the subject! Where do you think you could get a nice dress for the spring ball? Ruby said, as a blogger, you know all the insider tips," I chirped cheerfully. I can hear for myself how contrived it sounds.

Ember looks at the doll before turning to me. »I have still plenty of material. If you want, I can sew you a dress." I'm speechless for a moment.

Then I realize I can't possibly ask her for this favor. I shake my head slowly. »It's too much work. Besides, the party is Saturday in a week." Ember makes a dismissive gesture. "Nonsense. I would have

I wouldn't have made the offer if I didn't have enough time. "You can probably give me a slip from one of your old dresses, right?" Ember asks. "We'll make you something pretty, it'll be great."

"Accept the offer, Lydia," Ruby tells me, putting an arm around my shoulder.

I am so overwhelmed by the openness of both of them, by their warmth and willingness to help, that my throat tightens and my eyes begin to burn. I blink frantically and breathe in and out deeply. Maybe it's the hormones, but I'm finding it incredibly difficult to keep my composure at this moment.

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“Thank you,” I finally manage to say.

“Oh, don’t thank me yet. My work has a price. Whereby this one is very small…,” says Ember, looking back and forth between me and Ruby with an almost devilish smile.

Confused, I look at Ruby, who looks anything but happy.

"Ember..." she says, her tone serious.

»Come on, Ruby.« Turning to me, she adds: »I would like to go to the party with you.« »That's a great idea! Isn't it?« I ask Ruby, but she just looks at her sister with a grim expression.

"Lydia would like it if I went with you." "You haven't told me yet who the mysterious boy is,

"Who you met at the last party," says Ruby.

“What does he have to do with me wanting to have a nice girls’ night out with you?” Ember replies.

Ruby just raises an eyebrow.

“I saw what you ordered from the decorating company. I I really want to go to the fairy ball too. When do you experience a party like that?" Ember continues.

Ruby takes a deep breath, holds it for a few seconds and lets they then slowly escape. “We agreed on rules last time and you didn't stick to them. I'm just worried." "I haven't been drinking or being naked on the tables

danced. So I don’t give you any reason to worry at all.”

Ruby sighs. She doesn't say anything for a while. She looks like she would mentally make a pros and cons list.

“The same rules apply as last time,” she finally says. "And this time you'll stick to it - deal?" Ember's smile widens.

“Agreed?” Ruby asks.

»I would love to accompany you to the spring ball, Ruby. Thank you for the nice invitation!" Ember says triumphantly. When Ruby doesn't react, she exhales audibly. "Deal, I'll follow your rules." "Okay," says Ruby and nods. "Then I guess we'll have a three-way date to the spring ball."

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Ember cheers and elbows me in the side. "This is going to be so great." I hope she's right.

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Lydia

The dress that Ember made is a dream. The top is made of a flowing champagne-colored fabric and has short sleeves. Just below my chest, she sewed on a tulle skirt - similar to Ruby's dress - with lots of little fabric flowers scattered across it. It falls gently and is cut in such a way that it hides my belly as best as possible. I'm pretty sure Ember knows about it, but strangely enough, I don't have a bad feeling about it.

"I think we need to get going slowly," says Ruby with a glance at the clock on my desk. It is made of dark wood and gold ornaments decorate the shimmering clock face. My father gave it to me for my tenth birthday. I have no idea why I still have it there. It's not even particularly pretty, but I can't bear to part with it.

"Lydia?" Ember's voice sounds close to me, tearing me from my thoughts.

"Yes?"

"Are you okay?" she asks carefully. Ember has exactly the same eyes as Ruby: green and piercing. Sometimes I feel like both sisters can see right into you.

»Yes, everything is great.« I beam at her. »I think James and Percy have been down there for twenty minutes. We should really get going.” Ember nods, but her eyes remain thoughtful.

»Thanks again for the beauty program, Lydia,« says Ruby. »That “It felt so good after the stress of preparation.” She comes to me and gives me a quick hug.

“You two made sure I was properly dressed. “That was probably the least,” I reply.

I hired stylists to do Ruby's, Ember's and my makeup and hair. Now we look like

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we could walk on a red carpet. One where fairies are present. Or Shakespeare himself.

Together we make our way down to the foyer, where James and Percy are already waiting. The two of them are talking and I hear Percy laughing. The sound touches me. It is the first time in a long time that I have seen the two of them exchange a word with each other in a relaxed manner.

James turns around and his eyes suddenly land on Ruby.
His eyes light up, as they do almost every time he looks at her or speaks to her.

"You look beautiful," he says as Percy holds my coat open for me to slip into.

"You say that every time," I say to James.

He just shrugs his shoulders, his gaze still fixed on Ruby. She turns around in a circle and smiles broadly at him. "I feel like a princess."

"You look like one too," James replies, cupping her cheek before leaning down to give her a gentle kiss.

"I always don't know whether to find it nice or disgusting," Ember murmurs close to me.

“You think it’s beautiful,” I reply automatically. "That's so much better than seeing them both unhappy."

Ruby

As we watched the fifteen fake trees being installed at Boyd Hall yesterday afternoon, I thought we had made a huge mistake. In the daylight the arrangement looked strange, far too bulky and not at all atmospheric. But now that I look around, I breathe a sigh of relief.

The soft glow of the lanterns and candles, the blue and purple
Flower petals that we distributed and the delicate classical music of the orchestra create a fairytale atmosphere in which the guests visibly feel comfortable in their elfin dresses and bright suits.

“Ruby, everything looks beautiful,” Lydia sighs next to me.

“Really nice,” Ember agrees.

She points to the wooden swing that is attached to one of the trees. Our photographer is standing in front of it, waiting to take a picture of the

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Couple can do that is just getting into position. The girl grasps the flower-covered ropes and her boyfriend, standing behind her, places his hands over hers. It looks very romantic.

“We definitely have to take a photo together later,” says Lydia.

"I told you it would be worth coming here," I reply.
Then I automatically start looking around for Lin. I have to ask her if she has spoken to the caterer and checked out the buffet yet. But before I can locate them, James gently places his hand on my back.

I look up at him questioningly.

»I know exactly what you want to do now. But your shift isn't for…" he glances at his watch, "an hour." "You remembered that?" I ask, amused.

He nods. "You belong to me now, not to the morsels, Ruby Bell." The next moment

he pulls me away from Lydia and Ember. I just manage to glance over my shoulder at them before I have to look forward to avoid stepping on my dress.

At first I think James is going to walk me to the bar, but then he swerves and pulls me towards the swing. Another couple has just posed there and we stop a few steps behind the photographer.

I look at James with a grin. »Seriously? I remember times when
you had no interest in our parties at all," I note.
“And now you even want a picture of a couple as a souvenir?”

“You know why I didn’t feel like it,” I hear James say close to my ear. I'm getting goosebumps.

“In reality, you felt like it,” I say. "Admit it. It was all a facade, you actually really liked the DJ at the back-to-school party and were just jealous that you didn't hire him for your own house parties." James snorts quietly. “Exactly.” Suddenly he leans towards me and runs his mouth

over my cheek and then over my jaw.

I shudder as he presses a kiss to the spot behind my ear.

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"You look really beautiful," he murmurs, and I feel his warm breath on my skin. Goosebumps spread across my body, and I'm just about to open my mouth to return the compliment when the photographer's voice makes me flinch.

“The next ones,” he calls out boredly. When he sees it's my turn he raises an eyebrow in surprise. "Oh, it's you, Ruby."

Mr Foster and I have known each other since I started organizing events at Maxton Hall. He also shoots and edits the official event photos for our blog, the school's website and Lexington's monthly newsletter. He is a professional and the fact that he agreed to take these swing pictures tonight with a Polaroid camera only increases my respect for him.

“Good evening, Mr. Foster,” I say.

"I don't think I've ever taken a picture of you," he reflects loudly and then points to the swing. "Take a seat."

“Thanks,” I murmur, sitting down as James positions himself behind me, one hand wrapped around the swing rope and the other on my back. Even through the fabric of my dress I can feel the warmth radiating from him. A tingling sensation runs through my entire body and I wonder if this exciting feeling when I'm close to him will ever go away. Hopefully not.

"Smile!" says Mr Foster, but he would not have asked me to have to – my smile comes naturally.

After the picture is taken, we get a print from a Polaroid camera. James gives him a quick shake before we look at him.

“This is so cheesy.” Sitting on this flower swing with James standing behind me – all the couples would probably be photographed in the same pose that evening.

I already know that I will continue to grin every time I look at this picture.

“I like it,” says James.

He puts it in his jacket pocket with a smile. Then he raises his hand and strokes my cheek with his knuckles. It seems as if he is not doing this consciously, but as if

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himself. When he pulls his hand away again, I would like to hold it there and rest my cheek in his palm.

“Shall we dance?” I finally ask. I need to do something to control the heat his gentle, natural touch has ignited in my body.

James's eyebrows rise in surprise. “You want to go dancing voluntarily?” I nod and take his hand.

Before I can change my mind, I pull him onto the dance floor behind me and between the other couples who are already slowly moving to the music.

I put a hand on James' shoulder and start moving with him. This time I watched videos and practiced with Ember in advance, but I quickly realized that I didn't have to worry about the step sequences we had learned.

James and I are just swaying back and forth.

»At the beginning of the year I never thought I would be here. With you«, James murmurs close to my ear. "I am so grateful."

His words send a warm tingling sensation through my body. "I'm grateful to have you too, James." We move on to the slow song

the orchestra is playing. At some point I let my hand move higher until I can stroke his neck. James pulls me so close to him that no sheet of paper would fit between us. I can feel his breaths on my body. They walk just as irregularly as my own. As I let my second hand slip out of his and wrap it around his neck, James sucks in a sharp breath. His hands wander over my waist and stroke my sides. I swallow hard and close my eyes.

Then I feel James' lips brush over my hairline.

“James…” I whisper and slowly open my eyes again.

He looks at me through half-lidded eyes. I'm holding my breath, I take in the sight of him. His beautiful eyes, the slight curve of his lips.

“Ruby…” he says hoarsely.

And then I can't stand it a second longer. I stand on tiptoe and he comes towards me.

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When our lips meet, it's like pure electricity shoots through my body. It's always like that with James. I can't describe it at all, but a simple kiss from him is enough to turn my world upside down and make me forget everything around me.

James lightly strokes my lower lip with his tongue and I allow him entry. I bury my hands in his hair and can feel his moans against my lips.

“God, get a room,” a piercing voice calls out next to us.

James pulls away from me and I blink several times. Then I look over James' shoulder and recognize Camille, who is currently dancing with a guy from our level. She rolls her eyes.

"We're really bad," I mutter, burying my face in James' shoulder.

Suddenly I notice how he stiffens. »What...« I raise my head.

James fixes his gaze on a point above my shoulder, and I turn around to follow his gaze.

Mr Sutton has just entered the dance floor with a woman.

“Isn’t that our tutor from the Oxford study group?” I ask.

“Philippa Winfield,” James murmurs. He always remembers all the names of people - even those he only meets once. I think that's something you naturally learn when you're born into a big company.

“They both look familiar,” I say after Mr. Sutton has put his arm around Pippa. She smiles at him—they're at about eye level because of her high heels—and then she leans forward and whispers something in his ear that makes him laugh. It's a shy laugh that's very different from the one he gives in class.

"Fuck," says James just as Mr Sutton looks over Pippa's shoulder and his happy expression fades.

It doesn't take long for me to realize why.

Lydia.

She is standing near the dance floor and has seen everything. Now She turns on her heel and leaves the hall through one of the rear exits.

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I want to go to her immediately, but James holds my hand. Before
When I ask him why he is doing this, he nods in the direction Lydia has just disappeared.

Mr Sutton runs after her.

“Do you think that’s a good idea?” I ask hesitantly.

James' expression is impenetrable. “They both have to at some point talk to each other. Besides, I think she'd rather be left alone with us right now." Since James knows Lydia better than

anyone else, I trust him.

"I don't want her to be sick," I murmur.

At my words, James looks at me warmly. »She can handle it. I am quite sure of that.« The

certainty with which he says this and the way he greets me with a Just looking at him gives the impression that he's not just thinking about Lydia.

For the first time since I have known him, he also seems to think of his own Happiness to believe. And that makes me incredibly happy.

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Lydia

I regret coming here. I should have listened to my gut feeling and not allowed myself to be talked into it. I knew it wouldn't be easy for me to see Graham. However, I never expected something like this.

Just when he danced with Pippa, when he put his arm around her as if it were the most natural thing in the world, when she smiled at him and he smiled back, when the distance between their faces kept getting smaller - I couldn't take it anymore. It was just too much.

And even now, in the empty hallway, without music and without people around me around, my heart won't stop racing. I feel sick and my hands feel sticky. Dots dance in front of my eyes. I think my blood pressure is too high. I immediately put a hand on my stomach, as if that alone would tell me whether everything is OK with the little ones.

»Lydia?«

I lower my hand and turn around.

Graham is standing a few meters away from me, his jacket open, his brows furrowed thoughtfully.

"What?" I ask aggressively. Oh, how sick I am of always pretending in front of everyone that everything is fine in my life. *Nothing* is fine. Especially not now, when he is standing in front of me. When he followed me even though I thought he hadn't even noticed my presence. When he looks at me as if he knows what is going on inside me - just like before.

I can't look away. What has been building up inside me is more and more powerful until I can no longer hold it back.

"Did you have fun?"

His expression darkens and his brows furrow even further. "We were just dancing, Lydia."

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I snort disdainfully. “There was clearly more than that in there >dance<."

We've never argued before, and now I know why. It feels awful and not at all liberating to snap at him like that.

“It would have been weird if I had turned down her request to dance. People already talk behind my back.” I laugh. “So you just almost made out with my tutor on

the dance floor to keep people from wondering about your relationship status?” The words come out louder than I intended and Graham glances nervously over his shoulder.

"I hate this, Graham," I say. My voice is cold, but at the same time she trembles. I have never heard myself speak like this before. "I hate that you can't even say three words to me without immediately looking around in panic." I clench my hands into fists and push back the burning sensation behind my eyes with all my strength.

“Do you think I enjoy this?” he suddenly replies.
All I can do is let out a bitter snort.

He clenches his hands into fists too. "I'm trying to do the right thing for both of us!" "The right thing?" I can't

believe he just said that.

"Do you think it's right to dance with other women while I watch?" "Do you think I *enjoy* it?

Staying away from you, pretending

"We never knew each other?" he asks, stunned. Then he tears his hair and shakes his head. “It hurts like hell, Lydia, and it’s getting worse every day.”

"It's definitely not my fault!" I almost scream the words and

I bite my lip afterwards. I take a deep breath and think about what Mum has been teaching me about composure all my life. "I'm not calling you," I continue quietly. "I'm not checking in on your class. Hell, I'm not even looking at you. What else do you think I should do to stop it hurting *you ?"* Graham shakes his head again. Then he takes a long step

towards me - and cups my face in his hands.

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For a moment I'm petrified. Then I push his arms away. He's not allowed to touch me like that - when he does, it feels like it used to, and I can't stand it for a second.

"We can't go on like this, Lydia," he croaks.
»I already said that I would stick to the agreement.« »Me too. Still, we're both ruined by it." I feel my anger gradually subsiding and only pain remains.
Pain that tears me apart from the inside and makes me unable to breathe properly.

I wish I hadn't pushed his arms away. At the same time, I wish I had done it with more force.
“It was just a dance,” Graham whispers.
I just nod. I'd like to look away, but I can't.
Graham and I - we haven't been this close for a long time. I feel like I have to soak up every second before the moment is gone and I'm left alone.

"Nothing has changed for me, Lydia." My breath catches. "What - what do you mean?" Graham moves a little closer, but doesn't touch me. "What I mean is that you are the first thing I think of when I get up. I think of you all day long. When I see something funny, I want to tell you about it first. I have your voice in my ear when I go to sleep at night. God, Lydia, I love you. I loved you when we first spoke on the phone. I will never stop loving you, even though I know there is no chance for us." My heart beats so fast that it's like I've just run a marathon.

run. I can't believe he just said that.
"I'm going to change schools." That breaks me out of my state of shock. I shake my head. "No. No way. You said yourself that Maxton Hall was the best thing that could have happened to you. That you'll never find a better job again."

"I don't care. I want to finally be able to be there for you again. I want to be able to go to a café with you, hold your hand. And I want my best friend back. If that means I have to take a worse job, I'll gladly do that."

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Again I shake my head, completely confused by this turn of events.
»I can't do that. Why now all of a sudden?« »This is not
a spontaneous idea. I have been thinking since my very first
I spend every day here thinking about it. Every morning I ask myself if Maxton
Hall is really worth losing each other."

"But we have..." I stop, unable to think clearly.

»That was our joint decision. That is why I
nothing said. I was afraid of putting pressure on you. But now…" The tears come
faster
than I can hold them back. I chicken out
I close my eyes and am shaken by a silent sob. When Graham touches me
this time, I don't resist, but let my forehead sink wearily forward against his chest
and allow him to gently stroke my cheek.

"I'm so sorry I couldn't be there for you, Lydia," he whispers.

The longing for him is almost unbearable at this moment. As well
like the guilt that I still haven't told him about the pregnancy, and the sadness -
not just about our relationship, but also about our friendship. I dig my hands into
his shirt and hold on to him. "I miss my mum. And I miss you. All the time," I sob.

"I know. I'm so sorry." He strokes me again.

His gentle touch reminds me of our very first meeting.
At the time, we were no more than friends who had met online, but he held
me just like that when a young woman in a café asked me about the headlines about
me in the newspaper. I tried not to let on how much her words had affected me, but
Graham sensed it immediately and hugged me. He whispered in my ear that everything
would be OK. Just like now.

His soothing voice eases my pain, and as he strokes his thumbs over my damp
cheeks and reassures me that we'll be okay, I sink for a moment into the dream and the
illusion that he might be right.

But then Graham stiffens.

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"Lydia," he whispers.

I pull away from him a little and follow his gaze.

At the end of the corridor, just five meters away from us, stands Cyril.

His face is as pale as I have ever seen it before, and
he looks from Graham to me and back again in disbelief. His mouth opens.

But then his facial expression changes. His brows come together, his eyes narrow,
and he clench his teeth so hard that the bone in his jaw shows.

The next moment he turns on his heel and disappears
back towards Boyd Hall.

“Damn,” I hiss, pulling away from Graham.

»Lydia ..." I

shake my head and wipe my fingers over my
wet cheeks. "I need to talk to him. Can we maybe talk on the phone later?"
Although Graham looks as if his

entire body is under
Tense, my words bring a warmth into his golden brown eyes that I have been longing
for for months. It is familiar, like a faded memory that slowly takes on color again and
becomes reality.

"I'll call you," he says. "After the party." "Okay," I

whisper.

For a moment I'm tempted to hug him again, but then Cyril's stunned face appears in
my mind's eye and I turn on my heel to look for him instead.

I run after Cyril as fast as I can. I catch him just past the Boyd Hall exit.

"Cy..." I say breathlessly, grabbing his elbow.

He turns around and rips his arm away from me. »Don't touch me.« I raise my

hands, shocked by his cold tone. This is how Cyril
never spoken to me. The way he looks at me is also completely foreign to me:
disparaging and full of contempt. He shakes his head.

"I can't believe you did that, Lydia." I look up at him, frowning. "I

don't think you
allow yourself to judge me, Cy. Or should I remind you

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"Remember what kind of people you've been with?" Cyril winces.

"You think I'm mad because you're sleeping with your teacher?" Now I'm the one cringing. There is

one right behind Cyril
small group of people who have also just left the hall.

“Why else?” I ask quietly.

He makes a desperate noise, then tilts his head back to look up, as if the sky could tell him what to say next. Then he looks back at me and swallows hard.

"I'm mad at you for stalling me for ages." My mouth drops open. “What?” “For me

there is only you, Lydia. I've been in

love with you for years." "But," I croak. "But what happened to us wasn't anything serious."

Cyril looks as if I had slapped him in the face. He opens his mouth, but no words come out.

"I didn't know you felt that way," I whisper. I carefully reach out to him a second time and touch his arm. He is my friend, I have known him since childhood. If I had known that he had serious feelings for me, I would never have started anything with him.

"Are you telling me you didn't notice anything?" he replies incredulously.

I silently shake my head.

“So you didn't notice that I haven't been with anyone since the thing with us. You didn't notice that after your mother's death, I was there for you every day from morning to evening and comforted you." "That's what friends do for each other," I whisper through tears.

"I'm not doing this for anyone," he says, his tone bitter. "I'm only doing this for you." I

stare at him, unable to move. Nausea overcomes me,
At the same time, more tears stream down my cheeks. "I'm sorry. I didn't want to hurt you."

Cyril hesitantly raises his hand and wipes a tear from my
Cheek. Then his expression hardens. “But you did.”

With these words he turns around and walks towards the parking lot.

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James

The evening clearly didn't turn out the way I imagined.

The plan was to spend as much time with Ruby as possible - we each only had one hour shift and the rest of the time was free. I wanted to dance with her, celebrate and kiss her as much as she would allow in front of everyone else.

But then Lydia suddenly came back to Boyd Hall distraught. At first we thought her conversation with Sutton had gone badly or that he had said something that hurt her. When we finally found out from her what really happened, I immediately went looking for Cyril.

Alistair and Keshav had no idea where he could be, and it has It took me ages to find Wren, but he was at least able to tell me that Cyril rushed home a while ago. I then took a taxi and asked Percy to drive Lydia, Ember and Ruby home.

Now I am standing in front of Cyril’s front door and press the the bell. I can hear the gong from outside echoing throughout the house. I'm sure Cyril is here - his car is parked sideways in the driveway, and I saw a light on on his floor as we drove up the driveway.

I'll ring the bell again. And one more time. Just as I raise my finger again, the door bursts open.

Immediately, I smell a strong smell of alcohol. Since the Less than an hour has passed since he and Lydia met, and yet Cyril is already swaying. His dark hair is a mess, and the top buttons of his shirt are undone.

"Of course. Lydia sent her guard dog," he slurs.

"Can I come in?" I ask.

Cyril swings the door open, turns around and walks up the stairs to the upper floor without looking back at me.

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There are no lights on in the whole house. Apparently his parents aren't there again.

I follow him up to the first floor and straight into his room. The window is open, but the smell of smoke and alcohol still hangs heavy in the air.

Cyril sits on the windowsill. I can see the butt of a cigarette glowing in an ashtray. He picks it up, gives it a deep tug and leans back.

»So,« he begins without looking at me, »you are here to take me to to silence?"

"I'm here because I'm worried about you," I answer and go to him at the window.

Cyril turns to me and raises an eyebrow at me.

"And because Lydia is worried." He snorts a laugh and takes another drag.

Next to the ashtray there is a bottle of whiskey that is not even half full. I wonder if he really drank all of that in the last hour.

I never expected that I would experience Cyril like this.

»I'm sorry, man.« Cyril puts out the cigarette. Then he grabs the bottle, she starts and puts her head back.

"I don't understand it," he says between gritted teeth. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and sets the bottle down with a clink. "I just don't understand why."

I don't know how to answer that. Cyril has been hoping to get together with Lydia for years. Now to find out that his wait was in vain must be absolutely devastating for him.

»I would have done anything for her. Anything,« he continues, shaking his Head. Apparently it makes him dizzy because he slumps a little to the side. I grab his arm and pull him off the windowsill.

"I know," I say.

Suddenly Cyril grabs me with both hands. "You have no idea, how that feels, James. To hope for something for years and see it all fall apart before your eyes."

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His face is contorted in pain. He sways and cannot stand straight. Without further ado, I take him by both arms and steer him towards the bed. I give him a light push, forcing him to sit down. When I'm sure he won't immediately fall over again, I let go of him and go to the window to close it. Then I close the heavy gray curtains.

I turn to Cyril. He leaned forward and buried his face in both hands. The sight of him just makes me feel bad. This whole situation is so twisted, and I feel sorry for Cy, but I still have to keep Lydia's best interests in mind. She's the one who could lose everything if her relationship with Sutton comes to light.

I sit on the bed next to Cyril. “You can’t tell anyone about this, Cy,” I say urgently.

Cyril just shakes his head. Then he lowers his hands and turns head to me. “Do you really think I would ever do anything to harm Lydia?” I look back at him. "No, I don't think so." He nods.

Then he stares silently at his hands for a while. »I always thought the thing with us would have been just as important to her." "It's not your fault either. That much is clear."
He just grumbles and falls back onto the bed with a groan.

"I'll get you a glass of water," I say after a moment.
Cyril doesn't say anything back, so I get up and go downstairs to the kitchen. When I return he is sitting up in bed again. I've brought a bucket upstairs in case he gets sick overnight, and Cyril is eyeing him with a sneering look.

"Here," I say and hold out the glass to him. He takes it and forces himself to take a few sips. Then he puts it on the bedside table.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" I ask.
"No, man. I think I need to be alone now." "Okay, then I'll go." I point my thumb over my shoulder.
Cyril nods curtly. Then he does something he hasn't done in at least ten years - he stands up and wraps both arms around her

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me. At first I'm taken aback, but then I pat him on the back.
He rests half his weight on me and I hold him up as best I can.

“It’ll be okay,” I say quietly.

Cyril breaks away from me and avoids my gaze. It is obvious that he does not believe my words.

Ruby

It's already after half past one when James finally comes home. He knocks softly on Lydia's bedroom door and opens it slightly. When he sees me sitting on the bed next to his sleeping sister, a smile comes to his lips that makes my stomach tingle. I stand up carefully, trying not to make any noise. James' smile widens when he sees that I swapped the dress for one of his shirts and one of Lydia's leggings.

Only when I closed the door quietly behind me did I dare to say something. Lydia was so upset after we came here - I don't want to wake her up.

“You’re here,” he greets me quietly.

I nod. »I actually wanted to get out with Ember, but Lydia saw so desperate. I didn't want to leave her alone, so I told mom I was staying at her house. Have you found Cyril?”

James' smile fades. “It was pretty close. I don't know if he'll even remember anything tomorrow." That doesn't reassure me much.

"I trust Cy," James adds. "You can rely on him for things like this."

I look at him skeptically, but finally nod. "Okay." James looks down the hall and then back at me. I grab his hand and pull gently, and together we walk to his room.

There I sit on the oversized bed.

“Is Lydia feeling better now?” James asks as he takes off his jacket and loosens his tie. Then he falls down next to me.

“Yes,” I answer thoughtfully. "I think so. Mr Sutton called and they spoke for a while.”

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James doesn't seem to know what to make of this. He just exhales audibly and rubs his forehead.

»What?« He

just grumbles. »I don't want Lydia to get into trouble. I
I just don't know how to prevent this house of cards full of secrets from collapsing soon."

“It won’t,” I say softly, leaning forward to close him
touch. I feel the need to comfort him when he looks like that, and I wish I could do more than just stroke his cheek.

James looks at me with dark eyes. »I would do anything for the people I love.« I run my fingers further down to his

neck.
his neck with my hand, running my thumb along his hairline. "I know." "That includes you, Ruby." I stop in

mid-motion and swallow hard. Suddenly
there is a lump in my throat that I cannot swallow.

"I love you," he whispers.

There is so much emotion and at the same time so much pain in his voice, that for a brief moment I think I can no longer breathe.

But the next moment my body reacts as if by itself to its
Confession. I bend forward until I'm kneeling on the bed and am level with James. I gently lower my mouth to his and kiss him, just briefly.

“I love you too, James,” I whisper, leaning my forehead against his.

James inhales audibly. "Really?" I nod and

kiss him again.

It's actually just supposed to be a quick kiss again - but then it closes
James puts a hand around the back of my head, and what started out gently quickly becomes more. I lose my balance and fall to the side into the soft down. James doesn't break the kiss for a second. All the words I want to say disappear from my tongue as James parts my lips with his. I sigh softly.

When he lets go of me this time, we are both breathless.

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“Thank you for being there for us today,” he murmurs.

We are both lying on our sides, facing each other.
James strokes my waist upwards and places his hand on my ribcage. He draws small patterns on my skin.

I still remember exactly how it felt when he first
times: as if his touch was burning through the fabric of my clothes right into my skin. It's the same now as his hand moves back down and comes to rest on my thigh.

"Thank you for letting me be there for you," I whisper and brush one of the reddish-blonde strands from his forehead. I could run my fingers through his hair forever; I love the way it feels under my fingers.

We lie there quietly. The only thing that can be heard are our even
breathing. We can't let go of each other. I have to touch James all the time, as if to remind myself that this is actually reality. That we have actually found each other again and there is this new, ever-growing trust between us.

I try hard, but eventually my eyelids become so heavy that I can barely keep them open. James is there when I fall asleep, one hand in mine, the other gently buried in my hair.

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Ruby

“What do you think?” Lin asks the following Monday, pushing her planner across the table to me.

I look at the appointments she has written in a purple pen. Between Chinese characters, in her neat handwriting, it says "Moving to Oxford", and in the field for the following day she has written "Celebrating moving in with Ruby". I grin broadly at Lin. And even though the whole thing is still a few months away, I take my gold pen out of my pencil case, flip to the monthly overview of the entire year in my planner and write exactly the same thing.

“Tada,” I whisper just as the bell rings for lunch. Lin and I start to put our things away, but before I can shoulder my backpack, the gong sounds a second time - shorter this time.

"Ruby Bell is summoned to Principal Lexington's office immediately," Principal Lexington's secretary's voice rings out over the loudspeaker. Immediately, every single student in the room turns and stares at me.

Frowning, I look at the clock above the classroom door.

Actually, our conversation with Principal Lexington is just before the end of the lunch break. If he wants to see me now, something must have happened.

Goosebumps spread across my body as I walked in

Thoughts chasing the question of what that could be.

“Should I come with you?” Lin asks as we leave the classroom.

“No, go ahead and get something to eat.” I grip the straps of my backpack tightly.

"OK. Do you already know what you want? Then I can take it with me and you don’t have to wait in line.”

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»That would be great. I'll just take whatever you take.« Lin squeezes my
arm briefly before we head down the aisle in different directions.
continue in different directions. The walk to Principal Lexington's office seems
much longer than usual today. The uneasy feeling increases the closer I get. And when
the secretary waves me through with a stern look, my heart threatens to jump
out of my chest with excitement.

I take a deep breath before knocking on the heavy wooden door and entering.

The greeting gets stuck in my throat.
My mom is sitting in front of the principal's desk.

Right now I'm having horrific images of Dad in the hospital because he's had
another accident.

"Is Dad okay?" I ask immediately and move quickly towards her
to.

"Your father is fine, Ruby," Mum replies, without looking up from the headmaster's
massive desk.

I look back and forth between my mother and the principal, confused.

"Sit down, Ms. Bell," Principal Lexington tells me, pointing to the empty chair
next to my mom. I sit down hesitantly.

Principal Lexington places his folded hands on the table in front of him
and then looks at me over the top of his glasses.

»There is nothing more important to me than the reputation of our school. We have
stood for intelligence and excellence for centuries. If anyone does anything to harm this
school, I will take action. You should be aware of that by now, Ms. Bell."

I swallow hard. "Principal Lexington, I actually thought the spring ball was a complete
success. If something went wrong, I'm really sorry, but..." Before I can finish my sentence,
Principal Lexington opens one of the small drawers on his desk and pulls out four printed
pictures, which he slides across the table towards us.

»These photos were sent to me over the weekend by someone
Member of the parents' board," he continues, unmoved.

I can hear my mum taking a sharp breath and I lean closer to the desk. The
pictures are dark and at first I can't see anything - until I spot myself in them.

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They are pictures of *me.*

I pick up one of the prints and hold it closer to my eyes.

It takes me a moment to classify the photo - but it must be from the back-to-school party. That's the only time I wore this green dress.

But I am not alone in the picture. There is a man standing right in front of me.

Mr Sutton.

And it looks like we're kissing.

I remember us talking to each other.

But we were never that close. I have no idea who took this photo, but it is clearly intended to harm me - or Sutton.

"It was a completely harmless situation. I..." "Ms. Bell, I don't

think you understand," Lexington interrupts.

"The pictures were sent to me by a member of the parents' council, and a student also confirmed having seen you and Mr Sutton together." "We were just chatting!" I say indignantly.

“Ruby, watch your tone,” Mum warns me. When I gave her one

When I glance sideways, a cold shiver runs down my spine.

My mom has never looked at me like that before - like she was incredibly disappointed in me. But before I can say anything in my defense, Lexington continues and Mum looks away from me.

“I've had something like this in all twenty years of working here

never experienced this, Ms. Bell. I will not allow the reputation of our school to be destroyed because of an affair." "I'm not having an affair!"

I shout.

I can't believe this is happening right now. This must be a nightmare.

»I have a boyfriend,« I continue quickly. »I … I'm not having an affair with a teacher. I would never do something like that, I swear." I can't say Lydia is the

one with Mr Sutton

was together. That simply does not work. Not after everything she

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has been through and what is still to come. I would never abuse her trust like that.

"I don't think you realize the seriousness of the situation, Ruby," Principal Lexington continues and lifts up one of the pictures. »I think it's best if you leave school. You and Mr Sutton are suspended from Maxton Hall College with immediate effect."

Silence.

It feels like someone just pulled the plug. All I can hear in my ears is a beeping sound. The seconds pass as if in slow motion, Principal Lexington's mouth is still moving, but I don't hear anything anymore.

"You can't do that," I say breathlessly. "I have an acceptance letter from Oxford University." Rector Lexington doesn't answer, he

just pushes the pictures together

and puts it back in an envelope. It's brown, and I can see a stamp in the back corner - probably the sender. I squint and see a curved black B.

My heart skips a beat.

That can't be.

They would never have done that.

They wouldn't have cheated me like that.

"Which student testified against me?" I ask breathlessly.

Now Principal Lexington looks at me almost with pity. "This is confidential information, Ms. Bell. Now if you would please leave my office? We will send you a letter regarding the suspension. Good day."

He leafs through a stack of papers on his desk and then looks at his computer – an unmistakable signal that we are now dismissed.

Quite. Certainly. Not.

"Do you know how much I worked my ass off for this school?" I blurt out.

Principal Lexington slowly looks back at me. "Don't make me call security, Ms. Bell."

"Just because I have a scholarship and no rich parents who can give you money if a rumor goes around about me, you can't just kick me out of school!"

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“I must ask you very kindly!” says Principal Lexington indignantly.
"You lousy..."

"Ruby!" my mother says sharply. She grabs my arm and pulls me up from my chair.

Without another word, she drags me through the office and out into the anteroom. I fume and stare at Lexington for the entire ten feet until Mum slams the door behind us.

That just didn't really happen. It just can't be.

Shaking my head, I turn to my mother. "Can you belive that? How sick does someone have to be to think of something like that?” I ask her.

Mum just shakes her head and doesn't look me in the eyes. Instead, she fixed her gaze on a point over my shoulder.
"I knew this would happen if we sent you to that awful school." I flinch and my eyes widen. "W-what?" Mum shakes her head. "Ruby, how

could you do that?" "I'm telling you I didn't do anything!" I shout.

If even my own mother doesn't believe me, I don't know what will I should do. Despair overcomes me, runs through my veins and makes it difficult for me to breathe.

"Mum, you have to believe me - I would never kiss a teacher." "I never thought you would

lie to us to sleep at your boyfriend's house either, but it seems like things have changed in the last few months." I look at her with my mouth open.

Mum takes a deep breath and finally sighs quietly. "I have nothing more to say to you right now, Ruby. I'm so disappointed in you."

Tears well up in my eyes. I search for words, but find no. My body feels like it's under anesthesia. The only thing racing through my mind is wondering who the hell took these pictures.

»Mum ...«

»Please take the bus home,« she interrupts me and swallows difficult. "I need to talk to your father now." "I didn't do that,

Mom."

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Without reacting to my words, she adjusts the handle of her handbag on her shoulder, turns around and disappears into the hallway.

I'm left alone.

Principal Lexington's words repeat on a loop in my head.

You are suspended from Maxton Hall College with immediate effect.

Suspended. Shortly before the end of the second term. Before I get the chance got a degree. Although there is a printed email with the Oxford acceptance on my wall at home.

If I don't get a degree, I can forget about Oxford.

Everything I have been working towards for the last eleven years.

The realization of what just happened hits me with full force. I stagger on the spot, having to hold on to the secretary's desk because everything seems to be spinning around me. It's only with great effort that I manage to leave the office without collapsing.

In the hallway I meet groups of students who everyone is looking forward to the lunch break, and my feet naturally want to carry me towards the cafeteria. But I'm no longer allowed to go to the cafeteria.

I am no longer allowed to attend the meeting with the event committee.

You are suspended from Maxton Hall College with immediate effect.

Actually, I'm not even allowed to stand here in the hallway anymore.

“Ruby?” comes a familiar voice next to me.

I look up, my eyes blurred with tears. James is standing in front of me. When he sees how upset I look, he gently puts his arm around my upper arms.

"I heard you were called out. What happened?" he asks urgently.

I can only shake my head. Saying it is just too crazy - and then this nightmare becomes reality. The only thing I can do is fall against James and wrap my arms around him. I bury my face in his jacket and let the tears fall for a brief moment. Just for a short time, just until I have solid ground under my feet again.

“Principal Lexington…expelled me,” I say after a while. I break away from James and look up at him.

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He wipes a hand under my eye, his gaze confused. “Apparently someone took photos of me and Mr. Sutton looking like we were kissing.”

James' hand freezes on my cheek. “What?” I can only shake my head.

James pulls away from me and looks at me with wide eyes. "What did you just say?" "Someone sent photos to Principal Lexington that look like I'm the one having the affair with Sutton," I whisper urgently.

I wipe my eyes with a shaking hand. A few people stare at me as I pass, and I see a pair of ice-blue eyes.

“That can’t be,” James says.

“Why not?” comes Cyril’s voice. "You're the one who took those photos, Beaufort." I look between James and him in a daze.

"What?" I whisper.

James doesn't react. He just stares at Cyril, who is standing with his head tilted with his head bowed and his hands buried in his pockets.

"Go on. Tell her," he tells James.

»What nonsense are you talking about, Cyril?« I ask, clawing fingers in James' arm.

Cyril raises an eyebrow challengingly. "Ask him, Ruby. Ask him who took these pictures." I look at James again, who is standing there completely motionless.

“James?” I whisper.

When I say his name, he seems to wake up from his trance. He turns to me and swallows hard.

I look into his eyes.

Panic rises within me.

That can't be.

“Who took these photos?”

James’s breathing suddenly quickens too. He slowly raises a hand as if he wanted to touch me but didn't dare. "It's not -" *"Who,* James?" James opens his mouth again, but then closes it again.

He narrows his eyes and I see him swallow. Once. Twice.

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When he opens his eyes again, it feels as if someone had
a push to the chest.

"He's right, Ruby." The
ground beneath my feet shatters into thousands upon thousands of pieces.

"I'm the one who took the photos." And I fall.

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epilogue

Ember

I feel like a criminal.

My eyes dart to the clock, to the counter and the waitress behind it, to my cappuccino and back to the front door of the café. The cycle begins again. And again.

Each new minute seems to pass more slowly than the previous one.

I've already missed a whole class of school. I've never felt so criminal in my life, not even when Mum caught me stealing a scone from behind the counter at *Smith's Bakery* when she hadn't told me to.

The bad conscience I have now is not the same as back then compare. This time I'm actually doing something forbidden.

The excitement means I can hardly sit still. I shift in my chair, wondering if the cappuccino was a good choice. I'm not really a coffee drinker, but since I slept so little last night, I thought the caffeine would be good for me.

I probably should have left it alone.

Ten more minutes.

I'm wondering how I'm going to endure this. I briefly consider packing up, getting up and leaving, only to come back in thirteen minutes and act like I've just arrived. But that seems a bit exaggerated to me.

What this excitement is doing to me is crazy.

Normally nothing upsets me so quickly.

But I don't usually skip school behind my parents' back and meet up with a boy I don't really know.

I absently leaf through the stack of information brochures and applications for funding programs and scholarships. Many of them still contain post-its with which Ruby marked important points, in a color system that is guaranteed to have some deeper meaning behind it.

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The café's bell rings. I look up - and suddenly everything around me seems to be happening in slow motion.

He really came.

His gaze wanders over the people in the café. His eyebrows briefly furrow a little - then he spots me at the table against the wall. I raise my hand uncertainly in greeting. The wrinkle on his forehead instantly smoothes and his lips curl into a smile.

He slowly strolls towards me.

He wears a black leather jacket with a wide collar over a grey shirt with a pocket on the chest, dark jeans and heavy boots. It's a great outfit, effortless but stylish at the same time.

So far I have only seen him in a suit – I was curious to see how he dresses in his free time.

The half-smile doesn't leave his face as he stands up sits the chair opposite me.

My heart is racing. There is so much darkness in his eyes that I So many things that I *will explore in the future.*

“Good morning, Ember,” says Wren Fitzgerald.

A smile slowly spreads across my lips.

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thanksgiving

First of all, I would like to thank my editor Stephanie Bubley, who worked tirelessly with me on this novel and always tries to get the most out of my stories.

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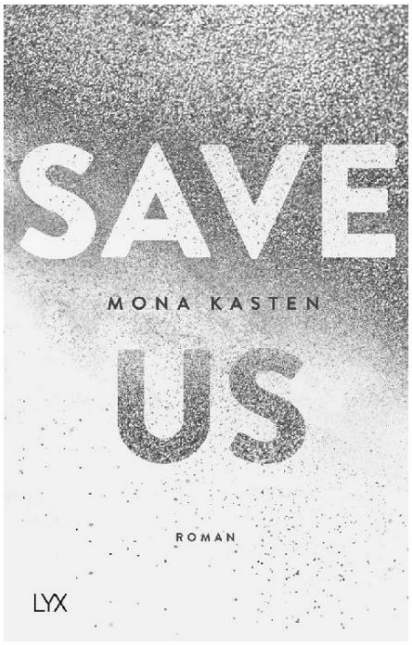
Thanks go to my husband Christian, who always had my back so that I could get Ruby and James back on the right track, and who plotted with me in the car when I got stuck.

And finally, I would like to thank all the readers who came with me to Maxton Hall. I'm always happy to see how you cheer for Ruby, James and co. We'll read each other again soon!

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Ruby and James' story continues



(released on August 31, 2018)

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The author



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Mona Kasten was born in Hamburg in 1992 and studied library and information management before devoting herself entirely to writing. She lives in Lower Saxony with her husband, her cats and an endless supply of books, loves caffeine in all forms, long walks in the forest and days when all she can do is write. The author is always happy to hear from her readers on Twitter (@MonaKasten).
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Mona Kasten's novels at LYX

The Maxton Hall series: 1.
Save Me 2.
Save You 3.
Save Us *(released on 31.08.2018)*

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Trust Again 3.
Feel Again

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