

SAVE

MONA KASTEN

ME

ROMAN

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Mona Kasten

SAVE ME

Novel



LYX

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About this book

Money, luxury, parties, power – all of this could not be less interesting to 17-year-old Ruby Bell. Since she was seven years old, she has had only one wish: to study at the University of Oxford. Now, shortly before her graduation, her dream is within reach. All she has to do is survive another year at Maxton Hall College – the most prestigious and expensive private school in England. Since she got hold of one of the coveted scholarships, she has been trying to be invisible and attract as little attention as possible from her classmates. Above all, she stays away from James Beaufort, the secret leader of the college. He's too arrogant, too rich, too attractive, and he embodies everything Ruby can't stand about England's high society. Fortunately, he has no idea that Ruby even exists – at least until now. Because when Ruby sees something she shouldn't have seen, her invisibility cloak disappears from one moment to the next. All of a sudden, James knows exactly who she is and does everything he can to make sure she doesn't destroy his family's reputation. Ruby is irritated – on the one hand, because James suddenly seems to be everywhere she is, but above all because it is increasingly difficult for her to ignore the violent crackling that reigns between them. James Beaufort is the last man she should be attracted to. Ruby knows that. And yet her heart soon leaves her no other choice ...

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For Lucie

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I was the city that I never wanted to see,
I was the storm that I never wanted to be.

GERSEY, ENDLESSNESS

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Ruby

My life is divided into colors:

Green – Important!

Turquoise – School

Pink – Maxton Hall Events Committee

Purple – Family

Orange – Nutrition and Exercise

Purple (taking Ember's outfit pictures), green (getting new highlighters) and turquoise (asking Mrs. Wakefield for the subject matter for the math work) I have already done today. It's by far the best feeling in the world to check off an item on my to-do list. Sometimes I even write down tasks that I have long since completed, just to be able to cross them out immediately afterwards – but then in an inconspicuous light gray so that I don't feel quite so much like a cheater.

If you open my bullet journal, you can see at first glance that my everyday life is mostly made up of green, turquoise and pink. But almost a week ago, at the beginning of the new school year, a new color was used:

Gold – Oxford

The first task I wrote down with the new pen is:

Pick up a letter of recommendation from Mr Sutton

I run my finger over the shimmering metallic letters.

Only one year left. One last year at Maxton Hall College. It seems almost unreal to me that it is finally starting now. Maybe in three hundred and sixty-five days I'll be sitting in a seminar on politics and being taught by the most intelligent people in the world.

Everything in me tingles with excitement when I think about the fact that it won't be long before I know if my greatest wish will come true. Whether I really made it and can study. In Oxford.

No one in my family has ever studied, and I know that it is not a matter of course that my parents did not just smile wearily when I first announced

to them that I wanted to study philosophy, political science and economics at Oxford. I was seven at the time.

But even now – ten years later – nothing has changed, except that my goal is within reach. It still seems like a dream to me that I made it this far at all. I catch myself again and again being afraid of suddenly waking up and realizing that I am going to my old school after all and not to Maxton Hall – one of the most prestigious private schools in England.

I take a look at the clock hanging above the massive wooden door of the classroom. Three minutes to go. I finished the tasks we are supposed to work on last night, and now I have nothing else to do but wait for this lesson to finally come to an end. I bob my leg impatiently, for which I immediately get a blow in the side.

"Ouch," I hiss and wants to hit back, but Lin is faster and swerves. Her reflexes are incredible. I suspect that this is due to the fact that she has been taking fencing lessons since elementary school. After all, you have to be able to stab like a cobra quickly.

"Stop being so jittery," she replies, without taking her eyes off her full sheet of paper. "You're making me nervous."

That makes me wonder. Lin is never nervous. At least not in such a way that she would admit it or show it. But at that moment, I actually see a hint of concern in her eyes.

"I'm sorry. I can't help it." Again I trace the letters with my fingers. In the last two years, I've done everything I can to keep up with my classmates. To become better. To prove to everyone that I'm right to go to Maxton Hall. And now that the university application process is starting, the excitement is almost killing me. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't do anything about it. However, the fact that Lin seems to feel the same way reassures me a bit.

"Have the posters actually arrived yet?" asks Lin. She glances over at me, and a strand of her shoulder-length black hair falls into her face. She strokes it impatiently from her forehead.

I shake my head. "Not yet. Certainly this afternoon."

"Okay. Tomorrow after Bio we'll distribute them, won't we?"

I point to the corresponding pink line in my bullet journal, and Lin nods contentedly. Again I look at the clock. It is only with difficulty that I can stop myself from bobbing my legs again. Instead, I start packing my

pens as inconspicuously as possible. They all have to point the pen in the same direction, so it takes me longer anyway.

However, I don't pack the golden pen, but solemnly put it in the narrow rubber band of my planner. I turn the cap so that it points forward. That's the only way it feels right.

When the bell finally rings, Lin shoots up from her chair faster than I would have thought humanly possible. I look at her with raised eyebrows.

"Don't look like that," she says as she slips her bag over her shoulder. "You have begun!"

I don't reply, but just stow away the rest of my things with a grin.

Lin and I are the first to leave the room. With quick steps we cross the west wing of Maxton Hall and turn left at the next junction.

In the first few weeks, I constantly got lost in the huge building and was late for class more than once. I was infinitely embarrassed, even though the teachers never tired of assuring me that most newcomers to Maxton Hall feel the same way as I do. The school resembles a castle: it has five floors, a south, west and east wing and three annexes in which subjects such as music and computer science are taught. The branches and paths on which you can get lost are countless, and the fact that not every staircase automatically leads to every floor can drive you to despair.

But while I was completely lost at the beginning, I now know the building like the back of my hand. In fact, I'm pretty sure I'd find my way to Mr. Sutton's office blindfolded.

"I should have had my letter of recommendation written by Sutton, too," Lin grumbles as we walk down the hall. Venetian masks adorn the high walls to our right – an art project of the last graduating class. I've stopped in front of it a few times and admired the playful details.

"Why?" I ask, making a mental note of telling our janitor that he has to get the masks to safety before the back-to-school party starts here on the weekend.

"Because he likes us since we organized the graduation ceremony together last year, and he knows how committed we are and how hard we work. He is also young, ambitious and has just graduated from Oxford himself. God, I could really slap myself in the face because I didn't come up with the idea."

I pat Lin's arm. "Mrs. Marr also studied at Oxford. Besides, I imagine it's better received when you're recommended by someone who has a little

more experience than Mr. Sutton."

She looks at me skeptically. "Do you regret asking him?"

I just shrug my shoulders. Mr. Sutton happened to hear at the end of last school year how much I wanted to go to Oxford and then offered to squeeze him out about anything I wanted to know. Even though he studied a different subject than I intend to do, he was able to provide me with a whole lot of insider information, all of which I greedily absorbed and later carefully noted down in my planner.

"No," I answer at last. "I'm sure he knows what is important in the recommendation."

At the end of the hallway, Lin has to turn left. We agree to talk on the phone again later, and then quickly say goodbye to each other. I take a look at my watch – five to half past two – and pick up the pace. My appointment with Sutton is at half past two, and I don't want to be late under any circumstances. I rush past the tall Renaissance windows, through which golden September light is cast into the hallway, and squeeze through a group of students dressed in the same royal blue school uniform as me.

Nobody takes notice of me. That's how it works in Maxton Hall. Although we all wear the same uniform – blue and green checked skirts for the girls, beige trousers for the boys and tailored dark blue jackets for everyone – it is obvious that I don't really belong here. While my classmates come to school with expensive designer bags, the fabric of my khaki green backpack is now so thin in some places that I expect it to tear every day. I try not to be intimidated by this, nor by the fact that some people here behave as if they own the school just because they come from wealthy families. I am invisible to them, and I do everything I can to keep it that way. Just don't stand out. So far, this has worked well.

I push past the rest of the students with my eyes downcast and turn right one last time. The third door on the left is Mr Sutton's. Between his and the office in front of it is a heavy wooden bench, and I let my gaze wander from it to my watch and back again. Two minutes to go.

I can't stand it for a second longer. Resolutely, I smooth my skirt, straighten my jacket and check whether my tie is still in place. Then I step to the door and knock.

No answer.

Sighing, I take a seat on the bench and look in both directions of the hallway. Maybe he'll get something to eat quickly. Or a tea. Or coffee.

Which makes me think that I shouldn't have drunk one today. I was excited enough anyway, but Mum had cooked too much, and I hadn't wanted to dump it away. Now my hands are shaking slightly as I take another look at my watch.

It's half past two. To the minute.

Again I look down the corridor. No one in sight.

Maybe I didn't knock loud enough. Or – and the thought makes my pulse rise – I made a mistake. Maybe our appointment is not today, but tomorrow. I frantically tug at the zipper of my backpack and pull out my planner. But when I look inside, everything is correct. Right date, right time.

Shaking my head, I close my backpack again. Normally I'm not so out of my mind, but the thought that something would go wrong with my application and that I might not be accepted to Oxford because of this almost makes me go crazy.

I admonish myself to come down again. Resolutely, I get up, go to the door and knock again.

This time I hear a noise. It sounds as if something has fallen to the ground. Carefully I open the door and peer into the room.

My heart skips a beat.

I heard right.

Mr. Sutton is here.

But... He is not alone.

On his desk sits a woman who kisses him passionately. He stands between her legs, both hands around her thighs. The next moment, he grabs her tighter and pulls her forward onto the edge of the table. She moans softly into his mouth as their lips merge again, burying her hands in his dark hair. I can't see where one of them starts and the other ends.

I wish I could take my eyes off them. But I can't do it. Not when he pushes his hands even further under her skirt. Not when I hear his heavy breath and she sighs softly, "God, Graham."

When I finally free myself from my state of shock, I can't remember how my legs work. I stumble over the threshold, and the door opens so vigorously that it slams against the wall. Mr. Sutton and the woman jump apart. He jerks his head around and sees me in the doorway. I open my mouth to apologize, but all I can do is a dry gasp.

"Ruby," says Mr. Sutton, breathlessly. His hair is completely disheveled, the top buttons of his shirt are undone, and his face is reddened. He seems strange to me, not at all like my teacher.

I feel a murderous heat rush into my cheeks. "I... I'm sorry. I thought we had a—"

Then the young woman turns around, and the rest of the sentence gets stuck in my throat. My mouth opens, and icy cold spreads through my body. I stare at the girl. Her turquoise blue eyes are at least as wide open as my own. She jerkily averts her gaze, lowers it to her expensive high heels, lets it wander across the floor and then looks helplessly at Mr. Sutton – Graham, as she had just sighed.

I know them. In particular, I know her reddish-blond, perfectly wavy ponytail, which always dangles in front of me in history.

In Mr Sutton's lessons.

The girl who just made out with my teacher here is Lydia Beaufort.

I'm getting dizzy. Besides, I'm sure I'll throw up at any moment.

I stare at the two of them and try everything to erase the last few minutes from my head – but it's impossible. I know it, and Mr. Sutton and Lydia know it too, I can see it plainly by their shocked expressions. I take a step back, Mr. Sutton with an outstretched hand, one towards me. I stumble over the threshold again and can just catch myself.

"Ruby..." he begins, but the rustling in my ears gets louder and louder.

I turn around on my heel and start running. Behind me, I can hear Mr. Sutton saying my name again, this time much louder.

But I just keep running. And further.

2

James

Someone maltreats my skull with a jackhammer.

That's the first thing I realize when I slowly wake up. The second is the naked warm body that lies half on top of mine.

I glance to the side, but all I see is a mane of honey blonde hair. I don't remember leaving Wren's party with anyone. If I'm to be honest, I can't remember leaving the party. I close my eyes again and try to evoke images from last night, but all I know are a few disjointed scraps of thought: Me, drunk on a table. Wren's loud laugh as I fall down and land on the ground at his feet. Alistair's warning look as I dance closely with his big sister and press myself tightly against her back.

Oh, fuck.

Carefully I raise my hand and brush the girl's hair out of her forehead.

Double-fuck.

Alistair is going to kill me.

I sit up jerkily. A stabbing pain shoots through my head, and for a moment my eyes are black. Next to me, Elaine grumbles something incomprehensible and turns to the other side. At the same time, I realize that the jackhammer is my cell phone, which is lying on the bedside table and vibrating. I ignore it and search the floor for my clothes. I find one shoe near the bed, the other directly in front of the door under my black pants and the corresponding belt. My shirt lies over the brown leather chair. When I put it on and want to close it, I notice that a few buttons are missing. I groan and hope fervently that Alistair is no longer there. He doesn't need to see the destroyed shirt, nor the red scratches that Elaine left on my chest with her pink-painted fingernails.

My phone starts vibrating again. I glance at the display, and my father's name shines at me. Grand. It's just before two on a school day, my head feels like it's going to burst at any moment, and I've almost certainly had sex with Elaine Ellington. The last thing I need now is my father's voice in my ear. Resolutely, I push him away.

What I need, however, is a shower. And fresh clothes. I sneak out of Wren's guest room and close the door behind me as quietly as possible. On the way down, I encounter the remains of last night – a bra and several other items of clothing hang over the banister, cups, glasses and plates with leftovers are scattered all over the foyer. The smell of alcohol and smoke is in the air. It cannot be overlooked that a party was celebrated here until a few hours ago.

In the salon I find Cyril and Keshav. Cyril sleeps on the expensive white sofa of Wren's parents, and Kesh sits on the armchair by the fireplace. A girl has made herself comfortable on his lap, burying her hands in his long black hair and kissing him passionately. The two look as if the party is about to start again. When Kesh pulls away from her for a moment and discovers me, he throws his head back and laughs. I give him the middle finger as I pass by.

The opulent glass doors leading into the Fitzgeralds' garden are wide open. I step out and have to squint my eyes. The sunlight is not particularly glaring, but it still feels like a stab directly in my temple. Cautiously, I look around. It doesn't look any better out here than it does indoors. Rather the opposite.

On the loungers by the pool I find Wren and Alistair. They have their arms crossed behind their heads, their eyes hidden behind sunglasses. I hesitate for a moment, then I stroll to them.

"Beaufort," Wren says happily, pushing up his glasses so that they sit on his frizzy black hair. He grins broadly, but I can still see how pale his dark brown skin looks. He must have quite a hangover, just like me. "Had a nice night?"

"Can't really remember," I answer, daring to look in Alistair's direction.

"Fuck you, Beaufort," he says, without looking at me. His hair shimmers golden in the midday sun. "I told you to keep your hands off my sister."

I expected this reaction. Unimpressed, I raise an eyebrow. "I didn't force her into my bed. Don't pretend she can't decide for herself who she wants to have sex with."

Alistair grimaces in agony and lets out an incomprehensible hum.

I hope that he will get his act together and not hold it against me forever, after all, I can't undo it. And actually, I don't feel like justifying myself to my friends. I have to do that often enough at home.

"Woe betide you if you break her heart," Alistair says after a while, looking at me through the reflective lenses of his aviator sunglasses. Although I can't see his eyes, I know that his gaze is not angry, but rather resigned.

"Elaine has known James since she was five," Wren interjects. "She knows exactly what to expect from him."

Wren is right. Elaine and I both knew yesterday what we were getting ourselves into. And even though I can hardly remember anything, I still have her breathless voice clearly in my ears: It only happens once, James. Just once.

Alistair doesn't want to admit it, but his sister is no more a child of sadness than I am.

"If your parents find out, they'll announce your engagement immediately," Wren adds after a while, amused.

I twist the corners of my mouth disgruntled. My parents have been keen for years to get me engaged to Elaine Ellington – or any other daughter of a wealthy family with a huge inheritance. But at eighteen, I have much better things to do than even give a thought to what or who is in store for me after I graduate from school.

Alistair also snorts contemptuously. He seems to be just as unimpressed by the idea of welcoming me as a new member of his family soon. Playfully offended, I press my hand to my chest. "It almost sounds like you don't want me to be your brother-in-law."

Now he pushes his glasses up into his wavy hair and glares at me with dark eyes. Although he has a slim figure, I know how strong and fast he can be. I've experienced that often enough during training.

The look with which he looks at me gives me an idea of what he is up to.

"I'm warning you, Alistair," I growl, taking a step back.

It's faster than I can blink. Suddenly he is standing right in front of me. "I warned you too," he replies. Unfortunately, you weren't interested."

The next moment he gives me a violent blow in the chest. I stumble backwards, straight into the pool. The impact drives the air out of my lungs, and for a moment I don't know where up and down is. The water rushes in my ears, the throbbing headache seems much worse to me underwater.

Nevertheless, I don't show up immediately. I let my body go limp and remain in the same position, face down. I stare at the tiles of the pool,

which I can only see dimly from here, and count the seconds in my mind. I close my eyes for a moment. It is almost peacefully quiet. After half a minute, I gradually run out of air and the pressure on my chest increases. I let one last dramatic bubble rise, keep waiting, and then...

Alistair jumps into the pool and grabs me. He pulls me with him to the surface, and when I open my eyes and see his shocked look, I have to snort and gasp for air at the same time.

"Beaufort!" he shouts stunned and throws himself at me. His fist lands in my side—damn, his punches are hard—and he tries to put me in a headlock. Because he's shorter than me, it doesn't work out the way he hoped. We wrestle for a moment, then I get hold of him. I lift it up with ease and throw it as far away from me as possible, Wren's laughter reaching my ear as Alistair goes down with a loud splash. When he reappears, he stares at me so angrily for a moment that I have to snort again. Alistair, like all Ellingtons, has a total angelic face. Even if he wants to look threatening — his light brown eyes paired with the blonde curls and his perfect facial features make it simply impossible.

"You're a wanker of the worst kind," he says, splashing a gush of water at me.

I wipe my face with my hand. "I'm sorry, man."

"It's okay," he replies, but continues to splash me with water. I spread my arms and let it go over me. At some point he stops, and when I look at him, he just shakes his head laughing.

That's when I know that everything is fine between us.

"James?" a familiar voice sounds.

I whirl around. My twin sister stands at the edge of the pool and covers the sun. She wasn't at the party yesterday, and for a moment I think she's trying to give me hell for skipping class with the boys today. But then I look properly, and I get ice-cold: her shoulders are limp, her arms hang powerlessly next to her body. Avoiding our gaze, she stares at her feet.

As fast as I can, I swim to her and get out of the pool. I don't care how wet I am, I grab her by the upper arms and force her to lift her head and look at me. My stomach does a somersault. Lydia's face is red and swollen. She must have cried.

"What's going on?" I ask, holding her a little tighter by the arms. She wants to turn her head away, but I won't let that. I grasp her chin so that she can't avoid my gaze.

Tears shimmer in her eyes. My throat gets dry.
"James," she whispers hoarsely. "I messed up."

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Ruby

"This is perfect," says Ember and gets into position between the gorse and the apple tree.

Apples are scattered all over our small garden, which we still have to collect. But even though our parents have been jostling for days – picking apples in purple is not in my calendar until Thursday.

I already know that the moment Ember and I bring the baskets into the house, an argument will break out between Mum and Dad over who gets the bigger share. Like every year, Mum plans to bake cakes and dumplings that she can lay out in the bakery for tasting, while Dad wants to cook what feels like hundreds of jams in the most adventurous flavors. Unlike Mum, he unfortunately has no one in the Mexican restaurant where he works to give them to try. This means that Ember and I will probably have to serve as guinea pigs again, which can be really great in the case of a new tortilla recipe – but not at all with apple jam with cardamom and chili.

"What do you mean?"

Ember stands in front of me in a practiced pose. I'm always surprised at how well she can do it. Her posture is relaxed, and she shakes her head briefly so that the curls of her long light brown hair fall a little wilder. When she smiles, her green eyes literally shine, and I wonder how it can be that she looks so awake after getting up. I haven't even managed to comb my hair so far, and my straight bangs are certainly perpendicular to the sky. And my eyes, which are the same color as Embers, don't glow at all. On the contrary, they are so tired and dry that I have to blink constantly trying to get rid of the unpleasant burning.

It's just after seven o'clock in the morning, and I've spent half the night lying awake brooding over what I saw yesterday afternoon. When Ember came into my room an hour ago, I had the feeling that I had just fallen asleep.

"You look great," I reply, lifting the small digital camera. Ember gives me the signal, and I take three pictures, then she changes her pose, turns to

the side and gives me – or rather the camera – a look over her shoulder. The dress she is wearing today has a black Peter Pan collar and a striking blue pattern. She stole it from Mum and altered it a bit to give it a waist.

For as long as I can remember, Ember has been overweight, and she regularly struggles to find clothes for her physique that are fitted. Unfortunately, the market is not exactly flooded with it, and she has to improvise constantly. For her thirteenth birthday, she asked our parents for her first own sewing machine, which she has been using ever since to sew clothes that she likes.

Ember now knows exactly what suits her. She has a great knack for street style. For example, she combined her current dress with a denim jacket and white sneakers with silver heels, which she painted herself.

A few days ago, I noticed a jacket in a fashion magazine whose fabric looked like the material that garbage bags are made of. I wrinkled my nose and quickly flipped through, but when I think about it now, I'm pretty sure Ember would rock the jacket like a supermodel.

This certainly has a lot to do with the self-confidence she radiates – in front of the camera, but also in real life.

That wasn't always the case. I still remember the days when she hid in her room because she was teased at school. At the time, Ember seemed small and vulnerable, but over time, she has learned to accept her body and ignore what others say about her.

Ember has no problem calling himself "fat". It's like Harry Potter," she always says when someone is surprised by her choice of words. The name "Voldemort" is only so terrible because no one dares to pronounce it. It's exactly the same with ›fat‹, but it's simply a description like ›slim‹ or ›thin‹. It's just a word—and not a negative one."

It was a long way for Ember to learn that, which is why she started her blog. She wanted to help others who are in a similar situation to herself to accept themselves. Ember has been telling the world for over a year that she thinks she is beautiful the way she is, and with her passionate contributions to plus size fashion, she has built a community within which she is considered a pioneer and source of inspiration.

Mum, Dad and I have also learned an incredible amount from her – not least because she always provides us with articles on the subject – and are incredibly proud of what she has achieved.

"I think I already have it," I say, after I've also photographed her third pose. Ember immediately comes to me and grabs the camera. As she clicks through the shots, her nose wrinkles critically. But in one of the pictures in which she looks over her shoulder, she finally smiles.

"I'll take that." She presses a kiss on my cheek. "Thank you."

Together we walk through the garden back into the house and try to place our feet between the fallen apples. "When will the article go online?" I ask.

"Tomorrow afternoon, I thought." She gives me a sideways glance. "Do you think you'd have time to look over it tonight?"

Actually, no. After class today, I have to hang up the posters for the celebration at the weekend and then continue to work on my presentation in history. I also have to come up with a plan to get my letter of recommendation without ever having to speak a word to Mr. Sutton again. Just the thought of yesterday – of Lydia Beaufort on his desk and of him between her legs – makes me feel nauseous again. The noises the two of them made ...

I jerkily try to shake the memory out of my head, but this only has the consequence that Ember looks at me in amazement.

"I'm happy to do it," I say quickly and push past her into the living room. I can't look Ember in the eye. When she discovers the rings under my eyes, she knows immediately that something is wrong, and I don't need her questions at all right now.

Not if I just can't get Mr. Sutton's stifled moans out of my ears, no matter how hard I try.

"Good morning, honey."

My mother's voice makes me wince, and I make a quick effort to control my features and look normal. Or whatever you look like, if you haven't caught your teacher making out with your student.

Mum comes to me and presses a kiss on my cheek. "Are you all right? You look tired."

Apparently, I have to practice that again with the normal facial expression.

"Yes, I just need caffeine," I murmur and let her maneuver me to the breakfast table. She fills a cup with coffee and strokes my head again before placing it on the table in front of me. Meanwhile, Ember goes to Dad and shows him the pictures I took of her. He immediately puts the newspaper

aside and bends over the display. He smiles, the slight wrinkles around the corners of his mouth deepening. "Very pretty."

"Do you recognize the dress, darling?" asks Mum. She leans over him from behind and puts her hand on his shoulder.

Dad lifts the camera higher, and behind the lenses of his reading glasses, his gaze becomes thoughtful. "Is that . . . is that the dress you wore on our tenth anniversary?" He looks over his shoulder at Mum, and she nods. Mum and Ember have roughly the same physique, which is why Ember had a lot of clothing available to experiment with at the beginning of her sewing machine career. In the beginning, Mum was always sad when Ember sewed up and more or less destroyed the clothes, but that hardly happens anymore. In the meantime, she is happy about everything that Ember conjures up from her old clothes and blouses.

"I wasted it and sewed a collar on it," says Ember. She sits down at the table and pours cornflakes into one of the bowls Mum has prepared for us.

A smile spreads across Dad's face. "It really turned out very nice," he says and reaches for Mum's hand. He pulls on it until her face is at his height, then he gives her a tender kiss.

Ember and I look at each other, and I know she thinks the same thing I do: Ugh. Our parents are so in love with each other that sometimes it can make you feel a little sick. But we take it with composure. And when I consider what happened to Lin's family, I appreciate that my own is intact. Especially since we had to work hard for the strong bond that unites us.

"Let me know when your post is online," Mum says after taking a seat next to Dad. "I want to be able to read it at once."

"Okay," Ember replies, his mouth full.

We have to hurry if we want to get to the school bus on time, so I can understand that she loops like that.

"But you look over it first, don't you?" Dad asks to me.

Even after more than a year, Dad is still skeptical about Ember's blog. He is not comfortable with the Internet, especially not when his daughter reveals pictures and thoughts of herself there. It took Ember some strength to convince Dad that a fashion blog for plus size fashion is a good idea. But Ember approached Bellbird with so much enthusiasm and courage that Dad had no choice but to allow her. His only condition is that I – as a sensible big sister – test read Ember's blog articles and check the pictures before she

posts them, so that no details from our private lives end up on the net. But his concern is unfounded. Ember works carefully and professionally, and I admire her for what she has already achieved with Bellbird in such a short time.

"Of course." I also put a spoonful of cornflakes in my mouth and wash it down with a big sip of coffee. Now Ember is the one who looks at me in disgust, but I ignore her. "I'll be a little late today, only you don't be surprised."

"Is there a lot going on at school?" asks Mum.

If you knew.

I'd love to tell Mum, Dad and Ember what happened. I know that I would feel better afterwards. But I can't. My home and Maxton Hall are two different worlds that don't belong together. And I swore to myself never to mix them. That's why no one in my school knows anything about my family, and that's why my family doesn't know anything about what's happening at Maxton Hall. I drew this line on my first day at school, and it was the best decision I could have made. I know that Ember is often annoyed by my closed-mindedness, and I feel guilty every time my parents don't manage to hide their disappointment quickly enough, when I no longer answer their "How was your day?" as "Okay". But my home is my oasis of peace. What counts here is family and loyalty and loyalty and love. At Maxton Hall, only one thing counts: money. And I'm afraid that I'll destroy our peaceful place if I drag things from there here.

Apart from the fact that it's none of my business what Mr. Sutton and Lydia Beaufort do with each other, I would never snitch on them anyway. The fact that no one in Maxton Hall knows anything about my private life only works because I stick to the rule I have set up for myself: Just don't attract attention! For two years now, I have been doing everything I can to remain invisible to the majority of my classmates and to run below their radar.

If I told someone about Mr. Sutton or went to the headmaster with it, it would cause a scandal. I can't risk that, especially not now that I'm so close to my actual goal.

Lydia Beaufort and her entire family – especially her hideous brother – are exactly the kind of people I should keep miles away from. The Beauforts run the oldest and largest men's outfitter in England. They have their fingers in the pie not only everywhere in the country, but especially

everywhere in Maxton Hall. Even our school uniforms were designed by them.

No. I should not mess with the Beauforts under any circumstances.

I'm just going to pretend that nothing happened.

When I finally smile at my mother and mumble "Not so bad," I know how forced it must look. I am all the more grateful when she doesn't follow up and instead pours me another cup of coffee without comment.

School is the horror. I try to concentrate on the lessons, but my mind is constantly wandering. Between classes, I'm terrified of running into Mr. Sutton or Lydia in the hallway, and I literally sprint from one classroom to the next. Lin gives me a weird look from the side more than once, whereupon I remind myself to pull myself together. The last thing I want is for her to start asking questions that I can't give her answers to. Especially since I'm pretty sure that she didn't buy the excuse that I made a mistake in the appointment yesterday and therefore don't have my letter of recommendation yet.

After the last hour, we go together to the secretariat and pick up the posters, which finally arrived in the mail yesterday. I would have preferred to go to the cafeteria first – my stomach growled so loudly in biology that even the teacher turned around to see me once – but Lin had the idea that we could hang up a few on the way there and save time.

We start in the auditorium, where we attach the first poster together to one of the mighty columns. When I'm sure that the adhesive strips hold, I take a few steps back and cross my arms. "What do you mean?" I ask Lin.

"Perfect. At this point, everyone who comes in through the main entrance notices it." She turns to me and smiles. "It's really pretty, Ruby."

I look at the intricate black letters announcing the back-to-school party for a while. Doug has really conjured up great graphics for us – the font combined with the subtle speckles in gold looks classy and glamorous on the silver background, but at the same time modern enough that it passes for a school party.

Maxton Hall is known for its legendary parties. In this school, everything is celebrated – the start of school, the end of school, foundation day, Halloween, Christmas, New Year's Day, Principal Lexington's birthday... The budget available to the event team is dizzyingly high. But – as Lexington always reminds us – the image we build with successful

events cannot be paid for with money. Because the Maxton Hall parties are only in theory for the students. First and foremost, we want to attract parents, sponsors, politicians and all other people with a lot of money who finance our school and ensure that their children get the best start in life through their support – and end up directly in Cambridge or Oxford.

When I came to school, I had to choose an extracurricular activity, and the events committee seemed like the best choice: I love planning and organizing, and there I can act in the background without my classmates taking notice of me. I didn't expect that I would have such fun with it. Nor that I would share the leadership of the team with Lin two years later.

Lin turns to me, a big grin on her face. "Isn't it the best feeling in the world that no one can chase us around this year?"

"I don't think I could have endured another day under Elaine Ellington's thumb without beating her up," I reply, and Lin chuckles softly. "Don't laugh. I'm serious."

"I would have liked to have seen that."

"And I would have liked to."

Elaine was an obnoxious team leader—bossy and unfair and lazy—but the truth is, of course, I would never have hurt her. Apart from the fact that I don't think much of violence, I would also have violated my rule of doing everything to avoid attracting attention here.

But now it was done anyway. Elaine graduated and left school. And the fact that her dictatorial nature was just as unpopular with the others on the team as it was with us became clear when Lin and I were elected as her successor – a fact that still seems unreal to me.

"Shall we hang up the two posters and then go out to eat?" I ask, and Lin nods.

Fortunately, the rush hour is long over when we finally enter the cafeteria. Most students are already on their way to their afternoon classes or are still taking advantage of the last rays of sunshine in the school's park. Only a few tables are occupied, so Lin and I manage to get one of the good seats at the window.

Nevertheless, I avoid taking my eyes off my lasagna as I balance my tray across the room to our table. Only when I have sat down, put the remaining posters on the chair next to me and my backpack on the floor, do I dare to look around. Lydia Beaufort is nowhere to be seen.

Across from me, Lin spreads out her planner in front of her and begins to study it as she sips her orange juice. I see Chinese characters as well as triangles, circles and other symbols on the pages and admire them once again for their system, which looks so much cooler than the colors I work with. However, I remember that I once asked Lin to explain to me which sign has which meaning and for what occasion she uses it, and after half an hour I lost track and gave up.

"We forgot to put a sample poster in Principal Lexington's drawer," she murmurs, brushing her black hair behind her ear. "We'll have to do that in a moment."

"Sure," I say with my mouth full. I think I have tomato sauce on my chin, but I don't care at all. I have murderous cabbage steam, probably because I haven't been able to get anything down except a few cornflakes since yesterday afternoon.

"I still have to help my mum with an exhibition today," says Lin, pointing to one of the Chinese characters. Her mother opened an art gallery in London some time ago, which is doing well, but where she often has to support Lin – even during the week.

"If you have to leave earlier, I can hang up the rest on my own," I offer her, but she shakes her head.

"Our agreement was a fair division of labor when we accepted the job. We'll either do it together or not at all."

I smile at her. "Okay."

I told Lin at the beginning of the school year that I don't mind taking part in some of her work from time to time. I like to help others. Especially my friends – because I don't have that many of them. And I know that the situation at home is not easy and that she is often challenged more than is actually reasonable. Especially when you consider that she also has to meet the high workload of our lessons. But Lin is at least as ambitious and just as stubborn as I am – probably one of the reasons why we get along so well.

The fact that we found each other actually borders on a miracle. Because when I came to Maxton Hall, she moved in completely different circles. Back then, she was sitting at a table with Elaine Ellington and her friends during her lunch break, and I would never have thought of talking to her, even though we were both on the events team and I had noticed a few times that she was as meticulous about her planner as I was.

But then her father had a real scandal on his hands, which caused Lin's family to lose not only their fortune, but also the circles in which they moved. Suddenly Lin was alone during the breaks – I don't know if her friends didn't want to have anything to do with her anymore or if Lin was just too ashamed of what happened. What I do know, however, is what it feels like to lose all your friends in one fell swoop. That's what happened to me when I moved here from my old high school in Gormsey. I had been overwhelmed by everything – the high demands in class, the extracurricular activities, the fact that everyone here was so different from me – and had not managed to maintain contacts with Gormsey for the first time. My friends there made it clear to me what they thought of it.

In retrospect, however, I know that true friends don't make fun of you all the time just because you like to do something for school. I always dismissed words like "nerd" and "smartass" with a laugh, even though I didn't find it funny at all. And I also know that it has nothing to do with friendship if the others cannot muster any understanding that you are in a special situation. They didn't once ask me how I was doing or if they could support me.

At the time, it hurt a lot to see these friendships break up like that, especially since no one in Maxton Hall wanted to have anything to do with me – or even took notice of me. I don't come from a rich family. Instead of designer bags, I have a six-year-old backpack, instead of a shiny MacBook, I have a laptop that my parents bought me used before school started. On the weekends, I'm not at the hip parties that everyone is talking about for the entire next week – for most of my classmates, I simply don't exist. Now I think it's a good thing, but the first few weeks in Maxton Hall I felt incredibly lonely and isolated. Until I met Lin. It wasn't just the fact that she and I went through something similar with our friends that connected us. Lin also shares two of my biggest hobbies: she loves to organize, and she loves manga.

I can't say if we would have met if it hadn't been for the thing with her parents. But even though I sometimes feel like she misses the time she had a name here and hung out with people like the Ellingtons, I'm grateful that I have her.

"Then you go to the headmaster and hang up the posters at the library and the learning center on the way there. I'll take care of the rest, okay?" I suggest.

I hold out Lin my hand to the high five. For a moment it looks as if she wants to say something, but then she just smiles gratefully and claps. "You are the best."

Someone pulls the chair next to me to the side and sits down on it. Lin turns chalky pale from one second to the next. I frown as she stares at me with wide eyes, then at the person who sat down next to me, and at me again.

Very slowly, I turn to the side – and look straight into turquoise blue eyes.

Like everyone at the school, I know these eyes, but I have never seen them up close. They are part of a striking face with dark brows, pronounced cheekbones and an arrogantly curved, beautiful mouth.

James Beaufort has sat down next to me.

And he looks at me.

Up close, it looks even more dangerous than from a distance. He is one of those in Maxton Hall who behaves as if the school belongs to them. And that's exactly what he looks like: his posture is upright and self-confident, his tie fits perfectly. On him, the actually quite ordinary school uniform looks first-class, as if it had been made for his body. That's probably because his mother designed it. The only thing about him that is not accurate is his reddish-blond hair, which, unlike his sister's, is not perfectly styled, but wildly jumbled.

"Hey," he says.

Have I ever heard him talk? Roaring on the lacrosse field or drunk at the Maxton Hall parties, yes, but not like this. His "Hey" sounds familiar, and so is the sparkle in his eyes. He acts as if it were something completely normal for him to sit down next to me during his lunch break and talk to me. We have never exchanged a word with each other. And it should stay that way.

Carefully, I look around and swallow hard. Not all, but clearly a few heads turned in our direction. It feels like the invisibility cloak I've been wearing for two years has slipped a bit.

Not good at all, not good at all, not good at all.

"Hey, Lin. Would you mind if I kidnapped your girlfriend for a moment?" he asks, without once looking away from me. His gaze is so intense that a shiver sends a shiver down my spine. It takes me a while to understand what he said. The next moment I turn my head to Lin and try to

make her understand without saying that I would mind, but she doesn't look at me at all, only at James.

"Sure," she croaks. "Go ahead."

I just manage to grab my backpack from the floor, then James Beaufort's hand is on my lower back, and he maneuvers me out of the cafeteria. I take an extra step faster so that his hand disappears, but even after that I can still feel his touch as if it has burned itself into my skin through the fabric of my jacket. He leads me around the large staircase in the foyer and only comes to a stop behind it at a point where our classmates, who are still running in and out of the cafeteria, can no longer see us.

I can imagine what he wants. Since he hasn't even looked at me once in the last two years, it must have something to do with the matter between his sister and Mr. Sutton.

Only when I am sure that no one can hear us anymore do I turn to him. "I think I know what you want from me."

His lips curl into a slight smile. "Are you doing that?"

"Listen, Beaufort—"

"I'm afraid I'll have to interrupt you at this point, Robyn." He takes a step towards me. I don't back down, but just look at him with a raised eyebrow. "You'll forget what you saw yesterday as quickly as possible, will you understand? If I find out that you lose a single word about it, I'll make sure you get kicked out of school."

He presses something into my hand. As if in a daze, I lower my gaze and stiffen as I realize what it is.

In my hand is a heavy bundle of fifty-pound bills. I swallow dry.

I have never held so much money in my hand.

I look up. James' arrogant grin speaks volumes. It clearly tells me that he knows exactly how much I could use the money. And that this is not the first time he has bought someone's silence.

His gaze and his entire posture are so smug that I am suddenly seized by an incredible rage.

"Are you serious?" I ask between clenched teeth, holding up the wad of money. I'm so angry that my hands are shaking.

Now he looks thoughtful. He reaches into the inside pocket of his jacket, pulls out a second bundle and holds it out to me. "More than ten thousand are not possible."

Completely stunned, I stare at the money, then again in his face.

"If you keep your mouth shut until the end of the term, we can double the whole thing. If you make it to the end of the school year, we'll quadruple it."

His words repeat themselves in my head, over and over again, and the blood boils in my veins. How he stands before me, throws ten thousand pounds at my feet, and thus wants to forbid me to speak. As if that were nothing. As if that's what you would do when you were born with a golden spoon in your mouth. All of a sudden, I realize something very clearly:

I just can't stand James Beaufort.

I detest him. Him and everything he stands for.

How he lives – without consideration or fear of consequences. If you bear the name Beaufort, you are untouchable. No matter what you do – dad's money will fix it somehow. While I've been working my ass off for the past two years to have even a tiny chance of being picked up at Oxford, high school is nothing but a walk in the park for him.

It's unfair. And the longer I stare at him, the angrier I get about it.

My fingers cramp around the bills in my hand. I clench my teeth tightly and tear open the thin strip of paper that holds the bundle together.

James frowns. "What—"

I jerk my hand up and throw the money in the air.

James returns my stoic gaze ironically, the only reaction is the throbbing muscle on his jaw.

While the bills are still slowly sailing to the ground, I turn around and leave.

Ruby

A reddish-blond ponytail bobs in front of my face. I focus all my anger on him.

It's all Lydia's fault! If she hadn't made out with our teacher, I wouldn't have caught them and she wouldn't have been able to snitch on me to her brother. Then I could concentrate on the lessons now and not have to worry about the fact that he called me Robyn. Or that I threw five thousand pounds around.

I bury my face in my hands. It's unbelievable that I actually did that. Not accepting the money was of course the right thing to do. But still – since yesterday afternoon, a lot of things have been shooting through my head for which I could have used it well. Our house, for example. Since Dad's accident eight years ago, we have rebuilt it piece by piece and made it barrier-free, but some corners could still be improved. In addition, our car is slowly but surely giving up the ghost and we are all dependent on the vehicle. Especially Dad. With the forty thousand pounds James offered me at the end of the school year, I could have bought a new minibus.

I shake my head. No, I would never accept hush money from the Beauforts. I am not for sale.

I pull out my planner from under my history book and open it. All points for today have already been ticked off. The only one that still sneers at me is: pick up letters of recommendation from Mr. Sutton.

With clenched teeth, I stare at the letters. I'd love to erase it with correction fluid—just like the memory of Mr. Sutton and Lydia.

For the first time since the beginning of the lesson, I dare to look ahead over Lydia's head. Mr Sutton is standing at the whiteboard. He wears a checked shirt over which he has pulled on a dark gray cardigan, as well as the glasses he always wears in class. His three-day beard is well-groomed, and on his cheeks I can see the dimples that everyone in our course always adores.

Suddenly there is laughter around me – he has made a joke.

One of the reasons why I always liked him so much.

Now I can't even look at him.

I don't understand that – Mr Sutton is good enough to make it to Oxford, studies there for years, is allowed to teach at one of England's most prestigious private schools shortly after graduating, and the first thing he does is to do something with a student? Why, for heaven's sake?

His gaze meets mine, and in the next moment his smile slips a little. Lydia in front of me stiffens. Her shoulders become rigid, as well as her neck, as if she were resisting with all her might to turn to me.

I lower my gaze so hastily to my planner that my hair flies in front of my face like a dark cloud. The rest of the hour I remain exactly in this position.

When the school bell finally rings, it feels like days have passed, not ninety minutes. I take as much time as possible. As if in slow motion, I pack up my things and stow them carefully in my backpack. Then I close the zipper, so slowly that I can hear every single tooth snap into place.

Only after the footsteps and the voices of my classmates gradually become quieter do I get up. Lost in thought, Mr. Sutton stuffs his documents into a folder. He seems tense, every bit of humor he has just displayed has disappeared from his features.

The only student who is still in the room with us is Lydia Beaufort. She pauses at the door, looking back and forth between me and Mr. Sutton with a tense jaw.

My heart is pounding in my throat as I shoulder my backpack and walk forward. At some distance from the lectern, I stop and clear my throat. Mr. Sutton looks at me. His golden-brown eyes are full of regret. I can literally feel his guilty conscience. Its movements look like those of a robot.

"Lydia, would you leave us alone?" he asks, without looking at her.

"But—"

"Please," he adds softly and lets his gaze wander to her for a moment.

With her lips pressed together, she nods and turns away. She closes the door of the classroom quietly behind her.

Mr. Sutton turns to me again. He opens his mouth to say something, but I beat him to it.

"I wanted to pick up my Oxford letter of recommendation," I say quickly.

He blinks, perplexed, and it takes a moment for him to react. "I... Of course." He frantically leafs through the folder in which he has just stowed away his teaching materials. When he can't find what he's looking for, he leans forward, picks up his brown leather bag from the floor and heaves it onto the desk. He opens it and rummages around in it for a while. His hands are shaking, and I can see a hint of redness on his cheeks.

"Here's the copy," he murmurs, as he finally pulls out a transparent film containing a sheet of paper. "I was going to talk it over with you first, but after—" He clears his throat. "I've already uploaded it because I didn't know if you'd still pick it up."

With stiff fingers I accept the letter. I swallow hard. "Thank you."

Again he clears his voice. The situation is becoming more and more unpleasant. "I want you to know that I—"

"Not." My voice is a hoarse croak. "Please... not."

"Ruby—" Suddenly, in addition to the regret in Mr. Sutton's eyes, I recognize another emotion: fear. He's afraid of me. Or rather, what I'm going to do with the knowledge I have about him and Lydia. "I only wanted —"

"No," I say, and this time my voice is firmer. I raise my hands defensively. "I don't intend to tell anyone about it. Really not. I... I just want to forget about it."

He opens his mouth and closes it again. His gaze is equal parts surprised and doubtful.

"It's none of my business," I continue. "And no one else."

There is a pause between us, in which Mr. Sutton examines me so intensely that I don't know where to look. It's as if he wants to find the answer in my eyes as to whether I really mean it. Finally, he says quietly, "You know that I will continue to be your teacher. »

Of course I know that. And I find the idea of having to spend several hours a week in one room with Lydia and Mr. Sutton anything but tempting. But the alternative would be to go to the headmaster, and my meeting with James Beaufort gave me a clear taste of what was to come.

Especially since I really think that Mr. Sutton's private life is none of my business.

"I just want to forget about the whole thing," I say again.

He lets out a long breath. "And you put ... no conditions?" When he sees my indignant expression, he quickly adds: "Not that you wouldn't pass

my course with ease. You're one of the best in this class, you know that. I just thought that... I—" He breaks off with a frustrated groan, his cheeks are reddened, his posture is unsteady and his gaze almost desperate. He suddenly looks incredibly young, and for the first time I wonder how old he is. I guess in my mid-twenties at most.

I try to smile, which I don't really want to succeed in. "I just want to graduate, Mr. Sutton," I say, putting the copy of the letter in my backpack.

When he doesn't reply, I go to the door of the classroom. There I look over my shoulder again. "Please don't treat me any differently now."

He stares at me as if I were an apparition – and not one of the good guys. His gaze is suspicious, and I can't blame him at all.

"Thank you very much for the letter of recommendation."

I can see that he swallows hard. Then he nods once. I turn away from him and leave the classroom. After closing the door behind me, I lean my back against it, close my eyes and take several deep breaths.

Only then do I realize that I am not alone. A quiet noise makes my eyes open again immediately.

Across from me, James Beaufort is leaning against the wall. He crossed his arms in front of his chest and supported one foot against the wall. His gaze is on me – he's harder than yesterday, his charisma darker. There is no trace of the conspiratorial grin with which he wanted to sell me the money.

He pushes himself off the wall and comes towards me. His steps are slow and seem almost threatening. The moment passes as if in slow motion. My heart starts racing. This is his kingdom. And I feel like an intruder.

Only shortly before me does he stop. He looks down at me without a word, and for a moment I forget how breathing works. When I get it back, I notice how good it smells. Like star anise. Spicy and tart, but pleasant. I would have liked to move a little closer with my nose to him, but then I remember who I have in front of me.

James reaches into the inside pocket of his jacket.

That frees me from my state of shock. I squint my eyes and glare at him. "If you put money in my hand again, I'll shove it down your throat."

His hand remains in place for a second, then he pulls it back. There is a dark flicker in his eyes. "Stop this Mother Theresa number, and tell me what you want from my family." His voice is velvety and deep – a strange contrast to his harsh words.

"I don't want anything from your family," I begin, glad to have the door behind me. "Except perhaps that you leave me alone. And Mother Theresa would have taken the money and distributed it in the cafeteria or given it to the needy on the street. You know. Charity and so on."

James' face turns to stone. "Do you think that's funny?" he asks, the anger clearly audible in his voice. He takes another step towards me, comes so close to me that the tips of his shoes touch mine.

If he gets a single millimeter closer, I'll kick him in his soft tissues – no matter who in Maxton Hall knows my name afterwards. "I don't want any stress with you, Beaufort," I say calmly. "Not even with your sister. And above all, I don't want your money. The only thing I want is to get through the last year of school here."

"You really don't want the money," he says, looking so incredulous that I can't help but wonder what he and his family must have experienced in the past. Or which people they had to deal with.

It's none of my business, it's none of my business, it's none of my business!

"No, I don't want your money." Maybe he'll believe me if I repeat it a few more times and look him firmly in the eye.

He looks at me for what feels like an eternity, seems to explore my face and my intentions bit by bit. Then he lowers his gaze, first to my mouth, then to my chin and neck and even further down. Centimetre by centimetre.

When he looks up again, understanding has spread across his features. He takes a step back. "I see." He sighs and then looks in both directions of the hallway. "Where do you want it?"

I have no idea what he means. "What?"

"Where you want it." He rubs the back of his head. "I think one of the tutor rooms is free back there. I have a master key." He looks at me scrutinizingly. "Are you very loud? Mrs. Wakefield's office is right next door, and she usually stays longer."

I can only stare at him while I wonder what the hell he wants from me. "I have no idea what you are talking about."

He raises an eyebrow mockingly. "Sure. Listen, I also know the I-don't-want-any-money scam." Then he suddenly grabs my hand and pulls me across the hallway. In front of the room in question, he digs the key out of his trouser pocket and unlocks the door.

With his free hand, he begins to loosen his tie.

Where do you want it?

When I realize what he meant by it, I gasp in horror. But then he suddenly takes my hand and begins to pull me into the room. I hold on to the door frame and snatch my hand from him.

"What's the point?" I snap at him.

"We're re-negotiating now," he replies. He glances at his wristwatch. It consists of a black strap and a bronze case and looks chic. And insanely expensive. "I've got training in a moment, so it would be really cool if we could hurry."

He holds the door open for me and nods into the room as he unties the knot of his tie completely and then begins to unbutton his shirt. When his chest comes out and I catch a glimpse of the muscles underneath, my brain suffers a short circuit. My throat becomes dry as dust.

"Are you abandoned by all good spirits?" I croak, taking a step back before he can undo the last button of his shirt.

He looks at me piercingly. "Don't pretend you don't know how things are going here."

I let out a contemptuous snort. "You don't have all the cups in the cupboard anymore if you think I'll let myself be silenced with physical favors. Who do you think you are, you pompous bastard?"

He blinks several times in a row. Open the mouth and close it again. Finally, he shrugs his shoulders.

My cheeks are hot. I don't know whether to be disgusted or ashamed. I think what I feel is a mixture of both. "What's wrong with you?" I murmur, shaking my head.

He snorts. "Everyone has a price, Robyn. What is yours?"

"My name is Ruby, damn it!" I hiss, clenching my hands into fists. "You should just leave me alone from now on, that's my price. I really can't afford to be seen with you."

His eyes fly sparks. "You can't afford to be seen with me?"

The incredulity in his voice should actually make me angry, but now I only feel sorry for him. Almost.

"The fact that you talked to me in the cafeteria is enough. I don't want to be part of your world."

"My world," he repeats dryly.

"You know... the parties, drugs and all the. I don't want to have anything to do with it."

Suddenly, footsteps can be heard in the hallway. My heart skips a beat and then starts racing. I give James a push into the room and slam the door behind us. I listen with bated breath and fervently hope that the person walking outside doesn't come into this room.

Please don't, please don't, please don't.

The footsteps get louder and I squint my eyes tightly. They pause briefly in front of the door. Then they become quieter again and finally fade away completely. I breathe a sigh of relief.

"You are really serious." James' tone is unfathomable, as is his gaze.

"Yes," I say. "So please close your shirt again."

He slowly complies with my request, but keeps an eye on me. As if he was looking for a back door that I might have kept open. He doesn't seem to find one. "All right."

The pressure on my chest abruptly subsides. "Okay. Grand. So, I have to go home now, my parents are waiting." I point over my shoulder with my thumb. When he says nothing, I awkwardly raise my hand to say goodbye. Then I turn to the door.

"I still don't trust you." The sound of his dark voice sends goosebumps down my arms.

I push down the handle. "It's mutual."

James

The atmosphere in the locker room is tense, the air as if electrified by the adrenaline that floods through us. These minutes, just before the coach speaks to us and we are finally allowed on the field, are the worst and the best at the same time. In these minutes, everything seems possible: victory and defeat, pride and shame, triumphant joy and unbearable frustration. At no time is the team spirit greater or the motivation higher.

From outside, the cheers of our classmates reach us, as well as those of the opposing fans. It's hard to believe that no one in Maxton Hall was interested in lacrosse just five years ago. Back then, it was the sport for losers – those who couldn't convince at rugby or soccer were put on the lacrosse team, and the team was correspondingly bad. A motley bunch of pubescent hunger hooks with pimples on their faces and too long arms and legs that they didn't know what to do with.

I thought it would be fun to sign up there. Above all, I hoped that it would drive my father mad. I never expected that I could actually enjoy it. Or that after only a few weeks I would be gripped by the ambition to make more of this team. I persuaded my friends to switch, threatened Principal Lexington with the wrath of my parents if he didn't provide us with a better coach, and had our best designer design new jerseys for me.

It was the first time in my life that I could muster passion for anything. And it was worth it. Because today, five years later, after hours of training several times a week, after blood, sweat, tears, a few broken bones and winning three championships, we are the damn figurehead of the school.

We all worked our asses off to get to where we are now. And it fills me with pride every time I look at the determined faces of my team before a game.

Just like now.

However, there is also another feeling today. It's dark and painful, and it's making it difficult for me to pull the protective gear over my head for the first time in all these years.

This will be the first game of my last year of school.

When this season is over, that's it for me. Then lacrosse was nothing but part of a slow, cruel countdown that I can't stop. No matter how hard I try.

"All right?" asks Wren, bumping his shoulder against mine.

With all my might, I push the thought aside. It's not that far yet – there's still a whole year ahead of me in which I can do whatever I want. With a grin that is only halfway forced, I turn to him: "We're going to show the Eastview shits."

"McCormack is mine," Alistair interjects instantly, as if he had just been waiting for the cue. "I still have a score to settle with him."

"Alistair," Kesh begins on my left. He rubs his fingers over the bridge of his nose, exactly over the spot that was broken a year ago. "Just don't do it." His tone of voice and the meaningful look he throws at Alistair leave no doubt that this is not the first time the two have talked about the matter.

"No," Alistair replies simply.

McCormack, with whom I unfortunately share a first name, deliberately hit Kesh in the face with his stick during our last game – right after he took off his helmet. I can still remember the shock when Kesh went to the ground. Of the blood that splattered from his nose and dripped onto his jersey. The minutes in which he lay unconscious in front of us.

McCormack had been suspended for the next three games, but the thought of Kesh's battered face is enough to make anger boil up in me – and obviously also in Alistair, who still looks at Kesh with a determined expression.

"Just don't do anything rash," he says and puts on his blue jersey. Then he ties his hair into a deep-seated, messy bun and closes his locker door.

"You know him," Wren murmurs, leaning sideways against the locker, a crooked grin on his lips.

"I don't care if I'm suspended for the rest of the season. McCormack will pay." Alistair pats Kesh on the shoulder. "Be glad that I am so committed to you and your honor."

Before he can pull his hand away, Kesh grabs it and holds it in place. He glances over his shoulder. "I mean it."

Alistair narrows his amber eyes into narrow slits. "So do I."

The two stare at each other for a moment too long, and the already charged air becomes even thicker. Time to intervene. "You'd better save

your energy for the game," I say in a tone that makes it unmistakably clear that I'm not talking to them as their friend at that moment, but as their captain. Two angry pairs of eyes are directed at me, but before the two can reply, I clap my hands loudly.

The team immediately gathers in the middle of the dressing room. As I walk, I pull the jersey with the number 17 over my head. The material feels familiar, as if it were a part of me. Again, this dark feeling wants to fight its way up in me, but I push it back with all my might and instead concentrate on Coach Freeman, who steps out of his dressing room at that moment and comes to us. He is a tall, lanky man who, with his long limbs, would have been mistaken for a long-distance runner or track and field athlete rather than a lacrosse player. He pulls his blue cap over his hair, which has become lighter and lighter in recent years, straightens the umbrella and then puts his arms around me and Cyril, his captain and co-captain.

He lets his gaze wander through the room. "For some of you, this is the first season, for others the last. Our goal is the championship," he growls. Anything else is unacceptable. So see to it that you get the sacks ready."

Coach Freeman is not a man of big words, but that's not necessary. The few sentences from him are enough to evoke a loud, approving roar in our ranks.

"This has to be the best season Maxton Hall has ever seen," I add, a lot louder than the coach. "Clear?"

The boys bawl again, but Cyril is not loud enough yet. He holds one hand to his ear. "Clear?"

This time the roar is so loud that my ears are ringing – exactly as it should be.

Then we put on our helmets and grab our clubs. The way out of the changing rooms through the narrow tunnel feels like diving – the sounds from outside only reach me muffled, almost as if I had pressure on my ears. I grip my racket tighter and lead my team outside onto the court.

The grandstand is packed. The people cheer as we run onto the field, the cheerleaders dance. Music booms through the speakers and makes the floor vibrate under my feet. Fresh air rushes into my lungs, and I feel more alive than I have in weeks.

While the substitutes and the coach go to the edge of the field, we go to the middle of the field and build up in front of the players of the other team, who all look at least as motivated as we do.

"It's going to be a good game," Cyril murmurs next to me, expressing what I think.

While we wait for the referees, I let my gaze wander over the stands. From here I hardly recognize anyone, except Lydia, who sits at the top with her friends as always and acts as if the whole spectacle could not interest her less. I look at the edge of the pitch, look at the substitutes of the other team, then their coach, who is just walking up to Coach Freeman to greet him.

A head of brown hair catches my attention. A girl stands next to the two. She exchanges a few words with them and then points to something in her hand. When the wind blows her hair out of her face, I recognize her.

I really can't afford to be seen with you.

The memory of her words feels like a punch in the stomach. No one has ever said anything like that to me.

As a rule, the exact opposite is the case. People want to be seen with me at all costs. From the first moment I entered this school, my classmates were hot on my heels and tried to get my attention. That's how it works when your name is Beaufort. Ever since my maternal family founded the fashion house for traditional men's clothing one hundred and fifty years ago and created a billion-dollar empire in the process, there has been no one in this country who does not know our name. "Beaufort" is associated with wealth. With influence. Power. And in Maxton Hall, there are a number of people who think I can get them these things—or just a fraction of them—if they just put enough honey on my mouth.

I can't even count on both hands how many times someone has slipped me design sketches for suits after a night of partying. How many times someone approached me under a pretext, only to ask for my parents' contact details in the course of the conversation. How many times someone has tried to break into my circle of friends just to be able to pass on insider information about me and Lydia to the press. The picture from Wren's sixteenth birthday two years ago, in which I pull a line of coke into my nose, is just one example of many. Not to mention what Lydia has already had to go through.

That's why I chose my friends carefully. Wren, Alistair, Cyril and Kesh are not interested in my money – they have more than enough of it. Alistair and Cyril come from the Old English aristocracy, Wren's father has built up

an incredible fortune with stock deals, and Kesh's dad is a successful film producer.

People want our attention.

All except ...

My gaze lingers on Ruby. Her dark hair shimmers in the light of the sun and is tousled by the wind. She fights with her bangs, smoothing it out with her hand, although that doesn't help at all, because two seconds later it is whirled again in all directions. I'm pretty sure I've never seen her before the thing with Lydia. Now I wonder how that can be.

I really can't afford to be seen with you.

Everything about her arouses my suspicion – but especially her piercing green eyes. I want to go to her to see if she looks at other people the way she looked at me: with fire in her gaze and full of contempt.

This girl watched my sister make out with a teacher. I wonder what she's up to. Whether she is just waiting for the right time to drop the bombshell. It wouldn't be the first headline about my family to appear in the newspapers.

Mortimer Beaufort's affair with 20-year-old

Cordelia Beaufort's plunge into depression

Will addiction destroy him? James Beaufort!

After a dinner with a co-worker, the media accused my father of an affair, turned an argument between my parents into a severe depression and turned me into a junkie who is about to overdose and urgently needs to be rescued. It's hard to imagine what would be in the newspapers if journalists got wind of Lydia and Mr. Sutton.

I continue to look at Ruby. She digs a camera out of her backpack and takes a picture of the coaches as they shake hands again. My grip on the stick becomes so tight that my gloves creak. I can't judge Ruby, I have no idea if she told the truth or if there is ice-cold calculation behind her façade.

Maybe I should have offered her more money. Or she wants something else and is just waiting for the right moment to demand it from me.

I don't like the fact that the fate of my family – especially Lydia's – is in the hands of this girl.

I really can't afford to be seen with you.

We'll see.

Ruby

I'm completely overwhelmed.

Lacrosse is a fast sport. The ball shoots from one pocket to the next, and I can hardly keep up – neither with the camera nor with the naked eye. It should have been clear to me from the beginning that I wouldn't be able to document this game without Lin. Usually, we divide the articles about sporting events among ourselves: one notes the course of the game, the other takes the photos. But Lin was ordered to London again today by her mother at short notice, and we didn't quickly reach anyone from the event team who could have stepped in.

But since the posts about the lacrosse team on our event blog are by far the most clicked, we didn't want to suspend it. The only problem is that in order to write a report with the headline "Maxton Hall vs. Eastview – Duel of the Giants", I would have to understand what is happening on the field in the first place. But between the roars of the players, the loud curses of the coaches and the cheers and boos of the spectators, it is difficult to keep track of the individual moves, let alone to get suitable photos of important scenes. Especially since I have to work with a camera that is certainly over ten years old.

"Damn shit!" Coach Freeman yells next to me so loudly that I flinch violently. I look up from the camera in my hand and realize that I missed Eastview's second goal. Dung. Lin will kill me.

I stalk one step closer to the coach. When you're at a game live, unlike on TV, there's no instant replay, but maybe he'll explain to me what happened. But before I can open my mouth, he starts screaming again.

"Give the fuck it, Ellington!"

I whirl back to the field. Alistair Ellington sprints towards the opponent's half, so fast that I don't even raise the camera as a test, because it's impossible to capture the move in one picture. He tries to dash between two defenders, but then suddenly a third enemy appears and stands in his way. Ellington is damn nimble, but small compared to his teammates. Even I realize that he has no chance against three at once.

One of the defenders throws himself heavily at him with his shoulder. Ellington counters, but slides back a good half a metre on the pitch.

"Give up!" the coach yells again.

Alistair continues to brace himself against the player, even on the sidelines I can hear the two of them goading each other on. Suddenly, Alistair's already tense posture becomes even stiffer, and for a second he

and the opposing player seem frozen in their positions. Coach Freeman takes a deep breath, probably to shout out another instruction, but then Alistair pulls back his stick, swings out and hits his opponent in the side with full force.

I gasp in horror. Alistair strikes a second time, this time into the opponent's stomach. He screams in pain and kneels. Meanwhile, the other defender pounces on Alistair, pulls him to the ground with him and begins to beat him with gloved fists. Alistair also hits him with the stick. The shrill whistle of a whistle sounds, but it takes several team members to pull the beaters apart. I hear James Beaufort's dark voice. He yells at Ellington, and I can imagine that as team captain he would like to rip his head off now.

Next to me, Coach Freeman curses non-stop. Of his swear words, "damn shit" is still the nicest, all the others are definitely not suitable for young people. He has taken off his cap and is tearing his hair so brutally that I think I can see a few of them fall to the ground. Shortly afterwards, the referee sends Alistair off the pitch.

He comes to us on the edge of the pitch, takes the helmet off his head and removes his face mask. He carelessly throws both to the ground.

"What the hell was that, Ellington?" growls the coach.

I move inconspicuously backwards a bit so as not to get caught in the crossfire.

"He deserves it," he answers. His voice is perfectly calm, as if he hadn't just been involved in a fight.

"You are—"

"Suspended for the next three games?" Alistair shrugs his shoulders. "If you think the team can cope with it, as far as I'm concerned."

Then he walks leisurely past the coach, throws his stick on the floor as well and takes off his gloves. When he catches me staring, he stops.

"Is what?" he asks challengingly.

I shake my head.

Fortunately, the referee's whistle saves me from having to give an answer. As fast as I can, I go back to my original position. It takes me a few seconds to figure out where the ball is – in the pocket of Wren Fitzgerald's stick. Wren is not as fast as Alistair, but stronger. He rams an Eastview player out of the way with his shoulder, but shortly afterwards the ball is taken from him by another. However, Beaufort is hot on his heels, who intercepts the ball again when his opponent wants to pass it.

I twist the corners of my mouth disgruntled. Beaufort is really good. Damn well, in fact. He moves agilely and smoothly, adapts his steps to those of his opponents and is brutal when someone gets in his way. I can't see his face under the helmet, but I'm sure he's enjoying being on the pitch. When he plays, it looks like he's done nothing but run around with a lacrosse stick all his life.

"What are you doing?" Alistair's voice suddenly sounds next to me. Not only does it make me cringe in disgust, but it also reminds me why I'm actually here. I hastily open my notebook again.

"I'm writing the article about the game for the Maxton Blog," I explain without looking up. "What's the name of the defender who just took the ball from Wren?"

"Harrington," Alistair answers. I can feel his gaze on me as Coach Freeman rants again. Apparently, Beaufort lost the ball while I was devoting myself to my notes. Eastview is back in possession.

"Come on, Kesh," Alistair murmurs.

The Eastview attacker jumps half a meter into the air to catch the ball. Back on the ground, he takes two short steps and then shoots the ball forward in a powerful movement. It all happens so quickly that at first I can't tell whether it ended up on the net or not. But then the Maxton Hall side cheers loudly in the stands when Keshav holds up his stick. Apparently, Alistair's quiet incantation helped—it held.

"Let me look good when you write the article," Alistair says as I write Keshav down on my pad at the last second.

Skeptically, I return his gaze. It's the first time I've seen him up close, and I notice that his eyes are the color of Scotch. "You beat up another player for no reason. How do you think I'm going to wrap it up well?"

A shadow flits across his face as his gaze lands back on Keshav. "Who says I did that for no reason?"

I shrug my shoulders. "It just didn't look like you had given much thought to what you were doing from here."

Alistair looks at me with a raised eyebrow. "I've been waiting for months for the moment to give McCormack a beating. And just as he opened his mouth and insulted me and my friends, I finally had the official occasion."

One of his blond curls falls into his forehead, and he brushes it out of the way. Then his gaze falls on my notes. He wrinkles his nose. "How are

you going to decipher that later, when you write the article? You can't read anything there."

I would like to protest, but he is right. Under normal circumstances, my handwriting is neat, if I make an effort, even really beautiful. But at the speed with which I had to document everything here, it has mutated into a pig's claw.

"Normally there are two of us," I justify myself, even though I couldn't really care less what Alistair Ellington thinks about my writing. "And it's not so easy to take photos, watch the game and remember all the moves at the same time so that you can write them down afterwards."

"Why didn't you just film the game?" he asks. He sounds genuinely interested and not as if he is just looking for a reason to make fun of me.

Without comment, I lift my camera.

Alistair wrinkles his nose. "When is the part from?"

"I guess my mum bought it before my sister was born," I reply.

"And your sister is how old? Five?"

"Sixteen."

Alistair blinks a few times, then a grin spreads across his face. So he doesn't look like the tough lacrosse player who beat someone up with a stick just a few minutes ago. More like a ... Angel. He has beautiful, even facial features, which, together with the blond curls, make a completely harmless impression. But I know that this is deceptive. Alistair is one of James Beaufort's best friends - and thus he is pretty much the opposite of harmless.

"Wait a moment," he says suddenly, then turns around and disappears through the door that leads to the changing rooms. Before I can ask myself what he's up to, he's standing next to me again. In his hand he holds a black iPhone.

"I don't have enough storage space to record the whole game, but I can take a few pictures," he explains. He unlocks the display, calls up the camera app and turns the phone so that the lens points in the direction of the playing field. When he notices that I'm not moving, he raises an eyebrow. "You have to watch the game, not me."

I blink perplexed. I'm so taken by surprise that I'm not even embarrassed that he caught me staring again. "You want to help me?"

He shrugs his shoulders. "I have nothing better to do now, anyway."

"That's . . . really nice of you. Thank you." I try not to sound too suspicious, but I don't really succeed. This situation is just so surreal. I can't believe that this is actually Elaine Ellington's brother. Elaine would never have helped me. On the contrary, she would have laughed at me for my camera and made sure everyone knew about it the next day.

I watch Alistair out of the corner of my eye for a while, but he actually seems to take his new task seriously. He takes one picture after the other and only sometimes lowers his cell phone to shout something motivating to his team or to insult the opponents.

I devote myself to my notes, which is much easier for me now. When Coach Freeman comes to us, I first think that he wants to send Alistair off the pitch completely because of the dirty words he shouts at an Eastview attacker. But instead, he stands next to me and begins to explain the moves and name some of the maneuvers.

During the last ten minutes of the game it starts to rain, but that doesn't seem to dampen the mood either in the stands or on the pitch, rather the opposite. When Maxton Hall wins the game after a goal assist from Cyril Vega on Beaufort, the fans seem to go crazy. The coach lets out an animalistic scream, turns to them with clenched fists and raises his arms in the air.

Hastily, I close my pad and stuff it into my backpack. In the meantime, my hair is soaking wet, and my bangs stick to my forehead. There's no point in plucking it up, and I don't want to stroke it backwards at all, since I've inherited my dad's high forehead.

One by one, the players jog off the pitch and give Alistair a high five – all except Keshav, who walks towards the locker room without even looking at him. An emotion flits across Alistair's face that I can't define. His grin slips for a split second, and his eyes become dark, impenetrable. But then he blinks, and the moment is over so quickly that I think I've only imagined it.

Again, Alistair catches me looking at him. He raises his eyebrows.

"Thanks again," I say quickly before he can beat me to it. I don't know if he's nice to me when his friends are around, and I'd rather not take a chance. "For the pictures."

"No problem." He taps on the touchscreen of his cell phone and then holds it out to me. The numeric keypad is open on the display. "Give me your number so I can send you the pictures."

I take the cell phone. Even before I have typed the last digit, a voice sounds that I know far too well by now.

"What are you doing there?"

I look up.

James Beaufort is standing in front of me. The rain has completely soaked him: his reddish-blond hair is much darker than usual and hangs low in his forehead, which makes his facial features look even more angular. He holds the stick in one hand and his helmet in the other, and he doesn't seem to care that water runs down his entire body from his face over his shoulders and mixes with the mud that has accumulated on his jersey during the game.

I don't want to, but I stare at his wet body. The sight awakens something in me that has nothing to do with mistrust and aversion. It's a feeling I don't know, but I'm pretty sure James Beaufort is the last person I should feel it in his presence.

Resolutely, I push aside all thoughts about what that might mean and try to appear as uninvolved as possible.

Fortunately, Alistair answers his question. "She's writing an article about the game for the Maxton Blog." He takes the cell phone out of my hand, looks at my number and then the name under which I have saved it. I doubt he knew my name beforehand. "I'll send you the pictures later, Ruby."

"Great, thank you very much," I say, even though I'm already mentally preparing myself for the fact that he most likely won't do it. No matter how much he surprised me in the last half hour – he is still Alistair Ellington.

"I'm going to see how angry Kesh is," he says to James.

"Really angry," says James, directing his cold gaze at his friend and teammate. "Just like me and everyone else. I told you to keep your hands off McCormack."

"And I didn't listen to you." Alistair shrugs his shoulders. "You may be my captain, James, but not my mother." He sounds as if he doesn't care what James thinks of him, but when he pats him briefly on the shoulder, it seems like an apology to me. Then he turns around to go to the locker room.

James' gaze is now on me again. It is colder than it has just been. I don't know if it's me or the short confrontation with Alistair, but nevertheless I would like to get out of here as soon as possible.

"What's the point?" he asks.

The rain suddenly seems much icier to me.

"I don't know what you mean," I say, sounding braver than I really feel.

He lets out a short sound, which is probably supposed to represent something like a laugh. Or a bark? I'm not quite sure. The only thing I notice is that his posture has become even stiffer and his facial expression even more unyielding.

"Keep your hands off my friends, Ruby."

Before I can reply, he rushes past me into the locker room to the cheers of the spectators.

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James

"This party is lame." Wren takes a big sip from his flask and then passes it on to Cyril, who is leaning next to him on the balustrade and has a similarly disgusted expression on his face.

Below us is Weston Hall, a sprawling, lavish dance hall with Maxton Hall's signature Renaissance windows, wickered parquet flooring, and stucco trim on the walls. Like the rest of the campus, this space exudes an atmosphere as if you've been transported straight back to the fifteenth century – at least normally.

Tonight you have the feeling of having stumbled into a children's birthday party. The decorations are playful, and at the buffet there is children's punch and hors d'oeuvres in small preserving jars with colorful bows. The music is horrible. What the DJ is doing down there at his desk is a mystery to me. There are no transitions between the songs, rather it sounds as if he simply turned on a Spotify playlist and pressed shuffle. I expect at any moment that an annoying mood will advertise a bad newcomer. In addition, the guests do not seem to have been clear about the dress code for the party. Some have dressed up far too much, others are dressed too casually.

All in all, the party is a complete failure. It seems as if someone tried to bring a breath of fresh air to Maxton Hall, but didn't dare to throw the tradition completely overboard. The result is a strange mishmash of noble and innovative, which confuses the guests and prevents even a spark of mood from arising.

"Oh, come on. It's not that bad," Alistair interrupts my thoughts. He buries his hands in his pockets and rocks back and forth on the balls of his feet, his gaze fixed on the dance floor under the balustrade, where a few people have actually gathered in the meantime.

"You're the only one who wants to go to these parties," Kesh replies with a roll of his eyes.

Alistair shrugs his shoulders. "Because they're funny."

Kesh twists the corners of his mouth. He takes the hip flask from Cyril and passes it on to me without drinking from it.

"It's going to be fun, believe me." I take a big sip of Scotch and enjoy the burning sensation that runs down my throat.

Wren looks back and forth between me and Alistair. Then his eyes get big. "You have something planned?"

I ignore the question and just shrug my shoulders vaguely, but as always, Alistair doesn't have his facial features under control. You don't have to know him very well to see that he is concocting something. His conspiratorially sparkling eyes and restless posture actually reveal everything.

"I don't think so. You planned something, told him, but didn't tell me?" Wren points his finger accusingly, first at Alistair and then at me. "You're my best friend. I see this as a betrayal against my person."

I smile. "Treason?"

He nods energetically. "High treason. A violation of the holy brotherhood that has united us since childhood."

"Such bullshit."

For my dry tone of voice, I get a firm boxing punch to the shoulder.

"You have to look at it this way, Wren: He's going to give you a great surprise," Alistair says, pinching Wren's cheek. The latter endures it with a grimace.

"I hope for your sake that it will be worth it."

His words are already coming slowly, but this is only our third round with the hip flask. When Wren reaches for it again, I leave it to him anyway. Actually, it's a shame to drink the expensive Bowmore up here secretly instead of from a crystal glass, but at Maxton Hall parties, alcoholic beverages are only served for parents or alumni. Students are strictly forbidden to even go near the bar. However, this has never prevented us from making sure that we have fun here, and most teachers turn a blind eye when they realize that we have been drinking. The worst we've gotten for it so far was a warning.

My parents donate so much money every year that the school has no choice but to be lenient. She simply cannot afford to mess with us or our friends.

"Where is Lydia?" asks Cyril. His tone is effortlessly casual, but he can't fool any of us. Cyril has been infatuated with my sister for years. And

since the two had something together two years ago, things have gotten really bad. Lydia, who just wanted to have fun, ended the matter after a few weeks – not knowing that Cyril was head over heels in love with her and that she broke his heart.

Sometimes I really feel sorry for him. Especially when I think about the fact that he hasn't gotten involved with anyone for over two years and is obviously still mourning her.

"Don't you think it's about time... I do not know... to look ahead?" asks Alistair.

Cyril gives him a scathing look from ice-blue eyes.

"Lydia went to a friend's house before, I think she'll come later," I answer before the situation can escalate. Every time we even come close to addressing the Lydia topic, Cyril reacts as if we had insulted him in the worst possible way.

He must not find out under any circumstances that my sister had something to do with this joke of teacher.

Which reminds me that I urgently need to exchange a word with Mr. Sutton. The bastard should keep his hands off my sister, otherwise I'll make his remaining time at Maxton Hall a living hell.

I'm annoyed that I didn't set my sights on it long ago. But making sure Ruby kept her mouth shut was a priority. Especially because there is still something about this girl that makes me suspicious.

A few days ago I met her in the hallway when I went to philosophy with Lydia. While my sister stared resolutely at the floor, I looked at Ruby. Our eyes have crossed, but after not even a blink of an eye she has seen through me. I did the opposite and looked after her until I had to turn my head towards her. I was particularly struck by her proud attitude. The way she held her folders tightly in her arms, her determined steps, the protruding chin. She looked like she was going into a fight.

As if automatically, I am on the lookout for her. My sensors must be aligned with them somehow, because in a crowd of over a hundred people, it only takes me a few seconds to find them. I lean with both arms on the railing of the balustrade and lean forward a bit.

Ruby stands at the edge of the buffet and frantically writes down something on a clipboard. She looks up, looks around and starts writing again. Then she turns abruptly and runs towards the music system, behind

which the DJ is standing. She exchanges a few words with him and points to her notes.

Something clicks into my head.

Oh, damn it.

She has to be part of the event team.

The corners of my mouth twitch. That would be amusing.

Ruby says something more to the DJ, and he nods. Then she walks back across the dance floor until she is back at her place at the buffet, a little away from the action. She reaches into the neckline of her dark green dress and pulls something out. A mobile phone. She taps on it and stows it away again. At the same moment, a guy in a suit approaches her.

When I realize who it is, I grip the wooden railing more tightly.

Graham Sutton.

Apart from the fact that I'm suspicious of any guy who gets too close to my sister, Sutton has a whole host of other alarm bells. Especially when I see him talking to Ruby now. She avoids his gaze, but does not seem particularly upset.

I squint my eyes and curse myself inwardly for standing up here and not down at the buffet, where I could hear what the two are talking about. Maybe it's something completely banal like the event. Or they talk about my sister.

What if the two make common cause? What if Sutton made a deal with Ruby? I haven't thought of it at all, and I doubt that Lydia has considered it. She didn't explain to me how she came to make out with her teacher, but I know my sister well enough to know that this man is more to her than a little adrenaline in between.

The irrepressible need to protect my sister germinates in me. As if by magic, I reach into the inside pocket of my jacket and take out my mobile phone. I unlock it with my thumb, then I swipe left on the display to open the camera.

The corner where Ruby and Mr. Sutton are standing is dark. He has put a hand on her shoulder and comes quite close to her face with his mouth as he speaks. Only at second glance do you see that Ruby's clipboard is between them and they are both looking at it. Apparently, they are really talking about the event.

It's completely harmless when you see it in real life. But on the display of my mobile phone, from a well-chosen angle and with reasonable editing,

the situation could clearly be interpreted differently. I press the shutter button. Several times in a row.

"What are you doing?" comes Alistair's voice close behind me. He looks over my shoulder at the cell phone.

"Protect myself," I reply.

He frowns. "What have you got against her?"

I take a deep breath. I'd love to have more Bowmore to finally turn off my head completely. I haven't been able to do that for days.

"She saw something she shouldn't have seen."

Alistair looks at me thoughtfully for a moment, then nods. "Okay."

"If she tells anyone, Lydia is in real trouble."

He looks down and watches Ruby, who is still talking to Mr. Sutton. "I see."

I take one last picture and push the phone back into the inside pocket of my jacket. Then I let my gaze wander to the entrance of the hall. "My guests have arrived."

A grin spreads across Alistair's face. "Showtime."

Ruby

The party is a complete success. At eleven o'clock, guests crowd into Maxton Hall, drinking and eating, chatting or dancing. So far, nothing has gone wrong, and Principal Lexington has just congratulated Lin and me on the successful evening. I'm so relieved that I think for a short moment whether I shouldn't go on the dance floor and let go a bit. But I've already released Doug and Camille for the rest of the evening, and one of us has to keep an eye on the buffet so that no one gets the idea of mixing alcohol into the punch.

During the first two hours, the dance floor was yawningly empty, and I was quite worried. But Kieran, who is in the event team with me and took care of the music, said that was quite normal. And he was right. For half an hour, the guests have been dancing to various remixes of songs from the charts, which I personally don't like at all, but seem to be well received here.

I look around. I don't know many of the faces, but that's quite normal. The purpose of these parties is to bring alumni together, find sponsors and woo the parents of future students. Principal Lexington was the first to

explain this to me when I applied for the events committee two years ago. Maxton Hall events are only secondarily there so that we students can spend a nice evening together.

Suddenly the light goes out. The same goes for the music.

I freeze in shock for a second, then I hastily reach into my bra and take out my phone. "Damn, damn, damn," I murmur and try to turn on the flashlight.

An angry murmur goes through the hall, echoing through my head like an echo. This party has to run smoothly. Nothing can go wrong. Even if a power generator fails, Lin and I will be held accountable, and I can already hear Mr. Lexington's disappointed lecture on planning and foresight and damage to the school's image.

I immediately make my way past the buffet. To look for Lin now makes no sense, I urgently need to go to caretaker Jones so that he can go with me to the basement and clean up the electrical box ...

The light comes back on, and I breathe a sigh of relief and press my hand to my thumping heart. But when I turn around and see James Beaufort standing behind the DJ booth, it slips straight into my pants.

He talks to the DJ and presses something into his hand. Probably money. I clench my teeth tightly. I'm standing far too far away to intervene quickly enough. I look at the dance floor. A few guests look around curiously, probably wondering what happened to the music. Others head towards the buffet or bar.

I only notice that some people there don't look like Maxton Hall clientele at all when it's already too late.

"Friends," the DJ's voice sounds. "As I just heard, there is a very special surprise for you today. Are you ready?" My stomach does a somersault. Across from me, on the other side of the dance floor, I spot Lin and Kieran, who look like statues with their chalk-pale faces. "Have fun!"

The lights are dimmed until the hall is in semi-darkness. An astonished murmur goes through the crowd when the music starts again. The song that is played has deep bass and a slow beat that makes the chandeliers clink. I stare at the dance floor. A few women and men begin to dance lasciviously. Suddenly, the atmosphere in the hall seems to be completely different than it was a few minutes ago. It is no longer dignified and noble – but dirty and wicked. I'm about to make my way to Beaufort to confront him, when someone touches me on the arm.

"Are you Ruby Bell?" asks the guy who stepped up next to me. I nod absently. At the other end of the hall, one of the young women grabs Mr. Sutton and Mr. Cabot and pulls them into the middle of the dance floor.

"This is a gift from your friend James Beaufort," he continues, shoving a chair into the back of my knee so that I fall on it. Perplexed, I look up at him.

The guy may be in his early twenties, has light blond, gelled back hair and light blue eyes. He gets into position in front of me ... and starts dancing. My mouth becomes dry. My head is on stand-by. I can't believe this is happening right now. But it does. The guy first slowly slips his jacket off his shoulders, then he begins to loosen his black bow tie. When he loosens it completely and throws it behind him, a few women scream in delight. Then he plays with his suspenders, lets one slide over his shoulder and smiles seductively at me. When he arrives at the second carrier, he turns smoothly around his own axis and then lets him shoot back onto his chest in a challenging manner. Then he leans over to me and rocks his hips to the slow rhythm of the song.

"Won't you help me, Ruby?" he murmurs, taking my hand, which is surprisingly warm, and guiding it to his suspenders.

"Come on, take it off!" someone calls out to me.

That pulls me out of my rigidity.

I jump up. The guy backs away. For a moment he seems uncertain, but then the inviting smile returns to his lips. Without further ado, he pushes the suspenders over his shoulder and continues with his show as if nothing had happened.

My heart stops as my gaze falls past him to the middle of the dance floor. Two of the young women dance in front of Mr. Cabot, dressed in nothing but shimmering thongs and thin lace bras.

This can only be a bad dream from which I will wake up drenched in sweat at any moment. But when I also see Alistair Ellington, on whose lap sits a man who also gets rid of his suspenders and then starts unbuttoning his shirt with Alistair's support, I can no longer fool myself. This is reality.

I whirl around angrily. I discover him immediately. James Beaufort leans against the edge of the hall and watches the spectacle. He holds a glass of brown liquid in his hand, and his expression is almost blissful. In the next second, our eyes meet. Smiling, he raises his glass and toasts me. The rational part of my brain advises me to find Lin first and then go to the

teachers so that we can stop this madness immediately. The irrational part wants to do bad things to James, which are associated with great pain. Although this part is much louder right now, I think better of it and turn away.

I can still inflict pain on James Beaufort later. And I already know exactly how.

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James

On Monday morning, there is no other topic of conversation than the party. After our school's online forum almost exploded over the weekend because everyone shared and commented on their pictures and videos, our classmates give us a high five in passing today and thank us for the successful evening. The action was not only a headline in our daily newspaper, it has also reached other schools in England.

Of course, my parents didn't believe a word I said when I assured them that I had nothing to do with the whole thing, but in the end they were angrier at Lydia, who didn't show up at the party at all.

All in all, the campaign was a complete success.

At least until the loudspeakers rattle in the corridors and an announcement echoes through the school.

"James Beaufort is immediately summoned to the office of Rector Lexington."

I expected that. Lexington has already expressed his disappointment at the incident during the assembly, which takes place every Monday before classes start at Boyd Hall, and reminded all students of Maxton Hall's code of values in a meaningful voice. It's always the same: We pull off an action, he tells the entire student body how shocked he is, then calls us to his office, only to warn us and dismiss us five minutes later.

"Let's see if he gives the same lecture as always," Wren says, wrapping an arm around my shoulder. He presses me to his side for a moment. "Don't let yourself be made small."

"I never do," I reply, say goodbye to him and the others and stroll on my way to the rector's office. Once there, his assistant points wordlessly to the door.

Without hesitation, I knock twice.

"Come in."

I enter and close the door behind me. When I turn around, I am taken aback. Next to the headmaster's desk stands Coach Freeman, and right in

front of him sits ... Ruby. She gives me a quick look over her shoulder before looking ahead again.

"You wanted to talk to me?" I ask. I'm a bit surprised by the audience.

Lexington points with his hand in front of his desk to the seat to the right of Ruby. "Sit down." His tone is different than usual. Normally, he sounds equally annoyed and irritated when he talks to me, as if it were all just annoying to him and as if he would rather quickly turn back to the important things of his work. This time his voice is disturbingly quiet. The furrows on his face also seem deeper than usual. Apparently, I didn't have a good day for a lecture.

I drop into the chair in front of his desk.

"Is it true that it was you who made some—" He clears his throat. Apparently, he first has to look for a word appropriate for these premises. »... Have hired entertainers who have caused unrest?"

At the word "entertainer" I have to hold back a laugh.

"That depends on who you mean by 'entertainer,' sir," I say slowly. "I swear I had nothing to do with the DJ."

Lexington nods and looks at me with steel-gray eyes. "Do you think this is a joke, Mr. Beaufort?"

I raise my shoulders indecisively. "Some days, sir."

Ruby gasps indignantly. I look at her, but she immediately avoids my gaze.

Principal Lexington leans forward on his dark mahogany desk. The light that shines into the room from outside illuminates his face only halfway. The silence in here suddenly seems almost ghostly to me.

"Say, Mr. Beaufort. How do you think this incident will affect the reputation of our college?"

I have to think about the answer for a moment. "I think that something like this is quite good for our image. Everything is always much too stiff here, it doesn't hurt to loosen it up every now and then."

"You really don't have all the cups in the cupboard anymore," Ruby hisses.

"Ms Bell!" barks Mr. Lexington. "It's not your turn now."

Ruby's face turns chalky pale. She presses her lips tightly together and lowers her gaze to the green backpack lying on her lap. He looks like he's going to fall apart at any moment.

"Mr. Beaufort, what you have done has crossed a line. I cannot tolerate such acts at Maxton Hall College."

... therefore, I hereby issue a warning. If you engage in such behavior again, you will face consequences.

I know Lexington's lecture by heart. I would love to have a say and watch his reaction.

"You are a grown man, and this is your last year of school. You need to start taking responsibility and realize that your actions will have consequences," Lexington continues.

Oh. This part is new.

"Since you ruined the first event of the school year, I think it's only fair that you support the school's events committee from now until the end of the term. Let's call it community service under the supervision of Ms. Bell."

A second of silence. Then...

"What?" Ruby and I shout at the same time.

The next moment we are staring at each other.

"That's out of the question," I say, while Ruby mutters, "Sir, I don't know—"

Lexington raises his hand and silences us. He looks at me over his rimless glasses, his eyes seeming to bore into mine.

"Mr. Beaufort, you have been at this school for five years. In that time you have allowed yourself the most impossible things," he begins, "without me once calling you to account. I turned a blind eye when you organized a car race in the schoolyard. I let you get away with it when you and your friends thought it would be a fun idea to outfit the founder statue with a cheerleader outfit and wig. Or when you created online dating profiles for me and other teachers. Or when you had an unauthorized party at Boyd Hall. Not to mention the countless times you've appeared drunk at official parties. But you finally have to learn that your actions elicit reactions. Maxton Hall College has built a reputation over the past two centuries. We stand for discipline and excellence, and I cannot allow you to jeopardize that over and over again with your youthful recklessness." Now Lexington looks at Coach Freeman, who nods briefly. After that, his gaze is on me again. A queasy feeling spreads through my stomach. "Mr. Beaufort, you are suspended from the lacrosse team with immediate effect for the remainder of the term."

The blood rushes in my ears. I see that Lexington opens his mouth and continues talking, but not a single word gets through to me anymore.

Last season, an opposing player tackled me so hard with his stick that we both hit the ground with full force – he hit me with his entire weight. I had never felt such a severe pain before, and for half a minute it was simply impossible for me to breathe in.

That's exactly how what's happening right now feels.

"That . . . you can't do that," I croak, hating how pathetic I sound. I clear my throat, take a deep breath, and force the mask of impenetrability back onto my face, just like my father taught me.

"Yes, Mr. Beaufort. I can," replies the headmaster calmly, folding his hands in front of his stomach. And before you threaten me with your parents – I have already spoken to your father this morning. He assured me that he would support any punishment I decided to take."

I didn't expect that either. "Sir, with all due respect, it's our last season. I'm the team captain, my boys need me." Seeking help, I look up at Coach Freeman.

The regret in his gaze feels like a punch in the stomach. "You have yourself to blame for that, Beaufort."

"Alistair is suspended for the next three games. When I'm not here—"

"Cyril will step in as captain, and I'll put one of the freshmen in your position."

My throat gets dry. I feel heat shoot into my cheeks with anger and my hands begin to tremble. I clench them tightly into fists, dig the short nails into my skin until it hurts and my knuckles crack.

"Please, Coach." Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Ruby sliding back and forth in her chair. The situation seems terribly uncomfortable to her, but at this moment I don't care what she thinks of me.

This is my last year of school. The last few months until my life goes completely down the drain. For lacrosse – for this last, carefree time with my friends – I would do anything. Even if that means I have to beg in front of Ruby Bell's eyes.

To my horror, Coach Freeman does not soften. He just shakes his head, both arms crossed in front of his chest.

"Ms. Bell, I trust you to explain everything about the events team to Mr. Beaufort," Principal Lexington continues, as if he hadn't exactly destroyed my life. "He has to take part in every meeting, to take part in

every celebration until the term is over. If he refuses or causes you problems, you will come directly to me, understood?"

"Yes, sir," Ruby says quietly but firmly.

"When is the next meeting? Then Mr. Beaufort can make a note of it in his diary."

Ruby clears her throat, and even though I really don't want to, I turn my head to her.

Her gaze is hard. Mine is harder.

"The next meeting is today after the lunch break in room eleven of the library," she says, without any emotion in her voice.

I clench my teeth tightly. I am desperately looking for some way out of this situation, but it is impossible. Besides, I have no idea how to explain the matter to my parents.

This time I really fucked it up.

Ruby

"What?"

Lin shouts it so loudly through the group room that the people in the library can probably all hear it. The rest of the team just stares at me in disbelief after my announcement.

"James Beaufort is now a member of the events team," I repeat, just as neutral as the first time.

Lin bursts out laughing. After she has calmed down halfway, I start again: "Please behave normally when he's about to come." In my last sentence, I look at Jessalyn Keswick, who is in the process of applying her lip gloss. The soft pink flatters her black skin, just like all her makeup. Jessalyn is a beautiful, charismatic person and captivates everyone – including me. I could look at them for hours.

"What?" she asks with an innocent smile. "I just want to look my best when Beaufort comes here." She blows me a kiss on the hand. I roll my eyes, but pretend to catch it and then carefully stow it in my pencil case. The rest of the team laughs.

"What does Lexington expect from it?" asks Kieran Rutherford, a boy in the Year Among Us. With his pale skin, sharp, onyx-colored eyes and a tad too long hair, he looks like a vampire – a young Count Dracula with sharply cut features. He is also a scholarship holder at Maxton Hall and the

one in our team who works most reliably and ambitiously next to Lin and me. "That we convert him and lead him back to the right path?"

Lin snorts. "Believe me, converting doesn't help either."

There he is. The reason why Lin is my best friend at Maxton Hall.

"Hey!", Camille interrupts. It doesn't surprise me, after all, she is one of Elaine Ellington's best friends and thus part of James' clique. On top of that, she can't stand Lin and me and hates that we've been given the leadership of the committee. I don't know why she's still on the event team, but I suspect that she's only interested in the note in her report card. In any case, she does not get involved with passion and diligence.

"Anyway," I say quickly, because I see that Lin has opened her mouth to say something. "He will attend our meetings, whether we like it or not. I just wanted to warn you. He was also suspended from the lacrosse team for the remainder of the term."

Jessalyn whistles appreciatively. "But Lexington took a lot of action."

A murmur of approval goes through the room. "Beaufort didn't deserve anything else," says Lin. "We spent half the holidays planning the back-to-school party, and he just ruined everything with his action. Besides, Ruby had to let Lexington complain to her for half an hour today."

"Seriously?" Kieran asks incredulously.

When I nod, he says indignantly, "But it's not your fault that Beaufort smuggled these people into the party."

I raise my shoulders indecisively. "We hosted the party, so Lin and I are responsible for it. In addition, the entrance should have been better controlled. From this point of view, we are already partly to blame. He wants us to apologize publicly on the Maxton Blog so that people know that the thing wasn't planned by us."

Which makes my anger at Beaufort much greater. Since I've been at Maxton Hall, I've never been admonished – by any teacher, let alone by the headmaster himself. If I want to have even a spark of hope of being accepted to Oxford, then I need a pristine white file, and James has endangered it with his childish behavior. I'm certainly not going to let my future be ruined by an idiot who has too much time and money and doesn't know what to do with it.

"That's totally stupid and makes no sense at all. You're the last one who should take responsibility for this crap." Kieran frowns angrily.

I smile gratefully at him and ignore Lin's meaningful look. She has been trying to make me believe since the end of the last school year that Kieran has a hopeless crush on me. But that's complete nonsense. He's just a nice guy.

I clear my throat. "Shall we begin then?"

The others nod at me, and I point to the whiteboard on which Lin has already written the agenda items for today's meeting. "First we should follow up on the party – what went well, what didn't? Apart from Beaufort, of course. Camille, would you take minutes?"

Camille gives me a scathing look, but unfolds her pad and picks up a pen. Lin begins to describe her impressions of the party, and I look at the clock for a moment. It is now shortly after two. The lunch break is over. So Beaufort should be here at any moment. An uneasy feeling spreads in my stomach. It's fluttery and dull, as if I were... excited.

I immediately suppress the thought and join the discussion. We need so much time for the feedback round and the formulation of future to-dos that we have to postpone the remaining items until the end of the week. We distribute some more tasks among us, and then the meeting is over. Afterwards, Lin and I stay in the group room to formulate the letter of apology.

James Beaufort does not show up for the entire two and a half hours.

After Lin and I send the letter to Lexington, we say goodbye to each other. Lin goes to her car. Her home is not far from our school, but there is no bus going there, which is why her mother gave her a small used car last summer.

My hometown is half an hour from Maxton Hall College. With its crumbling facades and poorly maintained streets, Gormsey is pretty much the opposite of glamorous, but I like living there. Even the daily bus ride to and from Pemwick, where Maxton Hall College is based, doesn't bother me. On the contrary, it is the most relaxed time of the day for me. During the ride, I don't have to be the Ruby who doesn't tell anyone about her family, nor the Ruby who can't share her experiences at school with her family. Instead, I'm just... Ruby.

On the way to the bus stop, I pass the sports field, where the lacrosse team is currently training. As I pass by, I watch the players sprinting up and down the entire pitch in their equipment.

The player with the jersey number 17 catches my eye.

I stop abruptly. Then I step closer to the fence and hook my fingers into the wire mesh.

The guy wants to take me in his arms.

With my mouth open, I stare at Beaufort, who passes a ball to Cyril Vega while running. I can hear his stupid laughter from here.

This... this... Asshole!

Just at that moment, Beaufort turns around and discovers me. Through the helmet, I can hardly see what is happening in his face, but his posture changes. She stiffens, and he stretches his chin almost a little defiantly. That damn idiot! Behind me I hear the roar of the approaching school bus. Despite the raging heat spreading in my stomach, I avert my gaze from James and walk the rest of the way to the bus stop.

Let him do what he wants.

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Ruby

While Ember reads my personal statement for the Oxford application, I frame her purple name with the gold pen in my calendar. Now Ember looks much more official and solemn about my statement.

»My passionate interest in politics, from the philosophical principles to the economic aspects in practice, makes Philosophy, Politics and Economics the perfect course for me. It connects all the areas that interest me, and I am happy about the opportunity to study the most important issues of today's society in a depth that only Oxford can offer me," my sister reads aloud and then pauses on her back for a moment. She puts her pencil in her mouth and rolls onto her stomach on her bed to look at me.

I hold my breath.

Ember starts to grin. I fish one of her wedge-heeled sandals off the ground and throw it at her.

"Come on, Ember," I whisper. It's two o'clock in the morning, and we should have been in bed by now. But I worked on my statement until a few minutes ago, and since my sister is nocturnal anyway and often works on her blog until the early hours of the morning, I snuck over to her room and asked her to read it.

"It's a bit rambling," she replies just as quietly, although I can hardly understand her because of the pen between her lips.

"That's the way it should be."

"It sounds kind of boastful, too. As if you wanted to brag about your knowledge and all the specialist literature you've already read."

"That's the way it should be." I get up and go to her bed.

She growls thoughtfully and then circles a few places on the page. "I would definitely delete these spots," she says and holds it out to me. "You don't have to slime up the university and keep mentioning where you're applying. They already know that they are Oxford. Even without you saying it twenty times."

My cheeks are getting hot. "That's right." I take the letter and place it on her desk together with my planner. "You're a sweetheart, thank you."

Ember smiles. "No problem. And I already know exactly how you can return the favor."

That's how it's always been between me and Ember. One does something for the other and is then allowed to make a wish that the other does for her, whereupon the other in turn has a favor with her. It's a kind of barter, a constant back and forth of favors. But if Ember and I are honest, we just enjoy helping each other.

"Shoot."

"You could finally take me to one of your Maxton Hall parties," she suggests casually.

I stiffen.

It's not the first time Ember has asked me to do this, and every time it hurts me anew to have to disappoint her. For it is the only favor that I will never do for her.

I'll never forget the one parent-teacher day when Mum and Dad came to Maxton Hall to introduce themselves to my teachers and get to know my classmates' parents. It was terrible. Apart from the fact that the main building is hundreds of years old and the opposite of barrier-free, people's looks couldn't have been more derogatory. Mum and Dad had dressed up – but that day I learned that Bell-chic can't be compared to Maxton Hall chic. While the other parents appeared in costumes and Beaufort suits, my dad was wearing jeans and a jacket. My mum was wearing a dress that was beautiful, but with flour from the bakery still stuck to it, which we only noticed when an elderly lady gave it a disparaging look and then turned around to gossip about it with her acquaintance.

Even today, it breaks my heart when I think of Mum's pained expression, which she tried to hide behind a fake smile. Or on Dad's stretched chin when he repeatedly failed with his wheelchair at a doorstep and Mum and I had to help him. The two tried not to show how much they hurt the wrinkled noses and facing backs of the other parents. But they couldn't fool me.

On that day, I decided that from now on there would be two worlds for me – my family and Maxton Hall – and that I would carefully separate the two. My parents are not part of England's elite, and that's a good thing. I never want to put them in a situation where they feel so uncomfortable

again. They've been through enough after Dad's boating accident, and the shit that's happening at Maxton Hall is the last thing they're supposed to be dealing with.

And the same is true for Ember. My sister is like a firefly – with her dazzling personality and open nature, she always attracts attention. I know exactly what can happen at Maxton Hall, and I've seen for myself what the guys there are capable of, because they think they own the world. The stories I've listened to in the girls' toilet over the last two years have partly turned my stomach. That wouldn't happen to Ember.

I only want the best for my sister. And that definitely doesn't include my school and its visitors.

"You know we can't let people from outside the parties into the parties," I answer belatedly.

"Maisie was at the back-to-school party last weekend," Ember replies dryly. "She said it was legendary."

"Then she snuck in without the security noticing. Besides, I already told you that the party was a total failure."

Ember frowns. "Maisie's mouth didn't sound like a failure. Rather the opposite."

I press my lips tightly together and close my planner.

"Come on, Ruby! How long will you keep me going? I also promise to behave. Genuine. I'll pretend to be one of them."

Your words give me a sting. It hurts that she thinks I don't want her with me because I'm afraid she might embarrass me. The hopeful look with which she looks at me makes my throat tighten.

"I'm sorry, but I can't," I say quietly.

From one second to the next, hope is replaced by flashing anger. "You're so stupid, really."

"Ember ..."

"Just admit that you don't want me at your stupid parties!" she says reproachfully.

I can't answer. Lying is out of the question, and the truth would hurt her.

"If you knew what was going on behind the scenes at Maxton Hall, you wouldn't keep asking me to come with you," I whisper.

"If you need anything in the middle of the night, go to your stupid school friends," she hisses. Then she pulls the blanket over her head and

turns with her face to the wall.

I try to ignore the painful throbbing that spreads through my chest. Silently, I take my planner and the writing from her desk, turn off the lights and leave the room.

The next day I feel like I'm exhausted and have to use concealer to cover my dark circles. After the argument with Ember, I couldn't fall asleep and lay awake almost all night. As always, Lin immediately notices that something is wrong, but she thinks that it still has to do with Beaufort and the catastrophe of the weekend, and I leave her believing.

After class, I go straight to the library. I want to use the half hour before the next meeting to bring back books and borrow a few new ones that have not been available the last few times.

The library is the place I like most in Maxton Hall and where I've spent most of my time so far. With its vaulted ceiling and open gallery, it does not look gloomy but inviting, despite the shelves made of dark wood. As soon as you step through the door, you can feel that there is a welcome, productive atmosphere here in which you simply have to feel comfortable. Not to mention the incredible selection of literature we have access to here. In the mini-library in Gormsey there is not a single book that would have helped me with my personal statement, while here I was hopelessly overwhelmed at the beginning with the decision of which one I should start with.

I spent whole days in my favorite place by the window, partly because Maxton Hall is the only place where I feel comfortable, and partly because you can't take the centuries-old books of the reference collection home with you. Sometimes, when I'm here, I wish my day had more hours. Or that I could stay longer than the end of school. For me, it's like getting a taste of what to expect at Oxford. Except that the libraries there – according to the website – are even larger and better equipped. And be open around the clock.

Working my way through the introductory literature mentioned on the university's website is nerve-wracking. Many of the books are complicated works, where I only understand paragraphs after reading them several times. But it's also fun, and I've gotten into the habit of creating a small booklet for each book, in which I summarize the content and add my own thoughts and notes.

I'm lucky, and the three books I really want to read are available again. After I have borrowed it, I go directly to our group room. I'm a bit early, but this way I can write the agenda on the whiteboard and sort my notes. Because we discussed the back-to-school party for so long on Monday, we have a lot of catching up to do today.

I open the door with one hand while holding the books pressed against me with the other hand. I place the small pile on a table. Even before I put my backpack down completely, I run my fingers over the cover of Arend Lijphart's *Patterns of Democracy*.

"We're on a date this weekend," I whisper.

Someone lets out a soft snort.

I drive around. At the same moment, my backpack slips off my arm and falls to the ground with a loud rumble.

James leans against the windowsill at the other end of the room, both arms crossed in front of his chest. He looks at me with a raised eyebrow. "That's a bit sad," he says.

I need a moment to collect myself. "What's sad?" I ask, picking up my backpack from the floor and placing it on the table next to the books. One of the holes on the bottom is torn open even further on impact, and I curse inside. I'll have to ask Ember if she can help me sew.

"That you start the weekend with school stuff." He strolls slowly towards me. "I would spontaneously think of better things to do."

"What are you doing here?" I reply, unimpressed and without responding to his allusion.

"Didn't you listen to Lexington? I have to start taking responsibility and realize that my actions are followed by consequences." He repeats the rector's words with a mocking smile.

I open my backpack and take out my planner, pencil case, and committee folder, one by one. "And now you've suddenly decided to listen to what he tells you?"

James' gaze is impenetrable as he comes to a stop in front of me. At this moment, I can't assess him at all. "It's not like I have a choice, is it?"

I look at him skeptically. "The day before yesterday you clearly made a choice."

He just shrugs his shoulders. Presumably, the coach admonished him after he found out that James was at training. Serves him right.

"I'm here. Just be happy about it." At the same moment, he bends down and picks up something from the floor – a pen. It must have fallen out of my backpack. James holds it out to me. Since this gesture seems almost friendly to me, I clear my throat and look for something I can say to him.

"The punishment lasts only one term, James," I say. It's the first time I've said his first name.

That changes its expression. Suddenly, he doesn't just seem to see through me anymore – he looks right into me. There is a fire in his gaze that burns into me and sends a shiver over my body. My stomach tingles excitedly. Abruptly, he averts his gaze and turns on his heel to go back to the back. "That doesn't change the fact that I hate this."

My heart is pounding wildly, and I swallow hard as he sits down on one of the chairs with his arms crossed and looks outside.

I don't know what he means by "this." Whether it's the fact that he's not allowed to play lacrosse. Or the fact that he has to spend his time here. Or maybe he just means me. But I can live with that.

There is too much at stake for me to let a spoiled rich boy throw me off my game. We both have to go through it now, whether we like it or not, and the sooner we accept that, the easier it will be for us to get through this time.

Without another word, I turn to the whiteboard and write down the agenda for today's meeting. It makes me jittery not knowing if James is watching me or not, but my pride doesn't allow me to turn around. Fortunately, the door to the group room opens a little later. "I'm sorry, our printer at home was spinning, and I had to go back and print out my statement, but now I have it, and..." Lin pauses mid-sentence when she spots James.

"Hey," he says.

I wonder if he greets all the people in this world like that. He must also say "Hey" to the lecturers when he is invited to the Oxford interviews.

"What's he doing here?" Lin asks me without taking his eyes off James.

"To take up his punishment," I say truthfully.

James says nothing. Instead, he bends down, opens his bag and takes out a notebook. He puts it on the table in front of him. The book is black and bound in leather, and the curved B is embossed on the cover, which stands for the Beaufort brand. It certainly costs a fortune. We were once in

one of the Beaufort stores in London when we were looking for a new suit for Dad. That was a few years ago, when he often had to appear in court because of his accident. I can still remember the four-digit price tags that made sure that we didn't stay in the store for more than two minutes, but left as inconspicuously as possible.

Next to me, Lin clears his throat. Caught out, I tear my gaze away from James and curse the heat that rises to my cheeks again today. Thankfully, Lin is tactful enough not to comment on it.

"Here," she says and holds out a transparent film with several sheets of paper to me. "My statement."

I fish mine out of the folder and give it to her. "Here's mine. But it's not perfect yet."

"Neither do mine," says Lin. "That's why we read it again. Do you think you'll get to see it tonight?"

"Absolutely. We can go through them tomorrow in the free hour for math." Immediately I take out the golden pen and write down Lin's statement read and correct in my planner.

"I'm very honored that my name is there with the Ultra Pen," Lin says quietly and grins at me. I return her smile and then write the rest of the agenda on the board as our team gradually arrives. Everyone eyes James cautiously from the side, except for Camille, who greets him with kisses on both cheeks.

After everyone has arrived, we start with the meeting.

"The most important thing today is actually our second big event of the school year," Lin begins, her face lighting up. "Halloween."

Kieran lets out a low, ghostly "Uh-huuu," and laughter goes through the round.

"The masked ball was very well received last year," Lin continues, opening a slideshow from the previous year on her laptop. She rotates the screen and holds it up so that the others can see the pictures.

"Can't we just do the same thing again? I mean, if it was so well received," Camille suggests. It would save us a lot of work."

"That's out of the question." Lin looks at her in dismay, whereupon Camille just shrugs her shoulders. Meanwhile, I step to the right side of the whiteboard, which is still free, and write Halloween in the middle. Then I draw a circle around the word.

"We have to agree on a motto today," explains Lin. "Let's just brainstorm, right?"

For a short moment it is quiet.

"I only know what I don't want," Jessalyn finally begins.

"Out with it. So we can narrow it down," I say and indicate to her to get started.

"I don't want orange. Black and orange decoration looks like a child's birthday party, that doesn't suit Maxton Hall at all."

I nod and write down stylish decoration in the upper right corner of the whiteboard.

"How about Black and White?" suggests Doug. He is the most taciturn member of our team and almost never speaks up, so I am positively surprised by his proposal. I smile at him and turn to the blackboard.

"Black and White is worn out."

Suddenly it is as quiet as a mouse in the room.

Slowly I turn around again. James sits leaning back in his chair, his relaxed posture in stark contrast to the tense atmosphere that suddenly prevails in the room.

"Excuse me?" Lin says what's on my mind.

"Black and White is worn out," James repeats, just as dry as the first time.

"I already understood you," Lin hisses.

He looks at her with a frown. "Then I don't understand the question."

"We're brainstorming, Beaufort. We throw ideas into the room and write them all down, without comment, in order to come up with the solution through spontaneous ideas," I explain as calmly as possible.

"I know what a brainstorming session is, Bell," he replies, pointing to the whiteboard with his chin. "And I tell you that it won't work out that way."

"Says the guy who thinks you need strippers to create a good atmosphere," Kieran murmurs.

"I only did that because I knew how lame your party would be."

Nobody says anything, but I can feel how the mood in the room is getting more and more charged. Except for Camille, everyone stares at James with angry eyes, but he doesn't seem to care at all. With raised eyebrows, he looks around. "Come on. You must have noticed that yourself."

"If you really believe that, then you don't have them all anymore," says Kieran, and Jessalyn nods in agreement.

"Guys," I interrupt. I look at them in dismay. "Pull yourselves together." The corners of James' mouth twitch suspiciously, and I point the pen in my hand at him like a gun. "You don't have to grin at all. We spent a large part of the holidays planning this party. She wasn't lame."

James leans forward on the chair, both arms resting on the table. "That's a matter of opinion."

It feels like a vein on my forehead is starting to throb. "Oh, yes?"

He nods.

"And why, if I may ask?" asks Lin bittersweetly. I know this tone. It doesn't bode well and makes me get unpleasant goosebumps.

James raises a hand and counts. "The buffet looked cheap. The music sucked. There was no fixed dress code. And the mood came up much too late."

I can literally feel Lin starting to shake next to me. If we were alone, I would wring James' neck for his harsh criticism. So much work has gone into this party from everyone in this room, it's not fair to dismiss it all as a complete failure. Especially since it's not true. But as a team leader, I have to react reasonably calmly. And there were some points that didn't go optimally, as we found out on Monday during our follow-up.

"As for the music, I agree with you," I say in a calm voice. "She wasn't perfect. But people danced anyway, so I wouldn't call it a complete failure."

"Because that's what you do at a party. But the atmosphere was nowhere near as good as it might have been with decent music."

Three years ago, at my old high school, I attended a seminar on dispute resolution. The course lasted five afternoons and taught us methods for resolving conflicts. I don't remember everything, but one thing stuck in my mind: that you have to make all parties feel heard and direct the energy that comes from an argument to what matters.

With this resolution in mind, I take a deep breath and then look at James firmly. However, this does not change the fact that we are still in the process of finding a theme for Halloween. I think Doug's suggestion is really good and will write it down. Just as I will write down all the other suggestions so that in the end we can see what fits best and what doesn't." With these words, I write Black and White on the board. Then I turn around again. "Any more suggestions?"

"Okay, I have an idea," Jessalyn interjects, raising her hands as if she had a groundbreaking vision. »Classically chic with a spooky touch. Grave lights, black flowers. A modernized version of the traditional Halloween party."

I write it down immediately.

"It's just as boring."

"If you have nothing to contribute, just shut up, Beaufort," Lin hisses.

"A red and black vampire party," Kieran suggests.

"Lame, too," James murmurs.

I'll get through this. I won't ram a pen into his eye.

"The main thing that is lame is how you malign our proposals all the time," Jessalyn counters. "Why don't you make one yourself for a change instead of exuding your negative energy here?"

James straightens up and looks at his notebook. I doubt that there is even a word in it that has anything to do with planning a Halloween party.

"My suggestion is a Victorian party. Weston Hall would be perfect for this. You could get original crockery and cutlery from the time, punch bowls, napkins with lace and so on. Preferably in black. The primary sources of light would be candles – as they were back then – which would create a spooky atmosphere. Of course, you would have to be careful not to burn down the school, but with the right fire protection precautions it should be possible. The dress code would be decadent and noble according to the era. And there are tons of games that the Victorians played on Halloween. They could be included in the process."

After James has finished, the room is very quiet for a moment.

"That's . . . a really great idea," I say hesitantly.

His eyes sparkle as he looks at me. "I thought we were just taking notes and not commenting?"

I avoid his gaze and write the suggestion on the board.

"I once read that in the nineteenth century they baked cakes for such occasions in which five different objects were hidden," says Kieran. "Those who had the objects in their cakes were predicted to be very lucky. We could modernize that and give a reward to those who catch one of the pieces."

"But then announce it beforehand. Not that anyone chokes," Camille replies, wrinkled her nose.

"What music should we play?" asks Jessalyn.

"How about classical music that's a bit mixed up?" I suggest.

"But not your weird classical-electro-dubstep remixes," Lin groans.

"Hey! They're cool. I can also concentrate well." Everyone in the team looks at me skeptically, and looking for help, I turn to Kieran, who shares my taste in music in the vast majority of cases. "Come on, Kieran. Tell them."

"There are great remixes of Victorian music. I heard a good one from Caplet the other day."

I smile gratefully and form with my lips "Send me the link".

"Well, I'd organize an orchestra," James interjects. "And rehearse a dance for the beginning of the party."

A murmur of approval goes through the room, which makes me feel a little sick. I can't dance at all.

"Okay, when I listen to it, it almost seems like we've decided on a topic," Lin says, sounding as surprised as I feel at that moment.

She points to the whiteboard. "I would still like to do a vote. Which of you is for Black and White?"

No one answers.

"Who for the classic-chic party?"

Again no reports.

"What about the wicked vampire party?"

No hands go up.

"What do you think about a Victorian-style Halloween party?" I ask, and before I've even finished the sentence, four arms have gone up in the air. James looks for a moment as if it would be too stupid for him to get in touch, but in the end he does it anyway.

I did not expect the turn that this meeting has taken. I look at Lin with raised eyebrows. "I'd say then we have a motto for this year's Maxton Hall Halloween."

James

Percy has parked the Rolls-Royce directly in the courtyard of the school's main entrance. He stands leaning against the car, his cell phone in one hand, his cap in the other. The silver strands that run through his dark hair seem to increase every day. When he sees me, he immediately puts away his cell phone, puts his cap back on and stands up straight. That's not really necessary, and he knows it.

I walk down the steps, and the people around me willingly avoid me. Apparently, I look just as bad as I feel. It's all the fault of this damn events committee! I already regret that I didn't just keep my mouth shut and keep the suggestion with the Victorian party to myself. When I think of the list of to-dos that the others formulated afterwards, I feel completely different. If I were to throw the party at home, I could delegate everything to service providers and wouldn't have to lift a finger myself. But in this case, I'm the service provider, as Ruby told me with raised eyebrows.

I just want to scream when I think that I still have a whole term full of such meetings ahead of me. In addition to the fact that I find it unbearable not to be able to participate in training anymore.

This is definitely not how I imagined my last year of school.

When I arrive at the car, I actually just want to fall into the back seat, but before I can get in, Percy grabs my arm briefly.

"Sir, you look as if your mood is not good."

"You have a splendid power of observation, Percy."

He looks uncertainly back and forth between me and the car door. "You may want to curb your temper a little. Ms Beaufort is not in good shape."

At the moment, the stupid event team is forgotten. "What happened?"

Percy seems indecisive for a moment, as if he is not sure what to tell me and what not. Finally, he takes a step towards me and says softly, "She just talked to someone. A young man. It looked like an argument."

I nod, and Percy opens the door so I can get into the car.

Fortunately, the windows are darkened. Lydia looks terrible. Her eyes and nose are bright red, and tears have left dark gray traces on her cheeks. She has never cried as much as she has in the last few weeks, and it makes me incredibly angry to see her like this and at the same time to know that there is nothing I can do about it.

Lydia and I have always been inseparable. When you have a family like ours, you have no choice but to stick together, no matter what. I can only remember a few days in my life when I didn't see my twin sister. Whenever she feels bad, I have a strange feeling in my chest – and she feels the same way. Our mother explained to us that this is often the case with twins, and made us promise early on to cherish this connection throughout our lives and not to recklessly jeopardize it.

"What's the matter?" I ask after Percy has started the car.

She doesn't answer.

"Lydia—"

"It's none of your business," she hisses.

I raise an eyebrow and look at her until she turns away from me and stares out the window. That seems to be the end of our conversation.

I lean back and look outside as well. The brightly colored trees pass us by so quickly that they blur into a blurred picture, and I wish Percy would drive slower. Not only because the thought of home makes me sick, but above all to give me more time to break Lydia's silence.

I'd like to help her, but I have no idea how. Over the past few weeks, I've tried everything to find out what happened between her and Mr. Sutton, but she blocks every time. Actually, I shouldn't be surprised. We may be inseparable, but we've never talked about our love life. There are simply things you don't want to know about your sister – and vice versa. But this time it's different. She's devastated, and I've only seen her like this once, almost exactly two years ago. And at that time it almost destroyed our family.

"Graham's going crazy," Lydia whispers suddenly, when I'm no longer expecting it.

I turn back to her and wait for her to continue. The anger I feel towards this scumbag of a teacher bubbles up in me again and again, but I push it back. I don't want Lydia to close herself off to me any more than she already does.

"I'm so afraid Ruby will tell Lexington," she croaks, her voice nasal.

"She won't do that."

"How do you know that?" In her gaze, I recognize the same skepticism I felt towards Ruby when I first met her.

"Because I continue to keep an eye on them," I answer after a while.

Lydia doesn't look convinced. "You can't run after her all the time, James."

"I don't have to. She's on the event team."

Lydia looks at me in surprise, and I smile crookedly.

It is good to observe how the tension seems to fall off her shoulders, not completely, but at least a little bit. After a while, she says quietly: "I've totally forgotten about the event team. How corrosive is it there?"

I just grumble.

"Have you talked to Dad yet?" she asks cautiously.

I shake my head and look out of the window at the moment when the Rolls-Royce comes to a stop. In front of us, the façade of our mansion rises into the air, the gloomy sky with the heavy clouds above it a reflection of my mood and what lies ahead of me today.

"How would you describe me in three words?" asks Alistair over the music blaring from my stereo. He sits on the sofa, bent over his cell phone, and his blond curls fall into his forehead as he looks at the display with his head tilted.

I have just prepared two gin and tonics for us and come back to the sofa with the glasses. Without looking up, Alistair reaches out and takes one from me.

This is already our third round, and finally the blurry feeling in my head that I've been waiting for all this time sets in. It makes me forget that the others are at lacrosse practice. And above all, it represses the memory of the last two hours. My father's voice is already only a quiet hiss.

"How about 'excessively engraver'?"

Alistair grins. "That would be correct. But I shall probably get on with modesty."

Laughing, I drop down on the sofa next to him. I can't get rid of the impression that he had already had a drink or two when I wrote to him and asked if he wanted to come over. Apparently, the fact that he is suspended from the team does not leave him as unscathed as he would have us believe.

In any case, he burst into my living room with the announcement that from now on I would keep my hands off Maxton Hall guys and take a closer look at "this online dating" instead. He said that with a broad grin, as if he wasn't really serious and only put on the profile because he was bored.

But I know him well enough to know that he is anything but indifferent to the matter. He's tired of the guys in Maxton Hall because they just want to make out with him secretly. Unlike most of them, Alistair has been publicly admitting to his sexuality for two years – much to the displeasure of his asshole parents, who have been treating him like an outcast ever since.

If he finds someone online who doesn't make him feel like a dirty secret, I'm all for it. Especially since it distracts me from my own problems, and that's very convenient for me right now.

"Does it have to be exactly three words?" I ask. He shakes his head. "Then ... 'nice guy, lacrosse, sporty and looking for hot dates, blah blah.'"

He grins crookedly. "Blabla, it's okay."

I slide a bit closer to him, with gin and tonic sloshing out of my glass and running over my hand. Cursing, I wipe them on my pants and then look at Alistair's cell phone. When I see the draft for his profile, I laugh.

"What?" he asks challengingly.

"You are not one eighty-five, liar."

He snorts. "Yes."

"I'm one eighty-four, and you're half a head shorter than me, man. Subtract ten centimeters, then you might be right."

He thrusts my elbow into the side, and alcohol lands on my fingers again. "Don't be such a damned killjoy."

"Okay, okay." I take three large sips from my glass and set it down on the table. Then I grab my laptop from the coffee table, open it and start looking for reasonably reasonable-sounding profile descriptions.

Asking Alistair if he wanted to come here was exactly the right decision. He immediately let his driver take him and from then on did nothing but distract me – without asking a single question.

"Oh God," I murmur.

Alistair makes a questioning sound and leans over to look at the screen of my laptop.

I turn it a bit towards him. "I wanted to get inspiration for your profile description, but now I wish I had never clicked on that link. Who would

write 'Ideally I would do it with my twin, but since I'm an only child, you'll have to suffice' in his description?"

Alistair snorts away. "I don't feel like it anymore. I just write 18, lacrosse, open to everything."

"No, man," I say, shaking my head. "'Open for Everything' is almost a carte blanche for strange requests."

He just shrugs his shoulders. After a few minutes, without looking up from his cell phone, he says, "By the way, Elaine asked for you."

I raise an eyebrow, but I don't reply. It's the first time since Wren's party that Alistair has brought up the subject, and I can't tell from his voice whether this is going to be a serious conversation or not.

"She's worried about your young, fragile heart and wanted to know if you still think about her often."

Okay, definitely not serious.

"As if," I reply. I doubt that Elaine wasted a single thought on our night together. It's probably Alistair, who can't let go of the topic, because I've awakened his brotherly protective instinct with it.

"I still can't believe you had sex with my sister." He shakes his head and makes a choking sound. "Can't you get engaged to her after all? I think then I could cope with the whole thing better."

Grinning, I give him a slap on the shoulder. "If I'm going to get engaged to anyone, it's certainly not so that you can sleep better."

Alistair sighs in mock despair. Then he holds out his cell phone to me: "Can you at least help me with which picture I should take?"

He shows me two, one in which he lies shirtless and with his arms crossed behind his head on a lounge, another in black and white, in which he has photographed himself in the mirror and is wearing a suit.

"The one on the couch," I say. "You're wearing too much on the other one."

"I like your team spirit, Beaufort."

After that, the topic of Elaine is fortunately ticked off, and I get us a fourth round of gin and tonics. We toast, and Alistair devotes himself to his new hobby again, while I half-heartedly scroll through my e-mail program.

I freeze when I see that I have received an appointment invitation from the Beaufort Offices. Reluctantly, I open the e-mail, which says nothing except: Next Friday, 7 p.m., business lunch with the sales management in London. Be on time.

From one moment to the next, my good mood disappeared. Instead, an ice-cold shiver runs down my spine as the memories of the argument with my father this afternoon come back.

You embarrass us.

We have a reputation to lose.

Childish, stupid boy.

I'm annoyed that I flinched when he came up to me with his hand raised, because I know better: In the presence of Mortimer Beaufort, you don't show weakness or fear.

The appointment is nothing more than a punishment. He is fully aware that he is hitting me more than his words or his blows ever could. Actually, we have an agreement: As long as I go to Maxton Hall, he will leave me alone with everything that concerns our company. The fact that I now have to participate in this meal is his way of telling myself: "I control your life, and if you don't pull yourself together, it'll be over sooner than you think."

Frustrated, I push the laptop off my lap and go to the bar. I pour myself a tumbler full of whiskey and stare into the brown liquid for a moment. Then I turn around and take him to the sofa.

Alistair looks at me. There is no trace left on his face of the grin from earlier. "Are you all right?"

I shrug my shoulders.

I wanted Alistair to come over so I could forget about my dad, not to talk about it.

Alistair doesn't follow up. Instead, he holds out his cell phone to me. "I have a match." The display shows a picture of a black-haired guy with plenty of muscles.

I slide down a bit on the sofa until I can lean my head back. "What has he written in his description?"

"That he needs someone to take care of his heart. And about his penis."

"How creative."

"Oh. And he has ... just sent me a picture of his cock. How about you tell me your name before you show me your genitals?" Alistair murmurs, and I have to laugh against my will.

That's one of the reasons why Alistair is one of my best friends. If I wanted to, I could talk to him about what is repeating in my head in a continuous loop. I could talk to him about anything – but I don't have to. In the meantime, we have been friends for so long that we are attuned to each

other and know and respect our limits, even if we like to test them. I doubt that I could build up such a friendship with anyone else.

"Are you hungry?" I ask after a while.

Alistair says yes, and I call downstairs in the kitchen. After the argument with my father, I had lost my appetite, which is why I now feel completely starved.

While we wait for the kitchen assistant to bring us the food upstairs, Alistair continues to look at photos of half-naked guys, and I scroll through my blog list on my laptop. Besides some lacrosse sites and blogs of friends, I have been following mainly travel blogs for a few months now. Hardly anything makes me switch off as well as the reports and pictures from foreign countries. I mark some of the new entries for later – now I'm too drunk to be really receptive.

I have also saved the school blog on my list. Actually just to make fun of it, but when I see the lettering in the timeline now, Ruby's face suddenly appears in my mind's eye. My stomach makes a small leap that I don't know if it's due to hunger, alcohol or maybe something else.

My index finger takes on a life of its own, and I open the blog.

Little by little, I click through the school's events – all boring – skim through articles – unbearably unimaginative – and look at the photos in search of Ruby's face. Although her name is above many posts and she is mentioned by name at the school's events, she is not seen in a single picture. Shortly after Lydia told me that she and Sutton were caught by Ruby, I googled her and tried to find out as much as I could about her online. But there was nothing. She doesn't have a single account, neither on Facebook, nor on Twitter, nor on Instagram – at least not under her real name.

Ruby Bell is a phantom.

I keep scrolling. In the meantime, I have searched through the entire last year and still haven't found what I'm looking for. Whatever that is. The longer I look, the more annoyed I become. Why the hell is there nothing to find about her?

"Are you looking at the school blog?" asks Alistair suddenly.

Caught, I look up. Alistair looks at my laptop with a disgusted expression. But when his gaze falls on the word I have typed into the browser's small search field, his face suddenly lights up. "Oh, that's how it is."

"What?"

His grin widens. "When I tell the others."

I close my laptop. "There's nothing to tell."

Alistair's answer is interrupted by the knocking of our maid Mary, who brings us the food. While she drives the little car into my room, I stagger to get up to refill my glass. Now, in addition to my father's voice, I also have to push the image of Ruby's smug face out of my mind.

OceanofPDF.com

Ruby

The pink font in my planner mocks me. She says I should ask Beaufort for Victorian clothes. Unfortunately, I don't want to do that at all.

I overdosed on James Beaufort this week and I'm ready for the weekend. Since we decided on the motto for the Halloween party, he has been misbehaving during our meetings. Either he makes one nasty comment after the other, or he ignores us completely. I wouldn't care if we hadn't decided yesterday that the poster we want to design for the celebration should show a couple in authentic Victorian clothing. And the easiest way to get such costumes quickly and, above all, for free is through the Beauforts and their huge archive.

After the meeting, Lin and I drew lots to see which of us had to ask James for the favor – of course I lost. Since then, I have been thinking about how best to address him about it. Maybe I'll just write an email. Then I wouldn't have to ask him in front of all the other people and most likely get a reprimand.

With full force, I close my planner and slide it into my backpack.

"We can swap," Lin suggests, shouldering her own bag. Then she grabs her tray, puts it on mine and takes both to take them to the dishes return.

For a moment, I weigh up whether the alternative – listening to an hour-long lecture on Lexington's fire safety regulations – would be better.

"Wait a minute," says Lin as we walk out of the cafeteria and towards the learning center. "I'll take it back. I will not deceive."

"What a pity. I would have done it immediately."

The campus is bathed in golden-red autumn light, and the first leaves on the oaks are beginning to change from a rich green to a delicate yellow or dark red.

"Come on. It's not that bad now."

"Says the one who screamed loudly 'jackpot' when she won the fire safety lecture in the lottery," I say dryly.

She grins, caught. "I just think he's so arrogant. I mean, until the term is over, he's a full member of our team. Then he can also contribute something, right? Especially since the whole thing was also his proposal."

"Yes. Unfortunately, it was a really good suggestion." I hold my student ID card in front of the door of the learning center until the small light in the knob lights up green. Then I open it and let Lin go ahead.

The Learning Center is a small building that is only used by the Sixth Form. This is where you can meet if you want to prepare presentations or need a quiet place to study for the final exams. Today, the first meeting of a study group is taking place in one of the tutor rooms, which is supposed to prepare us for the upcoming application process in Oxford.

"Oh," Lin says softly as we enter the room, at the same moment that I stiffen.

When you talk about the devil.

The room has twenty seats, and the only people who are here are Keshav, Lydia, Alistair, Wren, Cyril and... James. In addition, two girls and a guy I only know by sight, and a young woman, but I assume is our tutor. She is the only one who greets us.

I go to one of the places furthest away from Beaufort's clique. Lin follows me and sits down next to me. Mechanically, I unpack my planner, my pens and the new notepad that I bought especially for this study group. While I arrange everything on the table in front of me – it has to be parallel to the edge of the table – I try with all my might to pretend that the others don't exist. I don't want to have anything to do with James and certainly nothing to do with his friends. Just thinking about the fact that I have to compete with people like him in the application process, with people who come from very rich families with whom entire generations have studied at Oxford, makes me sick.

How Lin stands in contrast to me, I don't know. She wasn't part of James' clique at the time, but she moved in his circles because she was friends with Elaine Ellington and a few other girls from the year above us. But then her father left her mother for another woman – who turned out to be a marriage swindler a little later. Within a year, he lost his entire fortune to them, which was a huge scandal at the time and the reason why no one wanted to have anything to do with the Wangs anymore. Neither business, nor socially, nor at this school.

In order for Lin to continue attending Maxton Hall, her mother had to sell her country estate and move to a smaller house near Pemwick. Although the two still live in four times as many square meters as we do, it must have been an insane change for Lin at the time. Not only did she lose her family and the life she had known until then, but above all all all her friends.

Most of the time, Lin acts as if none of this ever happened. As if it had never been different. But sometimes I can see a hint of longing in her eyes that makes me suspect that she misses her old life after all. Especially when I see how wistfully she looks at the empty seat next to Cyril. I've been wondering for a long time if the two of them used to have something going on, but every time I steer the conversation even remotely in that direction, Lin instantly changes the subject. I can't blame her, after all, I hardly ever tell anything private about myself. But I'm still curious sometimes.

As if by magic, my gaze wanders to James. While his friends are talking and seem to be constantly moving, he sits completely rigid in his chair. Wren talks to him, but I'm pretty sure he's not listening. I wonder what thoughts are responsible for the scowl on his face.

"It's nice that you're all here," the tutor begins, and I tear my gaze away from James. "My name is Philippa Winfield, but you can call me Pippa. I am currently in the second semester of my studies in Oxford and also had to go through the application process at that time. So I know how you're feeling right now."

Wren mumbles something that makes Cyril laugh. He conceals it with a clearing of the throat. They're probably talking about how pretty Pippa is. With her dark blonde, wavy bob and porcelain complexion, she almost looks like a doll. A beautiful, expensive doll.

"In the coming weeks, I will help you prepare for the Thinking Skills Assessment and the interviews. The TSA is a two-hour test that you have to take for certain courses of study at Oxford. It helps the university to find out whether you have the skills and critical thinking skills to study there."

The test is on my calendar for shortly after Halloween, and I'm already nervous when I think about the tasks that lie ahead. In the next thirty minutes, Pippa explains to us how the test is structured and how much time we will have for which part of the task – all things that I have known for a long time. I don't want to know anything about the course of the test, I want to learn how to pass it. As if Pippa had read my thoughts, she finally claps

her hands once. "The best thing to do is to just take a look at an example question that could be used for the text task. At that time, it helped me a lot to discuss certain questions with other applicants, because we all have different approaches and that can be really enlightening in some cases. That's why I thought we'd best do it this way." She opens her folder and takes out a stack of papers, which she distributes to us. "On page two you will find the first question. You," she says, pointing with her hand to Wren, who has been whispering something again. Please read the question aloud."

"With the greatest pleasure," he replies with an outrageous smile, before picking up his paper and reading aloud: "The first question is: If you can give reasons for your actions, does that mean your actions are rational?"

Lin's arm shoots up.

"You don't have to raise your hand, I'm opening the open discussion," Pippa says and nods to Lin.

"All actions have an emotional origin," my friend begins. "Although it is always said that you should think and make the intelligent decision instead of listening to what your heart tells you, in the end all decisions are guided by feelings and are therefore not rational."

"That would be a very short essay," says Alistair, and his friends laugh. All except James. He blinks several times as if he had just woken up from a dream.

"It's a thesis that can now be elaborated on or refuted by one of you," says Pippa.

"In order to be able to answer the question, we would first have to define what 'rational' means in this context," says Lydia suddenly. A pen is stuck behind her ear, in front of her she holds the note with the question in her hands. Which course of study will she apply for?

"Rationality means thinking or behavior that is characterized by reason," Kesh murmurs.

"In this context, rationality means reason," I say. "But reason is something subjective. How should reason be defined if every person has different rules, principles and values?"

"But I would say everyone has more or less the same basic values," Wren interjects.

I raise my shoulders indecisively. "I think it depends on who you are brought up by and which people move around you."

"Every person learns from childhood that they are not allowed to kill other people and so on. If you act according to these principles, it is objectively rational," he replies.

"But not every action can be traced back to these principles," Lin points out.

"So if I do something that breaks me, but I know that it follows a certain principle – then that's a rational decision?" asks Lydia. I look at her confused, but her gaze is firmly fixed on the piece of paper with the questions.

"If it corresponds to your basic understanding of reason, then yes," I answer after a short pause. "This clearly shows how different the principles of different people can be. I would never voluntarily do anything that would break me."

"Is my basic understanding of reason, then, worth less than yours?" Lydia suddenly looks quite angry. Red spots appear on her pale cheeks.

"By that I mean that I believe that an action cannot be rational if it hurts someone. Be it yourself or someone else. But that's just my claim."

"And your standards are higher than those of other people. Right?"

Surprised, I look at James. He spoke so softly that I almost didn't hear him. He no longer looks as if his thoughts are somewhere else. Now he is right here, in this room, his cold gaze fixed on me.

I grip my pen tightly. "I'm not referring to myself, but to the fact that everyone thinks and acts differently in general."

"Let's say I smuggle strippers into a party to set the mood and give everyone present a nice evening," James says slowly. "Then that would be a clearly rational decision, if you follow your understanding of the question."

At any moment, my pen breaks through in the middle. "That wasn't a rational decision, it was just immoral and shit."

"It's best not to use words like 'shit' in the essay or in the applicant interviews," Pippa interjects.

"You're differentiating in a place that isn't asked here," James replies dryly. "For example, if you have two job offers, one of which earns you more, but you would be happier with the lower-paid job, the rational decision would be to choose the better-paid job."

"If one acts according to a monetary principle of reason, which should not be a surprise with you." My body is flooded with energy, and it seems to me that no one exists in this room except James and me.

Now he raises an eyebrow. "First, you don't know me at all. Secondly, it is the rational action to opt for the better-paid job."

"Why, if I may ask?"

He looks me straight in the eye. "Because no one in this world is interested in you if you don't have money."

With his words, I become aware of the worn soles on my shoes and also of my perforated backpack. Anger flares up in me, blazing and frantically fast. "That's how you can tell who you were raised by."

"What do you mean by that?" he asks, his voice dangerously calm.

I shrug my shoulders. "If you are told from an early age that no one would be interested in you if you have no money, it is clear that you act according to a reason in which nothing else counts. Pretty pathetic, really."

A muscle in his jaw begins to twitch. "You'd better say no more now, Ruby."

"In Oxford you won't be able to forbid anyone to speak. Maybe you should get used to getting contradicted or get used to the idea of being rejected. But even then you shouldn't have any problems, after all, you're still rich, and the world is interested in you."

James flinches as if I had slapped him. The room is dead quiet. The only thing I hear is my own racing heartbeat and the roaring noise in my ears. In the next second, James gets up so jerkily that his chair tilts over backwards and rumbles to the floor. I hold my breath as he leaves the room with long strides and slams the door violently behind him.

All of a sudden, I become aware of my surroundings again. James' friends blink perplexed, as if wondering what the hell just happened. Meanwhile, nothing but unspeakable shock is written on Lydia's face. A cold shiver runs down my spine. Slowly I come down from my adrenaline rush, and I realize what I just said.

So much for the topic of ›remaining invisible‹. Instead of a professional discussion, I got personal because James made me angry. What he said is true. I really don't know him. And I have no right to throw such things at his head just because he behaves like a headless bastard. That doesn't make me any better than him.

What the hell got into me?

James

Meanwhile, the pattern that runs across my sheet looks pretty impressive. The pointed black spikes, small spirals and wild circles seem almost three-dimensional. As if you only had to stretch out your hand to be drawn into the picture. I'm always surprised at what can come out of doodling. And how successfully it distracts you – for example, from the fact that my boys are just a few hundred metres away on the sports field and training for next weekend's game. Or the fact that I still have to spend exactly one hour and eleven minutes in this room.

"James!"

I look up. All the people from the event team look at me. "What?"

"He didn't even listen!" shouts Jessalyn, looking at Ruby indignantly, as if it's her fault that I don't feel like having these useless meetings.

"Then I'll do it again," Ruby says calmly, looking at me from the opposite side of the table. There's a rental shop in Gormsey, but you can see from the clothes that they're not original, they're made of plastic."

"Gormsey?" I ask, confused.

"My place of residence," she explains slowly.

Never heard of it.

I catch myself wondering what kind of house Ruby lives in. What their parents look like. Whether she has siblings.

Things that shouldn't interest me.

"We said last time that we wanted to make the photo as authentic as possible. But it's not so easy to find good costumes. Beaufort has been around for a good hundred and fifty years, hasn't it?"

She does her best to talk to me in a friendly way, but that doesn't change the fact that the all too familiar cold feeling runs through my veins.

I guess what's coming next.

"Do you think you could ask your parents if they could lend us some clothes from that time?"

I wish I could just keep scribbling in my notebook. Or would be somewhere else – lacrosse, for example. There, no one wants anything from me, I can just run, ram, execute, score goals and be free. On the field, I can forget. Here I am reminded of who I am and what lies in my future.

I clear my throat. "Unfortunately, I can't."

Ruby looks like she expected the answer. "Okay. May I ask why?"

"No, you mustn't."

"In other words, you don't want to help us," she says calmly.

"To be able or willing makes no difference. My answer remains the same."

Her nostrils puff up slightly as she tries to keep her composure. She doesn't really succeed, and watching her do it is somehow amusing. I try to ignore the fact that she's really pretty. I've never seen a face like hers: her snub nose doesn't match the proud line around her mouth, her cat eyes don't match the freckles on her nose, and the straight bangs don't match her heart-shaped face. But in a strange way, it all comes together perfectly. And it gets more appealing the more often I see them.

I can't explain why I lost my temper so much yesterday. It wasn't the first time that someone accused me of being a rich, spoiled bastard. It wasn't even the first time Ruby accused me of that. I don't know why their words touched me so much, but they did something in me – and I didn't like it. I don't know myself like that – and neither do my friends. None of them spoke to me about the incident today, although I had hoped that they would have fun teasing me with my reaction and thus take the seriousness out of the matter. But through her silence and her meaningful looks, Ruby's words have only gained more weight and meaning.

Inwardly I groan. I wanted to enjoy the last year of school, damn it, not worry about anything or anyone – and just have fun. Instead, I'm not allowed to play lacrosse, have to sit in this crappy group room where the air is insanely bad, and hear Ruby tell me that I...

Ruby snaps in front of my eyes.

"Sorry," I say, rubbing my face with both hands. "What?"

"Guys, we can do without him," Kieran says annoyed.

"I could do without you, but unfortunately I have to put up with you until the end of the term," I reply and look at him coldly.

"James!" exclaims Ruby angrily.

"What? I'm just being honest."

"There are times in life when honesty is inappropriate."

It is on the tip of my tongue to reply: "That's exactly what the right person says." But I don't do it. Somehow I find it spicy when she speaks to me so strictly. Which is probably due to the fact that I haven't been partying with the boys for two weeks and have way too much energy pent up in me. I urgently need to get my mind off things. As inconspicuously as possible, I take my cell phone out of my pocket and send a message to our group. Party with me tonight.

"Let's just get costumes from the rental company," Lin suggests. "With a little Photoshop, we can make them look reasonably authentic."

Kieran snorts. "That's just stupid. James Beaufort is on our team."

"Then I'll have to make an inquiry to Beaufort myself if James doesn't want to help," Ruby says suddenly.

"You won't," I say absently, without taking my eyes off my phone. Alistair is writing about how badly the newcomers are doing and that the coach is going crazy.

"You can't forbid me, can you?"

I definitely don't want her to talk to my parents. I don't want anyone near my parents. This is almost impossible, considering that they finance this school to a not inconsiderable extent with their donations and can be seen at every single party. But just the idea of Ruby near my father turns my stomach.

"Do you really want me to tell Principal Lexington at our weekly meeting how little you contribute?"

Slowly I raise my eyes and look at Ruby with narrowed eyes. I can't believe she's really trying to blackmail me right now. If I weren't so angry, I'd be impressed.

"Do what you can't help doing," I growl.

I ignore her for the rest of the hour, and no one speaks to me anymore. I draw angry patterns in my notebook, circles and sharp-edged objects that give rise to little pointed-toothed monsters holding lacrosse sticks in their claws. When Ruby declares the meeting over, I get up so quickly that Camille next to me flinches in shock. I'm almost out the door when Ruby suddenly gets in my way.

"Could you stay a moment?"

"I'm in a hurry," I say through clenched teeth.

I try to take a step around her, but she slides to the side as well. "Please."

Her tone is no longer annoyed as it was a few minutes ago. Now she sounds tired, as if she can't wait to finally get out of this room any more than I can. Maybe that's why I nod and make room for the others. Or maybe it's the thought of Principal Lexington and the fact that I want to avoid having to attend these team meetings longer than necessary. Kieran is the last to leave, and before he closes the door behind him, he gives me a strange look. If I had to type, I'd say he's jealous of me. Interesting.

Ruby clears her throat. She leans with her hips against one of the tables and has her arms crossed in front of her chest. "If you're mad at me, don't take it out on the team. The others can't help it, and it's mean to make their work difficult because of it."

The thought of yesterday almost makes me sick. I can remember every single word she threw at my head. But I definitely don't want her to know that she hit me with it.

So I return her gaze coolly. "I'm not mad at you."

"But you don't give a particularly peaceful impression either."

"We had a stupid debate in a study group, Ruby Bell. A debate that at some point became too stupid for me. What do you want from me?"

"I just wanted to apologize. I behaved unfairly and got personal, and I'm sorry about that."

Okay, that wasn't what I expected. I need a moment to search for the right words. "You're taking yourself far too seriously if you think I'm still thinking about it."

She blinks several times, clearly irritated by my biting answer. "You know what? Just forget it."

"You don't have to apologize to me just because you want something from me."

"I don't apologize to you because I want something from you, James," she contradicts. "But because I am sincerely sorry. I was just... bad yesterday."

We look at each other for a while, and I look for hidden intentions in her gaze. But I can't find any. Her facial expression is honest and open. She seems to be really serious. I briefly weigh up my options. I could continue to give her the cold shoulder and pretend I don't care what she said. But then I run the risk that she will actually blacken me at Lexington and extend

my time on that committee. I also realize that I don't really want to do that. Arguing with Ruby Bell is damn exhausting. I believe that it will make my life a lot easier if I meet her here.

"Okay," I say simply.

All of a sudden, the atmosphere between us is no longer as charged with anger as it was a few minutes ago. I feel like I can breathe deeply again, and Ruby's shoulders suddenly look a lot looser.

"Good," she replies. For a moment, she seems indecisive, as if she doesn't know what to do next. Then she nods and goes back to her table.

She takes her calendar, opens it and ticks something off. I wonder if her apology to me was seriously an item on one of her to-do lists. I wouldn't be surprised.

Actually, I could leave now. We have said everything that needs to be said. I don't know why I don't move from the spot, but watch her pack up her things. Everything seems to have its place in her hideous backpack, and there is something strangely soothing, almost hypnotic, about how a folder, a notebook, pens, a water bottle and finally her planner gradually disappear into it.

"How many costumes do you need for the poster?" I suddenly hear myself ask.

Ruby freezes in the middle of the movement. Slowly she turns her head to look at me. "Two," she says cautiously. "A men's and a woman's costume."

I can see how she tries in vain not to seem too hopeful, and I decide not to keep her in suspense any longer.

"I'll ask my parents," I say after a short pause.

Ruby's eyes light up, and it's obvious that it's taking a lot of effort for her to suppress a glow. "Really?"

I nod. "Are you satisfied now?"

Ruby closes her backpack and heaves it onto her shoulder. Then she takes a few steps towards me: "Thank you. You're really helping us with that."

I shrug my shoulders, and we leave the group room together for the first time since I've been attending meetings with the events team.

"The planning is actually going well, isn't it? For Halloween?"

Surprised, she looks at me from the side. I'm just as surprised by my question. Why the hell don't I just run away?

"Actually, yes. But I don't think I can sleep peacefully again until the party is a success."

"Why do you care so much?"

She thinks for a few minutes before answering. "I want to prove that I'm good at leading the team. That I do justice to the task. I had to fight hard to even get into the team, and then I had to fight hard not to let Elaine get me down." She gives me an apologetic look. "I know you're friends, but she really wasn't a good team leader. I don't want all the work and passion I've put into the committee and still put into it to be in vain."

I mutter thoughtfully, and she gives me a questioning look.

"I'm just wondering if there's anything I'm so passionate about."

"Lacrosse?" she asks.

I shrug my shoulders vaguely. "Perhaps."

We go downstairs, through the library and outside, and for the first time I really realize that the events that seem so pointless and annoying to me are an important part of other people's lives.

"What time is it?" Ruby asks suddenly.

I look at my wristwatch. "Shortly before four."

She curses quietly and runs off. "I'm going to miss my bus!"

Her green backpack bounces on her back, and her brown hair swirls through the air as she sprints towards the bus stop.

I go to my chauffeur, who is waiting for me in the parking lot in our Rolls-Royce. Asking my parents suddenly doesn't seem like such a big burden to me anymore.

Ruby

My phone vibrates as I sit in front of the TV with my parents and Ember watching The Voice Kids. I dig it out of my pants. The unlock button has been stuck for a while, and I feel like I have to press it a little harder every day. When my cell phone finally understands the instruction, I freeze.

An unknown number has written me a message.

I made the costumes for the poster ready. Can pick them up tomorrow in London. – J.

"I can't believe this girl is eight years old," Mum's voice reaches my ear in amazement.

"Why can't you two sing?" asks Dad. "Then I would have sent you to such a show back then."

"Our talents are elsewhere, Dad," Ember replies.

"Oh, really? What can you do?" I hear a dull sound that makes me look up. Ember threw Dad off with a sofa cushion. He laughs rumbling.

"My blog has over five hundred followers, Dad. I can sew and show people that you can wear whatever you want with a body like mine – that's something, isn't it?"

"You cracked the five hundred?" I ask, surprised.

She nods curtly. We haven't talked much since our argument. Ember is still angry that I refuse to take her to the next Maxton Hall party, so the fact that she made this big milestone has totally passed me by.

"That's great. Congratulations," I manage. I don't know why my words sound so forced, because they come from the heart. Ember has been working on Bellbird for over a year. She puts so much work and love into her blog that she deserves to be successful with it.

"Thank you." Ember lowers his gaze to the remote control and begins to fiddle with it.

"Do you think Ember can sign up there armed with the sewing machine and go to the casting?" asks Dad suddenly. "Or perhaps she could give a lecture. I would love it if you explain to the people there what you have taught us – with Voldemort comparisons and everything, so that everyone understands it!"

Ember lets out a snorting laugh. "I don't think that's possible, Dad. It's a singing show."

"Ah. Yes. That's one argument. What about Britain's Got Talent? It's a talent show, and if what you're doing doesn't belong there, I don't know what is. In an emergency, we'll just invite your five hundred followers and put them in the audience. And then we'll all cheer you on together."

"Absolutely!" I agree. "Go and register your designs for a casting show. I will make colorful signs and distribute them to all five hundred followers."

Ember grimaces. I stick my tongue out at her. Her eyes begin to sparkle, and then a cautious grin spreads across her lips. At that moment I have the feeling that everything is fine again. We got along tacitly, as usual. I feel my shoulders relax with relief.

Dad says something else, but at that moment I'm distracted by the message that lights up again on my phone. I start to reply, but delete it immediately. I have no idea how to react. The idea of going to London with James and spending a day with him, outside the boundaries that Maxton Hall usually draws around us, feels strange. Exciting when I think about it more closely. Again I type a few words.

Suddenly, a pillow lands in my face.

"Hey!" I shout.

"Our discussion wasn't over yet, Ruby," my father says deadly serious. "Get involved."

"No, Dad, I can't sing, and no, I'm not going to a casting show so you can make fun of me."

"Mh," he says, looking at me thoughtfully, while Mum makes a delighted sound. "Such a little girl with such a wonderful organ!"

"There are other ways to win at a talent show. If that doesn't work out with the sewing machine, you might as well learn to juggle."

"If you really want to go to a casting show, maybe you should apply yourself," I say dryly.

"You know what? Maybe I'll do that," Dad replies in a feigned defiant tone.

"And what do you want to appear with?" asks Mum absently. She doesn't let the TV screen out of her sight.

"How about—"

Danny Jones, one of the jury members, presses the button, and his chair begins to turn. Mum bursts into cheers, and Dad raises his arms euphorically as well.

Ember and I look at each other and laugh at the same time.

"Did we have anything planned for tomorrow?" I ask after the girl has left the stage and the mood has calmed down a bit.

Dad shakes his head. "No, why?"

"We're planning a Halloween party at the moment and have to get costumes. A fellow pupil has been able to find some, and is now asking if we want to pick them up in London tomorrow."

"It's a two-hour drive. Would your ominous classmate drive, or do you take the train?" asks Mum.

I raise my finger to indicate that she should wait a moment. Then I type my answer.

Ok. How do we get to London? – R. B.

I hope he understands that my initials are meant to be a joke.

My chauffeur will pick you up around 10am. OK? – J. M. B.

I snort and immediately feel Ember's questioning look on me.

For a moment, I'm on the verge of googling James just to find out what the M stands for, but I'm holding myself back. Googling it would also cross a line. I don't want to know what is written about him on the net. Hundreds of rumors are circulating in the school alone. My need for James Beaufort gossip will last until the end of my life.

"My classmate seems to have a driver," I answer belatedly.

"A driver?" asks Ember skeptically. "So it's one of those snobs."

"Beaufort belongs to his family."

"You want to go to London with the Beaufort boy?" asks Dad. His tone is a mixture of surprised and suspicious.

I nod slowly. "Yes. We can get clothes from the archives."

Dad furrows his eyebrows. "And you're going to... Two of you?"

"Come on, Angus," Mum interrupts. "Leave Ruby alone."

"What? If Ruby has a date, I want to know."

I feel my face turn red. "That's not a date, Dad. We're doing school stuff."

He just grumbles. Ember, on the other hand, stares at me with wide eyes. She lets herself fall back on the sofa and crosses both arms in front of her chest. "That's so... Oh man. You don't know what a chance it is, Ruby."

"I'll take pictures for you," I say soothingly, but Ember just looks stubbornly at the TV.

"So it's okay if I drive?" I ask Mum. She seems to me to be the only sensible person in this living room.

"Of course," she says instantly, giving Dad a warning look as he opens his mouth again. "You're old enough to decide with whom you go where and when."

Her words inexplicably make my cheeks even redder. Without paying much attention to this, I type an answer:

Ok.

By the way: Instead of champagne, I would like to have Ben & Jerry's. – R.
J. B.

PS: If you list another initial now, I'll go crazy.

I hesitate for a moment and wonder if I can really send the message like this. James and I are not the kind of people who joke with each other via chat. Or is it?

See you tomorrow, Ruby.

No, we are probably not that kind of people.

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Ruby

The next morning I am on the verge of going crazy because I have no idea what to wear for the visit to Beaufort. I don't know if there is a dress code there and if so, how chic I have to make myself. I also wonder if James will wear a suit. We've both never seen each other outside of school, which means we don't know each other in anything other than the school uniform.

I finally decide on a black skirt, over-the-knee stockings and an ochre knitted sweater with a crocheted white collar and a black bow. I put on my black brogues, which I was able to get hold of a few months ago in Gormsey's thrift store.

When it comes to fashion, I'm nowhere near as willing to take risks as Ember. I prefer to buy things that I feel confident in and that I know I can wear for a long time. But I still like to get dressed up and take time to look well-groomed – probably that's also due to my penchant for order.

When I'm dressed, I go back to my sister as a precaution. She is already awake and sitting at her small desk by the window when I poke my head through the door.

"What?" she asks, without turning to me.

"What do you say to this outfit?" She turns to me in her chair, and I push the door all the way open so she can look at me.

"Very pretty," she says after taking a look at me from head to toe.

"Really?" I ask, turning around once. When I look at Ember, she squints her eyes.

"No date, huh?" There is something teasing in her tone.

I roll my eyes. "Ember, I can't stand the fellow."

"That's clear," she replies and stands up. She goes to her closet, a small chamber built into the wall, and opens the door. Then she leans forward until she has half disappeared in it and begins to rummage. Carefully I step behind her and look over her shoulder. After half a minute she reappears and hands me a burgundy little bag.

"My bag!"

"Don't act so indignant. You're just walking around with your backpack anyway," she says defensively. She points to my outfit. "But it goes really well with that."

"Actually, I should ask for interest, because you have kept it for so long." I tap off the thin layer of dust that has formed on the imitation leather. I also bought this part in the second-hand shop in the village center. I walked around proudly with it for two whole weeks until our neighbor Mrs. Felton spotted me in Mum's bakery and bragged loudly that the bag had once belonged to her fifty years ago. After that, I willingly lent it to Ember and didn't want it back at first. But now that I'm holding it in my hand, I'm glad to have it back.

"I'm not going to pay interest on something you didn't even know was still in my possession," Ember replies.

The ringing of the doorbell freezes me. I take a look at the clock. It's a quarter to ten. "He's too early," I groan and run to my room to hastily move my phone and wallet from one pocket to the other.

"Ruby!" comes my mum's voice.

As I go downstairs, I remind myself to stay calm. There is no reason to be excited at all. It's nothing more than a trip for school—Lin and I have done this a hundred times before, and it will be no different with James.

I take a deep breath and take the last steps. Mum has already opened the door, and when I come into the hallway, she is talking to a man. My mouth opens.

First, James didn't lie. He really has a chauffeur. And with uniform, cap and all the trimmings. Secondly, the chauffeur looks like Antonio Banderas. He has tanned skin, deep brown eyes and an expressive, almost sensual mouth. He is certainly in his forties and extremely attractive. If I interpret the blush on Mum's cheeks correctly, she thinks exactly the same as I do.

"Good morning, miss," says the Zorro chauffeur, raising his cap briefly in greeting.

"Good morning—"

"Percy," Mum helps me out and beams at me.

»... Percy," I finish with a smile and take my parka from the cloakroom. So, Mum. I'll see you later."

"Have fun, honey. And take photos for us." Mum gives me a kiss on the cheek, and I step outside to Percy. The next moment, as if by magic, he

stretches a huge black umbrella above my head.

"Thank you," I say.

"Gladly, miss. The car is right there in front."

I follow his hand gesture and almost stop in amazement. On the street in front of our house is a Rolls-Royce. Shiny black and huge, it looks like a foreign body among the other cars parked on the side of the road – even to me, and I've gotten used to the sight of limousines and expensive cars by now.

Percy opens one of the back doors and holds the umbrella over me until I get in. I thank him, whereupon he nods and carefully closes the door behind me. Less than half a minute later, the car starts. Nervously, I smooth my skirt and check that nothing has slipped when I put it in.

Only then can I look at James.

He sits on the side bench, an unfathomable expression on his face. He looks like he doesn't know what to make of the fact that I just got into his car. He wears a dark gray suit interwoven with fine threads, a white shirt and a dark silk tie with a tie pin. In one hand he holds a glass, which I fervently hope is apple juice, and I notice a silver signet ring on his left finger that I have never seen before. A coat of arms is depicted on it, certainly that of his family.

The longer I look at him, the more inappropriately dressed I feel in my pieced-together vintage outfit. Unlike me, everything about James screams money, from the top of his head to the tips of his shiny black leather shoes. I try not to be impressed by it – after all, I knew what I was getting myself into.

Only at second glance do I notice how tired James looks. His turquoise eyes are undermined in red, and dark shadows lie underneath them.

"Good morning," he finally says roughly.

Maybe he just woke up. Or he partied through the night and didn't sleep at all.

"Good morning," I reply. "Thanks for picking me up."

When he doesn't reply and instead looks at me just like I did before, I look around in the limousine. The seats are made of leather, opposite James is a bar with glasses and a compartment with a door, which I assume is some kind of refrigerator. Between our area and the driver's side is a dark partition.

As the silence between us threatens to become uncomfortable, I say with a nod in Percy's direction, "Your driver could be a Hollywood star, by the way. I've never seen such an attractive man in his mid-forties."

"You flatter me, miss. I'm fifty-two," Percy's voice sounds through a speaker on the ceiling.

Dismayed, I look at James. He starts grinning, from one ear to the other. An insane heat shoots into my cheeks.

"If you say things like that, maybe you should turn off the intercom, Ruby Bell," James points out, pointing over himself. I follow his gaze and see a bright red light.

"Oh."

"I'll do it, sir," says Percy, and a second later it goes out.

I bury my face in both hands and shake my head. "In films, only the partition wall goes up. How am I supposed to know that you have to press an extra button for this?"

"Don't worry about it. Percy rarely gets such compliments from me. I'm sure he'll be happy."

I shake my head. "I think I have to get out."

"It's too late for that now. You'll be trapped here with me for the next two hours." I hear a soft clinking. "Here, for you."

Slowly I take my hands off my face. James holds out a small blue cup to me.

"Don't say you really got me ice cream," I manage incredulously.

"We still had some at home," he says simply. "Take it, or I'll eat it."

Without another word, I take the cup from him. James leans down to the refrigerator again, and the next second he's holding a second Ben & Jerry's mug in his hand. I watch him with interest as he peels off the foil and lifts the lid. Seeing him in this suit with the ice cream on my lap seems so unreal that I wonder for a moment if I'm actually awake or still asleep.

The ice condenses in my hand, and a cold drop lands on my lap. I look around for a napkin.

"Up there on the right," says James, nodding to the bar.

I stretch, take one of the eggshell-colored napkins from the pile and spread it out on my lap. Then I lift the lid of the cup and take a first spoonful. I close my eyes with relish. "Mhhh. Cookie Dough."

"I had to guess which is your favorite variety," says James. "Was I right?"

"Yes. Definitely cookie dough," I say with full conviction, but pause for a moment. Whereby. The new salted caramel is also really good. Do you know that?"

James shakes his head.

For a while, silence spreads between us. Then he says, "This is the best hangover breakfast I've had in a long time."

So yesterday he was celebrating. "Did you have a long night?"

I regret the question immediately as he smiles ambiguously into his ice cream. "You could say so."

"So this part of the ominous James Beaufort rumors is true."

"Ominous James Beaufort rumors?" he asks, amused.

I raise an eyebrow. "Come on."

"I have no idea what you are talking about."

"As if you didn't know that there are tons of rumors about you and your clique."

"For example?"

"That you eat caviar in the morning, bathe in champagne, destroyed a waterbed during sex ... and so on."

He freezes with the spoon halfway to his lips. A second passes, then another. In the end, he shoves it into his mouth and eats the ice cream leisurely while pretending to think intently. It seems as if he is gradually waking up. The dull veil has disappeared from his eyes.

"Okay, then let's clear up the rumors," he begins. I find the thought of eating fish eggs just disgusting. When I have breakfast, I drink a smoothie, usually poached eggs or muesli."

"In the smoothie?" I grimace in disgust.

"Not in the smoothie. And that."

"Oh, yes."

Again he thinks for a moment. "The champagne thing isn't right either. That means it's not quite true. I once dropped a damn expensive bottle from Wren's parents into the pool and then bathed in it. But that was not intentional."

"Wren's parents must be big fans of yours."

"If you only knew." He smiles and continues to spoon his ice cream.

"And... what about the waterbed?" I ask hesitantly.

James pauses and looks at me with sparkling eyes. "You're interested, aren't you?"

"If I'm to be honest, yes," I admit without taking my eyes off it. "I mean, waterbeds don't break so quickly, do they? I've heard they're totally stable."

"It wasn't a waterbed, but a normal frame."

I swallow dry. There's something in James' eyes that I've never seen before. Something dark, heavy that makes my stomach tingle.

"How boring," I croak, but my voice belies me.

I don't want to imagine James having sex.

Really not.

Unfortunately, I am now thinking about what he must have done to destroy his bed. And what he must have looked like. He showed me a bit of skin when he undressed in front of me. I know it's well built. And I've observed often enough how agile he can move during sports. He certainly makes the women in his bed quite happy.

At this moment, I am grateful for the ice cream in my hands. I would love to dive into it with my face to come down again.

"There is usually nothing or only a little truth to rumors." His knowing grin makes me fear that he knows down to the smallest detail what I was thinking.

I decide that it is time to tick off the topic of waterbeds now. "Then I'm glad there are no rumors about me."

James puts his ice cream back in the fridge and puts the spoon down on the bar. Then he leans back in his seat and looks at me thoughtfully.

"I don't know if I want to know what people say about me," I say quietly.

"Most people didn't know you at all. And if they said anything, it wasn't a bad thing."

I breathe a sigh of relief. "Really?"

James nods. "That's why I was so suspicious of you. Someone with such a good reputation can only have dirt on him."

I grimace. "I don't have any dirt on my hands."

"Of course not." His gaze is amused, and he leans forward. "Come on, Ruby. Tell me something that none of our classmates know about you."

I automatically shake my head. No. I wouldn't take part in such a game under any circumstances. "Why don't you tell me something that no one else knows about you?"

I expect him to protest, but instead he seems to be actually thinking about the question.

"If I am not taken at Oxford, my father will kill me." He says it casually, as if he had long since come to terms with this fact. But his eyes tell me another truth.

"Because he also studied there?" I ask cautiously.

"My parents both studied at Oxford. And their parents."

I have always envied James and his friends that they have the best prerequisites to be accepted at a university like Oxford because of their origins. But now I realize that there is a second side. One that is associated with an incredible amount of pressure and that makes me understand James' violent reaction in the study group a little better. I must have really hurt him with my words.

"I've always wanted to go to Oxford. Ever since I can remember," I begin after a while. I suddenly feel like it's okay to trust him with this part of me. After all, he just did, and it helped me understand him a little better. We've only argued since we first met. It can't hurt if we try to get rid of the prejudices we have against each other, at least in part. "My parents always encouraged me, even though they knew it would probably remain a dream. My grades were always good, but that alone doesn't qualify you for Oxford. But then they heard about the scholarships that Maxton Hall gives to a handful of students in England every year and signed me up for them. None of us expected it to work out, but I did something right during the interviews. Since then, the idea hasn't been quite so insane, and I vowed to do everything I could to make it to Oxford. I want to make my parents proud. And myself, too."

James is silent for a moment. He looks at me, and the sudden intensity in his blue-green eyes sends a shiver down my spine. "How long have you been at school?"

"For two years."

He growls.

"What's there to hum?" I ask.

He shrugs his shoulders indecisively. "I just wonder how it can be that I've never noticed you before."

My heart leaps. And at the same time, I pat myself on the back inwardly – apparently my don't attract attention rule works perfectly. "I

have the gift of moving through the corridors like a shadow and merging with the walls."

One corner of his mouth lifts slightly. "That sounds like you're the in-house Maxton Hall ghost. Or a chameleon. But let's get back to the topic: It's your turn."

"With what?" Perplexed, I look at him.

"To tell me something about you that no one else knows."

"But that's what I've just got!"

He shakes his head. "That doesn't count. You only reacted to what I told you."

I take a deep breath and slowly expel it again while I think about what I could tell him. The fact that his alert gaze is on me doesn't make it any easier for me to think. On the contrary.

I shake my head resignedly. "There's nothing to tell."

"I don't believe you." He leans back, both arms crossed in front of his chest. "Come on. You can't just learn."

But, it flashes through my head, I can. However, thankfully, another thought comes to me at the same moment. "I read manga."

James looks at me for a moment as if he had misheard. Then he smiles. "That's something. I wouldn't necessarily call it 'dirt on the stick', but okay. What's your favorite manga?"

I blink at him perplexed. I hadn't expected an inquiry.

"Death Note," I answer with a delay.

"Would you recommend him to me?"

I have no idea how we went from "James destroys sex beds" to "These are Ruby's favorite manga." Really not a clue. Nevertheless, I nod slowly. "In my opinion, you miss an important part of your general education if you haven't read Death Note."

James looks shocked. "That would be terrible."

The corners of my mouth twist without my intervention.

I have to grin.

James Beaufort made me grin.

When I realize that, I quickly turn away and look out the window, but I'm pretty sure he saw it. In his eyes, something like triumph has clearly flashed.

I wonder why.

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Ruby

BEAUFORT

James' last name is emblazoned in imposing letters on the façade of the company's headquarters. While he gets out of the car and walks purposefully towards the entrance, I stop and stare with wide eyes first at the sign, then at the huge modern building, in which – as James explained to me during the drive – the largest Beaufort branch in England is located in the lower part, and the offices of departments such as Design, Sales, customer service and above all, of course, the tailoring department. Window fronts extend over all six floors of the building, behind which mannequins are set up, dressed in the classic fashion with which the brand has become famous.

"Are you coming?" James calls to me from the front door.

We talked about the rest of the trip. Not much, but still more than I expected. The feeling that I am really in a dream does not want to go away.

I'm in London. With James Beaufort.

I just can't believe it.

"Ruby!" shouts James, pointing to his watch with raised eyebrows.

That tears me out of my trance. Hastily I start moving and run to him. He holds the door open for me, and I enter the branch hesitantly. Then I look around.

It's much bigger than the one I was in with my parents back then. The high ceilings, white walls and well-kept hardwood floor make the showroom feel open and inviting, even if the furniture is all black. Shelves stretch along the back wall that reach up to the ceiling and in which countless shirts are stored. A brass rod is mounted above the shelves, from which a ladder hangs on the left side. Directly behind the entrance area is a large round table, in the middle of which stands a brass deer statue, around which neatly folded trousers lie in small stacks. Above the table hangs a chandelier, which gives the room warmth with its soft light. The scent in the

store is unique – tart but not intrusive, a mixture of the natural smells of the fabrics as well as an aroma that probably comes from an air freshener.

James gently pushes me on the arm. I look up at him, and he makes a head movement towards the back of the store. Slowly I follow him. To our right is another wall of shelves. A piece is recessed in the middle, and there hang pictures of men in different suits, illuminated on the sides by two brass lamps. Just below are a dark green velvet sofa with checkered cushions, a fur-covered futon, and a glass table with crystal glasses and a carafe of water.

All around us I see robust tweed, fine silk, the finest leather – the fabrics Beaufort works with are the best, that is their promise of quality. There's no doubt that I'm in a shop here where aristocrats and politicians come and go, and while I don't want to, I feel a little out of place.

But maybe that's simply because only men seem to be here. Men in sales, men further back standing on stools in front of large mirrors, men at their feet taking their measurements, and then the man standing next to me.

Suddenly, one of the men in question rises from the ground. He says something to the customer whose trouser hem he has just pinned, then his gaze falls on us. When he recognizes James, he becomes stiff as a stick. "Mr. Beaufort!" With a chalk-pale face, he looks at his wristwatch.

"Don't worry, Tristan, we have time," James replies.

I don't recognize his tone of voice at all. He speaks like a different person. Sublime and with authority. When I look at him from the side, I notice his straight posture. Even though he has his hands loosely buried in the pockets of his suit pants, you can tell that he is not just anyone in this store. I wonder how he does it. He seems to make every place he goes his kingdom. The school, the lacrosse field, this business. Does that also happen when he enters an ice cream parlor? Maybe I would have to try it out on occasion.

Tristan beckons another tailor over and passes his tape measure to him. The next moment he rushes to us and shakes James' hand. "Forgive me for not seeing you."

"Don't worry, Tristan," James replies. "Do you have time for us, or are you still busy?"

The tailor looks at him angrily. "Of course I have time for you, sir."

James turns to me. "Ruby, that's Tristan MacIntyre, Beaufort's first tailor. And Tristan, that's Ruby Bell. She's the head of the events team at

Maxton Hall."

I look at James with raised eyebrows. I'm surprised that he introduced me like that. He could have just said that I go to school with him. Or nothing at all except my name.

Tristan straightens his jacket, and when his gaze falls on me, his posture relaxes a bit. A practiced smile comes to his lips. "Mr. Beaufort doesn't often bring school friends here, so I'm very glad to make your acquaintance, Ms. Bell."

I return his smile and shake his hand. He grabs her, but instead of shaking her as I expected, he turns her halfway and hints at a kiss on the back of my hand. All of a sudden, I feel the need to curtsy. Luckily, I can just hold back and say instead, "Joy is on my side, Mr. MacIntyre."

"Feel free to call me Tristan."

"Only if you call me Ruby."

His smile widens, and with a meaningful look he turns to James: "We had a few costumes brought from the archive. They are up in the tailor's shop. So if you would both follow me, please."

He turns around and leads us through the shop to the back to a dark wooden door. Through it we reach a stairwell.

"I hope you like the clothes we picked out," Tristan says on the way upstairs. "They were designed by their great-great-great-great-grandfather himself, Mr. Beaufort."

I look at James in surprise, but his face shows no emotion as he says, "I'm sure they're enough for the occasion."

"Is that the great-great-great-great-grandfather who founded Beaufort?" I ask curiously.

Tristan nods. "Exactly, together with his wife in 1857. Did you know that Beaufort was originally a fashion house for both men and women? It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that the decision was made to focus on the core competence."

I knew that since Lin suggested asking James about the costumes. I interjected that it wouldn't do any good, because then we would still be missing the dress for the woman, whereupon she told me about the beginnings of Beaufort fashion and showed me pictures of the opulent dresses that were sold under the brand at the time.

"Yes," I say belatedly. "But I don't know why."

"Our economic situation was bad," says James. "My great-great-grandfather made a few wrong decisions, and we were on the verge of bankruptcy. Specializing was the only way out."

"After that, Beaufort became the brand it is now," Tristan explains, as if he had been there himself. "Nobody makes suits like we can. You can get everything your heart desires from us - from suits for everyday life to evening wear. The quality of the workmanship cannot be compared to off-the-shelf goods, not to mention the fact that we personalize each suit with the customer's initials. Mr. Beaufort, show me yours."

I stop and turn to James, who is standing one step below me. Now we are on an equal footing. My gaze lingers on his eyes for a moment too long, the expression of which I again can't really interpret. Then I lower him onto the breast pocket of his dark gray suit, which is embroidered with the initials JMB.

"I've been wondering since yesterday what the M stands for," I confess. I look up again, and suddenly I'm so close to him that I can see details in his face that I haven't noticed before. For example, that his eyelashes are surprisingly dark for his hair color. Or the pale freckles that run across his cheeks.

"Mortimer," he answers quietly.

"Like your dad?"

He nods and looks past me to Tristan. A clear sign that he does not want to deepen the conversation in this direction.

As we walk up the rest of the stairs, Tristan tells me about the special fabrics the Beaufort tailors work with and the number of cufflinks they can choose from.

Until now, a suit has always been just a ... Suit. I have never been able to notice any major differences, let alone suspect how many decisions have to be made before one is made. Or how many different ways there are to make it.

"We measure every diamond, we leave nothing to chance," says Tristan as we leave the stairwell and enter an illuminated hallway. "That has always been Beaufort's claim. We work with the greatest care and offer the best quality. That's why we even get to dress the royal family." He stops next to a photograph hanging on the wall. I step closer, and my mouth opens.

There is a picture of the crown prince on the wall.

"Don't say you dressed him," I say reverently.

James says nothing, but Tristan smiles proudly. "Not only him."

We continue along the hallway, where pictures of celebrities, politicians and members of the nobility hang on the walls from start to finish – all of them dressed in Beaufort suits. I see Pierce Brosnan, the Beatles, and even a photo of the prime minister. In addition, a number of men whose faces mean nothing to me, but whose attitude in the photos alone conveys to me that they are powerful and very rich.

"Have you met all these people?" I ask James.

He shrugs his shoulders. "A few."

"That's really cool," I murmur and am almost a little sad when Tristan opens a door at the end of the hallway and finally leads us into the tailor's shop.

Curious, I look around. The room is spacious and almost looks like a huge, bright hall. Although it's Saturday, there must be fifty people working here right now between tailor's dummies and tables piled up with fabrics.

"Come, the costumes are back there." Tristan leads the way and crosses the room with us in tow. As they pass by, the staff greet James politely but stiffly. When I glance over my shoulder, I can see her putting her heads together and whispering. Frowning, I look at James. He has put on a mask of nonchalant arrogance, the same expression I know from him at school. I wonder what's going on in his head right now. He doesn't look like he's enjoying the fact that people here seem to be afraid of him.

I want to know more about him, I suddenly realize. More about James, Beaufort and what goes on behind the scenes of this wealthy family.

Tristan tears me out of my thoughts when he stops abruptly. "Voila," he says, pointing to a tailor's dummy next to him, which ...

It takes my breath away.

The tailor's dummy wears a Victorian dress. It is made of green silk, is two-piece and has short sleeves with black lace flounces. The top is tight-fitting, the neckline subtly heart-shaped and decorated with black glass stones. The skirt is pompous and looks even bigger and heavier due to the underskirt. The green fabric, folded in pleats, alternates with panels of lace fabric and reaches the floor. It's by far the most beautiful piece of clothing I've ever seen in my life.

I don't know how to take it home or to school. I don't even dare to touch it for fear of getting it dirty.

Behind the doll with the dress is another doll dressed in a men's costume consisting of a frock coat, waistcoat, shirt and trousers. The frock coat has a slight waist cut, and it looks as if it is made of a soft woolen fabric. The black vest has several pockets and is pointed at the bottom. In the small collar of the white shirt is a black tie that looks wider and is shaped differently than the ties I know.

"When gentlemen dressed up in those days, they didn't do things by halves. Every detail had to be perfect," explains Tristan and begins to remove the men's costume from the doll. After he has made it, he indicates to James to follow him behind a partition wall. "Come, Mr. Beaufort. Let's see if it suits you."

James doesn't look at me anymore before he follows Tristan behind the partition. He looks more like he's on stand-by and isn't really present at all. Since we left the Rolls-Royce, I haven't seen a single emotion on his face. As if it were his ultimate goal not to let anyone here participate in his thoughts or feelings.

While I hear Tristan's soft murmuring and the rustling of fabric, I dare to take a step closer to the dress. I wonder what kind of woman wore it before and what kind of life she led. Whether she had dreams and was able to make them come true.

It takes about five minutes for Tristan to come back to the front of me. "It suits him perfectly," he says triumphantly.

"You've got my measurements, Tristan," James comments dryly. "I'm sure you helped." Then he also emerges from behind the partition wall.

My mouth becomes dry.

James looks like he's straight out of the nineteenth century. The suit fits him perfectly, and Tristan has even combed his hair to the side and pressed a walking stick into his hand. I let my gaze slowly wander over his body, from top to bottom.

James looks just fantastic.

It's only when I look up at his face again that I realize how I must have stared, and judging by his dirty grin, James knows exactly what was going through my head. My cheeks are getting hot.

"It's your turn, Ruby," Tristan suddenly asks me.

"What?" Confused, I look at him. "With what?"

"Well, with changing, of course." He points to the dress. I stare at him, then at James. The latter tries to suppress a laugh with moderate success.

Only then do I realize what the two of them want from me.

"Out of the question!" I say with panic in my voice. I was supposed to get the costumes. There has never been any talk of getting dressed.

"Did you think I was the only one who traveled back in time? Certainly not." James stretches out his walking stick at me and taps my shin a little too hard. "So if you would please change your clothes."

"A true gentleman would never hit a lady with a walking stick, Mr. Beaufort," admits Tristan.

James lets out a snort. "Ruby is not a lady, Tristan. She's a tyrant."

"You haven't gotten to know my tyrannical side at all. But I'll be happy to show it to you." I look at James with squinted eyes. "Tristan, you don't happen to have another stick like that?"

"I'm afraid not. But you don't need a cane at all when you wear this wonderful dress. "Come on," Tristan says, looking so hopeful that I don't have the heart to fight back. I follow him behind the partition and he disappears and comes back a little later with a woman whom he introduces to me as his assistant and who helps me put on the two-piece dress. It turns out that I would never have been able to do it alone. Closing the many tiny eyelet closures is an art in itself, not to mention the fact that the top and skirt are reinforced with metal rods on the inside. I have to contort myself quite a bit to get both over my head or hip. After we have finished dressing, the hem circumference of the dress is so enormous that I hardly fit into the narrow area between the divider and the real wall.

"Done, boss," calls Tristan's assistant, and he steps back to us. When he sees me, he clappes his hands together in delight, and his face lights up. "How wonderful! Just a few final touches ..." As if out of nowhere, he pulls out a hair clip and steps behind me. He takes the top part of my hair – at least that's how it feels – pushes it back and clamps it with the clip. Then he stands in front of me again and tugs at a few more strands until a satisfied expression spreads across his face. Then I can finally turn to the mirror that hangs on the wall behind me.

My breath is taken away.

I didn't know I could look like that. Aside from the fact that the dress hugs my curves as if it was made for me, I feel like I can channel the spirit of the lady who once wore it. I feel beautiful, powerful and strong at the same time. As if the whole world was at my feet and all I had to do was

snap my finger to get what I wanted. I slowly turn to Tristan and smile. "Thank you for forcing me to put on the dress."

He indicates a bow. "Mr. Beaufort," he says solemnly. I present to you Ms Ruby Bell."

Carefully I start moving. One step, two steps, around the partition, four steps, five steps... Until I stop and dare to look up.

James is talking to Tristan's assistant, but when he sees me, he breaks off in the middle of a sentence. His brows move up, and his lips open slightly. He looks me up and down as if he has all the time in the world, and I swallow hard.

Then he mumbles something I can't understand.

"What?"

He clears his throat. "You... you look very pretty."

My heart stumbles. It's not the first time I've gotten a compliment from a boy, but it still feels kind of like it. I don't think James says something like that very often. His words come to me... honestly. And unmasked.

"The dress is made for her," Tristan agrees. He pushes me a little further in James' direction and then pulls out his cell phone. "Now look like a nineteenth-century lady and gentleman."

Next to me, James lets out a barely audible snort, but when I risk a look at him, he looks into the camera as if he hasn't done anything else in his life. I remember the pictures that went around Maxton Hall last year. In it, he modeled together with Lydia for his parents' new collection and had a poker face that was just as rehearsed as he is now. I turn my head to Tristan and try to look sublime and serious. I don't know if I'm doing it right, but he takes one photo after the other of us.

"Why don't you change the pose again? Maybe you bow and hold out your hand to her so that it looks like you're asking her to dance," he suggests after a few minutes.

James looks like a professional when he complies with the request. I doubt that many eighteen-year-old boys would look as elegant as he does when they take a bow – with or without a costume. But James seems to take it really seriously. I'm surprised when he suddenly grabs my hand and looks up at me from below. His skin is warm, and although he only touches my fingers very lightly, a tingling sensation runs up my entire arm.

When he looks at me like that, I can literally imagine it. A hall full of people in costumes, atmospheric orchestral music and James and I. How he

puts his hand on my back and leads me across the floor. Surely he knows how to move. I could well imagine giving up the helm while dancing with him and letting myself fall.

I swallow dry. I like the idea better than it should.

"Now maybe another picture of you facing each other?" says Tristan, and James gets up again. The silk scarf in his breast pocket has slipped a bit, and automatically I reach for it and straighten it.

Something flashes in James' eyes. I quickly take my hand away again – and then suddenly I don't know what else I'm doing with my arms, and let them hang lamely at my sides.

Suddenly, James reaches for my hand again. He puts his other on my waist, and I hold my breath. My heart starts racing, and I don't know why, but it feels amazingly good to be touched by him. At that moment, I can't remember why I can't stand him.

What is he doing to me?

James returns my gaze with exactly the same mixture of wonder and alertness that I feel right now. The sounds around us fade the longer we look at each other. I can only feel. His fingers resting on my waist and moving slightly, his hand gripping mine tightly. His gaze almost seems to me like a challenge that I want to accept at all costs.

"James," a deep voice sounds behind us.

The fire in his gaze goes out. From one second to the next. As well as his relaxed attitude. All of a sudden, he stands up straight and lets go of me as if he had burned himself on me.

One second. It didn't take any longer for him to become the James Beaufort I know again. The arrogant expression around his mouth and the coldness in his eyes suddenly make him look quite threatening in this outfit.

"Mum, Dad. I didn't know you were here today."

Oh God. I start to turn around in the bulky dress, and when I finally make it, my heart slips into my pants.

In front of me are Mortimer and Cordelia Beaufort. James and Lydia's parents. Leader of one of the most successful companies in England. Suddenly, I don't feel as strong and powerful in my elevator as I did a few moments ago – especially not compared to Cordelia Beaufort. Everything about her is stylish, elegant and sublime. She has a narrow face and the same arrogant mouth as James, except that hers is painted dark red. Her complexion is like porcelain, and she wears a tight-fitting white sheath

dress that is certainly from an expensive designer. Her shiny rust-red hair reaches just over her shoulder and is perfectly wavy, as if she had just come from the hairdresser.

James' father has sand-colored hair, ice-blue eyes and corners of his mouth that point slightly downwards. His posture is upright and proud, and he looks like he's on his way straight to an important business meeting in his tailored Beaufort suit.

His face shows no emotion as he looks me up and down.

Now I know from whom James inherited his impenetrable mask.

"We were at the company for a meeting with China," explains James' mother. She steps forward and kisses her son on the cheek, the scent of her perfume coming towards me. It smells powdery and like a bouquet of fresh roses.

"Percival told us that he would like to see you and your—" she looks at me briefly, "... school friend."

James doesn't answer. Since he makes no attempt to introduce me to his parents, I step forward with hot cheeks and shake hands with his mother. "I'm Ruby Bell. I am glad to meet you, Mrs. Beaufort."

She looks at my hand a moment too long before it strikes. "Joy is entirely on my side." She smiles and reveals a row of pearly white teeth.

I want to be like her, it shoots through my head. I want to get into a room like her and be instantly seen and respected as a strong woman by the people around me just because of my charisma.

What I don't want is to frighten people by my mere presence, as seems to be the case with Mr Beaufort. He nods curtly at me as I shake his hand as well, and then looks around the tailor's shop again, as if he's already had enough of me.

"I see you've ordered some clothes from the archive," says Mrs. Beaufort, looking at us with her head tilted. She takes a step forward and tugs at the skirt of my dress. A wrinkle forms between her brows. "The skirt is too long. Please change that, Mr. MacIntyre."

Tristan, who hasn't said a word since the arrival of the Beauforts, nods quickly. "Of course, ma'am."

Now Mrs. Beaufort gestures to me with her hand to turn around. I comply with her request with a queasy feeling in my stomach. "What else do you need the clothes for?"

"For the Victorian celebration at the end of October," answers James. He is as if he has been changed, and his monotone of voice is reminiscent of a robot.

"He means the party he has to organize because he acted like a wayward little boy," says Mr. Beaufort.

Mrs. Beaufort clicks her tongue. I finish my turn, which was not so easy to do with the dress, and now look inconspicuously back and forth between the three of them. James shows no reaction to his father's words. Mrs. Beaufort, on the other hand, looks at her husband admonishingly for a moment.

Then she turns back to me. She puts her hands on the short sleeves of the dress, tugs at them and finally says to Tristan: "It should be done a little further up here, Tristan. So it squeezes, and then can—" She looks questioningly into my face.

"Ruby," I help her out.

»... Ruby can't breathe properly," she ends.

Tristan nods and pulls me back behind the partition together with his assistant. I take another look over my shoulder at James, but he doesn't look after me, but is fully focused on his parents. His father talks to him, his gaze fixed on me. His murmur sounds annoyed, but I can't understand anything he says to James.

I look away and turn to Tristan. "The two seem very ... important." Only at the last moment do I manage to exchange "frightening" for a word with a more positive connotation. Tristan is already busy carefully pinning the hem of the dress with pins from a pin cushion on his wrist.

"You're right, miss." He says no more.

It is eerie how quiet it has become in the huge room since the Beauforts entered it. Nobody seems to be talking anymore, even Tristan only smiles at me briefly before he disappears and leaves it to his assistant to help me change. Getting out of the dress is much faster than putting it on. It takes less than ten minutes before I have my own things back on and can go back to the front.

I stand next to James, who has now taken off his frock coat and draped it loosely over his arm.

Mrs. Beaufort lets her gaze glide over me, then puts her hand on her son's arm. "I'll see you downstairs."

James nods curtly.

She turns to me. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Bell."

James' father doesn't say a word. The two turn around and leave the tailor's shop. Only when the door closes behind them can I breathe in again.

"You could have warned me, you know," I say quietly.

Stiffly, James turns to me. I wish I could read his gaze, but there is nothing but icy turquoise. "Percy is waiting for you downstairs."

"Well, I'm done. You are the one who is still stuck in the nineteenth century." Cautiously, I smile at him.

He doesn't reciprocate. "Our trip is over," he begins, and his voice sounds exactly as he looks. Cool and distant. "It's better if you go now."

I frown. "What?"

"You have to go now, Ruby." He says it slowly and emphasizes each syllable individually, as if I were hard to understand. "See you at school."

He turns around and goes behind the partition wall to change. For a moment I can only stare at him. In the next, I realize what he has just done. How he talked to me.

Anger spreads through me, and I take a step forward to confront him. But I don't get far. Tristan grabs my arm and holds me back. The look in his eyes is regretful, but also stern as he looks at me. "Come, Ruby. I'll take you downstairs."

He pulls lightly on my arm. Reluctantly, I let him lead me away. As we cross the tailor's shop, I can feel the pitying looks of all the employees on me.

Ruby

My invisibility cloak has slipped.

Word got around that I was in London with James at the weekend. Apparently, there are even photos of us entering the store together. Suddenly, people in Maxton Hall know my name, whose faces I've never seen before. Some greet me friendly in the corridors, others – most of them – whisper behind my back. It's worst during class, where I can't concentrate at all because my classmates stare at me all the time. As if they expected me to get up at any moment and explain at length what happened between me and James Beaufort over the weekend.

I want to forget last Saturday as quickly as possible. I still feel so humiliated, and my anger at James grows the more I think about his impossible behavior.

When the bell rings for lunch, I seriously consider skipping the meal, but I'm too hungry for not walking to be a realistic option. In addition, Lin promises to build up around me like a shield – and tell me the latest gossip about her father.

"He's got a new girlfriend again," she announces, after we've eaten in silence for a while.

I look up from my udon noodles. "But not another marriage swindler, is it?" I ask with my mouth full.

"No." She grimaces. "That is, at least I hope so."

"And?" I ask cautiously.

Lin shrugs. She pushes her half-eaten sandwich away from her and wipes her fingers on a napkin. "I don't know. I think he can just take a break from dating after the last woman went so wrong."

Lin meets with her dad once a month so that the contact between the two doesn't break off completely, and I admire her for dealing with the whole situation so pragmatically. I don't know if I could still look my father in the eye if he had treated me and my mum so badly.

"Was she nice to you?" I finally ask.

Lin shrugs his shoulders. "Yes, yes. A little too nice, perhaps."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know either. Somehow we didn't click." She begins to pluck small pieces from the napkin. "But that's okay. You just can't get along with every person."

I think for a moment. "With some people, surprisingly, you do click after a while." Involuntarily, my gaze goes to James and his friends. They have caught one of the good seats by the high windows and are talking animatedly. When James says something, it makes Wren laugh so much that Kesh has to pat him on the back for choking.

"It sounds like you're speaking from experience," Lin says with a meaningful look at James.

I shake my head and stare at my noodles again.

"Come on. Won't you tell me what happened?"

"I already have."

Lin raises an eyebrow. "All you said was, 'We picked up the costumes.' But I'm not stupid."

I take a deep breath. "It was okay. More than okay, in fact. Until his parents suddenly appeared."

Lin inhales hissing. "You have met the Beauforts?"

I nod thoughtfully. "They were... Very impressive. "I didn't have much time to talk to them because they were only there for a short time. After that, James was back to the way he is."

"What did he do?" asks Lin, seemingly remembering that she also has a tray of food in front of her. While she looks at me intently, she bites off a piece of her sandwich.

"He threw me out. I was escorted outside."

She pauses in the middle of chewing and stares at me.

I shrug my shoulders helplessly. I really don't want to think about the horrible drive back on Saturday, where I had to force myself to breathe in and out deeply to calm down.

"It was the most embarrassing thing I've ever experienced," I murmur, risking another look at James.

At this very moment, he looks at me. When our eyes meet, anger bubbles up in me again, and I'm about to get up and hit him with my tray.

But after blinking once, he cuts the connection and turns his attention back to his friends.

"Why did he kick you out?" asks Lin.

That's exactly what I've been racking my brains about for the rest of the weekend. And I only came up with one possibility that sounds plausible to me.

"I think he was ashamed of me. You should have seen how his father looked at me. As if I were dirt stuck under his shoe." I pull the bowl with the dessert towards me: chocolate cream with cream, garnished with a strawberry and a mint leaf. At least this day has one good thing in store for me.

"That's nonsense. You can't let anyone give you that feeling," Lin says so indignantly that I look up.

"It's the truth," I reply. "You would never have looked at me with your buttocks if it hadn't been for the thing with your parents."

Lin flinches as if I've slapped my chocolate cream in her face. Her skin turns ashen, and only then do I realize what I just said. I immediately open my mouth to apologize, but she rises jerkily.

"It's nice that you think so little of me," she hisses and grabs her tray, even though she hasn't finished eating yet. She goes to the dishes return and then leaves the cafeteria without looking around for me again.

I stare into my dessert and realize that I have lost my appetite. What a shitty day.

By the time I make my way to the library in the afternoon, I've almost gotten used to the whispering and looks of my classmates in the hallway. It's getting easier and easier for me to ignore them, even if the echo of their voices still resonates in my ears. I hadn't given a single thought beforehand that this day with James could have such an effect on my life at Maxton Hall. What was I thinking? James is the king of this school – of course, people are interested in who he spends his free time with. Getting into this car with him was a huge mistake. And I now pay for it with my invisibility.

The event meeting is a torture. Lin doesn't look at me, and I can't look at James. It takes me a lot of effort to tell the others about the costumes without letting it be known how hurt and angry I am. But it must have worked, because after I finished, everyone seems to be looking forward to the pictures. Camille then tells us that her parents know the owners of a large cutlery manufactory, who has agreed to stock us up on everything we need for the celebration. Jessalyn has obtained various offers from rental

companies for decoration and goes through them with us, and Kieran plays us music on his laptop that he has chosen.

I only get half of it.

After we have distributed the tasks for the next meeting and declared the meeting over, I hold Lin back by the arm. She still avoids my gaze, but waits until the rest of the team has left the group room. I close the door behind them and then turn to my girlfriend.

"I didn't mean it," I begin, "I'm sorry for what I said. I just thought... you were friends with completely different people before. I just wonder if we would have ever met like this if it hadn't been for the thing with your parents."

Lin looks at me for a while. Finally, she sighs and says softly, "You're right."

I pause. "Have I?"

She nods. "If you hadn't approached me that day, we would never have become as friends as we are now," she says, looking me in the eye for the first time since noon today. "I'm so grateful that you approached me in the toilet back then."

Her voice becomes scratchy, and she swallows hard. I still remember the day a year and a half ago when I went to the toilet on the first floor and heard someone sobbing. I had no idea who was in the dressing room, only that the person must be really bad. So I cautiously asked if everything was okay, to which Lin just told me to leave her alone. I didn't listen to them. Instead, I sat down on the floor opposite the cabin, passed her tissues under the door and waited until she was ready to come out again. That was the beginning of our friendship.

"I'm also grateful that I spoke to you. And I'm really sorry."

"Me too. I didn't mean to at you."

"Today is just a stupid day," I say resignedly. I take my phone out of my backpack and take a picture of the notes we wrote on the whiteboard during the meeting. Then I sit down at my laptop and send the picture to the others along with the protocol Lin wrote. Meanwhile, Lin begins to wipe down the whiteboard.

"Beaufort has been looking at you for the entire hour," she says suddenly.

I snort. "I was standing in front. Everyone looked at me."

"Not like him. He practically begged you with his eyes to look back at him."

"Such nonsense."

Lin shrugs his shoulders, "As you say. Nevertheless, it was great how you just gave him the cold shoulder. He deserves it."

I close the laptop and pack it in my backpack. "I just want everything to go back to the way it was before," I say as we turn off the lights in the room. "People are staring at me now as if we had been up to something else on Saturday. None of them have any idea what really happened. Nothing."

She grumbles thoughtfully. "I know. But you know the people here. They pounce on every little thing like vultures. Especially if she has something to do with James Beaufort."

I look at her sullenly. "Mh."

She gently thrusts her elbow into my side and holds the door open for me. "Come on. As soon as the next rumor makes the rounds, everyone will have forgotten about it."

We enter the hallway, and I'm about to answer when I see someone leaning next to the door.

James.

I stare at him. I almost asked him what the hell he was doing here, but I remember at the last second that I was ignoring him. So I avert my gaze and move on.

Then he pushes himself off the wall and comes towards me.

"Do you have a moment?" he asks. His gentle tone irritates me. He doesn't fit the James who treated me like dirt just forty-eight hours ago.

You have to go now, Ruby.

I would like to shout my opinion in his face, but I appreciate my library card and the key card for the group rooms too much for that. "No, I don't have time," I say curtly instead. I'm proud that I manage to keep my voice calm, but still give it emphasis. He should know that I won't let something like that happen to me.

"We need to talk," James continues, glancing briefly at Lin.

I shake my head. "We don't have to do anything, James."

Lin touches my arm, an encouraging gesture that shows me that I am not alone.

All of a sudden, I'm just tired. "You know what?" I say, looking James straight in the eye. "Perhaps it would be better if we went back to the way

we were before."

James frowns. "To the before?"

I have to clear my throat. A lump has formed in my throat and is getting bigger and bigger. "By that I mean the time when you didn't know I even existed. Maybe it would be better if we went back there. I was clearly better off then."

He opens his mouth to reply, then closes it, and the furrows on his forehead deepen. Finally, he nods slowly. "I see."

This is good. He understands what my problem is. So I won't have to deal with him in the future.

Nevertheless, it hurts when I turn around and walk with Lin towards the exit.

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Ruby

"What's wrong with you?" asks Ember, and I flinch violently.

I was so lost in thought while stirring that I didn't notice that she had crept behind me and was looking over my shoulder into the pot of jam.

"Nothing," I say a moment too late.

Dad points at me with an unopened package of preserving sugar. "Something is wrong, I agree with your sister."

I roll my eyes. "You're annoying me, that's what's going on." I stir with a little too much momentum, and the hot apple jelly splashes onto my hand. Hissing, I breathe in.

"Immediately under cold water," says Mum and takes the spoon from me. She presses it into Ember's hand and then pushes me to the sink, where she turns on the cold water.

"Just let me vegetate," I grumble.

"As far as I'm concerned," says Dad. "Only you've been like that since your ominous excursion on Saturday, and I'd like to know why."

I just grumble. I don't even have my peace at home.

I've never understood why everyone always complains about montage. For me, every Monday symbolizes a new start where the course can be set for a great week. I usually love Mondays. Today, however, everything appeals to me. The people at school, the memory of Saturday, Ember's curious looks. Even the little splash on my hand that burns like hell. Stupid apple jam.

I would love to lock myself in my room and stubbornly memorize the learning material for the next three months, but my family forced me to help with the canning. I'm sure that the jam is just an excuse to finally get me talking.

"Why don't you just tell us what happened?" Ember confirms my suspicion the next moment.

"Because you don't really want to know how I'm doing," I reply. "You're only asking me because you want to squeeze me out about

Beaufort."

"That's not true!"

"No?" I ask provocatively. "So you don't care what it was like there?"

Now she is stepping unsteadily from one leg to the other. "Yes, yes. But one does not exclude the other. I can be interested in one of the largest men's outfitters in England, but at the same time I can also be interested in your well-being. There's room in my heart for both, sister's heart."

"How cute," Dad says, driving past the two of us in his wheelchair to the stove. He takes a fresh spoon and dips it into the simmering jam. Watching him taste it is always fascinating. When I try a dish, I see ... normal. With Dad, you can immediately tell that he is a professional. His facial expression changes, as if he were taking apart all the ingredients in his mind and thinking about whether one is still missing and if so, which one it could be.

Just like now. He has tilted his head, and we look at him intently. In the next second, his face lights up, and he rolls back a bit to the small metal cart in which all his spices are stored. He reaches for a cinnamon mixture and adds a few pinches to the cast iron pot. The smell reminds me of Christmas – my favorite holiday.

"There's nothing to tell, Ember," I reply belatedly, and my sister groans in frustration. "You know everything there is to know about Beaufort."

"I'd like to see the tailor's shop too," she sighs, resting her chin on the palm of her hand.

"Wouldn't that be boring for you? You want to specialize in women's clothing," Dad admits.

The doorbell rings, and we look at each other in surprise.

"Who else can that be?" asks Mum and leaves the kitchen in the direction of the hallway.

"It's all about the atmosphere, Dad. To see how people work there, with what materials and cuts. It would have been totally interesting anyway." Seeing Ember so longing gives me a sting. I can understand that she thinks it's unfair that I was given the opportunity to visit the headquarters of a great designer just like that – something she probably won't get the opportunity to do anytime soon. On the other hand, I also think about how the trip ended for me. And I definitely don't want my sister to ever have to feel as humiliated as I did at that moment.

"I have an idea. Can't you ask your friend to give me a tour too?" asks Ember, and the thought that it's only half a joke worries me.

"You can ask him yourself, Ember," Mum says suddenly.

I turn to her, frowning. "What?"

"The boy is standing in front of our door," she explains, pointing over her shoulder with her thumb. "You didn't tell me how handsome he is."

I stare at her, my protective instinct shoots from zero to a hundred. "You didn't let him in, did you?"

"Of course not. You can do that – or leave it, if you prefer." Mum comes up to me and presses a kiss on my head. I can feel the curious looks of my family on my back as I cross the kitchen and step into the hallway. As if stunned, I go to the front door.

James is standing on the stairs that lead to our house. It's the first time I've seen him in casual clothes. The dark jeans and the white shirt make him look like a normal boy. If I had met him like that on the street, I might not have recognized him at all.

Above his arm hangs a large black protective cover with the logo of the Beauforts. I stare at the curved B for a moment and am suddenly seized by unspeakable anger.

He has no business here. I don't want him to even come near my family. My life here has nothing to do with my life in Maxton Hall, and I can't accept that he's standing in front of me now and just blurring the line I drew years ago – especially not after last Saturday.

The moment I open my mouth to confront him, he takes his eyes off our rose bushes and discovers me in the doorway. An emotion flares up in his eyes that I can't interpret – I never manage to – and then he goes up a step so that we are on an equal footing. He clears his throat and finally holds out the protective cover to me.

"I wanted to bring you the dress. Tristan changed it. It should fit perfectly now."

I make no attempt to take the dress off him. "And that's why you're coming to my house?"

He takes a deep breath, exhales jerkily and rubs his hand over the back of his head. "I also wanted to talk to you about Saturday. I acted like an asshole, and I'm sorry."

For a moment I can only stare at him.

It's the first time I've heard him say something like that, and I can't help but wonder how many times he's apologized in his life. When I think about what he has allowed himself in the last few years alone at school, his moral boundary must usually be much lower than mine.

Now, on the other hand, he really looks like he's sorry.

"I don't understand why you did that," I say quietly.

Especially not after he held my hand and we clearly had a moment together. I saw exactly how warm his gaze had become and clearly felt the crackle between us. I didn't imagine that.

He swallows hard. For a minute he says nothing at all and only looks at me with unfathomable eyes. Then he murmurs so softly that I almost can't hear his words: "I don't understand myself sometimes, Ruby Bell."

I open my mouth to reply, but close it again. I feel like he's being honest with me for the first time, and I don't want to ruin that by rejecting his apology. So I remain silent. I've been silent for so long that it would have been uncomfortable with any other person, but James and I—I think we could look at each other in silence for hours just to try to catch a glimpse behind each other's walls.

"Why did you really come here?" I finally ask.

"What you said at noon today—" He hesitates. "What if I don't want to go back to the way I was before?"

I let out a soundless laugh. "You threw me out. And before that, you embarrassed me in front of your parents. You pretended that I wasn't good enough to get to know her."

He shakes his head. "I didn't mean it that way."

I see that he is barely noticeably bobbing back and forth on his feet. It almost seems as if he is nervous. "I had fun on Saturday. Until... my parents have come." He clears his throat. "I think it would be a shame if we suddenly pretended not to know each other. You are no longer invisible to me. And I don't want to pretend either."

Although the bitter aftertaste of Saturday is still there, his words make something in me contract in tingling excitement. "I don't understand what you're asking me to do now, James," I say quietly.

"I don't expect anything. I just don't want it to be like before. Can't we just ... ?"

Speechless, I look at him.

He doesn't mean it seriously, it shoots through my head. He can't be serious. I'm not stupid. I know James can't stand me – even though we really had a good time together last Saturday. I'm the reason he was banned from lacrosse, and I know one of his sister's biggest secrets, so I'm a risk to him and his family. Guaranteed he just wants to keep an eye on me.

"If that's any of your tricks again ...", I start skeptically, but James interrupts me.

"No," he says and steps up the last step of the stairs.

I must not attach any importance to his words, I know that very well. I can't assess it – I doubt anyone can. And yet, at that moment, there is something in his gaze, something honest and regretful, that takes my breath away for a second.

How did that happen? How did we go from not knowing and bribing and hating to this point in just one month?

The door opens behind me. "Ruby? Are you okay?"

I stiffen. In front of me stands James Beaufort with a hundred and fifty year old dress over his arm and a look that makes my knees weaken. Behind me is my sister, with whom I fought over Dad's jam just a few minutes ago. My two worlds collide with full force, and I feel cold and hot at the same time. I don't know how to react, so I just nod at Ember with a forced smile and try to tell her to disappear without words. She looks back and forth between me and James, curious and skeptical at the same time, but then she actually pulls back and leans against the door.

Only then can I turn back to James. I need two breaths to collect myself. Then I remember that I still owe him an answer. "I don't know," I say honestly.

James nods slowly. "Okay. I actually only came here to apologize for Saturday."

"Only for Saturday?"

Now he smiles boldly. "I'm certainly not going to apologize for giving you a lap dance."

I don't know if I can accept his apology when he says something like that.

I don't know if he's serious or if he just wants to smooth the waters so that I don't tell anyone about Lydia. Still, it would make my life easier if I didn't have to get upset about him all the time. Or maybe even talk to him about school stuff from time to time. I noticed on Saturday that he is not

only quick-witted, but also intelligent. It was fun to talk to him. And then there was this something that triggered a tingling sensation in me and made me curious for more.

I know it's unreasonable and I shouldn't trust him an inch. But the longer I think about it, the more I realize that I don't really want to go back to the before.

I look him straight in the eye so that he understands how serious I am when I say, "I won't put up with you like that a second time."

"Understood," he replies quietly and finally holds out the dress to me.

At that moment it starts to rain. Not strong, but still in such a way that I get scared for the dress despite the protective cover. I quickly take it from James and bring it to safety in our cloakroom.

When I come back, countless drops of water have already collected in James' hair, which are now making their way down his face. He wipes his cheek with the back of his hand and then runs his hand through his hair without taking his eyes off me. My manners say that I should invite him in before he gets soaked in the rain, but I just can't. It doesn't feel right. I can't introduce him to my parents and my sister. Maybe I will never be able to do that.

"I accept your apology," I say finally.

His eyes light up. It's the first time I've seen such an expression on his face.

So we stand in the rain, he on the stairs of my family house, I in the doorway, not ready to invite him in.

But it is a start.

James

Watching lacrosse without being allowed to play just sucks.

My team is pumped with adrenaline as they come out of the locker room, and one player after another applauds me as I stand like a spectator at the edge of the pitch between the stands. I put up with the misery, but at this moment I just regret everything, especially the decision to mix up the back-to-school party a bit.

Worst of all, Roger Cree, one of the freshmen, has taken over my position and is doing so well that he's becoming a serious competitor. If he had been bad, my place in the team would have been secure, but like this? How am I supposed to know that the coach doesn't want to keep him in the team after my penalty work has expired? Especially since he seems to get along well with Cyril and the others lately.

When he comes and holds out his fist to me, I reluctantly bump into it with mine and then sit down with the substitutes on the bench at the edge of the field. I cross my ankles and watch as the opposing team runs onto the field and builds up in front of my boys. The team is good, I recognize many of the players from last season. One attacker in particular is unpredictable and incredibly fast. Hopefully Cyril has him in view.

"Hey, Beaufort. It's a shame that you can't play," one of the substitutes suddenly says to me. His name is Matthew, but I doubt we've ever exchanged a word before.

"Yes, man. Total crap," agrees another.

"I don't understand at all what this punishment is about. The action was totally awesome."

"Above all, it's your last year. How annoying to spend the last season on the bench."

Okay, that's enough. I get up jerkily. Without saying a word, I walk forward to the edge of the field. I'm happy about the sunglasses I'm wearing. Not only because the sun is shining damn bright for an October day today, but above all because no one can see how bad I feel.

I stand at a distance from Coach Freeman and survey the field with my arms crossed. It's cruel to have to watch my team and not be able to do anything. After kick-off, it takes less than five minutes for the first opponent's goal to be scored.

Suddenly, footsteps sound behind me. I glance over my shoulder and see Ruby and her friend Lin running towards the field. Both have bright red heads and disheveled hair. When they come to a stop, Ruby curses loudly. She hasn't spotted me yet, so I get the opportunity to scrutinize her inconspicuously.

She wears her school uniform, although most of our classmates come to the games in casual clothes or team shirts. She holds a tripod in one hand, a notebook in the other, and on her back, as always, she carries her hideous backpack, which looks like it will fall apart at any second. It's pretty much the color of vomit, but somehow she looks cute with it. Like a ninja turtle. A disheveled ninja turtle with a bright red head.

I stroll leisurely over to the two of them and watch them as they set up the tripod and an expensive-looking camera.

"Can I help?" I ask.

Ruby drives around to me and looks at me with wide eyes, obviously still not getting used to my attempts to make friends with her. I greeted her in the corridors all week, and each time she flinched, as if she was simply not used to someone talking to her outside of class.

"Did we miss something?" she asks hurriedly. Her gaze goes rapidly across the field and then to Coach Freeman. But he is so engrossed in the game that he didn't notice that Ruby and Lin were late.

"Ridgeview scored a goal. Slam dunk," I reply.

Ruby nods and scribbles something in her notebook. "Great, thank you."

Meanwhile, Lin sets up the camera and checks the settings before she starts taking pictures.

After that, both are engrossed in documenting the game.

I realize that I actually much prefer to watch Ruby than my team. At least the sight of them hurts much less. We've long since caught up and are in the process of finishing Ridgeview off – but I can't be happy about it with the best will in the world. When Cree provides the assist for two goals and even scores one himself in the second half, I realize that the boys don't need

me at all. I would like to disappear on the spot, and I have no idea why I don't just do it.

Instead, I stand on the sidelines with a stony face and let it get to me, clap when a goal is scored, curse when the opponents make a move against us, and answer all the questions Ruby and Lin ask me in between.

After just under an hour and a half, I don't feel like I've taken the world by storm, as I usually do when we've won a game. I'm just completely exhausted and can't bear to be here for a second longer. The thought of going to Cyril's party tonight and collecting expressions of sympathy from everyone who saw me standing on the sidelines today makes me sick. Without a word, I turn around before the team comes off the field and walk towards the school. I dig my phone out of my pocket and press the speed dial button for Percy to pick me up.

"James!"

I glance over my shoulder.

Ruby ran after me. Her bangs and the wind do not get along very well, individual strands stand vertically upwards. She notices my gaze and presses it smoothly onto her forehead again. That's one of her quirks that I noticed in the last week. In the meantime, I also know about the little comb that she carries around in her pencil case and uses when she feels unobserved.

"What's up?" I ask.

"Are you okay?"

Why does she ask me that? Nobody asks me something like that – because simply no one is interested in how I'm doing. And even if that wasn't the case, most people would be too afraid or respect for me to ask me that question.

"Must be pretty bad to watch the others play, right?" she asks softly.

"Yep."

She steps from one leg to the other. "Would you rather be alone?"

Uncertainly, I rub my neck and shrug my shoulders. Thank God Alistair keeps me from answering. With a bright red head, he jogs across the grassy area and comes to a stop in front of us. "Beaufort! Where are you going, my friend?"

Okay, the question is even shittier than Ruby's. "Home."

"Have you forgotten? Today we are celebrating at Cy's."

I haven't forgotten that, but unfortunately Cyril's party is the last thing I feel like doing now. But I can't tell Alistair that. The team won, and I'm still the captain, although currently suspended. Not celebrating this victory with my boys would be unfair. Not to mention that I don't feel like the questions that would certainly come if I didn't show up tonight.

"Sure, I'm in." Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Ruby's expression change. I avoid looking at them directly.

"Don't make such a face, man. It's going to be great. We have the whole house to ourselves."

I just grumble.

"Hey, why don't you come with me, Ruby?" I look at Alistair warningly, but he just looks back and forth between Ruby and me, grinning.

"You don't have to come," I say quickly. Cyril's party is definitely not the right place for someone like Ruby. "I don't think you'd like it there."

I realize that I said exactly the wrong thing when Ruby frowns. She looks like I challenged her – but that's the opposite of what I wanted. "How do you know what I like and what I don't?"

Alistair coughs restrainedly, and I give him a scathing look. He did that on purpose. He knows exactly what's going on at these parties and what the people like there.

"I'm very glad to come, Alistair. "Thank you for the invitation," Ruby says with a smile that is far too charming to be real. When am I supposed to be where?"

Alistair is just opening her mouth to answer, when I intervene.

"I'll pick you up."

Ruby's shoulders stiffen.

"There's no need for that, James."

"I have no problem picking you up on the way."

She raises her eyebrows. "Do you even have a driver's license?"

Alistair lets out an appreciative whistle. Apparently, he likes watching me verbally chafing. Shaking my head, I look at Ruby.

"Percy will drive us, if that's okay with you."

Now she grins from ear to ear. "That's even very okay with me."

"Percy, huh? I don't think it's bad either. He has something of Antonio Banderas," comments Alistair.

"That's what I said!" Ruby laughs – and I feel warm.

Damn it. Why can't I keep a cool head in her presence? I promised Lydia that I would keep an eye on her – and that's all there is between us. I just have to remind myself often enough.

"Well, Percy will be with you at eight."

Ruby nods. "Fabulous."

Ruby

Cyril Vega lives in the largest and most pompous house I have ever seen in my life. I'm not even sure if "house" is the correct term for what I'm looking at. The property, which we only got to after Percy's license plate was checked by a security guard via camera, seems endless. When I look left and right, I see nothing but well-kept lawns and symmetrically planted shrubs and trees.

When James and I get out of the car, I stop for a moment, tilt my head back and let the impressive façade work its magic on me. The high columns to the right and left of the entrance and the expansive balcony directly above make the manor house seem to be from another era.

James next to me seems completely unimpressed as we climb the white stone staircase to the oversized front door. But that's no wonder. On the one hand, Cyril is one of his best friends, and on the other hand, the house in which he lives is certainly at least as big. I feel my palms first get cold and then moist.

What am I actually doing here?

I swore to myself that I would never go to one of those strange parties. But a single stupid comment from James was enough to awaken my fighting spirit. I just had to do the opposite of what he wanted, which in retrospect is just totally stupid. I've been annoyed since Monday that the outing with James destroyed my invisibility at Maxton Hall – and now I'm accompanying him to this party, which will be attended by a large part of my classmates. I didn't think for a second this afternoon about what this will mean for me. People are guaranteed to talk about us again – probably even more.

Even from here we can hear the music and loud voices of the party guests. For a split second, I think about faking a sudden nausea and running away. But I don't want to give James the satisfaction. So I just rub my hands on my skirt and clear my throat. James gives me a sideways glance, which I

ignore. Then he opens the front door with a key that, strangely enough, he carries on his bunch of keys.

We enter the entrance hall, which is so imposing that it distracts me from my nervousness for a moment. It is tiled with marble and lavishly furnished, with gold and white accents everywhere in addition to the subtle colours of the furniture. A huge chandelier hangs from the ceiling, and to the right and left two staircases lead up to a gallery at asymmetrical angles.

At first glance, it looks like the party is taking place throughout the house. The music seems to come from another room, but there are also a few guests here in the foyer. None of them pays attention to us. I breathe a sigh of relief.

"What are they doing up there?" I ask James, pointing to the twenty or so boys and girls standing in the gallery.

"Playing a strange version of beer pong that is unique to Cyril," he replies.

I watch a guy drop something from above – ping-pong balls, as I realize belatedly. They shoot down into the foyer, where a row of cups is set up. A few of the balls hit right in, but most of them missed, whereupon the guys cheer, a few girls scream, and it feels like all of them are drinking.

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I," he replies.

"You've done it!" someone suddenly bawls above us. I look up and just catch Cyril swinging onto one of the railings. He clings to it and races down. The sight alone is enough to make me feel nauseous. Wren appears behind him, but opts for the safer option and takes the steps. As he walks, he tilts his head back and empties his glass.

Cyril is the first to join us and greets James with a half hug, patting him on the back with his hand. "I hope we've made you proud today."

I can feel James tensing up next to me. "You did," he says in a neutral tone that neither expresses exuberant joy nor betrays the fact how much it must have frustrated him today not to be able to play himself.

Cyril's gaze lands on me. "And you're ...?" he asks, his icy blue eyes gliding over me from top to bottom. He looks at my white blouse with blue vertical stripes and my black pleated skirt and looks as if he would wrinkle his nose at any moment.

Asshole. As if he looks better just because his black shirt probably cost more than my complete outfit.

"Ruby," James jumps in and introduces us to each other. "Ruby, this is Cyril."

"Ruby! Alistair told me he invited you." Wren comes up to us grinning. I suppress the impulse to look away.

"Hi," I answer, forcing a smile on my lips.

He greets James briefly, then his gaze is on me again. The message he sends me with his dirty, arrogant smile is unmistakable: This is my kingdom. Here I have the strings in my hand.

The next moment, James puts his hand on my back. "Cy, be a good host and offer us a drink."

He speaks in his I-am-James-Beaufort tone, and while I would never let him boss me around like that, his friends don't seem to mind. They just laugh and then lead us past the stairs to the back of the foyer. As he walks, Cyril picks up a few of the balls and throws them up before opening a door that leads into a large salon.

The room is smaller than the foyer, but there must be fifty people in it, talking or dancing. The music is deafeningly loud, and smoke rises to my nostrils and makes my eyes water.

I can count the parties I've been to so far on one hand. There were small get-togethers in our park in Gormsey and – just once – the fifteenth birthday party of a classmate. She had invited me out of false politeness, and I went because Mum insisted that I make an attempt to get closer to my classmates. It ended with me standing in a corner for half the evening and strangely bobbing to bad music, while I was counting the minutes inwardly until I could go home.

What is happening here in front of my eyes has nothing at all in common with it. Instead of cheap beer in plastic cups, guests drink expensive spirits from crystal glasses. The music does not come from a ghetto blaster, but from a sound system whose speakers are built into the walls at various points. I can also see a lot of naked skin.

So this is an elite party.

I look around and try to absorb all the impressions. The bass of the music is so loud that the ground vibrates under my feet.

Only at second glance do I discover the glazed conservatory that adjoins the room. There is a huge illuminated pool in it, which I will definitely stay away from.

A few guests swim in it in their underwear and splash the people on the edge wet. Others sit smoking and drinking on velvet-covered sofas that look antique and must have cost a fortune.

I am so overwhelmed by the situation that I only realize that James is asking me something when it is already too late. "Excuse me?"

James bends down a bit to me so that his mouth is at the level of my ear. "What you want to drink, Ruby Bell."

A shiver runs down my spine, and goosebumps spread across my arms. I ignore both. "A Coke, if there is one. Otherwise water."

James leans back a bit and looks me in the eye. "Does it bother you if I drink?"

I shake my head. "No."

"Very nice. I'll be right back."

The next moment, he and Cyril have disappeared. Wren stays behind and looks at me again with that knowing grin on his face.

"You don't drink anything?" His voice is pure provocation.

It takes me an insane amount of willpower not to turn around on the spot and leave him standing. Or yelling at him in front of everyone. But I managed to ignore him for two years – I wouldn't let a few stupid sayings throw me off my game right now.

"No," I answer curtly.

Wren is getting a little closer. I retreat immediately.

"Why not, Ruby?" he asks, taking another step towards me until I feel the wall behind me, "Have you had any bad experiences with alcohol?"

I can smell the alcohol on his breath, and I also notice how huge his pupils are. I wonder if he's getting drunk on anything other than just Scotch.

"You know exactly why I don't drink, Wren," I reply coldly, straightening my shoulders. If he doesn't leave me alone, I'm going to hurt him seriously. To my left, in the corner of my eye, I have discovered a dark wooden chest of drawers on which there are several statues and a lamp.

I know how to defend myself.

"I remember the evening very well," Wren replies. He raises his left arm and supports himself against the wall next to my head.

"But I don't," I manage between clenched teeth. So far, he has always left me alone at school. He never made a hint of what happened that evening two years ago – why today of all days?

"Really?" he murmurs and comes even closer.

Short circuit. I reach out with both hands and push him firmly away from me. "I don't feel like repeating it, Wren."

He takes my hands and interlaces our fingers. In panic, I look around in all directions. "I can still hear exactly what you whispered to me back then."

"That was only because you bottled me."

"Oh, really?" Again he has that dirty smile on his face. "Alcohol brings the most secret thoughts to the surface, Ruby. You wanted it at least as much as I did."

I freeze as the memory of that night finally makes it to the surface of my memory: Wren's gasping breath, his restless hands all over my body. The thought of it makes me hot. On the one hand out of shame, on the other hand because I actually enjoyed it. Only the way it happened still disturbs me today.

Wren is just opening his mouth again when a voice sounds behind us, which sounds stern and bored at the same time. "Leave her alone, Fitzgerald."

His eyes widen, and I look past him in amazement. Lydia has joined us. She gives Wren an unnerved look before she reaches for my hand without another word and pulls me away from him and a bit into the room. Only when we are out of earshot does she look at me with raised eyebrows.

"Who would have thought that someone like you, of all people, would carry around a dirty secret?"

Panic fills me, and I clench my hands into fists at my sides. But before I can say a word, she raises her hands. An amused smile plays around her lips. "Don't worry. I don't tell anyone."

I stare at her, and it takes a moment before I realize what she said. "I don't care who knows about it," I say defiantly, even though we both know it's an outright lie.

If I could, I would like to erase that evening from my own memory. I was fifteen at the time and had just arrived at Maxton Hall. It was the first event I had the privilege of attending, and I was so excited and nervous that I happily accepted all the cups of punch that Wren brought me. I didn't know that he had added alcohol from a hip flask to get me drunk. And when he pulled me into the hallway and kissed me, I was totally euphoric. Wren was one of the most handsome boys I've ever seen. And he wanted me. Getting my first kiss from him felt like a rush.

It wasn't until the next morning that I realized how wrong it was of him to bottle me unknowingly, and how naïve I had been. Since then, I haven't touched alcohol.

Opposite me, Lydia raises an eyebrow. "Really? I would have expected your reputation to be worth more to you."

"The fact that I was bottled and made out with someone won't destroy my reputation. It's not like I'm having an affair with a teacher."

I regret the words the moment I said them. Lydia turns pale. The next second, she takes a threatening step towards me. "You said you'd keep your mouth shut. I—" She falls silent abruptly and distances herself again.

"There you are." James steps up to us and hands me a glass of coke, ice cubes and a slice of lemon. He himself holds an expensive-looking crystal glass with brown liquid in his hand.

Slowly he looks back and forth between me and Lydia. "All right?"

"Brother, can you perhaps bring me something to drink? My glass is empty," says Lydia, fluttering her eyelashes a few times exaggeratedly.

James rolls his eyes, but takes her glass and turns around again to head towards the bar. As soon as he has disappeared, Lydia's smile fades again. She looks at me with cool eyes, and I swallow hard. I wish I hadn't come here. I don't want to be in this room, but at home, where I feel safe and secure. This is the exact opposite of that – an adventure I'm not up to.

"Listen," I say, before she can threaten me again. "I'm sorry I just said that."

Her mouth opens and closes. Then she looks at me skeptically. "What?"

"I am not your enemy," I continue. "And I don't care what's going on between you and Mr. Sutton. I will not reveal your secret."

She presses her lips tightly together.

"I just want my peace and quiet," I keep trying.

"Why should I believe you?" she asks with narrow eyes. "I don't know you at all."

"That's right," I say. "But James knows me. And I promised him."

"You promised him," she repeats, as if she didn't quite understand the meaning of the words.

"Yes," I say hesitantly.

For a moment she is silent and just looks at me suspiciously. But then her facial expressions change. Suddenly, she no longer looks skeptical, but

as if some pieces of the puzzle have come together in her head. Her gaze wanders from my face to a point above my shoulder. "So that's how it is," she says finally.

Confused, I turn around trying to figure out what she means. I see James standing at the bar. He takes out one bottle after the other, lifts them up and studies the signs.

"What's what?" I ask.

She smiles at me reassuringly. "Don't worry, you're not the first."

I have no idea what she's talking about.

"Many girls succumb to his charm much earlier."

That's when it clicks. And I can't help it: I snort away.

Lydia is taken aback. "What's so funny?"

"I don't know if anyone has ever told you that, but your brother is pretty much the opposite of charming."

She stares at me, and it looks like she doesn't know whether to hiss at me or laugh. James takes the decision from her, because he chooses this moment to come back to us.

"Here," he says, holding out her drink to Lydia. "For you, sister."

She glances at it briefly, then looks back at me. "I'm keeping an eye on you, Ruby." With these words, she turns around and disappears into the crowd.

"What was that?" asks James irritated, looking after her reddish-blond hair, which eventually disappears among the people.

When I just shrug my shoulders, he frowns.

"What did she say?"

"Nothing. She doesn't trust me and doesn't think I'm really keeping my mouth shut."

James lets his gaze wander around the room. It seems as if he has to think about his next words, as if he is not sure what he can and cannot tell me. "It is difficult for her to trust other people."

I look at him questioningly.

"Very few people would keep such a secret to themselves, Ruby." He shrugs his shoulders. "On the contrary. Ninety percent of people would sell it to the press or try to blackmail us with it. It wouldn't be the first time that someone has spent time with us just to get our family secrets." He avoids my gaze as he says this, and instead continues to watch the dancing people in the middle of the room.

"That sounds shitty."

One corner of his mouth contorts slightly. "It is."

I've never thought about that. It doesn't excuse James' behavior, but this information allows me to understand him – and Lydia – a little better.

"I wonder what I'm doing here if everyone distrusts me so much."

Thoughtfully, he lets his gaze glide over my face. He raises his hand as if to touch me, but lets it fall again and takes a sip from the glass that was actually intended for Lydia instead. His second drink. "You're here because Alistair invited you," he says finally.

"That's right," I murmur and tuck a strand of hair behind my ear that tickles my chin incessantly. "Alistair. If it had been up to you, I wouldn't be here now."

"It is not."

"What then?" I have no idea why the thought that he doesn't want me here bothers me so much.

"This is just not where you belong, Ruby."

It feels like he's stabbed me with something – a small knife, perhaps. It costs me a lot of effort not to let the pain show.

"So... That's not what I meant," he says immediately. Apparently, I didn't manage the pain-not showing as well as I thought.

"That's clear." I turn away from him and look through the large glass windows to the pool, where someone has just jumped in, fully clothed. After a few seconds, James pushes himself close in front of me and fills my entire field of vision.

"Hey, come on. I just wanted to say that I don't feel good about letting you around some people. In the end, they try to sell you something. I feel responsible for you."

"I'm good at taking care of myself, thank you very much," I reply bitingly.

Again he looks at me intently, and I take a mini sip of my Coke to break eye contact. When he looks at me like that, I get warm, and it's already much too stuffy in here.

"I don't want to be a block on your leg. Just act like you normally do," I finally say with a wave of my hand that encloses the whole room. Whatever James does at such parties – he should do it. I don't want him to act like a babysitter.

He nods and downs his second drink. Then he takes my glass from me and places it with his on one of the bar tables. The next moment he is back with me and reaches for my hand. He pulls me further into the middle of the room, right between the dancing people. My heart is pounding wildly, and I wonder what the hell he's up to as he pulls me a little closer to him. His chest brushes against mine, and he squeezes my hand briefly before he lets go of it and begins to move to the beat of the music.

James Beaufort dances at me. He looks down at me with a smile and makes circular movements with his hips.

"What are you doing?" I ask confused. I'm the only one standing stiff as a stick on the dance floor.

"I do what I usually do at parties," James replies.

Again, his gaze seems like a challenge that I simply have to accept. I try to move the way he does. When someone bumps into me from behind, I stumble against him, and he puts a hand on my waist to support me. My throat becomes dry, and my heart beats faster. An immense heat overcomes me when I look up at him again. We are so tightly pressed together that not even a sheet of paper would fit between us.

Someone next to us is cheering. I tear my gaze away from James' face and look around. At least five pairs of eyes are focused on us.

I must have lost my mind. James and I may live peacefully together now, but this is something completely different. And if I don't want rumors about us to spread like wildfire in school, then I urgently need to get off this dance floor now.

"I have to go to the toilet," I manage. James immediately withdraws. His eyes sparkle knowingly, and at this moment I'm far too confused to understand what that means. He nods to the left corner of the salon, where a corridor begins behind a high arch of the wall. "First on the right, second door on the left."

I slip between the dancing boys and girls and then walk down the hallway. Oil paintings of Vegas family members hang on the wall, and the wallpaper shimmers green and gold in the glow of the lamps. The dark red carpet under my feet has an elaborate pattern of various abstract shapes reminiscent of animals. I'm going to turn right, as James said. This part of the hallway is completely empty, and I lean against the wall for the time being.

I really have no idea what I'm doing here. Apart from the fact that I feel completely out of place, James unsettles me. His touches, his looks, his whispered words – if I didn't know better, I'd say he's flirting with me.

When he stood at my front door on Monday and said that he didn't want to go back to the past, I didn't expect something like this to come out of it. Does he dance like that with all his acquaintances? Probably so.

Maybe I just have to see it as a task. These people are my classmates, whether I like it or not. And if I make it to Oxford, I will have to deal with some of them and many other sons and daughters from rich families.

I take a deep breath, clench my hands into fists and push myself off the wall with new courage. I'm going to freshen up, and then I'll go back to the salon, finish my Coke, and dance with James. What is supposed to happen in a big way? People would be talking about me now anyway, then I can at least have a little fun.

With this decision, I go to the door, which is a few meters away on the left side of the hallway, and open it, hoping to find the bathroom behind it. The room is pitch dark except for the light that shines in from the hallway. My eyes need a moment to get used to it, but then I can make out the outline of a large antique secretary, a sitting area with upholstered chairs and... lots of bookshelves.

This is definitely not the bathroom – this is a library! I hesitate for just a tiny moment, then I take a curious step inside and look around. There are more books on the first shelf alone than we have in our entire house. A smile spreads across my face, and I venture one step further... and then I hear it.

Heavy breathing. And muffled sighs.

Turn around and go, a shrill voice calls in my head, but by then it's already too late. My gaze falls on Alistair, who is leaning against one of the bookshelves further back in the room. He has his head back and is moaning loudly at this second.

A soft smacking sounds. "If you keep being so loud, I'll stop."

I freeze. This voice sounds familiar to me. It is quiet and deep, a bit smoky.

"Keep going," says Alistair, dropping his head forward.

The guy who knelt in front of him stands up. "Only if you kindly ask for it."

Alistair pulls him down by the hair to kiss him. The guy supports himself with both hands on the shelf next to Alistair's head and returns the kiss. That's when I realize who he is.

Keshav.

I take a sharp breath as Keshav's mouth travels down Alistair's face to his neck.

At that second, Alistair spots me at the door.

"Kesh, stop," he whispers in panic and jerkily pushes his friend away from him.

I turn on my heel and flee from the library back into the hallway. In panic, I look around to both sides and decide to run back to the salon. I push past dancing people, their faces blurring before my eyes, and search the room for James.

I discover him with his sister, Cyril and Wren near the pool. They talk about something, Wren gesticulates wildly in the air.

I need a moment to collect myself.

Why the hell do I have to keep catching people making out who clearly don't want an audience? Since when have I been collecting strangers' secrets? That's not normal.

It takes me an incredible amount of effort to calm down and calm down at least somewhat. I decide that I have to take back my decision from just now. I can't have fun here, and I'll never get used to these people.

I want to go to James and ask him to take me home, but he is so close to the pool that I hesitate for a moment. The sight of the water makes my stomach feel queasy. Finally, I gather all my courage and carefully enter the conservatory. A little way away from the group, I stop at the wall. Wren is the first to discover me. "There she is."

I nod curtly at him and almost breathe a sigh of relief when James comes to me the two steps that separate us. I never thought he would be the person I feel most comfortable with at a party, but today it is. He's become my fixture, and I have to stop myself from reaching for his hand.

"All right?" asks James. He has a new glass in his hand, this time again with brown contents. In the meantime, a slight blush can be seen on his cheeks.

"I'd like to go home soon," I whisper, still out of breath.

James frowns, but nods immediately. Apparently, you can see that I'm on the verge of going crazy. He drinks his glass empty before placing it on

the nearest table. "Sure."

"Oh, come on. Since when do you leave my parties before four o'clock in the morning?" asks Cyril offended.

"Since I have someone to bring home," James replies, looking blankly at his friend. There it is again, the insurmountable arrogant wall.

"Come on, Ruby. Don't be a killjoy. Let's leave our friend," Wren says, crouching down to splash water up from the pool with his hand. A few drops hit my neck, and it feels like all the air is being squeezed out of my lungs.

"Don't do that," I hiss, barely recognizing my voice because it sounds so shrill.

"Are you made of sugar or what?" Cyril asks laughing. He is no longer wearing a shirt and is wearing black swimming trunks. His hair is still damp from swimming. He is one step closer. I back away and cling to James' arm. I don't care what the others think.

"Come on, Cy. Leave them alone," says James, but now even his authoritarian tone doesn't help. Cyril grins at me like a predator. The next moment he makes a leap towards me, grabs my bag and passes it on to a grinning Lydia.

"Cyril, I'm warning you...", I manage breathlessly – but it's too late. He pulls me into a hug that has nothing loving about it and drags me into the pool with him. I'm still screaming as I hit the water with full force, kicking my arms and legs in panic.

Then we go down, and my heart skips a second. Suddenly I'm no longer in the Vegas house, but in a murky yellow-green lake. I'm no longer seventeen, but eight years old. And I can no longer swim, but am helplessly at the mercy of the bitterly cold water.

I can't breathe.

The algae pull me into the depths, and I can't move. My arms don't work, my legs are also out of action. I have no control over my body.

The pressure on my chest is growing rapidly. And then I have no choice but to breathe in the water.

James

While Wren and my sister laugh out loud as Cyril reappears and splashes water at us, I stare after Ruby, who has become a dark, blurry spot under the surface of the water. At first she fidgeted like crazy, but now she doesn't move at all.

Something is wrong.

"If she knew that we already knew about the pretend to be dead, she wouldn't pull it off," Wren says, holding out his hand to Cyril to help him out of the pool.

Ruby still doesn't show up. Deep down, I know that something is very wrong. My heart is beating like crazy, and I take a run-up.

"James, I don't think they're seriously in need of help—" I don't hear the rest of Lydia's sentence anymore, because I make a head into the water. In long strokes I swim to Ruby, wrap an arm around her upper body and pull her up.

She doesn't move.

"Ruby," I gasp as we get back to the surface of the water. I shake them. "Ruby!"

Suddenly, she flails her arms around. She coughs and struggles for breath, and I hold her tightly pressed against my upper body so that she doesn't sink again.

She is completely beside herself. "Get me out of here," she demands shrill. "I have to get out of here!"

I nod and swim with her to the edge of the pool. Then I lift them up by the hips and set them down on the edge of the pool. Again she coughs loudly and extensively to get rid of the water she has inhaled in the short time. I pull myself up on the edge and sit down next to her, holding her while she chokes.

"Take me out of here." Her voice is a broken croak that shakes something deep inside me. I straighten up and help Ruby up. She has lowered her gaze, but I can still see the tears that mix with the drops of

water on her face. When she stands on both feet again, she tilts to the side. I feel how much she is shaking all over her body and crouch down a bit to lift her up. She doesn't even protest, but buries her face on my neck so that no one sees that she is crying.

Angrily, I turn to Cyril, who has lost his grin.

"You shitty wanker," I say quietly. I'd rather have screamed it in his face, but I don't want to scare Ruby.

With her in my arms, I turn around and go outside through the back door in the conservatory.

It takes Percy a while to arrive, but he has towels and a change of clothes with him. Ruby avoids my gaze as I wrap her in several towels and start to dry her. She is still shaking all over. Percy silently hands me another towel, which I spread out on her head. Then I squeeze the water out of her hair. I'm probably exaggerating, but I'll rub it dry until it doesn't shake anymore. Even if it lasts all night.

Suddenly, her body is shaken by a silent sobbing. I freeze. It hurts amazingly to watch a person as strong as her cry, and I have no idea what to do. All I can do is dry her off further, stroke her back in gentle circles, and then ask Percy to give me the Maxton Hall sweatshirt he also brought.

"Can you unbutton your blouse?" I ask cautiously.

Ruby doesn't show any sign of hearing me. Since I doubt that she would be able to do anything with her quivering fingers anyway, I pull the sweatshirt over her head without further ado. I pull the fabric down over her torso and then blindly start unbuttoning her blouse. When it is open, I carefully push it off her shoulders and then help her to put her arms through the sleeves of the sweater. I'm just about to put the hood on her, when she raises her hands and clasps my forearms. Her fingers are still ice cold.

The next moment she lets her head sink forward against my chest and takes a deep breath. Her breath is just as shaky as her whole body. I think it's terrible to experience them like this.

"It's all my fault," I murmur.

Ruby lifts her head from my chest and looks up at me. Her eyes still shimmer suspiciously, but now I have the impression that she has some control over herself again. She looks like Ruby again. The stubborn, battle-ready Ruby, who doesn't put up with anyone. A huge stone falls from my

heart, and a feeling spreads through my chest that feels heavy and light at the same time.

I turn away from her and unbutton my own shirt to put on the second sweater Percy has brought.

"Come on, let's take you home," I finally say, holding the door of the Rolls-Royce open for her.

She gets in, and I slide next to her on the bench. As Percy drives off, I let my head sink against the backrest. All of a sudden, the alcohol makes itself felt again, and the world turns a little faster than it should.

Ruby moves next to me, and I give her a quick look. She pulled the sleeves of my blue sweatshirt down to her fingers, so that her hands disappear completely under the fabric. The need to reach for it overwhelms me. I quickly look away again.

"I'm terrified of water," Ruby whispers into the silence.

I have to pull myself together not to look at her. I think she feels safer if I continue to look out the window and not at her. "Why?"

It takes a moment for her to answer. "My dad likes to go fishing. He used to take me on his boat, and we spent whole weekends together on different lakes. When I was eight, we had an accident."

Her body tenses up next to mine, and I feel that she must be stuck in a terrible memory. Her breath falters. Now I reach for her hand and grasp the fabric over it with my fingers.

She feels small and fragile, but I'm sure Ruby is the exact opposite of fragile.

"What happened?"

"We were rammed by a larger boat that didn't see us. Ours was completely destroyed, and my dad hit hard. His head has been overstretched, and a vertebra has been smashed."

I squeeze her hand briefly.

"He's been in a wheelchair ever since. And I'm terrified of water," she ends quickly.

I think there's a lot more to the story, but I don't dig deeper. What she told me is enough to get an idea of what must have been going on inside her mind when Cyril dragged her into the pool with him.

"I'm sorry," I say, feeling totally stupid at the same time. She just shared one of her most traumatic experiences with me, and the only thing I can say is a lame apology.

"It's okay. You're not like your friends." Her hand appears under the sweatshirt, and carefully she feels for mine. I interlace our fingers and hesitantly run my thumb over the back of her hand.

"That's not true," I murmur, shaking my head. "I'm just like my friends. Worse, in fact."

She shakes her head almost imperceptibly. "You're not right now."

For the rest of the journey, we sink into consensual silence as I ponder what she has just confided in me. Ruby dozes off at some point, and her head slides onto my shoulder. Her hand doesn't let go of mine for a second, and thoughtfully I run my thumb over her skin, which fortunately is warm again by now.

After twenty minutes we arrive at Ruby's home. Inside the light is still on, and I should actually wake her up. But I can't bring myself to do that yet, not when she looks so peaceful.

"She's a sweet girl, Mr. Beaufort," Percy's voice suddenly sounds through the loudspeaker above my head. I look ahead, even though the partition wall is raised. "Don't mess it up."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I answer.

But I don't let go of Ruby's hand.

Ruby

Ember and I spend Saturday in our pajamas. Mum and Dad are with friends, and we take advantage of the fact that we can take over the kitchen and bake chocolate chip cookies. We are in the process of making sure that the dough bowl is really empty when the doorbell rings. Ember and I both startle up and stare at each other. Then I tap my finger on my nose at breakneck speed. Ember groans in agony when she realizes her defeat and trots towards the hallway.

A little later I hear a brisk voice that I know well. "Hi, are you Ember? I'm Lin. Where's your sister? I have to talk to her urgently!"

Before I even have time to blink, Lin stands in front of me and holds out her cell phone to me. "Don't tell me it's really you."

For a moment, I can only stare at her. It's the first time Lin has been at my home. So far she has only picked me up a few times and always waited in the car on the street. Actually, their presence should make me nervous. After all, she goes to Maxton Hall and is therefore a part of my life that I want to keep away from my family at all costs. But the longer I see them standing in our kitchen, the clearer it becomes to me that the opposite is true. I'm glad she came here. Our argument the other day clearly showed me that we are not just school friends, but could be more. Maybe it's time for me to dare to open up a bit.

I deliberately shove the dough scraper into my mouth again so as not to have to answer. Unimpressed, Lin takes a few steps closer until she stands directly in front of me and holds the phone so close to my nose that I have to lean back to see anything at all in the dark photo.

It shows James from behind, and he is carrying someone who has his arms wrapped tightly around his neck and his face buried against his neck. You can't tell that the person is me, but nevertheless the heat rises to my cheeks. I wonder how many images of that moment still exist. And who has already seen them.

"Ruby?" asks Lin, her tone suddenly a lot less brash. "What happened yesterday?"

"I was at Cyril's party," I say finally. "That's what I told you."

"Yes, you did. What I want to know is what happened here."

"What happened where?" asks Ember and grabs the cell phone from Lin's hand. Her mouth pops open as she stares at the photo. "Is that really you?"

"Yes," I admit and swallow hard. This day with Ember was supposed to distract me. I wanted to suppress the thoughts of last night and keep my head from buzzing. What happened yesterday ... I don't know what it was myself. Let alone how I should put it into words or deal with it.

"Tell me right away what happened yesterday," my sister demands in her I-tolerate-no-contradiction tone, which she clearly inherited from Mum.

I bend down to the oven to look at the cookies. Unfortunately, they are not finished yet and cannot save me from Lin's and Ember's questioning looks. I sigh softly, drop the dough scraper back into the bowl and then nod in the direction of the dining room. After we have sat down, I begin to tell you.

At the end of my story, the two of them look at me with completely different expressions. Ember, on the other hand, has her chin resting on one hand and smiles dreamily at me.

"This Beaufort seems to be a really nice guy," she sighs.

"He's not!" Lin blurts out incredulously. "The guy you were talking about just now—it couldn't possibly have been James Beaufort."

I just shrug my shoulders. In retrospect, it also seems unreal to me that he actually went so far as to protect me from his friends, but ... He did. Even more, in fact. He took care of me. I got dressed and behaved like a gentleman. He held my hand when I told him about the Dad thing.

Last night changed things between us. I can feel that clearly. A tingling runs through my whole body when I think of his gaze and the way his fingers brushed my bare skin. How my body shook briefly from the heat and James thought that I was still freezing – but the exact opposite was true. How he touched me as if I were made of thin, fragile glass.

"That's exactly what I meant when I told you to be careful," Lin says, shaking his head and bringing me back to the present.

"I know," I murmur. I wish I could forget what it felt like when I went down in the water.

"I can't believe Cyril really did that," she continues. "When I see him, I twist his neck."

She looks so stunned and disappointed that I ask myself again if Cyril is more to her than just a classmate. Whether there is a story between the two and if so, what exactly happened. So far, she has always shut down when we have talked about her love life. Maybe now would be the right time to try again carefully – after all, I have just opened up to her.

But Ember interrupts my thoughts with her next words.

"Luckily James was there." Her eyes look like they're going to turn into little red hearts at any moment. "I can't believe he actually carried you away from the party. In his arms!"

Me neither. Especially when I think about how cold and arrogant he behaved towards me at first. I just can't bring this version of him together with the James who wrapped me in countless towels yesterday and stroked my back until I stopped shaking. The James who wreaked havoc in my mind and haunted me last night in my dreams where his warm hands were on my bare skin.

Not good. Not good. Not. Good.

"If I didn't have it as evidence, I wouldn't believe it," Lin says, staring at the picture again. "How can a fellow who is always misbehaving like that suddenly behave like a knight?"

"Apparently, he noticed that Cyril had crossed a line with Ruby, so he intervened. That shows that he has a good core," Ember notes. She looks at me, and suddenly something changes in her face. "Oh oh."

Lin raises his head. "What?" When her gaze falls on me, she groans. "Ruby!"

Apparently, my emotional chaos is clearly written all over my face. "I don't know either, okay?" I say. "I can't stand him, but—" I break off and shrug my shoulders helplessly.

Ember looks for a moment as if she wants to say something, but then she suddenly stands up. "Let's take a look at the cookies."

The three of us go into the kitchen, which now smells delicious. While Ember and I take the cookies out of the oven, Lin arranges them symmetrically on a large plate. When we finally go into the living room with it, she suddenly pushes her elbow into my side. "It's okay to be attracted to someone you think is stupid."

I would love to ask her if she speaks from experience. But when it comes to her love life, Lin is so silent that I don't dare to ask, "Do you think so?"

She nods.

As if by magic, my thoughts wander back to James. My hand starts to tingle where he stroked me, and when I remember how he undressed in front of me, a hot feeling wells up in my stomach.

"Although I still can't quite believe it. Beaufort, of all places. The fucking king of the school," Lin murmurs, slumping onto the sofa.

"I don't know how that could happen," I reply and reach for one of the cookies. It's actually still way too hot, but I still take a huge bite so that I don't have to say anything more.

"If he's really taken care of you so well, he's got my blessing," Ember admits, grabbing a cookie as well. Then she crosses her legs on the living room table. "What are you doing now? Have you spoken since yesterday?"

I shake my head. "Actually, I just wanted to spend a nice day with my sister today."

Ember straightens up like a meerkat. "You have to report to him!"

Shaking my head, I look back and forth between her and Lin. "Guys, there's nothing there. We are just... Friends." It seems strange to me to call James a "friend," but I just can't think of anything better at this moment.

"That's clear. Write to him now," Lin demands, and I sigh and take the cell phone out of my pocket.

I briefly think about what I can write to him, but decide on the obvious.

Thank you. – R. J. B.

After I have sent the message, I stuff the cell phone into the crack in the sofa so that I don't have to see it.

"What did you write to him?" asks Ember.

"I just thanked him."

Lin wrinkles his nose and finally reaches for a cookie. She breaks it into four parts and takes one of them. It is rare for Lin to treat himself to something sweet. She pays strict attention to her diet and forbids herself just about anything that is delicious. I think that's a shame, but I haven't managed to convince her so far that life with chocolate is much more fun.

My cell phone vibrates. It costs me all my willpower not to reach for it too quickly. I would be embarrassed in front of Lin and Ember to seem so greedy.

Fortunately, the two of them can't hear how hard my heart beats when I finally unlock the display and read the message.

You never told me what the J. stands for. – J. M. B.

I answer immediately.

Rate. – R. J. B.

James. – J. M. B.

That's pretty self-centered, don't you think? – R. J. B.

Jenna. – J. M. B.

Nope. – R. J. B.

Jemima. – J. M. B.

I'm kind of pretty impressed that it only took you three attempts. – R. J. B.

For a while he no longer answers. I stare at the dark display and am aware of Ember and Lin's expectant looks. I don't know exactly what I'm waiting for until my phone vibrates again after a few more minutes.

Are you feeling better?

No initials. No more jokes. My throat suddenly feels completely dry. I don't want to remember yesterday, I don't want to think about the water or the fact that I embarrassed myself in front of a large part of my classmates because I was totally hysterical. Above all, I don't want to think about Monday, and what might happen to me then.

I'm afraid of Monday. There are photos of us.

Lin and Ember start talking about something that has nothing to do with James or yesterday's party, and Ember turns on the TV on the side. She took a DVD out of the cupboard and put it in.

I'm grateful to them for giving me a bit of privacy, especially when I read James' next text.

Don't worry. In the picture you can only see my wet back.

I hold my breath. Is the message meant as it is written, or is it an indirect flirtation? I have no idea. All I know is that I want to stay on an equal footing with him.

At least in this respect I can be happy about the photo.

I have to wait a long time for his next answer. So long that I already regret typing the words at all. We're halfway through the movie when my phone vibrates the next time.

Ruby Bell, could it be that you are trying to flirt with me?

A smile spreads on my lips. I hide it in the collar of my pajama top. Then I turn off my cell phone and concentrate on the film with all my might.

Ruby

When I get off the school bus on Monday, James leans against the fence to the sports field and greets me with a wry smile.

After what happened a week ago in his parents' company, I didn't think I'd ever be happy to see him waiting for me in the morning.

"Hi," I say a little breathlessly as I come to a stop in front of him.

His smile widens. Apparently, he's also happy to see me. "Hey."

He lets his gaze wander over my face, and again there is this unfamiliar feeling in my stomach. I wonder if my skin would tingle if he touched me the way he did on Friday. I quickly push the thought into a dark corner of my head. "Are you my escort to-day?"

His smile doesn't slip a bit. "I thought we could go to the Assembly together and save you from each other's questions."

The next moment, he nods in the direction of school and starts moving. I hook my fingers into the straps of my backpack and follow him.

"How... What was the rest of your weekend?" I ask hesitantly.

"I went out to dinner with my family yesterday."

He doesn't say more. I give him a questioning sideways glance. He notices him, and his smile slowly disappears.

"My aunt Ophelia was visiting. You and my father don't get along very well."

For a moment I am speechless that he entrusts me with something so private. I didn't expect that, especially after he told me how badly he and his sister were cheated on in the past by people they trusted. On the other hand, I also told him something about myself on Friday. He must have noticed how difficult it was for me. And maybe he's like me now. Perhaps he also senses that something has changed and does not want us to return to the tense way in which we dealt with each other before.

Hope germinates in me. I have no idea what is called what has developed between James and me – friendship? More? Less? – but I'd like to find out, bit by bit.

"Was there a quarrel?"

He buries his hands in his trouser pockets. "Our family reunions are never particularly peaceful. The Beaufort Companies actually belong to my mother and her sister. But since my parents got married, my father has taken over quite a lot and also changed a lot of things in the company that go against the grain for some – especially Ophelia," he explains.

"Does she also work for the company?" I ask curiously.

James growls in agreement. "Yes, but she has no say in the main enterprise. She is five years younger than my mother and was therefore always left out a bit. She is more concerned with the subsidiaries or those of which my parents have bought shares."

I wonder how Ember would feel if our parents bequeathed us a company, but she – just because she is the younger of the two of us – had no say at all. No wonder that there is a thick air at the Beaufort family reunions.

"Lately, she has disagreed with a number of decisions, so the mood has been pretty bad. But... It was okay. I've had worse family evenings," he says with a shrug, and together we turn left onto the path that leads to Boyd Hall.

A girl overtakes us, with whom I have history together. When she sees James and me together, her eyes widen. I close my fingers a little tighter around the straps of my backpack and swallow hard. Nevertheless, I raise my chin and return her gaze defiantly until she turns away and quickly moves on.

"Hey, not so aggressive," says James, bumping his shoulder lightly against me.

"What else am I supposed to do? When she stares, I just stare back."

He steps in front of me, so that I can't go any further. "You let it get to you too much. You must be indifferent to it. Let them say what they want about you."

"But I am not indifferent."

"And? They don't need to know that. You just have to look like you don't care about any of it. Then they'll leave you alone."

Suddenly, his facial expression changes – now his eyelids are lowered a bit, his brows are relaxed and the corners of his mouth are slightly upwards. It's his look, I don't give a, and he looks so arrogant with it that I would like to shake him. "You look as if you could take a beating."

"I look as if I would like a spanking very much. That's the difference," he replies, nodding his chin at me. Now you."

I try to imitate his facial expression. Judging by the twitching corners of James' mouth, I don't really succeed well.

"Okay. Maybe it's enough to start if you just don't look at all your fellow human beings as if you're imagining them going up in flames."

We move on, and I try to take his advice to heart. Nevertheless, the queasy feeling increases the closer we get to school. Just before the entrance to Boyd Hall, James puts his hand on the back of my head and strokes it. Just a second, nothing more. It's probably meant to give me courage, but all of a sudden I'm nervous for a completely different reason. I don't know how James does it, but a single little touch from him is enough to turn my world upside down. The feeling is completely new to me, different and strange. But somehow also beautiful.

"Beaufort!" a voice sounds behind us, and I flinch. Students on their way to the Assembly stream past us, avoiding James and me as we pause again.

James turns around, and I reluctantly do the same.

Wren and Alistair come up the steps to us and stop in front of us. "Hey, Ruby." Wren rubs the back of his head almost embarrassed. "Sorry about Friday."

I'm not sure if he's really just apologizing for the pool thing or also for the way he harassed me at the beginning of the party. I can't ask him without James getting wind of the thing with Wren and me. The fact that he apologizes to me is certainly only due to James, but I'm still happy about it.

So I just nod and say, "It's okay. You didn't throw me into the pool."

Wren grins at me in surprise, as if he had expected a completely different reaction.

As if by magic, my eyes wander to Alistair, who is watching me silently. One look at his face is enough to make it clear to me that he knows. He knows that I was the one who caught him and Kesh in the library.

Cautiously, I smile at him. He doesn't reciprocate. His lips are narrow, bloodless lines.

"Can we go in?" asks James, looking around. We hum in agreement and climb the last steps up.

The assembly has just started when we get to Boyd Hall, and we inconspicuously look for seats in the last row. Nevertheless, I feel the gaze

of my classmates on me as word slowly spreads about who is sitting next to James Beaufort this morning. One head after the other turns to us as Principal Lexington stands in front and praises the lacrosse team for the outstanding performance on Friday.

I dare to look at James, but his face shows no emotion, nothing that could indicate that he could be uncomfortable with the situation and the murmuring around us. So I swallow, press my lips together and do the same.

After the assembly, James and Wren have math, while Alistair and I have to go to the East Wing for art. Before we say goodbye, James murmurs to me, "Think of the beating."

Although his words are completely innocent, I feel my cheeks getting hot. I ignore it and instead follow Alistair, who has already started moving. The atmosphere between us is still tense, and I feel like I have to say something. But with the best will in the world, I don't know what.

Alistair makes the decision for me and holds me back by the arm just before the art room. He pulls me aside and looks at me seriously.

"What you saw on Friday night," he begins quietly and then pauses. His gaze twitches to a few students who are just around the corner. He nods at them with a fake smile and waits until they have passed us and disappeared into the art space. Then he turns to me again. "You mustn't tell anyone about it."

"Of course not," I answer just as quietly.

"No, Ruby, you don't understand. You have to promise me. Swear to me that you won't tell anyone about it," Alistair whispers insistently.

"Why do you think I would?" I reply.

"I... It's just—" Again he has to take a break because people greet him in passing. "Keshav doesn't want anyone to know about it." I can see from the look on his face how difficult it is for him to pronounce these words. All of a sudden, he's no longer the arrogant, rich snob who beats people up on the lacrosse field. Now he looks incredibly young. And vulnerable.

No wonder. It certainly doesn't feel good to be with someone who hides you like you're a dirty secret.

"I won't tell anyone about it, Alistair. I promise."

He nods, and for a brief moment the relief is clearly written all over his face. Then his expression changes, and he looks at me deliberately: "If I do find out that you've told someone, I'll make your life hell."

With these words, he goes into the classroom without giving me another look.

I get through the rest of the school day better than expected. A few people give me strange looks and whisper behind my back, but no one dares to talk to me or tease me about what happened on Friday. James' escort from the morning probably actually did something.

During my lunch break, I eat with Lin as usual. At least everything seems to me as usual until someone comes to our table.

"Is there still a vacancy here?" asks Lydia Beaufort.

Lin and I turn our heads and stare at them. She points with her tray to the chair next to Lin.

"Yes?" I answer, sounding more like a question.

Without hesitation, Lydia takes a seat opposite me, spreads a napkin on her lap and begins to eat her penne. Lin gives me a questioning look, but I just shrug my shoulders helplessly. I have no idea what Lydia is doing here. Perhaps James has transferred the office of escort to her? Or she decided to put her words from Friday into action and keep an eye on me from now on.

I look at James, who is sitting at the other end of the cafeteria with his friends. Maybe I'm wrong, but the mood between them seems less exuberant today than usual. James and Alistair seem to be discussing something fiercely, while Keshav stares at his phone next to them and Wren stares at a book. Cyril is nowhere to be seen.

"He doesn't know that I sat down with you," Lydia says suddenly. She dabs her mouth and takes a sip from her water bottle. "I'm here because I wanted to apologize for Friday."

"But you didn't do anything," I reply, perplexed.

She shakes her head. "My friends and I all misbehaved."

"And that's why you're having lunch with us now?" asks Lin skeptically.

Lydia just shrugs her shoulders. "I've seen them over there vultures. When I sit here, they definitely don't dare to come here." It makes a head movement to a group of students staring in our direction. When they notice that I have turned around, they avert their gaze and put their heads together in a whisper.

"And besides, I wanted to ask you how you're doing," says Lydia.

I can't hide my surprise. When I think back to our last conversation, I only see her suspicious look in front of me. She didn't give me the impression that she cared about my well-being, and I can't help but wonder if my fall into the pool is really the only reason she's sitting here at our table.

Nevertheless, I decide to answer your question honestly. "I wish that hadn't happened on Friday. But I'm fine."

"Sometimes Cy really doesn't know when it's enough," she says.

I shrug my shoulders.

"But I've known him since I was little," she continues. "He really thought it was funny."

"What he did was pretty much the opposite of funny," Lin interjects, looking surprised when Lydia nods.

"It was totally wrong. And that's what I told him."

I look up surprised by my soup. "Really?"

"Yes. Of course."

For a moment, I don't know what to say. Finally, I decide: "That was nice of you. Thank you."

Lydia smiles and turns back to her penne.

I look at Lin the moment she looks at me. I shrug my shoulders again inconspicuously, then we also devote ourselves to our food.

After a while, Lin begins to talk about her morning, which started with her car not wanting to start. At first, it seems strange to me to make small talk while Lydia is sitting next to us, but she participates in our conversation as if it were the most natural thing in the world, and finally I stop wondering what her ulterior motives might be. Maybe she really just wanted to be nice and apologize to me. She wouldn't be the first in this family to surprise me.

When we have finished eating, I pull my backpack onto my lap and take out a small can, which I place in the middle of the table.

"The cookies are left over from the weekend," I say and lift the lid. "Would you like one for dessert?"

Lydia's eyes light up. "Did you bake them yourself?"

"Together with Lin and my sister," I say. "On Saturday, in my pyjamas."

"That sounds wonderful," she says and takes one of the cookies. "And so much better than my Saturday." She bites off a piece and chews

deliberately. "Oh, it's really tasty."

"Thank you." I smile. "James told me you had family over."

"Yes, that's always... especially. To be honest, I would have preferred to spend the day in my pyjamas."

I can't imagine someone like Lydia in pajamas at all, and when I try, I have to grin.

After the lunch break, Lin and I go to the group room to prepare for today's meeting. While I write the agenda on the whiteboard, Lin hands out the handouts that we have just printed out in the secretary's office. Then we wait for the others, who arrive one by one. As always, James sits down on the seat by the window. He puts the black notebook on the table in front of him and crosses both arms in front of his chest. The familiar sight gives me a sting because it makes it clear to me that it doesn't matter whether James and I understand each other or not: He's not here voluntarily. On the contrary, his presence prevents him from practicing lacrosse and is therefore a punishment he hates.

"Ruby?" Kieran stepped next to me unnoticed.

"Hm?" I say and look at him. Kieran is only a little bit taller than me. His black hair falls straight into his face, and he shakes it to the side.

"I wanted to ask if you have time today after the meeting? The selection of orchestras I've picked out is quite large, and I thought I'd discuss them with you before I choose the final three."

"Wait a minute," I murmur and look at my calendar. It only says Plan your birthday with Mum & Dad, nothing else. "Sure."

Kieran smiles with relief. "Great."

He goes back to his seat, which is diagonally adjacent to James's. Our eyes cross, and a mocking smile plays at the corners of his mouth as he looks back and forth between Kieran and me.

"What?" I form with my lips.

James picks up his cell phone. A little later, mine shines on the table in front of me.

He likes you.

I roll my eyes and ignore him.

"Okay, guys. Get us up to speed," Lin begins the meeting shortly afterwards, pointing with her hand to Jessalyn, who is sitting to her right.

"I have obtained several offers for the decoration. One of the contacts made a really good offer." Jessa gives the printed portfolio to the round. "Thanks again for the tip, Beaufort."

Surprised, I look at James, who nods at Jessa. As often as his gaze wanders out of the window to the sports field, I would not have thought that he would have gotten involved in something without being asked. And even without me noticing.

"I've done a few drafts for the invitations," Doug says next, handing Lin a USB stick. She pockets it and opens the presentation. "The first proposal is more classic and is based on last year's invitation," Doug explains.

I look at the ornate golden letters on a black background, but before I can form an opinion, Camille says, "I thought we wanted to deliberately distance ourselves from last year's party."

The others growl in agreement.

"Okay, let's get to the second suggestion," Doug continues, nodding to Lin to click on.

The next invitation is designed in bright colors typical of Halloween.

"It doesn't look as elegant as I imagined a Victorian celebration," Kieran interjects hesitantly.

I nod. "To be honest, I think so too."

At Doug's sign, Lin clicks to the next suggestion. A murmur goes through the room, and I sit straight as a bolt. The next moment, I lean down close to the screen and look at the invitation with squinted eyes.

It is designed in the look of old paper. The occasion on the paper head is written in squiggly yet legible letters, just below ... I can be seen. With James, who bows and gently holds my hand in his, as if he were asking me to dance.

It's one of the pictures that was taken on the Saturday we were in London. I can't believe he sent them on to Doug without my knowledge. I look up from the screen of the laptop and look at James across the room. He returns my gaze with sparkling eyes.

"The invitation looks great," Jessa says after a while. A murmur of approval goes through the room.

"The dress is simply a dream. You don't happen to have a few more of them?" Jessa asks James.

He shakes his head. "I can be happy that I got things at all."

"The invitation is great, Doug." Lin turns to the canvas to see it in large format. Then she gets up and takes a few steps backwards. "I think the key data could be made a bit more modern. Maybe in a different script or something?"

"I think so too," I agree and try not to let it be known how insecure I am about the picture. If we agree on this invitation, my face will be seen throughout the school – all over Pemwick! –hang. I don't know if I'm ready for this kind of attention. Unfortunately, this is not up for debate either – the team is enthusiastic and is already discussing commissioning the same printing company as last time.

Again my gaze falls on the picture. To James in his Victorian suit, my hand in his. When I think about how it felt to be so close to him and how charged this moment was between us, I get very warm. For the rest of the meeting, I don't dare to take a single look in James' direction.

When we are done, Jessa, Camille and Doug say goodbye. While Kieran comes over to me so we can watch the orchestras on Lin's laptop, I see out of the corner of my eye how Lin walks up to James. She sits down next to him and begins to talk to him. Frowning, I watch him nod and write something down in his notebook. I realize that Kieran is talking to me too late.

"Sorry, what did you say?" I ask.

"That I think the party is going to be the best we've ever had at Maxton Hall," he repeats, smiling at me.

"That would be great. We have been working on the planning for so long. I can't wait for it to finally happen."

"Neither do I. You must reserve a dance for me." Kieran is still smiling and looking at me through black eyelashes.

He likes you.

Lin has been saying this to me for months. Could it be that they are right? For me, Kieran has always been just the ambitious little vampire from the year Among Us. I thought that he would be nice to me because he hopes that I will then bring him into the conversation for the team management next year. It would never have occurred to me that he could have a crush on me.

Suddenly I notice how close Kieran sits next to me and that our knees almost touch under the table. I slide a bit to the side, but the next moment

I'm annoyed about it. The situation is completely innocent. Why do I let James' words suddenly throw me off my game?

I give him an angry look at him at the exact moment he looks at me. Unlike me, he doesn't do this furtively, but really obviously. I would like to stick my tongue out at him. But since that wouldn't be a particularly adult choice, I look at Kieran with a beaming smile instead and nod. "Of course. I just have to learn how to do it properly."

"I'll show you at the rehearsal," Kieran says, and I could swear I see a slight blush on his cheeks. Oh man.

"Good. Okay," I say, louder than intended. I clear my throat. "Shall we listen to the music now?"

We get out our headphones and go through the audio samples of the orchestras Kieran has chosen. Then we look at reviews on the Internet and sort them out.

"I think I'd suggest the three to the others. The best thing to do is to get quotes in advance, and then we'll just decide on Wednesday or Friday which one is best," I say finally.

Kieran nods. "All right."

"Great," I say with a smile and take the headphones out of my ear. I open my planner and grab my pink pen to jot down the tasks discussed today.

"You'll be eighteen on Saturday?" he asks, amazed.

Immediately I close my planner again. I try not to let it show, but I'm uncomfortable that Kieran caught a glimpse inside. This is something like my diary and definitely not meant for the eyes of strangers. "Yes," I say after a short pause.

"And what are you going to do?"

Lin chooses this moment to join our conversation from her seat next to James. "We'll do—" She falls silent when I give her a warning look. In Maxton Hall, it's nobody's business what I do on my birthday. This is my personal life, and I don't want others to know about it. "Nothing special," she finally finishes, pressing her lips tightly together.

"You didn't even say you're going to grow up soon," James interjects and stands up. He raises both arms above his head and stretches. "Why am I not invited?"

"Because you don't know how to behave," I reply.

"I'll show you how well I can behave," he says, but it sounds like the exact opposite. Suddenly I have to think about the party again. Not to the pool and everything that came after. But of the moment on the dance floor when I stumbled against James and felt his upper body on mine. He looked at me the same way, with that outrageous sparkle in his eyes that makes my stomach tingle.

I need to collect myself and remember where we are before I reply, "You're not invited, James."

"Okay." Again, it sounds as if he is not saying "Okay", but rather "We'll see".

Kieran stands up and shoulders his bag. "We'll hear each other again later, won't we?" I nod, and he leaves the room with a hand gesture that is half waving, half high five.

Then I stow my planner in my backpack and shut down Lin's laptop. I push him into his protective case and get up. "Are you still staying, or shall I lock it?"

James and Lin shake their heads. "We're done, too."

While the two of them also pack up their things, I watch them suspiciously. I want to know what they discussed with each other. Hopefully Lin didn't tell him about my birthday plans. Even though I confided in James an important part of me on Friday, there are things he doesn't need to know. And the fact that I'm going to spend the evening of my eighteenth birthday playing games with Lin and my family is undoubtedly one of them.

"Rutherford is totally into you," says James after we leave the library.

"That's such nonsense," I say, shaking my head.

"I think he's got a thing for you," Lin James agrees unnecessarily.

I give her a look.

"What? I've been telling you this for years. How he reads your every wish from your eyes and is always so incredibly nice. It's really, really obvious."

"How is that obvious? Nothing is obvious there. He's nice to me because I'm the leader of the team. He must be nice to me."

Lin smiles at me and pats my arm. "Okay, I'll correct. It's obvious to everyone except you. »

James laughs softly, and I glare at him. I would love to know what happened that the two suddenly get along so well. I don't remember them

ever agreeing before, let alone exchanging amused glances over my head. I'm not sure I can endorse this development.

I'm almost a little relieved when Lin says goodbye to me shortly afterwards with a hug and turns onto the path that leads to the parking lots.

James insists on taking me to the bus. "You give the poor boy hope," he says suddenly.

"What's your problem, James? Are you jealous?" That's the only counterattack I can think of in a hurry. But when he doesn't answer and I give him a sideways glance, I see that he has his hands buried in his trouser pockets and is frowning straight ahead.

"If anyone teaches you how to dance," he says after a short pause, "it's me."

"You're not serious," I manage incredulously. "Are you really jealous of Kieran?"

"No." He still doesn't look at me. "But I don't want the guy to get the wrong idea."

"What kind of thoughts?" I ask.

"That you only have to be sucked up to make you smile. That's pathetic."

Abruptly, I stop. "Excuse me? I suppose I'm smiling too, without anyone sucking up to me!"

Finally he turns to me, but I can't interpret the look in his dark eyes. "Really? You've never smiled at me like that."

"Because you haven't given me many reasons to smile so far."

For a moment he just stares at me. I don't understand why he's like that all of a sudden. He seems, and I can't follow his argumentation. Before the mood between us can change any further, I decide to change the subject. "Thank you for taking care of me today."

He just nods.

"Really. Nobody made a fool of me today. If you hadn't escorted me to school and the assembly, it would have looked different," I continue.

When he continues to be silent, I continue. "Your sister sat down with us in the cafeteria today and—"

Suddenly, James touches my arm and steps in front of me. I hold my breath and look up at him in surprise. His gaze is surprisingly serious.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"What are you sorry about?" I ask quietly.

"That I haven't given you so many reasons to look at me the way you looked at Kieran earlier."

"James—"

"I'm going to change that," he continues, looking deep into my eyes.

I swallow dry. My stomach suddenly feels queasy, my knees weak. I am aware of his touch on my arm, can clearly feel his light caress through the fabric of my blazer. Goosebumps spread across my arms. The need to touch him as well comes over me suddenly and completely unprepared. I don't want to do much. Putting my hands on his hip to hold me tight would be enough. But I can't. That just doesn't work. Just like this miserable breathlessness when he comes so close to me, or the tingling in my stomach when he looks at me like that.

"My bus is coming," I manage and break away from it.

The intensity does not disappear from his gaze. I turn around and sprint off so that I am no longer completely defenceless at her mercy. I have never been so happy to be able to get on the school bus.

Ruby

On Saturday morning, I wake up at six o'clock – and without an alarm clock. That's how it always is when it's my birthday. I sleep restlessly with anticipation of what Mum and Dad have come up with for me. Mum works in a bakery and always brings home the most delicious cakes in the world on these days, while Dad cooks a feast for us and decorates the entire downstairs with Ember's or my help. Already at seven I can hear them pottering downstairs and imagine what they are probably preparing right now. After all, you only turn eighteen once.

I listen to myself to see if I feel different, but that's not the case. Lin felt the same way last August. At least that's what she said when we lay next to each other in the grass after her barbecue party and looked at stars.

I turn on my side and reach for my phone. Jessa has already written me a lovely text message, and Lin has left me a voice message shortly after half past two. Then she sings softly and then wishes me all the best. At the end, she emphasizes how sure she is that we will both be accepted in Oxford and that she can hardly wait.

Then I get dressed, sit down at my desk and leaf through my calendar as a distraction. Today in a week is the Halloween party. It seems to me that I have been busy for an eternity with nothing else than preparing this celebration. On Friday morning, the finished posters came out of the print shop, and we used the meeting to distribute them at school. My worries were unjustified. Nobody said anything about James' and my photo to me or teased me about it. On the contrary, the reactions were consistently positive, and Rector Lexington wrote to me in an email that the invitation was also highly praised by the external guests for its design.

I haven't gotten used to the fact that everyone in Maxton Hall knows my name by now. It's strange to be greeted or offered a place to sit in the cafeteria. But I try not to let it show that it makes me feel insecure, and instead behave as usual – as if I don't care about all the attention. After all,

that's what James does. He acts as if he was not interested in anything. But I now also know that this is not true.

As if by itself, my thoughts wander to the moment last Monday. I'm going to change that. How resolutely he sounded and how insistently he looked at me. As if there had been nothing more important for him in life at that moment than to convince me that he was serious.

I shake myself to get the thoughts of James out of my head. But when my gaze clears again, I flinch.

James

I wrote his name in my calendar. And I didn't even notice it! My cheeks get hot, and immediately I reach for the extinguishing fluid in my pencil case. I start, but pause above the first letter. Slowly I put the small tube aside again and run my fingers gently over his name instead. My fingertips tingle. Not a good sign. I've been wondering for days what it's all about. After all, he is still ... he. But I can't deny that anything has changed. For a long time now, I have not been filled with anger and mistrust as soon as I see him, but with something else. Something warm and exciting.

And I have to smile. Because I am happy to see him. Because I enjoy his company. Because he is quick-witted and intelligent and I find him interesting. Because it's like a riddle that I really want to solve.

I never thought this would be possible, but... I no longer detest James Beaufort. Rather the opposite is the case.

Suddenly my room door opens, and Ember comes in. Caught shut, I slam my bullet journal.

Ember looks at me skeptically at first, then she looks at my planner as if she knows exactly that there is something terribly embarrassing in there. The next moment, however, she jumps up to me, grinning, and grabs my hand to pull me up from the chair. "I'm surprised you haven't made an attempt to calm down yet," she says. She continues to tug at my arm, even though it's really not necessary. I come along extremely voluntarily.

We leave my room, and I wrap my arm around her waist to hold her tightly against me. "You have to fulfill all my wishes today."

Although I am happy, I notice that there is also a sad feeling at this moment. It is my last birthday that I will spend here, with my family and Ember. Who knows where I'll be next year. Really in Oxford? With Lin by

my side? Or all alone? And what if I am not taken after all – where will I be then?

Ember prevents me from thinking any further, because the moment we turn right into the living room, she says: "Here's the birthday girl!"

I gasp loudly.

"Surprise!" my family shouts.

I slap my hand in front of my mouth and feel my eyes start to burn. I don't cry often, and if at all, it's when I'm alone in my room and no one can see me. But at the sight of my grandparents, my aunt and uncle, my cousin and my parents starting to sing Happy Birthday, it's impossible for me to keep my composure.

The room is beautifully decorated, Dad and Ember have outdone themselves this year. White and mint green pompoms hang from the ceiling, a garland in the same colors is stretched across the dining table, and at the back of the living room table on which my gifts lie, two shimmering metallic mint green balloons float, which together make up my age.

The next half hour passes as if in a frenzy. Everyone congratulates me, hugs me, asks how I feel, and finally gives me their gifts. From Uncle Tom, Aunt Trudy and Max I get the anthology of My Hero Academia, a manga series I've had my eye on for months, from Ember new pens and pretty stickers for my planner and from my grandparents two textbooks that are on the Oxford reading list. My parents give me an external hard drive for my laptop, which I have been wanting since my laptop gave up the ghost for no apparent reason at the beginning of the year and pretty much all my files have been lost.

"Who is that from?" I ask, pointing to a large package that is still on the table.

"From a secret admirer," Mum replies, shaking her eyebrows. Skeptically, I look back and forth between her and Dad. He just shrugs his shoulders.

"It came in the mail," Ember explains.

"No sender?" I ask, eyeing the black box and the blue ribbon skeptically.

"I don't think that's necessary, since we all know who it's from," Ember interjects.

"Oh my God, don't say you have a boyfriend," my cousin Max shouts, looking at me with wide eyes.

Ember says "yes" at the same moment as I shout "no".

"Open it," Trudy demands, peeking over my shoulder. She reaches forward with one hand and pretends to want to put on the bow. Just like that, I can push the package out of her reach. I lift it up and sit down on the sofa with it.

Slowly I loosen the loop. I feel terribly watched and give my family a look to stop staring at me like that. Unfortunately, it doesn't help. The room is as quiet as a mouse. Sighing, I lift the lid.

There is a bag in the box. With bated breath, I lift her out and place her on my lap. It is made of dark brown waxed leather, has an adjustable shoulder strap and two small front pockets under a flap with buckles. Carefully I open it. The inner lining of the bag is made of blue-green checkered fabric, and the division of the compartments seems perfect to me at first glance. There is a separate compartment for a laptop, several small ones on the side that can be closed with zippers, and a main compartment with a narrower separated area in the middle.

With this bag I could take over the world, I'm quite sure. Carefully I close it and stroke the expensive leather. I notice something that I didn't notice at first glance. On the lower right corner of the flap are three letters. R. J. B. – my initials.

My breath is taken away. I feel like I'm in a dream, and the oohs and ahs of my family barely get through to me. I look into the box, and on the floor, which is lined with black tissue paper, I discover a card. It is creamy white and has a narrow golden edge. In black letters it says:

Happy Birthday, Ruby. – J.

Nothing more. Nevertheless, a lot of feelings explode in my stomach area, sending a tingle through my entire body. I don't know how to react, I can only stare at the bag until suddenly numbers and pound signs dance in front of my eyes. This is for sure the most expensive gift I've ever received. But I don't really want to worry about that.

And I don't want to think about what it means that James thought of me and gave me such a gift. Did he see that my backpack would fall apart at any moment? Did he know that I had been saving money for months to buy a new bag for next year? Did he feel sorry for me?

I don't know, and thinking about it makes my head spin.

"The boy has style, that's for sure," Trudy sighs.

"And money," Max adds helpfully.

"I don't think he paid money for it if his parents own the company that made the bag," Ember points out.

"Guys!" interrupts Mum and points to the dining table where she has prepared a sumptuous breakfast. "Leave Ruby alone and sit down." She comes to me, takes the bag from my lap, carefully puts it back in the box and then reaches for my hand to pull me up. She wraps an arm around my shoulder and hugs me. "It's not proper to talk about a gift like that. The young man has thought about it, and that is a wonderful gesture for which we should be grateful." She taps her finger against my nose. "Now go blow out your candles."

Together we go to the table. For ten years, there has been only one wish that I mention in my mind when I blow out my birthday candles. Oxford. But this year, another word pushes to the surface, and I have to pause for a moment and concentrate.

"On your eighteenth birthday, you can wish for two things," Dad says gently. I didn't notice that he rolled next to me, but now he strokes my back briefly. Obviously, my inner struggle played out on my face.

"That's right," says Mum. "That's birthday law."

My cheeks warm, and I avert my gaze from them. I refuse to analyze why James' name was the first thing I thought of. Or why I take my parents at their word when I close my eyes and blow hard.

It will be one of the most beautiful birthdays we have ever celebrated. After our brunch we go for a walk and take a new family photo in the park in Gormsey, for which we need almost ten attempts, because someone else always has their eyes closed. In the afternoon, Lin arrives, and we play board games and pantomime together with my family, but in the end Lin and I only narrowly win against Max and Aunt Trudy. In the evening, Dad serves up a three-course menu with my and Ember's help, some of which he has already prepared the day before. We sit together around the dining table for a long time, and I'm surprised at how seamlessly Lin fits into our group. She doesn't seem to mind that she doesn't understand some family insiders. Instead, she asks my mum countless questions about her work in the bakery and talks to my dad for a long time about his spinal cord injury. As it turns out, Lin's uncle is also in a wheelchair – information that is completely new

to me. I admire how unbiased she approaches the topic and doesn't let Dad's disability unsettle her.

After everyone has left, I'm full of food and so satisfied that I could actually sleep right away. But when I put on my pajamas, my gaze falls on the black cardboard box on my desk. I stand up and stand in front of it. Hesitantly, I lift the lid and take out the bag. I open the two front closures with a soft click. I carefully take my school supplies, which I need for Monday, out of my desk drawer and start to stow them little by little in the compartments of the leather bag. It takes me several attempts until I am satisfied with my order. In contrast to my backpack, in which I always had to fit everything in a single compartment, this is heaven on earth. There are even small pen holders in the front that I put the pens I use most often for my bullet journal.

I don't know if James knows what a joy he gave me with this gift. But now that I look at the bag that was put away, I realize that there is no way I can return it. I lean forward and reach into my left front pocket to get out my cell phone, which I put there as a test. I hesitate for a second, then I call James' number and dial her. I lift the receiver to my ear and wait for the dial tone. The doorbell rings. And rings the bell. I'm just about to hang up when he picks up.

"Ruby Bell." He almost sounds as if he was expecting my call.

"James Beaufort." If he pronounces my full name, I can do the same. In contrast to the past, where I spat it out like a swear word, the letters now feel completely different on my tongue.

"Are you okay?" he asks, although I can hardly understand him. In the background I hear music that gradually becomes quieter. I wonder where he is and what he is doing.

"I'm doing great. I just packed my new bag," I reply, running my finger over the edge of the middle compartment. The seam feels even.

"Do you like it?" he asks, and I wish I knew what he looks like at that moment. What he's wearing. In my head, he's wearing the school uniform because I've rarely seen him in anything else, but I'm straining to conjure up the image of James in black jeans and a white shirt. On this day on our doorstep, he looked like a normal boy. Not like the heir to a billion-dollar company. Human. Tangible.

"She's beautiful. You know that wouldn't have been necessary, right?" I finally manage to say. I close the bag and then sit down on my desk chair,

both feet crossed on the desk.

"I wanted to give you something. And for someone who loves order as much as you do, the James is a good choice, I thought."

"The James?"

"That's the name of the model."

"You're giving me a bag that you named after yourself?"

"It wasn't me who called her that, it was my mother. There is also a Lydia. And those who have names like my parents. But Lydia is too small for you, and Mortimer is too big. Besides, I found it amusing to see you running around school with James."

I have to grin. "Are you giving Beaufort things to all your friends?" I ask.

He is silent for a moment, and I only hear the music playing softly in the background. "No," he finally answers.

He doesn't say more.

I don't know what that means. I just don't know what this is between us, let alone what I would wish for. All I know is that I'm incredibly happy to hear his voice.

"If you own the company, you'll have to name a bag after me at some point," I say, trying to break the silence.

"Shall I tell you a secret, Ruby?" His voice is very hoarse and hoarse. I wonder who he is with at the moment. And whether he left someone standing to talk to me on the phone.

"You can tell me anything you want," I whisper.

There is a small pause in which I can only hear his footsteps. It sounds as if he is walking on gravel. Then the crunching sound disappears, and the music can no longer be heard at all.

"I... doesn't want to take over the company at all."

If he were here, I would stare at him in disbelief. So I have no choice but to press my mobile phone tighter to my ear.

"If I'm to be honest, I don't want to go to Oxford either," he continues.

My heart is beating so hard that I can hear it pounding in my ears. "Then what do you want?"

He breathes in with a laugh. "It's the first time in a while that anyone has asked me that."

"But it's such an important question."

"And I don't know what to answer to that." He is silent for a moment. "It was always predestined for me, you know? No matter that Lydia Beaufort would much rather take over and could do it much better. She lives for our company, but it will still be me who my father will bring into the management next year. I've known that all my life, and I accept it. But it's not what I want." Another pause, then: "Unfortunately, I will never get the opportunity to even find out what it is. I don't plan my life myself, it's been planned for a long time: Maxton Hall, Oxford and the company. That's all there is for me."

I grip my phone tighter, press it to my ear, hold James as close to me as possible. What he just said is probably the most honest thing I've ever heard from him. I can't believe he confided this to me. That he lets me keep this secret for him.

"My parents always told me that the world was open to me. That it doesn't matter where I come from and where I want to go. Mum and Dad always said that I can do whatever I want and there is no idea that is too big. I think every person deserves a world full of possibilities."

He makes a low, desperate sound. "Some days ..." he begins, then pauses, as if he doesn't know if he's already revealed too much. But then he continues to speak, summons up the courage for even more honesty. "Some days I feel like I can't breathe properly because everything is crushing me so much."

"Oh, James," I whisper. My heart aches for him. I would never have thought that the pressure is so great for him and the obligations to his family weigh so heavily on him. It has always seemed to me that he enjoys the power that his last name gives him. But little by little, the pieces of the puzzle are now coming together in my head: his tension every time it comes to Oxford, his stoic expression when his parents showed up in London, how his eyes darken every time the company is mentioned.

Suddenly I understand it. I understand why he behaved like this at the beginning of the school year. What it's all about his childish pranks and the "I don't care about anything" attitude.

"This school year ... is the last thing you don't have to take responsibility for," I murmur.

"It's my last chance to be free," he agrees quietly.

I would love to contradict him, but I can't. Nor can I suggest a solution to his problem – there simply isn't one. If you have to accept such an

inheritance, it is not enough to sit down at a table with your parents and discuss the whole thing again. Also, I'm sure he's already considered all possible options. And if I judge James correctly, he will do what his parents ask him to do anyway. He would never abandon his family.

"I wish I were with you now." The words leave my mouth before I can think about their meaning.

"What would you do if you were with me?" he replies. All of a sudden, his voice has taken on a different undertone. Now he no longer sounds desperate, but rather ... badinaging. As if he was hoping for an indecent answer from me.

"I would take you in my arms." Not very indecent, but at least from the heart.

"I think I'd like that."

We've never really hugged each other, and if he were standing in front of me, I wouldn't have dared to say something like that to him. But like this, with his dark voice in my ear and without having to look into his eyes, nothing suddenly seems impossible to me anymore. I feel brave and sad and nervous and happy – all at once.

"Did you have a nice birthday?" asks James after a while.

"Yes," I answer and start telling him about my day, what gifts I got and that I won with Lin at pantomime in the evening. James laughs in all the right places, obviously relieved at the change of subject. Then we talk about all sorts of things: his weekend so far (lame), the upcoming work in English (challenging but doable), our favorite singers and bands (mine: Iron & Wine, his: Death Cab for Cutie) and favorite movies (mine: The Guardians of Light, his: The Amazing Life of Walter Mitty). I learn so many new things about him. For example, that he has a weakness for blogs, just like Ember. He tells me about a travel blog he recently discovered on which he actually only wanted to read an article – in the end, he missed a session in his parents' office because he was immersed in the entries about the author's trip around the world for several hours and didn't notice how time passed. And I feel exactly like him now. Before I know it, it's three o'clock in the morning, and I'm lying wide awake in my bed, James's voice still in my ear. I stare at the folded lacrosse sweater lying on my bedside table.

And I only think of James.

Ruby

Principal Lexington's steely gaze bores directly into mine as I try to keep still and not slide restlessly back and forth in my chair. It seems strange to me every time to sit in his office. His posture is the same as always: he has his hands folded in front of him on the desk, but at the same time looks at me with a razor-sharp look, as if he has no problem walking over dead bodies if it serves the good of his school. I wouldn't wish him as an enemy to anyone.

I doubt I'll ever get used to the weekly meetings with him. Especially not when Lin abandons me, as she does today, because she has to go back to London and support her mother at a reception at the gallery.

However, the fact that I am sitting alone in front of Principal Lexington's desk at this moment and facing his eagle eyes also has something good. So I could at least make my suggestion without Lin staring at me from the side or stepping under the table.

"Did I understand you correctly, Ms. Bell?" asks Lexington, leaning forward a bit. He looks at me with a frown. "You want me to revoke Mr. Beaufort's sentence?"

I nod slowly. "Yes, sir."

He narrows his eyes even further. "Why do you think I should do that? De Term is not over yet."

"He's really shown great commitment, sir," I say. "I never expected that. He had great ideas, and it's thanks to him that we can take Maxton Hall events to a new level with the Halloween party."

Lexington leans back and audibly lets out his breath.

He seems to like the idea. Whenever it comes to the school's image, Lexington reacts like a magpie that has discovered a glittering find. I decide to go one better: "I think James can now be more useful to the school on the lacrosse team. The team needs him. Roger Cree is good, but he lacks gaming experience. That's what Coach Freeman said when we interviewed him for the Maxton Blog on Friday."

The wrinkles on Lexington's forehead deepen. I can see that he has started to weigh the pros and cons in his head.

"And you're not just saying that because the boy messes up and you want to get rid of him?" he asks skeptically.

I wonder what Lexington would say if he knew that the exact opposite is true. I don't want to get rid of James. If it were up to me, I would spend every minute of my time with him.

But after James confided in me and I realized what this last year of school meant to him, I couldn't help it. I just had to talk to Principal Lexington. It's the only way I've come up with how I can help James and take at least a small part of the burden off his shoulders – even if only for a short time. Besides, I don't just do it because I want to do him a favor, but also because it's true. James really made an effort, and that should be rewarded. So he can at least play lacrosse together with his friends for the rest of the season and enjoy the year.

Involuntarily, the question arises in me as to what this means for us. After all, we are now friends too. Or something like that. Will he still spend time with me afterwards? Probably not. Something in my chest contracts painfully at the thought, but I try with all my might to ignore it. I'm doing this for James, not for myself.

"Ms Bell?" Principal Lexington pulls me out of my thoughts, and it takes me a moment to remember his question.

I shake my head. "Absolutely not, sir. I really only think about the well-being of the school. He supported us, and now he should support his team again. We can't afford such a crushing defeat as last Friday again if we don't want to lose our reputation."

I hit the bull's eye with that. Lexington's gray eyes flash, his shoulders suddenly tense.

"I see." He nods, and I involuntarily hold my breath. Mr. Beaufort is allowed to end his work on the organizing committee early and play lacrosse again." Relief spreads through me and also anticipation of James' reaction when I tell him the news. I smile gratefully, but Lexington raises an admonishing finger. "But not until next week, when the celebration has taken place. I'm not going to risk him coming up with anything to expose our school again."

My smile slips only minimally. "Of course, sir."

"And keep it all to yourself for now." He picks up the receiver of his phone, presses a button and then growls in: "Please bring Coach Freeman into my office."

Undecided, I remain in my chair. I don't know if I'm dismissed or if Principal Lexington wants to discuss something with me, but when he looks up, frowns and then makes a waving hand gesture, I assume that this is my signal to leave the room.

I wasn't exaggerating when I said to Lexington that we're going to take Maxton Hall events to a new level with the Halloween party. When the day finally arrives, we complete the final preparations and the guests arrive one by one, it is as if a huge boulder falls from my heart. The party is a success. More than that, it's even better than I hoped.

The decorations that Jessalyn and Camille have organized look beautiful. In the entrance area of Weston Hall, they have hung ornate vintage picture frames with old family portraits as well as several huge mirrors that are illuminated from different angles. Transparent black tablecloths and lace blankets adorn the buffet and the tables that we have set up around the dance floor for the guests. A thin layer of cobwebs is stretched all over the room, as well as more than fifty fairy lights that create a flickering glow with their candle-like light bulbs. We decided not to turn on the chandeliers and instead placed large silver candlesticks on the tables and on the windowsills, which don't give much light, but make the atmosphere all the more spooky and mysterious.

In the meantime, the hall is well filled, and almost all tables are occupied. Rector Lexington is giving the official welcome speech, which Lin, I and the rest of the team watch from the edge of the buffet. When he praises us for the good organization, Camille takes a step forward and waves to the audience as if she were a queen. Lin and I look at each other and try unsuccessfully to suppress our grins.

However, I have to admit that today we all look like queens and kings. While I'm wearing the dress from the Beaufort archive, Camille is wrapped in an apricot gown that perfectly matches her fair complexion. Jessalyn is wearing a sweeping pink dress and Lin is wearing one in exactly the same royal blue that is also the official color of the school and which makes me wonder if she intended that. The boys also look fabulous. Doug wears a simple sand-colored suit that has the same cut as the one James is in on the

poster. And Kieran ... Kieran, with his top hat, black suit, jacquard waistcoat underneath, and beige scarf, looks as if he actually came from another era.

When Principal Lexington finally thanks us, he raises his top hat and bows slightly. This time I avoid looking at Lin – I wouldn't be able to hold back the laughter anymore.

I'm totally excited. I don't know if it's because everything has gone well so far and the party is already looking like a success, or because I'm afraid that something unpredictable will happen. Nervously, I let my gaze wander around the room.

"He's coming," Lin whispers in my ear.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I reply just as quietly.

That's a lie. I know exactly what she's talking about.

James has not yet shown up. His friends and Lydia have not yet shown up either, but his parents, who are part of the parents' board, have. I'm painfully aware of his absence, and while I don't want to be distracted by it, it feels like an important part of the party is missing – after all, just like us, he's worked hard to make it a success.

After Lexington's speech, the hall erupts in applause, and we separate to take our respective positions. While I stand with Lin with the caterers to keep an eye on the buffet, I watch as Jessalyn, Camille, Doug and Kieran position themselves on the dance floor together with a few members of the theater group. The music starts, and the five couples perform a series of steps in formation that look incredibly complicated to me. Suddenly I'm glad that my argument that someone has to keep an eye on the guests has convinced me and that I don't have to take part in this dance.

The front couple consists of Kieran and a girl from the theatre group whom I don't know. They lead the others, walk across the dance floor and separate at the end, so that boys and girls split into two rows. They walk diagonally past each other and walk a lap before meeting in the middle and facing each other again. All the attention in the room is on them, the guests watch their dance as if spellbound.

Just at this moment, the huge double wing door of Weston Hall opens. A few people turn in the direction of the entrance, which causes Kieran and his partner to stop dancing for a moment. Frowning, I look at the door. My heart leaps.

James and his gang enter the hall, one prettier than the other. James is wearing the Beaufort suit, but the others have also dressed up – no silk scarf

and no button are in the wrong place. Lydia wears a beautiful silver-colored dress and an artful hairstyle, for which she must have had to sit quietly for hours. They all look perfect – as if they had come out of a Victorian movie. As they head past the dance floor towards the buffet, you can clearly see from their faces what they think of this party. Cyril wrinkles his nose, while Wren's cheeks are reddened and suggest that he has already had a drink before he came here. Kesh's black eyes wander unimpressed through the room and over the guests. When he sees me, his expression darkens, and he immediately puts a little more distance between himself and Alistair. It looks like it's a reflex, and next to him, Alistair frowns angrily.

James comes up to me, and I literally soak up the sight of him. Although I've seen him in this suit on countless posters in the last few weeks, reality takes my breath away – just like the first time I did in London. When he finally stops in front of me, my heart beats fast and irregularly.

"And? How's it going?" he asks, a slightly mocking smile around the corners of his mouth. He just acts as if he wasn't just over an hour late for our party.

"It's going fabulously," Lin answers for me. Apparently, I stared at James a little too long.

James nods. "That's good."

"I hope it will be better than the last celebration. Otherwise we'll leave right away," Cyril grumbles.

"Don't pretend you're too good for our parties," Lin says between clenched teeth. I look at her in surprise.

"I don't just pretend."

At his words, an angry blush shoots into Lin's cheeks. "You are really —"

"Hey. Peace, people." James' voice is low but decisive. He gives Cyril a look, whereupon he turns away from Lin and instead goes to Wren, who has come to a stop a little away from us and has punch poured into a glass.

A word from James is enough and someone like Cyril Vega falls silent. Sometimes it still seems uncanny to me what power James has at this school.

As if nothing had happened, he turns to the buffet and takes one of the appetizers. He holds it in front of his nose and looks at it carefully before

shoving it into his mouth. After swallowing it, he says to me, "Much better than last time."

I roll my eyes. "You suggested the caterer yourself."

He grins at me and then lets his gaze wander over me. I warm as I see his expression change and the mocking smile turn into something more delicate, more honest – a smile that seems to be meant only for me. "You look very handsome."

Something flutters in my stomach and I swallow hard. "You've seen me in that dress already."

"That doesn't change the fact that you look beautiful in it."

"Thank you very much. You look very handsome, too." I smooth the dress, although there is nothing to smooth out at all, when James suddenly stands in front of me and bows slightly, his hand stretched out with the inner surface facing upwards. I turn to his friends, but they seem to be busy pouring alcohol from a hip flask into their glasses unnoticed. Only Lydia looks at her brother with a strange expression in her eyes. I turn back to James.

"What are you doing?" I ask with hot cheeks.

"Would you do me the honour of dancing with me?"

I suppress myself from laughing. "There's a reason I didn't take part in the opening dance or the rehearsals for it, James. I can't dance—at least not like that."

"It was considered very rude at the time to refuse the offer to dance, Ruby Bell."

"Then please forgive me for my rudeness. Unfortunately, I have to take care of the buffet."

James straightens up and takes two steps to Lin. He whispers something in her ear that makes her laugh. Then she nods and makes a shooing movement with her hand. James comes back to me and offers me his arm. "Lin says she can take over for a moment."

I hesitate for a moment, but then hook up with him. While I give Lin an angry look over her shoulder, which she comments on with an apologetic shrug, James leads me towards the dance floor. I didn't even realize that the opening dance had come to an end and more and more couples in Victorian robes had entered the dance floor. When I look around now, it really looks like a journey through time lies behind us.

Quietly, the orchestra begins a new song, a gentle but rhythmic melody that slowly fills the entire hall. James takes my hand in his and puts his other hand on my back. He takes me a few steps to the side, rocks us back and forth, takes two steps back and one to the left, while I follow him, staring only at our feet – or rather at the sweeping skirt of the dress.

"Don't look down," he says quietly.

With a heavy heart I look up. James looks like he's done nothing but dance at balls since he was born. Which is probably even true. I wish I had joined the rehearsals or at least watched a few tutorials online and practiced with Ember.

Suddenly, James lowers his head until his mouth remains close to my ear. "Relax," he murmurs.

Easier said than done. Nevertheless, I try. I try to loosen the tension of my arms and no longer pay so much attention to doing all the steps correctly. I let myself go – just like I imagined when we tried on these costumes for the first time.

James catches me. He gently guides me across the dance floor, and I feel as if I am floating. I wonder if we'll ever have the opportunity to dance like that again. What will happen if I tell him that from now on he is no longer forced to attend our meetings.

Although I don't want it at all, I suddenly feel a weight on my chest. I try to ignore it, but it gets more and more overwhelming the longer I think about what will be between James and me after this evening.

"What's the matter?" he asks abruptly, inspecting my face with narrowed eyes.

"I have something to tell you."

James' turquoise blue gaze is on me, waiting and patient, even if I can see a spark of suspicion in it.

"I've been thinking about what you told me on my birthday. That you only have your last year of school, and then—" I clear my throat and feel that James is suddenly tense. "Well, at any rate, I've talked to Principal Lexington. We think it's about time for you to take part in training again."

His movements falter for a moment, then he continues dancing as if he had rehearsed a choreography.

"What?" he croaks. His voice has become quite hoarse. She is always what betrays him. His gaze remains hard, his posture straight and his

movements confident – but his voice never joins in. If something touches James, you can tell it immediately. This is also the case now.

"I think you've really done a great job in the team. That can reward Lexington." With my relaxed tone, I actually wanted to make the mood between us less charged, but the opposite happens. James's eyes darken, and the next moment he pulls me close to him – tighter than would have been appropriate in the Victorian era. But the dance floor is full, and all the visitors seem to be busy with themselves, so no one takes notice of us. About us and the fact that James takes my breath away with his intense gaze.

Again he clears his voice. "You—"

Suddenly the fairy lights go out. All at once. A few people in the orchestra make a mistake, crooked notes echo throughout the hall. The glow of the candlesticks is the only source of light in the entire hall.

"James, I swear to you, if this is one of your pranks, I will—" I hiss.

"It's not," he interrupts me. I can barely see his face, but he looks just as surprised as I do. Finally, he curses quietly. "We have to go to the power distributor immediately. The orchestra cannot continue to play like this. The mood in the cellar is about to begin."

I nod, and James clasps my hand tighter. Together we make our way between the irritated people on the dance floor, almost stepping on the hem of my dress. When we arrive outside in the hallway, I breathe a sigh of relief. James lets go of my hand as we go down the stairs to the basement, and I cling to the banister. I try not to think about what it means that I am sorely missing the feeling of his warm skin right now. It is pitch dark in the basement. James digs out his cell phone and turns on the flashlight to illuminate the hallway.

"So cold," I murmur, rubbing my upper arms. "And creepy." I have the feeling that a clown or monster or a cross between the two could jump out from behind a corner at any second.

James doesn't answer, but goes straight to a large box on the left side of the hallway.

"Actually, I should be alarmed that you know so much about the location of the power distributor."

James smiles boldly. He opens the box with the master key on his keychain, then takes a step to the side so that we can both look inside. Two fuses have blown, and when James pushes the switches up, the relieved

exclamations of the guests reach us from afar. In the next second, the light down here comes back on with a soft click of the neon tubes. James closes the power box again, and immediately I turn around on my heel. I can't get out of this basement fast enough.

I gather the skirt of my dress and climb the stairs. I'm almost there, when James stops behind me and says, "Wait." I turn to him and look at him questioningly.

"Did you really think I'd pull off something like that again?" He sounds seriously surprised, as if he can't believe that I expected this from him.

But if I'm honest, then ... I did.

I don't know what that is between James and me. And even though we've gotten closer in recent weeks, that doesn't mean I trust him. Too much has happened in the past for that, and I can still hear his and Lydia's warning words too clearly in my ears for that. I promised Lin to be careful, and I'm sticking to that.

"For a millisecond, perhaps," I reply meekly.

"I would never do that again, Ruby. Not after I know how much work you put into these events and how much they mean to you."

It feels like someone is pressing on my chest with two hands to make it difficult for me to breathe. "I'm sorry," I say quietly. "I guess I was just scared. That it would be like it was at the beginning of the school year."

James immediately shakes his head. "No."

He goes up a notch, and now we are exactly at eye level. His face is so close to mine that I see small blue crystals in his eyes, as well as the dark border around his iris.

I can't imagine what it will be like when I don't see James at our meetings every other day. Just the thought of it constricts my throat. Is there still a reason for him to spend time with me? He will train and be with his friends much more often than he has had recently. Will he realize how much he missed it? How much more fun does he have when he can spend his Saturday night drinking and partying instead of writing news with me about the political situation in the UK or my new favorite manga?

Will he realize how little our worlds fit together in reality?

I've enjoyed the last few weeks so much and I don't want to lose him under any circumstances. However, I am afraid that I have no say in this matter. It is clear to both of us which world he will ultimately choose.

The pressure on my chest is getting bigger and bigger. Maybe it's easier for me if I take the decision away from him before it's him who hurts me.

"That was probably our last task as teammates," I say, looking him firmly in the eye. My heart beats like crazy. If he gets any closer, he can certainly hear it.

"That's right," James replies quietly.

For a while, we just look at each other. Then we breathe in at the same time, as if we want to say something, but we both pause. The mood between us is so charged, and my pulse is so fast, that I can't stand it for a second longer. I do the first thing that comes to mind: I hold out my hand to James.

"It was very nice to work with you," I say as formally as possible.

At first, James seems surprised. Then an emotion enters his turquoise blue eyes that I have seen in it before, but have never been able to classify. Now I know what it is: longing.

He grabs my hand and holds it gently. "That sounds like you're saying goodbye to me."

The moment his words reach me, I understand that he is right. And at the same time, I realize that I don't want that at all. I don't want to say goodbye to him. Instead, I want to continue to have the opportunity to talk to James. To tell him even more about me and to listen when he confides things to me.

I want to know everything about you.

The thought comes over me suddenly and violently, and in my stomach spreads the same longing that I can see in his eyes. It is scorching hot, almost desperate, flows through my veins and makes me close my fingers even tighter around his. I don't know what's happening to me, but... my knees feel soft, and his hand is so warm in mine. I wonder how it would feel in other places on my body. I want more than this mere touch. More from him.

"James—"

"Yes," he murmurs again. He sounds just as confused, just as breathless as I am.

In the next second, he pulls me forward until I fall against him.

He looks me in the eye for a split second. Then he pushes his hand into my neck and grasps him tightly.

The next moment he presses his lips to mine.

I can't think anymore. My head turns off, there are no more rational thoughts, but only the scorching heat that chases through my entire body. I wrap both arms around his neck and bury my hands in his hair. He begins to move his mouth on mine.

James kisses exactly the way he moves and behaves: confident and proud. He knows exactly what he has to do, knows exactly how to touch me to ignite the heat into a fire. He enters my mouth with his tongue, without hesitation and not a bit shyly, and plays around mine until I feel like my knees could give way at any moment. But even if that were to happen, he would be there to catch me. His arm is tightly wrapped around me, and he holds me close to him. I can feel his body through the fabric of my bulky dress, but it's not enough. I need more.

I moan softly and slide my hands to his shoulders, then back to his neck and into the neckline of his shirt. His skin is warm and velvety, and everything in me calls for more, more, more.

I want more from him. Undress him, here, on this staircase in the middle of the school. I wouldn't care if someone came and caught us now. For me, the only thing that counts is James, his mouth on my lips, my jaw, my neck. He pulls my skin between his teeth until it pinches slightly, but I wish he would apply even more pressure. I want him to leave marks on my body so that in a few hours I can see that this really happened and was not an imagination.

"Ruby—" I thought I knew all the timbres of his voice. But this one is new. That's what he sounds like after he kisses me for the mind. He embraces my face and looks at me. His thumbs run over my cheeks. My jaw. My lips. Cheeks again. "Ruby."

I lean forward and put my mouth on his. A painful pull spreads through my abdomen and continues to work its way up until I find it difficult to breathe. Now I understand why he whispers my name all the time. I want to do exactly the same. James, James. Again and again James.

"James," a commanding voice sounds above us.

We jump apart. I step on the hem of my skirt and lose my balance, but James reaches forward and grabs my waist. He waits until I hold on to the banister. Then he immediately lets go of me and looks up past me. I follow his gaze.

Mortimer Beaufort stands at the top of the stairs, both hands clasped behind his back, watching us with dark eyes. My heart leaps.

"Your mother is looking for you."

James arches his back and nods curtly. "I'll be right there."

Mr Beaufort's brows lift slightly. "She's not looking for you right now, she's looking for you now."

James stiffens. I reach out and gently touch him on the arm, hoping that his father can't see it. James takes my hand in his and looks at our intertwined fingers. I hear him sigh softly. Then he raises my hand to his mouth and presses a light kiss on it.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs, and I can feel the words on the back of my hand. The next moment, he carefully pushes past me and goes up the stairs to his father, who is waiting for him with stiff shoulders and an ice-cold look. When James arrives at his place, he grabs him by the shoulder and maneuvers him back into the hall, while I stop on the stairs, feeling my hot cheeks and wondering what he apologized for.

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James

"I told you to keep your hands off this girl."

I stare out the window. The dark fields, together with the now almost completely bare trees, blur into a single dark mass. That's how my inside feels at this moment. I'm cold and hot at the same time, my palms are sticky and my throat is dry. I feel sick, but the opposite should be the case.

I wish I could go back to Ruby, to her beautiful mouth and the feeling she made me. In my mind, I still hold her in my arms, enjoy how she buries her hands in my hair and gently bites my lip.

If we hadn't been interrupted, I would have done a lot more than just kiss her.

"I'll talk to you," my father repeats. He will certainly throw his glass through the car in a moment. Telling Percy that I was going home with my parents was the stupidest idea I've had in a long time.

"James, darling, we only want the best for you," my mother adds more diplomatically. I can't look at any of them. When I do, the anger boils up in me, and I don't know if I can still switch to draught.

Why did this have to happen today of all days? Why did my father have to catch me with Ruby at that very second?

"We definitely didn't imagine a scholarship holder from a middle-class background and with a tragic family history for you," Mum continues. I turn my head and stare at her. I want to ask how the hell she knows that about Ruby, but it doesn't really surprise me. Actually, nothing surprises me at all in this family anymore.

"You deserve better, darling. Someone like Elaine Ellington. I heard you get along well—why don't you invite her to our house?" My mother's voice is calm and soothing. She desperately wants to mend the mood between me and Dad, but it's long too late for that.

"Elaine and I—it'll never work, mother." Besides, I'm pretty sure that she dropped out of her studies and is trying to hide it from everyone. She's no better than Ruby just because she comes from a family with blue blood.

Ruby works harder than anyone else for what she wants. She is intelligent, a good person and ... beautiful. A terrific kisser. An even better listener.

As if by itself, it reappears in my head. The memory of her mouth is the only thing that helps me to survive this car ride. I wish we had had more time. The few minutes with her were definitely not enough for me.

"You're embarrassing our family if you get involved with a gold digger like her," Vater continues. "I can't believe you're acting like that. We've brought you up better."

Try as I might, I can no longer ignore him. Not when he talks about Ruby like that. Boiling hot rage rises in me, and I look at my father angrily.

My mother gasps indignantly, Lydia next to me stiffens. She grabs my hand, but I tear it away. She's allowed to sleep with her teacher, but I can't even spend time with the person I like without being immediately confronted?

The car stops, and we unbuckle ourselves. I wait until Lydia and Mum get out, then I follow them. My father is close behind me, and before I can even take two steps, he holds me back by the shoulder and turns me to him. He grabs me firmly by the collar and shakes me.

"What do you think of forbidding me to speak," he growls, pushing me away so jerkily that I stagger back. The next moment he swings out and hits me in the face with the back of his hand. Pain shoots through my cheek, and for a few seconds I can't see anything but the colorful dots that have formed in front of my eyes. A metallic taste spreads through my mouth.

"God, Dad!" shouts Lydia and runs to me. She wraps an arm around my back and holds me tight before I commit a stupid thing and fight back. How I would like to do that: just fight back. To give him the same pain he has been inflicting on me since I was a child.

My mum takes Dad by the arm. He snatches himself from her grip and turns around to stomp into the house. After he's gone, she looks at me regretfully. "That's what happens when you mess with rabble, James." Then she lifts up her sweeping skirt to hurry after Father. I look after them and try to suppress the anger, which slowly but surely grows into a hatred that I don't want to feel. I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and then look at the blood on my skin as if it came from someone else.

Lydia stands in front of me and grabs me by the shoulders. "James. Is she really worth the stress?" she asks urgently.

I look at her, far too agitated to really think about her question. "Take care of your own shit," I growl, tearing myself away from her touch. I turn around and walk across the courtyard back to the entrance gate of our property. As I walk, I dig my cell phone out of my pocket and dial Wren's number.

I urgently need distraction.

Only after my third drink does the anger gradually begin to subside. I lean against a wall in Wren's parents' salon, drink Scotch from a crystal glass and let the booming music gradually silence my thoughts.

"Look at me. The prodigal son has returned," Cyril's voice sounds behind me. I turn around and see him walking towards me with outstretched arms and a mocking grin. Just like the rest of us, he has gotten rid of half of his costume, so that he only wears the high-waisted pants and the white shirt.

"What does the honor give us?" he asks. He wants to say something else, but then he sees my mouth and lets the air escape, whistling. "That looks bad, man."

I don't answer, but downpour the rest of my drink. Although I'm used to alcohol, my cheeks already feel numb.

"Leave him alone, Cy," Wren shouts from the sofa. Close to him sits a blonde girl who runs her hand up and down her thigh. She looks familiar to me, and when she lifts her head from his shoulder, I know why. Camille. My last stand was that she has something with Kesh, not with Wren, but it's not unusual for something like that to happen with us.

"What's wrong with you, Beaufort?" Cyril asks, wrapping an arm around my shoulder and maneuvering me to one of the sofas. I let myself fall on it and rub my aching face while Cyril pours me another glass and then holds it out. "James, with whom I grew up, doesn't put up with anyone. He won't let himself be banished from the team, and he refuses to do the dirty work for others."

The fact that he describes what I've done with the team in the last few weeks as dirty work makes new anger boil up in me, but I'm holding back. Cyril is what he is, and I've already been upset enough tonight. All I want is to get drunk – until I don't feel anything anymore. Neither my father's hand nor Ruby's lips. "I had no choice. You know that."

"," Wren interjects. Amusement flashes in his eyes. "You're just keen on Ruby."

Instead of answering, I take a sip and close my eyes. The stuff Cyril poured me is so strong that it leaves a burning trail from my throat to my stomach.

"Are you serious? You only went along with all this shit because you were into Ruby Bell?" asks Cyril in amazement.

"That's why he's changed so much." Wren doesn't look at me when he says that, but at Camille, whose hair he strokes deliberately.

"He has suck up to her like that. You should have seen him at the last meetings," Camille interjects. She gives me a pitying look. "Or did you just do it so that you could play lacrosse again?"

With the glass in front of my lips, I pause. "How do you know about it?"

"Ruby told us before the party."

Frowning, I look at Wren, who continues to stroke Camille. Is that why he started something with her tonight? To ask them about me?

"I haven't changed at all." My tongue feels heavy as I say this, and the words are low and indistinct.

"Of course you do." Alistair drops onto the sofa to my left. His golden blond hair is completely disheveled, and his cheeks are reddened. Either he's already had a lot of trouble, or he's picked up some guy and comes straight out of Wren's guest room.

"Where have I changed, please?" I reply calmly, trying to convince myself that I don't care what they think of me.

Alistair raises a hand and begins to count. "First, you don't come to our parties anymore or leave before sunrise, which old James Beaufort would never have done. Second, you spend your free time voluntarily with the nerds from the event team – no offense, Camille." She raises her middle finger. "Third, you suddenly don't give a about our deal."

"I didn't come here to listen to this bullshit."

Alistair raises an eyebrow. "That's not bullshit, and you know that."

"Alistair is right. We wanted to enjoy the last school year and really hit the shit again," says Wren. That was the agreement. Carpe Diem, man. Every day, as long as we're still together. Unfortunately, you lost James, who encouraged us to go all out, somewhere along the way, it seems."

I lean back and take another sip, the burning is now almost unbearable. The truth of her words gets through to me, and my stomach cramps.

You are right.

The plan was to make the last year of school the best in my life and to enjoy the time with my friends. With the boys, who are like a second family to me. The plan was not to develop feelings for someone with whom I can't have a future anyway.

I can still taste Ruby on my lips and feel her hands on my body. Unfortunately, this only means that I am still much too sober.

Ruby gave me a feeling that I had never felt before. Namely, that with her by my side, everything is possible. A beautiful, terrible lie. Because in truth, nothing is possible for me. Unlike her, the world is not open to me. It is predestined how my life will go.

Maybe that was exactly what captivated Ruby from the beginning. While she takes her life into her own hands, I am moved back and forth like a pawn. While she is alive, I only exist.

We don't fit together.

I just wish that had been clear to me before I kissed her.

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Ruby

How do you talk to someone you've made out with?

The only other boy I kissed before James was Wren, and I just ignored him at the time and pretended it never happened. That's out of the question with James. I spend much of Sunday lying on my bed staring at his sweater, which is still on my desk. I'd like to message him or call him, but other than can we please do this again? and What does this mean for us now? I can't think of anything to say, and I don't dare to do that. Especially since he and his parents disappeared so abruptly yesterday that I couldn't even say goodbye to him.

In the end, I get on my nerves with the brooding so much that I decide to distract myself and start with the follow-up to the event. Except for the brief power outage at the very beginning, everything went according to plan, and I had an email from Principal Lexington in my inbox this morning praising our team for the good work. I forward the mail to the team mailing list with a few warm words. After that, I grab one of the books my grandparents gave me for my birthday and read the first few chapters. Marking important places and providing them with colorful post-its has always helped me to bring order to my confused thoughts. As I take notes, I fill my head with information and facts, trying to dispel the memory of James' tight grip on my neck and his mouth on mine.

I wonder how many girls he must have kissed to be so good at it.

I wonder how far we would have gone if his father hadn't interrupted us.

I wonder if I'll get the chance to kiss him like that again.

Okay, maybe the book doesn't dispel the memory the way I imagined. But I refuse to let James throw me off my game. And I'm certainly not going to let James steal my mind. I'll keep my sanity. He's mine and won't disappear anywhere just because James released a few butterflies in my stomach.

This afternoon I read almost the entire first half of the book, although that's totally exaggerated. In the evening I am so tired that I fall into bed half dead. Unfortunately, I only dream of James, his dark eyes and the way he whispered my name hoarsely, again and again and again.

The next morning feels like my first day at school. I'm nervous and excited, and my stomach does a somersault as the bus comes to a halt at the bus stop. I wonder what it will be like to see James again. Will he come to me? Or should I go to him? Is that too offensive? Are we going to pretend that nothing happened? Or are we clearly more since Saturday? Thoughts are running over in my head, and I'm annoyed that I didn't just call him yesterday. Then at least I would now know where we stand and how I have to behave. I hate that I'm so insecure.

After I get off the school bus, I make a special effort to straighten my school uniform. No crease must be in the wrong place, my tie must be straight. I carry the bag I got from James over my shoulder. Their weight gives me a strange security. As if it were a confirmation that there really is something between James and me. I run my fingers over the initials on the flap as I look up at the massive iron gate of Maxton Hall.

I can do it. Behave normally. Everything is as usual, I say to myself in my mind, press my back and enter the school grounds.

During the assembly, James is nowhere to be seen. His friends are sitting in the last row, and as I walk past them to the front, I hear Cyril let out a snort. I don't know if it's for me, but a queasy feeling spreads through my stomach. I turn around, and he looks at me coolly. I ignore him.

In the first block I have art, and no matter how hard I try, I just can't concentrate. All I can think about is the fact that after that, I'm going to go to math, which takes place in the same room that James is sitting in at that moment. We have often met in the corridor between lessons, because Mrs. Wakefield almost always overruns her hours.

When the doorbell rings, I try not to get up from my chair too quickly, but judging by the look Alistair gives me from the other side of the room, I only succeed moderately. I start walking in the direction of the main building. The closer I get to the room, the faster my heart beats. Just before I have to turn into the hallway, I stop and straighten my black over-the-knee stockings so that they are at exactly the same height. Then I take a deep breath and go around the corner.

I'm mentally prepared to meet James, but when I spot him in the hallway next to Lydia, my heart skips a beat for a moment. To see him in the school uniform seems strange and familiar at the same time. After a short pause in which I try to calm my pulse, I continue walking. I can simply greet the two of them. Just say hello, nothing more. There is nothing funny about that. That it will be funny is the last thing I want. I have only to look into his eyes to know what is going on. Will I find the same nervousness in it that tormented me all Sunday?

Lydia discovers me first. Barely noticeable, she nudges James with her arm. He mumbles a few words and nods to her. Then he comes up to me. My smile mutates into a grin on its own. He is only a few steps away from me, and I open my mouth to greet him, as ...

... he runs past me.

"Hey," I hear him say behind me. I turn around and see him greet Cyril. They talk briefly, James gesticulates, and Cyril lets out a laugh. The two walk the few meters to their room and then disappear into it without looking back.

A nasty pain spreads through my chest. I remain in place, in the middle of the hallway. I swallow hard. When I look up, there is only Lydia besides me. For a moment it looks as if she wants to say something, but then she also turns around without saying a word and disappears into one of the rooms, while I can't put one foot in front of the other. It's simply impossible for me to move.

I spend the rest of the day as if in a trance. Each lesson seems longer to me than the previous one. I hear the words our teachers say, but I don't understand them and I don't absorb a single one of them. During my lunch break, I just can't manage to go to the cafeteria. Just the idea of seeing James there with his friends, firmly anchored in his world again, turns my stomach. Instead, I sit down in the library and stare out the window.

I just don't know what I did wrong. I can't explain why he behaves like that. I'm racking my brains about it, but I didn't make a mistake. And even if I did, I didn't deserve him to treat me like that. During math, I tried to convince myself that he probably just didn't see me. But when we met in the corridor after the lesson, he passed me again without even looking at me. An unmistakable signal.

Of course, Lin realizes that something is wrong, but I haven't told her about the kiss yet, and now I can't. It feels like there's an open wound in my chest. Everything hurts: when I breathe, when I move, when I speak.

Lin has to take over the team meeting on her own, while I just sit next to her and scribble in my planner. I discover the place where I painted over James' name with extinguishing liquid. No one knows what's underneath, but I run my finger over the white spot and swallow hard.

I didn't imagine our kiss. The way James said my name. How he looked at me. How desperate his touches were. There was something between us. Something big. And even if for some reason he came to the conclusion that the whole thing was a mistake, then he could have just told me. I'm a rational person and know that there are some things that simply don't work. That would have hurt too, but I could have lived with that.

What I can't cope with is the fact that he misbehaves so badly. And the longer I sit in the meeting and stare at his empty seat, the angrier I get. Was it all just a game for him? Did he want to see how far he could take me? Maybe it was also something his friends challenged him to do. Or he just wanted to wrap me around his finger so that I could put in a good word with Lexington. I feel sick just thinking about it. Was everything I've learned about him in the last few weeks nothing but a lie? Was he the James Beaufort I first met all along? Calculating, deceitful and arrogant?

I look out of the window and can see the lacrosse team on the sports field in the distance. My anger rises immeasurably. It devours me from the inside out, and my skin becomes hot and cold at the same time. Unconsciously, I clench my teeth so hard that they grind. It takes me the greatest effort not to let any of the emotional chaos that rages inside me show during the meeting. When it's over, I turn to Lin.

"Is it okay if I leave? I don't feel well."

She looks at me thoughtfully and finally nods slowly. "Of course, I'll take care of everything. We can also talk on the phone later, if you like." It sounds like a cautious offer, and I gratefully shake her shoulder.

I leave the room without saying goodbye to the others. The bag over my shoulder suddenly no longer seems like a gift from a friend, but like a bribe. I can't focus on anything but my disappointment and anger as I stomp through the library and run outside towards the sports field.

I can hear the shouts and roars from afar. Damn lacrosse.

At the edge of the pitch, I come to an abrupt stop and look around with my arms crossed. It doesn't take long for me to discover the royal blue jersey with the white seventeen.

"Beaufort, your girlfriend is here," Wren calls out less than a second later. Even though I can't see his grin through the helmet, I can hear it clearly in his tone.

James turns to the side and sees me standing on the edge of the field. I almost expect him to ignore me again, but then he makes a hand gesture.

"Keep going," he shouts and jogs over to me. When he arrives at my place, he looks at me for the first time that day – at least that's what I think.

"Well." My voice trembles with anger. I don't know that from myself. I'm always composed, never so agitated that I can't control myself. Since when have I been like this? Since when can I no longer approach things rationally, as I used to?

Since James has been in my life, the answer is. I've only been like that since I've known him.

He remains silent. I wait for him to make some kind of emotion, but he doesn't.

"Can you take that thing off?" I ask, pointing to his helmet.

He sighs annoyed, but complies with my request. His hair is sweaty and disheveled, his cheeks reddened. Now that he's right in front of me, I can see a wound on his mouth. It looks as if he has fought himself. Carefully, I raise my hand – it happens all by itself – to touch him, but he flinches back. I clench my hand into a fist and let it fall again discouraged.

"What's wrong with you?" I ask angrily.

His face is completely emotionless when he looks at me. "What's the matter?"

I'm sure my cheeks are just as red as his, and that's only because he's making me so mad. "You're acting like an asshole, that's what's going on."

His brows contract just above his eyes. "Am I doing that?"

"Stop acting so stupid and tell me why you're ignoring me," I demand, quieter, but no less emphatically.

Again, he doesn't say anything and just looks at me as if this conversation bores him to death. I take a step towards him.

"Was this all part of your plan?" I ask him. "Were you just kind enough to me so that you could train again?"

He lets out a snort that almost sounds like a laugh, but all of a sudden he can't stand my gaze anymore. Instead, he looks at the floor, where the tips of our shoes almost touch.

"In case I need to remind you, you kissed me after I dismissed you from the event team. So that really wouldn't have been necessary at that time."

He just continues to remain silent.

"Why are you acting like that?" I ask him, and I hate that my voice trembles. "Is it because of your father? Has he done anything?"

James looks up again, and now his eyes seem to reflect my anger. "If you feel better with it, then feel free to interpret it that way."

It feels like he's punched me in the chest. "You kissed me. Not the other way around. You didn't have to do that if you're so ashamed of it afterwards."

The furrows on his forehead are getting even deeper. "Don't read so much into it. You gave me something, I liked it. End of story."

"You liked it – end of story?" I manage incredulously. I can't believe that the guy standing here in front of me is actually the one I kissed on the stairs on Saturday. That it was his tongue that parted my lips, his touch that made my knees go soft.

Now he just shrugs his shoulders.

"Heavens, James, what's wrong with you," I murmur, shaking my head.

Even though I'm so angry, I wonder where the wound on his mouth came from. Who he fought with. Whether I could have done something about it.

"You could have just told me that the kiss was a mistake," I say as calmly as possible.

"Well, then I'll tell you right now," he replies coolly. "That was a nice thing, but it's really time we went back to before."

I can't believe that he just said that seriously. I feel like I've landed in the wrong movie. Something is terribly wrong here, but I can't stop it anymore. It feels like an avalanche that is unstoppable and sweeps everything around it with it.

"You don't have to maliciously destroy our friendship just because your friends or your parents talk you into something, you know?"

He smiles, but it's more of a grimace and can't be compared to the way he's looked at me in the last few weeks. "You try like a maniac to control everything around you, to correct every flaw you find in others – but it doesn't work that way, Ruby. This has nothing to do with my friends or family. This is me." He puts the flat of his hand on the chest protector. "Horrible and perverse and false. You should begin to get used to the idea."

The anger disappears, and in its place comes despair. It's exactly the same feeling that came over me at the party when I imagined having to say goodbye to him. But now it is much more violent and hurts much more. Because his farewell to me seems final.

I make one last attempt and raise my hand, place it on his cheek. I gently stroke his skin with my thumb. "You are neither horrible, nor perverse, nor false."

He lets out a bitter laugh and shakes his head.

"I don't want to lose you," I whisper, summoning up all the remaining courage I can find within myself.

He puts his hand over mine on his cheek. He closes his eyes, and it almost looks as if this moment is causing him physical agony. His fingers gently stroke the back of my hand, and a tingling sensation spreads through me. "You can't lose anything that doesn't belong to you at all, Ruby Bell."

He pulls my hand off his face. Then he opens his eyes again and looks at me. It's the same look as two months ago – cold and distant. All of a sudden, I feel hollowed out. An icy coldness spreads through me as the meaning of his words reaches me.

"Beaufort!" shouts Wren across the sports field. "You're missing your first training session in weeks. Come now, man!"

He wants to turn around, I can see that in the way his body tenses. It is as if he is connected to his friends by an invisible wire.

"Are we done here? The boys are waiting," he says emotionlessly, pointing over his shoulder with his thumb.

Never in my life have I felt so humiliated. Adrenaline rushes through my body as pain, despair, and anger mingle. I have to clench my hands into fists so as not to bump them against his chest. I want it more than anything, but he's so cold and dismissive that I don't want to give him the satisfaction of losing his composure in front of his friends.

"Yes. We're done," I say as dignified as possible.

James doesn't care about my dignity. He turns around before I finish the sentence and runs back to his friends. My pride disappears a little more with each of his steps, until I can hardly manage to stand upright.

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Ruby

Green – Important!

Turquoise – School

Pink – Maxton Hall Events Committee

Purple – Family

Orange – Nutrition and Exercise

If I were to divide my afternoon into colors, it would look like this:

Lila – Crying Me Out at Ember

Lila – Crying Me Out to Mum

Lila – Avoiding Dad so he can't ask me too many questions

Orange – Go for a run with Ember to clear your head

Green – Give James Beaufort the bag back and let him know how much he can lick my ass

A successful list, in my opinion. And if it actually existed, I would have ticked off all but the last one.

For an hour, I tried to write a letter to him with a towel turban on my head. Now I'm still sitting here, surrounded by crumpled leaves, and I decide to give it up. I wanted to write something in which I express my anger and disappointment, but on paper the words suddenly seemed completely irrational to me. I wish I had told him all this on the sports field, but I was far too shocked to be quick-witted.

In front of me on my bulletin board hangs the card that James wrote me on my birthday. The words meant so much to me at the time. I actually believed that he was serious. Now everything that happened between us seems to me as if I had imagined it. As if everything – our phone calls, the moments when we laughed together, our kiss – had sprung from a blooming imagination.

Suddenly I can't look at the map for a moment longer. I tear it off the bulletin board, take a black pen and write the first thing on it that seems to make the most sense to me at this second:

James

Fuck you.

–Ruby

I look at my work with my head tilted. I wrote the words right under his, and it hurts to look at them and realize that we've actually gotten to that point.

"Ruby?" Ember sticks her head into my room. "Dad made dinner. Are you coming?"

I nod, unable to take my eyes off the map.

Ember comes to me and looks over my shoulder. She sighs and strokes my arm. Then, without another word, she pulls the box out from behind my door and helps me put the bag back in it. My heart bleeds as I put the card on it and finally seal the box.

"I can take him to the post office tomorrow on the way to school," she says quietly.

A lump has formed in my throat that seems to be getting bigger and bigger. "Thank you," I say hoarsely as Ember hugs me.

Ember takes the box to her room so I don't have to see it. I'm grateful to her that she didn't say anything about James' sweater, even though I clearly saw her gaze lingering on it for a moment. I didn't have the heart to put it in the box. And I refuse to think about what that means.

After dinner, I lie down on my bed and stare at the ceiling. This one evening and this one night I give myself to mourn what has been between me and James. To mourn my friend I lost without knowing why.

But nothing more. I am still me, and I have sworn to myself that I will not let anything or anyone distract me from my path. From tomorrow everything will be the same as the last two years. I will focus on school and go to the event meetings. I will have lunch with Lin in the cafeteria. I will prepare for the job interviews in Oxford.

I will again live in a world where James Beaufort and the rest of Maxton Hall do not know my name.

James

Ruby is insanely good at avoiding me. It's as if she had memorized my timetable so that she wouldn't meet me anywhere. When our paths do cross, she walks past me with firm steps, without even looking at me, both hands tightly clasped around the straps of her green backpack. Every time I see her, I think of her card, which is folded up in my wallet and which I sometimes take out when the longing for Ruby becomes unbearable once again.

Just like now.

When will this finally stop? When will I be able to think of anything other than Ruby again? Especially since now is the worst possible time to be distracted. The Thinking Skills Assessment takes place on Thursday, and if I want to have even the spark of a chance in Oxford, I have to do outstandingly.

Unfortunately, I can't remember anything that Lydia and I have discussed in the last half hour. We printed out all the exercises there were to find, spread them out in Lydia's room and worked through them one by one until our heads were spinning. Lydia is just closing the book she leafed through in search of an answer and leaning on her elbow. She lies on her stomach, has her legs bent and lets her feet tap in time with the music that plays softly in the background. As she stretches out her hand, I wordlessly hand her the bag of chips from which we have been taking turns helping ourselves for over an hour.

Then I run my finger over the edge of Ruby's map again. In the meantime, it is already quite blunt, the corners full of creases. I'm just about to put her away again, when Lydia crawls a little closer to me on her stomach.

"What's that?" she asks abruptly, grabbing the card faster than I can react. I want to get it back immediately, but Lydia has already unfolded it and is reading my and Ruby's words. Her eyes darken, and when she looks up, I can see pity in her eyes. "James—"

I snatch the card out of her hand and put it back in my wallet, which I then slide into my pocket. Then I open the book that Lydia has just put aside again and start reading. However, the letters don't make sense, no matter how much I concentrate.

Why the hell is my heart beating so fast? And why do I feel so caught?

"James."

I look up from the book. "What?"

Lydia sits cross-legged and begins to twist her hair into a messy bun, which she then fastens high on her head with a hair tie. "What's the deal with this card?"

I shrug my shoulders. "Nothing."

Lydia raises an eyebrow and casts a meaningful glance at my trouser pocket, in which my wallet and the card have just disappeared. Then she looks at me again, warmer this time. "What happened between you and Ruby?"

My shoulders stiffen. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Lydia snorts softly and shakes her head. "I know exactly how you're feeling right now," she says after we've been silent for a while. "You don't have to pretend in front of me that the Ruby thing doesn't bother you. I have eyes in my head, James. I notice when you're feeling bad."

I stare at the book again. Lydia is right – I'm miserable. Everything in my life is a disaster, and there's nothing I can do about it.

"What weighs on me," I say, "is the fact that I have a shitty family and find the thought of my own future repulsive."

I feel Lydia's compassionate gaze on me, but I can't look at her. I'm afraid that I'll lose the last bit of self-control I have, and I can't afford that. Not in this house, where my father has eyes and ears everywhere and I've never really felt safe.

"Ruby is not well either. Why—"

"I only kept an eye on Ruby because of you," I interrupt. "That was all it was." The words scratch in my throat and feel unspeakably wrong as I say them. I can't breathe properly, and Lydia's gaze is so insistent that the weight on my chest becomes heavier and heavier. I have to blink against the unfamiliar burning in my eyes and swallow hard.

"Oh, James," she whispers and grasps my cold hand, rubbing the back of my hand with her thumb. I can't remember the last time we touched each other in this way. I look at her pale fingers for a while, which clasp mine. Somehow, with this simple gesture, she manages to make it a little easier for me to breathe again.

"I know what it's like when you can't have someone, even though you know they're the only one with whom this life would be somewhat

bearable," Lydia says abruptly, squeezing my hand tightly. "When I met Graham, I knew immediately that this was something special between us."

I look up jerkily. Lydia calmly returns my gaze. So far, she hasn't talked to me about Sutton's thing once and vehemently blocked any attempts by me to get her to talk. The fact that she does it now tells me how bad I am at hiding my despair from her, and how sorry I really have to be for her. Nevertheless, I am grateful to her for the change of subject.

"How did you meet in the first place? What's that going on at school?"

She shakes her head. For a moment, it looks as if she is looking for the right words. I can see that it takes them a lot of effort to tell the story. After all, she has kept this secret forever.

"It was over two years ago, shortly after the Gregg affair," Lydia begins, and immediately hot anger flares up in my stomach. Gregg Fletcher had pretended to be Lydia's boyfriend for several months, when in fact he was an editor at a local newspaper. He took advantage of Lydia and broke her heart just to get information about our family and our company.

I grip Lydia's hand tighter. "I didn't feel like it then," she continues. "On . . . nothing. I've totally withdrawn."

"I remember." The media pounced on our family like hyenas in the wake of Fletcher's revelations. It was a bad time, and we all had to find a way to cope with it. Mine was coke and too much alcohol, hers a grim silence and a wall that nothing could penetrate.

"One evening I was just desperate. I had no one to talk to, but I would have had to do so urgently. I was fifteen years old and had been deflowered by a reporter because I was so naïve as to believe that there could really be someone out there who cared about me. Not only for Beaufort. I felt terribly. I blamed myself so badly and wondered how I could have been so stupid."

She takes a short break and takes a deep breath.

"That evening, I created an anonymous profile on Tumblr. I just wanted to let it all out without any consequences. My first post was a bunch of confused words. I just wrote down how I felt and that I wished I could be someone completely different. A day later, I had a very nice message in my mailbox."

I stare at her. "But not from Sutton, right?"

She nods. "It wasn't much at all, just a few nice, sympathetic words, but in this situation they meant the whole world to me." A slight smile

comes to her lips. "After that, we started writing to each other regularly. We talked about all kinds of things, confided in each other things that we hadn't told anyone before. He told me about Oxford and the crushing competitive pressure under which he was gradually giving in. I am afraid of my broken heart and my fears for the future. We encouraged each other. Of course, I never told him my real name, and I didn't know his either. Still, what I shared with him felt more real than anything else in my life."

"That's crazy."

Again she nods. "I know."

"And then?" I ask.

"After six months, we spoke to each other on the phone for the first time. For a whole five hours. My ear hurt half the night because I pressed the receiver against it so hard. After that, we talked more and more."

I remember the night of Ruby's birthday, when we also talked on the phone for half an eternity. I drove home from Wren's party just to keep hearing her voice.

"That's why you threw me out of your room so often," I say with a smile. "And then you met at some point?"

"It took me over a year to dare to meet Graham. We went for a coffee after he graduated."

It's just unimaginable that all this passed me by.

"And when did you ... "Have you come together?" I ask, realizing at the same time that I sound like a sixth-grader.

"We were never really together, but we spent a lot of time together during the summer holidays." She clears her throat. "When Graham got the job at Maxton Hall, he put an end to the matter between us. Right away. He said we could continue to be online friends, just like before, but nothing more." A suspicious gleam enters her eyes. "That was okay with me, you know? Better that way than losing it completely. When he had no prospect of being taken on at the end of the school year, I regained hope. The whole thing started all over again until he was informed in the middle of the summer that a position had become available. The same heartache from the beginning. Only this time he didn't even want to have anything to do with me online. He completely cut me out of his life because he thought it would be better for both of us."

I think for a moment about everything she just told me. "What was that at the beginning of the school year?" I ask. "The day Ruby saw you

together?"

She swallows hard. "A kind of relapse."

I nod slowly. I knew that Sutton was more than a nice pastime for Lydia. She has suffered too much in the last few weeks and defended him too much when I dropped a remark about him. However, I never expected that the two could have a two-year history together. And that it was so serious between them.

"Only one more year, and then you could—" I don't know myself what I'm proposing to her. Even if Lydia no longer goes to Maxton Hall College, a relationship with a former teacher would destroy her reputation once and for all. I can imagine what our parents would say about it.

"I'm not stupid, James. I know Graham and I don't stand a chance." She withdraws her hand from me and reaches for the bag of chips as if she hadn't exactly confided her biggest secret to me. She shoves a handful into her mouth, her gaze transfigured on the cover of her bed.

It hurts me to see her like this. And above all, it hurts me that I can't help her. Because she's right: there is no future for her and Sutton, just as there is no future for Ruby and me.

"Thank you for telling me," I finally say.

Lydia swallows the chips and then takes a big sip from her water bottle. "Maybe you'll tell me about Ruby someday."

The pressure on my chest, which has slowly disappeared during her story, is suddenly back. I ignore Lydia's searching gaze and draw the next exercise sheet from the pile. "There's nothing to tell."

Lydia's soft sigh reaches my ears as if from far away. The task on paper blurs with the memory of Ruby coming to me on the sports field and the mean words I threw at her. All this runs like a cruel endless loop over and over again in my mind's eye until at some point I can no longer concentrate on the tasks at all and only stare at the wall.

The TSA is doing well. Everyone in my family is so adamant that I can do it, that I don't even want to worry about what will happen if it doesn't.

The week after the TSA is one of the last meetings of the Oxford study group. Ruby sits with Lin at the other end of the room. As always, she doesn't look at me in the last few days, but she also doesn't let it be known that something has happened between us. She behaves exactly as usual,

brings everyone to their knees with her astute argumentation and even manages to leave our tutor speechless once.

It's hard for me not to look at them all the time. Damn hard. As soon as she opens her mouth, I hang on her lips, and the need to kiss her comes over me.

In moments like these, I conjure up the image of my father, remembering the back of his hand hitting my cheek and the pain that pounded in my jaw for days afterward. It wasn't the first time he'd hit me. It doesn't happen often, but it happens often enough – especially when I don't think I live up to the demands of our family.

The fact that Ruby doesn't meet his expectations hurts me, but I'll have to live with it. I was born into a family from which I cannot isolate myself, no matter how much I wish to. I will go to Oxford, and I will inherit Beaufort.

It's time for me to accept that and stop feeling sorry for myself.

"Let's take a look at the second question. James, would you share your thoughts with us?" asks Pippa suddenly. I have no idea what she just said. The only thing I understood was my name.

"Rather reluctantly," I reply and lean back. If I'm honest, I just want to go home. And if I'm completely honest, I only want Ruby, but that's not possible.

The fact that she sits in this room without looking at me is tantamount to torture. It's the only thing that motivated me. Now there's only lacrosse, otherwise I'm not attached to anything anymore. Even the parties with my friends can't distract me from the fact that everything in my life feels pointless right now. The clock is ticking faster and faster until I graduate, and I just don't know how to stop it all. How I can make it so that my existence doesn't seem so dispensable to me.

"If you are invited to the applicant interviews, you have to have an answer ready for every question," says Pippa emphatically and makes an encouraging gesture.

I lift the piece of paper in front of me slightly to make it easier to read the italicized text.

When, if anything, is forgiveness wrong?

I look at the question. For ten seconds. Another ten until my silence becomes uncomfortable and someone in the room clears his throat. A cold shiver runs down my arms and backwards down my back. The paper in my

hand gets heavier and heavier until I have to put it back on the table. It feels like I'm swallowing cement, but I don't have anything in my mouth. Just my inadequate tongue, unable to form words.

"As a rule, forgiveness follows a harmful act," Ruby's voice sounds suddenly. "But if you forgive someone for the pain they've caused you, it doesn't mean they'll just disappear. As long as you still feel the pain, forgiveness is wrong."

I look up. Ruby looks at me blankly, and I want to reach out to her. There are only a few meters between us, but the distance feels so unbridgeable that it makes it difficult for me to breathe.

Pull yourself fucking together, Beaufort.

"If you forgive people too easily, they get the feeling that they can do anything. Thus, the anger of the person to whom evil has been done is the punishment for the offender who desperately desires forgiveness," Lin adds.

Yes, Ruby's anger feels like a punishment I deserve. But still, I wish that she doesn't spend the rest of the school year hating me. She is said to be looking forward to being able to live her dream soon in Oxford.

If anyone deserves that, it's her.

"Forgiveness can never be wrong," I reply quietly. Something flashes in Ruby's piercing green eyes. "Forgiveness is a sign of greatness and strength. If you lose yourself in anger for years and destroy yourself, you're no better than the person who wronged you."

Ruby lets out a contemptuous snort. "Only someone who constantly does wrong to others can say something like that."

"Isn't there this proverb? 'Forgive, but not forget'?" Alistair looks around the group, and Keshav and Wren growl in agreement. "You can forgive someone for their actions, but that doesn't mean that what happened is out of the world. Forgiveness is something obligatory in order to draw a line. Forgetting is something that takes a long time or does not happen at all. And that's okay. Forgiveness helps you to let go and move on."

Lydia to my right straightens up. "It sounds as if forgiveness happens with a snap of the fingers and only forgetting is really exhausting. But you should not forgive everything that has been done to you. If it's really bad, you can't just get rid of it."

"I think so too," Ruby agrees. "If you forgive too quickly, it means you don't take yourself seriously and carelessly push your own pain aside. This is self-destructive behavior. It takes time to recognize when to let go, that's

true, but if you see the decision to forgive as just a simple means to an end, it's wrong."

"Maybe we could distinguish between healthy and unhealthy forgiveness here," Lydia interjects, and Ruby nods. "Unhealthy forgiveness comes too quickly and ensures that you may be treated badly again. But healthy forgiveness only comes after careful consideration. In that case, one thinks enough of oneself not to be treated badly again."

"But forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation," says Wren, who is sitting next to Lydia. I lean forward a little to look at him. He has both hands clasped behind his head and sits deep in his chair. "If the original meaning of forgiveness is the letting go of anger, it is intended for the victim rather than the perpetrator, so he or she can determine for himself or herself the standards by which he or she forgives."

"But there are also unforgivable acts." Kesh spoke softly. Everyone turns to him, but he has his arms crossed and looks as if that was all he wanted to say.

"Can you elaborate a little further, Keshav?" asks Pippa kindly.

"By that I mean murder or something like that – I think it's perfectly okay if the victim's relatives don't forgive. I mean, why should they?"

My neck tingles slightly, and I look at Ruby again almost imperceptibly. Her gaze crosses mine, and the tingling sensation becomes stronger. We are separated by two tables and the space between them, but I want to bridge the distance with a jump, take her face in my hands and kiss her again.

"But that, too, is due to the moral ideas of each person. Everyone has a higher or lower threshold for what they consider unforgivable," says Lydia.

Kesh answers something, but I don't listen anymore. In Ruby's gaze, I can see exactly where her moral threshold lies at this second. What I said to her is unforgivable for her. Her mouth is pressed into a hard line, and under her eyes there are dark circles that must be there for my sake. She would never forgive me, and even though it was clear to me that there was no future for us, it is only at this moment that I realize what that actually means. I'll never get the chance to touch her again. I will never talk to her again. Laugh with her. They kiss.

The realization shakes me to the core. It's as if a deep black hole opens up below me, into which I fall and fall and fall.

I try with all my might to take deep and calm breaths while the rest of the discussion rushes past me. Just like everything else.

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Ruby

I used to always love to dream. In my dreams, the impossible was possible. I could fly and sometimes even do magic, I went to Oxford and traveled around the world as an ambassador. Most of the time, my dreams were vivid and seemed so realistic to me that the next day I went to school hyper-motivated and tried to give more than one hundred percent.

Now I loathe my dreams. James plays the lead role in most of them, and I just want it to stop. I wake up in the middle of the night – not from nightmares, but from a throbbing between my legs because I dreamed of him grabbing me and kissing me. I dream that he offers me physical favors for my silence again and that I don't stop him this time when he unbuttons his shirt. I dream of him leading me into a world where he hasn't cut me out of his life.

This morning I wake up again with hot cheeks and the blanket between my legs. Moaning, I roll onto my back and put an arm over my eyes. It can't go on like this. Somehow I have to manage to drive James out of my subconscious, otherwise I'll go crazy. How am I supposed to forget him when my dreams show me every night what else could have happened between us?

I rub my eyes and reach for my cell phone, which is lying on the bedside table. It's just before six, my alarm clock will ring in ten minutes anyway. Tired, I sit up and go into my mailer. Since yesterday evening, I have received eight new e-mails. I scroll through them slowly to see if there's anything important in them.

When I see who the sender of the last email is, I sit up in bed so quickly that I feel dizzy for a moment.

I have an email from St Hilda's Admissions Officer in my inbox.

With bated breath, I open the message.

Dear Ruby,

I am very pleased to invite you for an interview at St Hilda's College, Oxford. Congratulations on successfully passing the first selection process.

I no longer perceive the text that comes after that. My screeching is so loud that it echoes through the whole house. Ember comes running into my room, and I jump out of bed. It takes me a moment to find my balance, but when I do, I hold the phone in front of her nose. At the same time, I start jumping up and down.

"Oh my God!" she shouts, grabs my hands and then jumps in circles with me. "Oh my God, Ruby!"

Then I run down the stairs so fast that I almost lie on my nose. Dad has already rolled into the hallway with his wheelchair, Mum comes out of the kitchen with wide eyes. I solemnly hold up my cell phone. "I'm invited to the interviews!"

Mum slaps his hands over his mouth, and Dad lets out a shout. Ember wraps her arm around my waist and presses me tightly to her side. "I'm so happy for you! But I don't want you to move away either."

"I'm only invited to the interviews, that doesn't mean I'll be accepted. Besides, Oxford is only two hours away." I'm so excited that I can't stand still. My dream, which had been infinitely far away for years, has now moved a lot closer. I can almost grab it, everything feels so real all at once. My whole body is tingling with energy.

"We all know you're going to rock the interviews," Dad says, and Ember and I have to laugh at his choice of words. "They'll have no choice but to take you."

I grin so broadly that the corners of my mouth start to hurt. But I can't stop either. I haven't been so happy about anything for a long time.

"I'm so proud of you, honey." Mum presses a kiss on the crown of my head and pulls me tight. After she lets go of me, I bend down to Dad, who also hugs me.

"What does that mean exactly?" he asks after I've straightened up again.

I read through the mail, this time to the end. "It says here that I am to arrive at eight next Sunday evening. The interviews will then take place on Mondays and Tuesdays. Wednesday morning is departure."

"Four days in Oxford," whispers Mum, shaking his head. "I knew they'd invite you."

"It says here that I'm going to get free room and board."

"Then we've chosen the right university for you," Dad says, his eyes sparkling happily.

"I know exactly what you're going to wear." Ember grabs me by the hand and pulls me towards the stairs.

"My outfits for Oxford have been fixed since the summer holidays." Actually, even longer, considering that I've had an Oxford-style pinboard on Pinterest for over a year, on which Ember and I are constantly pinning inspirations. I wave to Mum and Dad before Ember pulls me behind him. Still on the stairs I can hear my parents:

"Oxford," whispers Mum.

"Oxford," Dad replies just as quietly.

They sound so happy. I sincerely hope that I have passed the TSA and will also get the interviews over with. I want to continue to make them proud and be the reason why they are so happy. If my family is happy, so am I.

I let Ember drag me into my room and to the wardrobe. While she takes out one outfit after the other and puts them on my bed, I fill out the university re-registration form and confirm that I will participate in the interviews. I then send Lin a screenshot of the email and eagerly await her response.

I still can't quite believe it.

Even if it's only for four days, I'm going to Oxford.

It is pitch dark when we arrive in Oxford on Sunday evening. Nevertheless, my parents, Ember and I decide to take another walk around the campus. St. Hilda's is located at the eastern end of the High Street in Oxford, and we walk along the River Cherwell, which glitters atmospherically in the glow of the lanterns, and between the imposing buildings that do not look run-down despite the weathered gray stone of their facades. On the contrary, with the semi-circular windows with white frames and the small balustrades, they exude the magical charm of old stories that I really want to hear all at some point.

St Hilda's is breathtakingly beautiful. And as I push Dad down the paved path of the campus, Mum and Ember next to us, I feel like I'm

walking straight into a fairy tale. My permanent grin, which I've been wearing since last week, is getting even wider.

"Next year you'll be sitting right there," Dad says suddenly, pointing to the lawn to our left. "A bunch of specialist reading in front of you. On a checked woollen blanket."

"Your ideas are pretty concrete, Dad," I say with a smile.

"Indeed." He nods seriously.

Aside from the beautiful nature of St Hilda's, what I also like about the college is that it's known for its diversity, sense of community, and the respectful way all students treat each other. Everyone is welcome here, regardless of the country and social class. After the time in Maxton Hall, I need that. I want to feel comfortable and not have to hide again. I can't imagine spending the next four years in a strictly conservative college like Balliol, for example.

In addition, St Hilda's has unicorns on its coat of arms.

"I can't believe I'm really here," I whispered. "I'm so lucky."

Ember clicks my tongue. "That's not luck. You've worked hard for it."

She's right. And yet I already feel sick when I think about the interviews that await me in the next few days. I urgently need to prepare myself a bit tonight and look through the notes I made in Pippa's class. I know it by heart for a long time, but I know that I will feel better afterwards.

After we have picked up my room key for the accommodation where I will be staying in the next few days at the porter's lodge and I have said goodbye to my family with a heavy heart, I take my small travel bag and enter the dormitory. From the inside, it's nothing special – blue carpet, bare white walls – but I still have a tingle in my stomach as I climb the stairs to the first floor. Maybe this building will soon be my new home.

My room is at the beginning of the hallway on the left. I take out the key and am about to put it in the lock when I hear someone else enter the hallway behind me. Smiling, I turn around.

My smile dies.

The person I thought was a student has reddish-blond, wind-tousled hair and wears a black tailored coat.

It's James.

"You want to take me in your arms," I blurt out.

He seems at least as surprised as I am. His gaze darkens, and he looks at the key in his hand. He takes three long steps with his small suitcase in tow until he arrives at the room across from mine.

I have the feeling that fate is playing a nasty trick on me right now.

Without saying a word, he opens the door and enters his room. His dark gaze lands on me again briefly, then he closes the door behind him and leaves me in the hallway.

I've had myself under control so well for the last few weeks. I ignored him, even if it hurt, and behaved as if the whole thing had passed me by without a trace. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of seeing how angry and hurt I am. And how much I miss him. But now I feel the anger rising up in me again. I would like to go to his door and kick it in. I want to throw all the words at his head that have been building up in me over the last few weeks.

Actually, I know that there is nothing more to say. He is what he is. I was like a little break for him, and it was unrealistic to think James could become something like a friend to me – or even more than that.

I can't let myself be unsettled by the fact that he's also here. I have a goal, and I will not lose sight of it. I've already come too far for that. Maybe I should just see it as another challenge to overcome on my way to Oxford. And as long as James doesn't get in my way, I can live with the fact that he lives across the street from me. I'm going to do it just like I did at school: pretend he doesn't exist.

Resolutely, I open the room door and enter. The room is minimalist, with a small wooden desk, a white built-in wardrobe and a simple bed. From here you have a view of the courtyard, in the middle of which there is a huge tree. I go to the window to take a closer look at him. Its reddish-brown leaves are scattered on the ground, the whole lawn is full of them. One path leads completely around the grassy area, at the edge of which lanterns and park benches are set up. I do it like Dad – imagine that in a few months I'll be sitting there, a stack of books next to me, my head full of new things to be taught, on a campus that's just perfect.

Even though the thing with James still hurts insanely, it suddenly doesn't seem so bad to me anymore. I'll make it.

Ruby

When I wake up the next morning, I am irritated for a moment by the bare white blanket above me. The mattress also feels weird when I turn around in bed. And it smells very different from my room.

You're in Oxford.

I sit up with a jerk and look around. Then I let out a soft squeak. I grab my phone from the bedside table and skim through my messages. Mum and Dad remind me to have a good breakfast because they know that when I'm really nervous, sometimes I don't have much appetite, and Ember picked out a motivational quote for me that I'd like to put directly into my planner. Kieran wishes me good luck and says that he is sure that I can do it. The last message is from Lin. She took a photo of her room in St. John's that doesn't look much different from mine. I write to her that I am happy to see her in the pub tonight – one of the dates on the calendar that the secretariat sent me in advance by e-mail – and wish her all the best for the interviews.

Then I get up and slowly get ready. My hands are shaking with excitement as I put on my make-up and slip into my outfit.

I chose the cognac-colored corduroy skirt and the white blouse embroidered with subtle flowers months ago and hung them in my closet, especially for this day. I also have my little burgundy bag with me and put on the braided leather bracelet that Ember gave me.

It doesn't match the rest, but you can hardly see it under the long sleeve of the blouse, and as soon as I put it on, I feel like a part of my sister and my family is with me.

In the breakfast room, you can see at first glance who the real students are and who is only here for the interviews. The former go purposefully to the food counter, laugh and talk exuberantly with each other, and I feel the strong desire that in a year's time it will be the same for me as it is for them at this moment. I want to get my coffee without running in circles twice because I can't find the machine, sit down next to my friends at a table and talk to them about the weekend. And I want to give the students who have

come for the interviews an encouraging smile in the hope that they will feel better then.

Last night, all this felt so unreal. Now Oxford seems to be becoming a reality. I eavesdrop on the two girls next to me while they are talking about one of their seminars, and I don't even notice how they catch me listening. I quickly lower my head and stare at my toast, which feels like lead in my stomach after just a few bites.

My schedule says that I should go to the common room after breakfast. When I open the door, I'm surprised at how loud it is in the small room, until I see that there are not only applicants inside, but also older students lounging on the battered sofas, talking loudly and clearly trying to lighten the mood a bit.

I find a free chair next to one of the sofas and sit down on it. A boy my age sits next to him, a book and a stack of index cards on his lap. He smiles at me, but it seems more like a grimace to me. He looks just as tense as I feel. With trembling fingers, I also take out my notes and begin to go through them one last time.

Suddenly I feel a tingling sensation in my neck that spreads over my entire upper body. I raise my head and look at the entrance to the common room. The next moment, I wish I hadn't. James stands there, his hands buried in his trouser pockets and an impenetrable expression on his face.

Please don't see me, don't see me, don't see me...

He discovers me on the chair. His gaze slowly passes over my face, wanders over my outfit and finally lands on the index cards in my hand. The corners of his mouth twitch almost imperceptibly, but then, as if admonishing himself not to smile, his expression hardens again, and he looks around the common room, apparently looking for a free chair.

"Ruby Bell?" a strange voice sounds. One of the older students has risen from the sofa. He is huge – certainly over ninety – has wavy brown hair that is slightly gelled back, and a bright white smile. He's one of those guys who just tried to lighten the mood, and that makes him sympathetic to me right now.

"Here," I croak and get up. My hands are cold and clammy. I wipe them down the hem of my skirt so they get warm again and I can shake his hand without it becoming uncomfortable. I put the cards back in my pocket and get up to go to the door where he's waiting for me.

As I pass James, I crane my chin, determined to ignore him. But he takes me by the hand. His warm fingers gently wrap around my wrist. His thumb strokes the sensitive skin there.

"Good luck," he murmurs. Then he lets go of me and goes to the chair I just vacated.

It takes me a few seconds to collect myself again. My heart is racing, and this time it has nothing to do with me being excited.

The guy who called my name smiles at me and waves me over. "Hi. I'm Jude Sherington. I'll take you to your interview," he explains and nods in the direction of the hallway. I leave the common room without turning around again. In a few minutes, everything will be at stake. In a few minutes it can be decided whether I will study at this university or not.

I touch the spot where James' thumb grazed my wrist. I should concentrate, but I can't forget the feeling of his fingers on my skin all the way to the professor's office.

I would love to get up and walk back and forth a few times to get rid of the tension. But Jude is still there and smiles at me every few minutes. He has led me through countless labyrinthine corridors and now leans silently against the wall while I sit on a chair opposite the office door and wait for it to open. It should now be any second.

Audibly, I let the air escape.

"Nervous?" asks Jude.

What a question. "Uncanny. What was it like for you then?"

"Something like that." He raises a hand and makes it tremble exaggeratedly. I think it's magical that he's so honest.

"But you did it."

"Yep." An encouraging smile appears on his face. "It's not rocket science. You'll be able to do it."

I nod, shrug my shoulders and shake my head – all at the same time. When Jude laughs, I grimace. At that moment, the door opens and a girl comes out of the professor's office. She has red cheeks, and her lips are bloodless. Apparently, I'm not the only one who is completely eaten away by nervousness. Unfortunately, I don't get a chance to ask her how it was, as she disappears without a word. The door to the office closes again, and I look questioningly at Jude, who is still wearing his reassuring smile.

"Don't worry, she'll let you know when you're supposed to come in."

So the waiting starts again. By now, it feels like I've used up all my excitement just by sitting here for so long. After another five minutes, my left foot has fallen asleep, and I move it inconspicuously to stop the tingling. It feels like there are lots of ants dancing in my ankle boot. Again I shake out my foot – and just at that moment the door creaks open. The professor appears in my field of vision, and my foot remains in the air at a strange angle.

"Ruby, please come." She has a pleasant, calm voice that spreads like a fire blanket on my strained nerves. I stand up and arch my back. Behind me, I can still hear Jude saying "Good luck," but I don't have a head to say thank you anymore. The professor holds the door open for me to the office where the interview is taking place, and as we walk in together, she introduces herself to me as Prudence.

The office is about the same size as our living room at home, but because it is completely cluttered, it still looks cozy. The furniture looks antique, as if it has been here since the college was founded, and the smell of old books is in the air. There are numerous shelves on the walls, in which the books are stacked crisscross. Another lecturer sits at a secretary standing on the opposite side of the room. She's busy taking notes and doesn't look up until Prudence leads me across the room to a table. I smooth my skirt again and then sit upright. The two lecturers sit down on the other side of the table, open their notepads and then lean back.

My heart is beating up to my throat, but I try not to let it show and to appear confident. I firmly believe that I can master this interview. I prepared myself and did everything I could have done in advance.

I take a deep breath and slowly let the air escape again.

"We are very pleased that you accepted the invitation, Ruby," the second lecturer finally begins. Like Prudence', her voice has a calming effect on me, and I wonder how it can be that these women are not only among the smartest in the country, but also have the gift of bringing people down so skillfully in such a situation.

"Thank you very much for the invitation," I reply and clear my throat. My voice sounds like I've swallowed something sticky that's still stuck in my throat.

"We'll start with the first question," Prudence continues. "Why do you want to study at Oxford?"

I stare at her. I didn't expect that. In the many reports on the applicant interviews, I only read about introductory questions that were directly related to the topic. I can't do anything about it – a grin spreads across my face. And then I start talking. Of everything. I talk about how I became interested in politics as a young girl and that I already knew as a seven-year-old that I wanted to study at Oxford. I tell them about how my father subscribed to the Spectator and the New Statesman for me on my twelfth birthday and watched debates from the parliament on television with me for hours. I talk about my passion for organizing and debating and my desire to change things for the better. Without too much slime, I underline that for me, Oxford is the best university where I can learn what I need to achieve my goal.

After I finished, I'm almost out of breath and can't tell if they're happy with my answer or not. Since I didn't expect a high five or anything like that anyway, that's okay with me. Two more questions follow, this time actually from the topic of politics. I try to argue well and not be unsettled by their questions. The whole thing lasts no longer than fifteen minutes, then the interview is already over.

"Thank you very much for the interview," I say, but Ada is already lost in her notes and doesn't hear me. Prudence takes me to the door and smiles goodbye to me again. I reciprocate and go outside. The door closes behind me, and from one second to the next I feel incredibly exhausted.

On the chair opposite the door sits the boy who smiled at me earlier in the common room. I remember the girl with the bloodless lips who disappeared before I had a chance to talk to her. I would have been happy to hear a few words of encouragement from her, but I can understand why she fled so quickly. Now that the adrenaline is starting to subside, I just want to get out of this building and into the fresh air. Nevertheless, I bring myself to a sincere "You'll make it, good luck" before I leave the room and try to find my way to my dormitory.

Ruby

I spend the rest of the day looking at the campus. I get a coffee-to-go, walk across the expansive green spaces and look around the buildings where, according to the study guide, philosophy, political science and economics are taught. It's exciting to move among all the real students, and at one point I'm so lost in thought that I don't notice how I'm walking straight into a lecture hall with them. No one seems to take notice of me, so I carefully sit down in the last row and listen to a lecture on the work of Immanuel Kant for the next hour and a half.

It's the best hour and a half of my life.

In the evening, applicants from all Oxford colleges will take a trip to the Turf Tavern, a legendary pub where celebrities such as Oscar Wilde, Thomas Hardy, Elizabeth Taylor, Margaret Thatcher and the cast of Harry Potter have already spent time. I arrive way too early at the meeting point mentioned on my schedule, but I'm not the only one. Some boys and girls I recognize from this morning's common room are already standing around in small groups, as well as Jude, who greets me with his beaming smile and immediately begins to ask me about my interview. When we are complete, we start walking. The pub is about a mile and a half from St Hilda's Campus. On the way we have to cross the Magdalen Bridge, under which the River Cherwell glistens in the orange-red light of the setting sun. Afterwards we pass a deer park, where some deer twitch their ears curiously and raise their heads when they hear us. Like most others, I reach out to stroke one of them – but they are probably not that tame. All at once turn around and run away across the meadow.

The rest of the way leads between old buildings over paths that are sometimes so narrow that only two people can walk next to each other. Gradually it gets dark. If I had been alone, I wouldn't have dared to walk through these alleys, but Jude walks next to me and tells me about his studies, so I'm distracted. I'm literally hanging on his lips. Everything I have seen here today and what he is telling me right now makes my desire to be

able to study here even greater. I've never wanted anything as much as Oxford in my life. Now that I'm getting a taste, it would crush me if I didn't make it. Would I be able to cope with that? I don't know. Not to mention the fact that I don't have a plan B.

Suddenly the path becomes wider again. Lanterns provide light, and snippets of conversation and music reach my ears. The square, which we come to after a few more minutes, is crowded with people. Most of them look like they're studying too, and they're chatting and drinking beer.

With our group we meander between them until we arrive at the Turf Tavern. The building where the pub is located looks old. Dark beams run diagonally along the white plastered front. The roof is a bit crooked and in some places green and overgrown with moss. In front of the pub there are seating sets on which a few people have made themselves comfortable under a parasol. It's so cold that I can see my misty breath in the air, so it's understandable that most of them are wrapped in thick coats, hats, and woolen blankets.

Under the lettering of the pub hangs a string of lights with colorful light bulbs, directly below is the entrance. The door is dark green, and the paint is already peeling off in some corners. Jude stops it for me, and I enter the pub.

The atmosphere inside is almost medieval. The ceiling of the Turf Tavern is low, and the walls are made of rough-hewn, coarse stone. Small lanterns hang from them and lamps with plate-shaped shades above the tables. We are led through a narrow corridor into an area that is a little further back and away from the noisy main room.

Jude with what feels like two meters walks in front of me, so I can't see much except his back.

But then I hear it. A laugh that I know very well.

Jude goes to one of the tables reserved for us and pulls a chair aside. The others also look for a seat one after the other, while I stand there and stare at the group that has besieged the table next to ours. Wren, Alistair, Cyril, Camille, Keshav, Lydia and ... James.

James, who wished me good luck this morning and stroked my wrist.

James, who pauses with the beer just in front of his mouth when he spots me, only to turn to Cyril to his right a second later and pretend nothing happened.

I swallow hard.

I don't know why it hits me so unprepared to see him and his clique here. After all, I knew that they had applied in Oxford and that this evening in the pub was a fixed item on the agenda for everyone who was invited to the interviews. Nevertheless, it puts a damper on my euphoria, and I have to admit that Oxford will not be the complete new beginning that I imagined so beautifully in my mind today. I'll have to live with seeing some of them again.

Provided, of course, that I am accepted at all.

"Ruby!"

I drive around and see Lin running towards me with his arms outstretched. Her cheeks are flushed from the cold air outside, and she has wrapped a thick gray scarf around her neck that covers half of her face. The next moment she falls around my neck, and I wrap my arms around her at least as tightly.

"Tell me everything," I say excitedly after we have separated from each other.

"Sit down," Jude interjects, pointing to the bench opposite him. Lin drops down on it first, and I follow her after I slip out of my coat. Somehow I manage not to take another look in James' direction.

"It's cool here," says Lin after we have sat down and the drinks and menus are in front of us. "Almost as if you had traveled back in time."

"Yes, I think you can really tell the pub's history," I agree. "But now tell me! Your text message was so cryptic. Did it go well?"

"You first!" replies Lin, and I tell her in the short version of my interview in the morning.

"The two of them had a total poker face – I couldn't judge at all whether they thought what I was saying was good or bad. They were probably totally confused because I had to grin so much at the first question," I say.

"At least they didn't look at you angrily. I had a lecturer with a monobrow that he wrinkled so much that I really faltered a few times. I was so glad when it was over." She sighs and rests her chin sullenly on one hand. "It really wasn't good."

"But you have another interview," I say encouragingly, squeezing her arm briefly. "You can do it."

"I even have two. In my case, the business and philosophy interviews were not merged. You lucky one."

"So you'll have two more chances to prove yourself. That's good, believe me."

"In my interview, I was asked if I could pick up a ballpoint pen that had rolled under the chair," Jude abruptly joins our conversation.

"What?" asks Lin.

"I immediately asked myself whether this was already part of the interview, and I began to question the question scientifically and structured my answer accordingly." He grins broadly. "But in the end, she really just wanted me to pick up the pen."

Lin and I start laughing.

Then a waiter comes and takes our order. Jude tells us that it's a must to have a beer at Turf Tavern at least once, so Lin and I both order some, in addition to a bit of finger food. While we wait for dinner, I tell Lin about my afternoon and the lecture I secretly snuck into. We also take the opportunity to ask Jude question after question about his seminars, his lecturers, his fellow students and life in Oxford.

After a while, the waiter brings our drinks. It's the first time I've had a beer in front of me. The only alcohol I ever drank was the sweet stuff Wren gave me at the party. When we toast this time, I know exactly what I'm doing. It's my decision. I drink voluntarily because it's part of this experience. It feels grown up and exciting to do something that I have forbidden myself to do for a long time.

I put the glass on and take a first sip. I immediately grimace in disgust. "That tastes awful," I manage.

Jude and Lin laugh out loud, while I look back and forth between the two with a seriously worried look. "Why do you drink it voluntarily?"

"Is this your first beer?" asks Jude.

I nod. "And definitely my last."

"That's what you're saying now," Jude says with wiggling eyebrows, and Lin nods. "It's like coffee. As a child, you think it's absolutely disgusting, but the older you get, the better it tastes." She points to my mouth. "By the way, you have a beer beard."

Startled, I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. "I've always liked coffee. This is ... It tastes good... as if one were licking the bark of a tree."

Lin and Jude both snort away.

"I'd rather not know how you know what tree bark tastes like," jokes Jude.

I demonstratively push the beer into the middle of the table. "Here, help yourselves. I'm going to get a Coke."

I slide off the bench, squeeze past two tables and walk along the narrow corridor to the bar. It is even more crowded than before, apparently the Turf Tavern is not only for students, but also a tourist attraction. It takes almost ten minutes for the bartender to take my order and finally push the Coke over the counter to me. I thank him with a smile and turn around.

At that moment I discover Lydia. She frantically makes her way through the people towards the toilet and doesn't seem to see me. Her cheeks are pale, and I notice her hand trembling as she raises it to push a man out of the way in front of her. Confused, I watch her until she disappears behind the toilet door.

She probably drank too much. And it's not even eight yet. Shaking my head, I go back to my table, where Jude, Lin and a few of the others we have come with are talking animatedly. I join in the conversation and sip my Coke in between. Again and again I glance over at the place where Lydia was sitting earlier, but she still hasn't come back from the toilet. When I think about it, she really didn't look good. Rather the opposite.

Cautiously, I watch her friends. James and Wren seem to be discussing something, while Camille almost sits on Keshav's lap and whispers something in his ear that elicits a smile from him. Opposite the two, Alistair drinks his half-full pint in a single gulp. His gaze is bitter, his brows tightly knit. Although he answers what Wren has just asked him, he does not take his eyes off Camille and Keshav, who are flirting with each other right in front of him. I think it's bad enough that Keshav hides the affair with Alistair from his friends, but the fact that he now also makes out with a girl in front of him makes his reputation sink to the basement and even deeper in my eyes.

None of the boys seem to notice that Lydia is not coming back. I hesitate for a moment, but then I apologize to Lin and stand up. The alcohol level has risen significantly within the last hour, you can tell from the bar visitors. Their conversations are now so loud that they almost drown out the music, and when I push past them, very few of them voluntarily give way to me. I breathe a sigh of relief when I finally make it to the other end of the

room. Carefully, I enter the women's toilet and look around. There are several small cabins. All doors except one are open.

Behind it, a soft sniffle can be heard. And after that ... a loud choking.

Carefully, I knock on the door and realize that it is not locked. It opens a little bit, but I don't dare to push it all the way open. "Lydia?"

"Please leave me alone," she croaks.

I remember the Monday after the party, when she sat down with me during the lunch break and apologized to me. She was nice to me, just like that. Now I have the opportunity to return the favor to her. "Is there anything I can do for you?" I ask quietly.

Instead of an answer, Lydia has to gag, then I hear an unappetizing splash. I quickly go to the sink, pluck a few wipes from the dispenser and moisten them under the tap. Then I hand it to Lydia with a soft clearing of the throat under the toilet door. "Here."

The scarves disappear from my hand.

I remain in my crouching, unsure of what to do. I don't want to leave Lydia alone in this state, but I don't know how I could help her either.

The toilet flushes and shortly afterwards the door opens a crack. I see a small section of Lydia's face. It's really unfair: despite her watery eyes and the red spots on her cheeks, she still looks beautiful. I recognize so much of her brother in her face.

But thoughts of James have no place at all in this situation.

"Shall I bring you a water or something?"

"No, it's all right. I just need a few more minutes to get the walls to stop spinning." She leans back until the wall supports her back. Then she closes her eyes and lets her head fall back.

"Did you drink too much?" I ask.

Lydia shakes her head almost imperceptibly. "I didn't drink anything," she whispers.

"Are you sick?" I try again. "I'm sure there's an emergency pharmacy somewhere here. If it doesn't get better."

Lydia doesn't answer me.

"Or...", I continue hesitantly, "... is it nervousness? Are you excited about to-morrow?"

Now Lydia is looking at me again. Her facial expression is a mixture of amused and deathly sad. "No," she says. "I'm not excited. I both had my interviews today, and they went really well."

"That's great," I say cautiously, but Lydia doesn't look very happy about this fact. On the contrary, new tears suddenly shimmer in her eyes. "Why aren't you happy?"

She shrugs her shoulders and puts a hand on her stomach. "It doesn't matter how my interviews went. I'm not going to study here."

"Why not? Don't you want to go to Oxford?"

Lydia swallows. "Yes. Actually, yes."

"Then what's the problem? If the interviews went well, I'm sure you'll make it."

"I don't mean it that way. I just think I... I can't study here."

I don't understand. "Why?" I ask, confused.

She doesn't answer. Instead, she lowers her gaze and looks at the hand on her stomach. She begins to move them slowly over the fabric of her blouse – or rather, over what is underneath: a small bulge.

Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't have thought anything of it. Every person has one or even more bulges on their abdomen when they sit down. However, most people do not caress this bulge. And they don't look at her with such a loving expression as is spreading on Lydia's face right now.

It clicks, and I breathe in sharply. "You really didn't drink anything," I whisper.

She slowly shakes her head. A tear rolls down her cheek: "Not for months."

I think of the drink she first asked for from James at Cyril's party, but then didn't accept. And of course, I think of the day I caught her and Mr. Sutton. A lump forms in my throat.

"Is it from—" I don't dare to finish the sentence, but I don't need to. Lydia understands what I'm asking and nods briefly.

"I don't know what to say," I admit.

"Then you're like me." She runs her fingers over the moist corner of her eye.

"How far are you?" I whisper.

Lydia gently strokes her belly. "In the twelfth week."

"Who knows about it?" I ask.

"Nobody."

"Not even James?"

She shakes her head. "No. And it should stay that way."

"Why did you tell me?"

"Because you didn't stop asking," she says immediately. Then she sighs. "Besides, James trusts you. And he trusts no one else."

I press my lips tightly together, trying not to think about what that means. "At some point, in the not too distant future, it won't be so easy to hide," I say, pointing to her belly.

"I know." Her words sound so broken, so sad, that I am gripped by a wave of sympathy.

"You can talk to me if you like. Also in the coming weeks and months. If you have no one, I mean."

Lydia looks at me skeptically. "Why should I?"

Carefully I pat her arm. "I'm really serious, Lydia. That's a big deal. I can understand if you don't want to talk to anyone about it, but—" I look at her belly. "You're expecting a baby."

She follows my gaze. "It's funny to hear that. I mean, I know, but so far no one has said it out loud. That somehow made it seem a little less true."

I understand well what she means. Once you have said things, you give them space in which they can unfold and become real.

"Shall I take you home?" I ask after a while.

Lydia hesitates and just looks at me silently for a few seconds. Then she nods and gives me a cautious smile – the first of the evening. I don't know if she really trusts me, but if not, maybe that will change in the future. I know the two biggest secrets in her life, and I intend to keep them to myself. I will not deceive Lydia. On the contrary, I can imagine that she is dependent on a friend in this difficult time.

I get up and hold out my hand to help her up.

"You know I was throwing up over the toilet bowl a few minutes ago, right?" she asks.

I wrinkle my nose. "Thank you for the reminder," I answer, but I don't withdraw my hand.

Smiling, Lydia strikes in.

Ruby

The interview the next day is the horror. On the one hand, it's due to the fact that I've been lying awake half the night brooding over Lydia's situation, and on the other hand, I can't get along with the two lecturers at all. They make jokes at the beginning that I don't understand, and when it finally starts, they are not satisfied with my answers. I am asked how many people are in the room and say that it cannot be determined exactly. After all, I could be dreaming or the two lecturers could only exist in my head. It's one of the tasks we went through with Pippa, but they don't like my approach at all. The philosophy lecturer calls it "pseudo-intellectual" and asks me to question it and find out why it is wrong. Then he asks me for a logical answer, and I say meekly, "Three."

After that, I'm totally insecure and think three times about every question before I say anything. It's a complete disaster, and when I'm done after half an hour, my head is spinning.

As if on autopilot, I politely say goodbye to the lecturers and leave the office. Once outside, I notice how dizzy I am and I have to support myself against the wall for a moment so as not to lose my balance.

My gaze falls on the applicant who is next to me.

Of course it's James.

It drives me crazy that he has this habit of showing up at all my low points and experiencing them live. He is talking to the student who brought him here – or rather, she is entertaining him while he stares at the tips of his shoes. Only when the lecturer closes the door behind me does he raise his head.

He looks great. He wears black trousers and a dark green shirt that accentuates his shoulders and upper body. I hate that both look so good on him. I also hate that he is dressed so formally and still doesn't look like a bourgeois. Actually, I hate everything about him.

Especially the way he broke my heart. Every time he looks at me, the pain that I've been so successful in suppressing over the past few weeks

comes back. My heart beats up to my throat, my mouth becomes dry, and a queasy feeling spreads through my stomach. And then there is this miserable longing. The need to walk up to him and take his hand in mine, just to touch him and feel his warm skin on mine. I also want to wish him good luck, as he did yesterday, but I just can't bring myself to say anything to him. If I open my mouth, my voice will break. Especially now, when I'm about to cry anyway.

Suddenly, James stands up and takes a step towards me. Before he can say anything, I avert my gaze and walk quickly down the hallway.

The rest of the day drags on like chewing gum. After the interview, I would like to go to my room and crawl under the covers, but I am intercepted by a few other applicants who wanted to take a tour of the campus together with two students from higher semesters. I watched a lot of things yesterday, but since I'm not sure if I'll ever get the chance to spend time in St Hilda's again after the terrible interview, I join the group. It's bitter to be shown the beautiful campus of a university where I might not study at all, but Tom and Liz put so much effort into the tour that I decide to put the dark thoughts aside for the rest of the time and concentrate on what they tell us.

St Hilda's was one of the first colleges in Oxford to be founded exclusively for women. Men have only been allowed to study here for nine years. I already knew that the college is known for its open nature, but as we walk around the campus and through the buildings, I can clearly feel that this is not just empty talk. The students greet each other, and even those who are sitting between stacks of books in the library and look super stressed take a moment to answer questions. The attitude to life here seems to be the complete opposite of that prevailing at Maxton Hall College. There is no division into rich and poor, cool and uncool, dignified and unworthy – everyone seems to be equal here.

At the thought that I might have actually messed up, something in me contracts wistfully.

Lin writes me a message at noon and asks how my interview was, but I can't bring myself to answer her. Neither did my parents or Ember. I am disappointed in myself and have to work out what happened with myself before I can face them. I know exactly how they will react: understanding, kind and comforting. I just can't stand that at the moment.

In the early evening we return to the common room. I'm really ready to hide in my room, but there's one last item on the agenda – a get-together with Jude and a few other students who have agreed to answer our questions about studying and living in Oxford. I try with all my might to find my positive energy again, but it just doesn't work out. So I take one of the cozy-looking wing chairs, pull my legs under my body and decide to just sit here and listen.

Little by little, the room fills up. James also shows up at some point. He comes together with the student who brought him to the interview this morning and waited with him in front of the door. The two are talking, and I can't take my eyes off him, no matter how hard I try.

I never understood why it's called heartbreak, and now I understand it even less. When I see James, it's not just my heart that hurts – everything hurts. On top of that, I find it difficult to breathe. It should be called whole-body airway obstruction pain. That sounds far less romantic and would be much more appropriate in my opinion.

I manage to tear my eyes away from him, just as James discovers me in the wingback chair. Our eyes only touch each other for a fraction of a second, but still my skin starts to tingle.

I'm too frustrated and too tired to fight it.

"So, guys!" begins Jude and claps his hands. "Are we complete? Then we can start. There are still seats back there," he says, pointing vaguely in my direction. While most of us have made ourselves comfortable on the sofas and armchairs, there are still a few free chairs with flowered seat cushions next to me. Only out of the corner of my eye can I see James and two other boys coming towards me. Cautiously, I dare to look to the side. James returns it with dark eyes.

I slide a bit to the right on the chair. I don't care what he thinks of me. I just don't want to sit too close to him. Actually, I don't even want to be in a room with him. The pain in my chest is bad enough as it is.

"You can ask us anything," Liz explains. "Studies, private life, career goals."

"Everything, really?" interjects the guy sitting to James' left.

"You can ask anything—but whether we answer is up to us." Jude winks at him, and a few people laugh restrainedly.

"Okay, who's going to start?" asks the student who brought James here. She is really pretty, with her black hair and dark complexion. I think she's

without make-up, but there's still a slight glow on her cheeks. I'd like to ask how she does it, but I'm afraid that's not the right question for this Q&A.

"How strenuous is studying here really? Do you have a private life at all?" asks a girl I'm seeing for the first time.

Jude, Liz and the pretty student look at each other, and Jude gives Liz the right of way to answer with a gesture.

"Of course, the studies are more intensive than at other universities, especially if you live on campus and still have to settle in. But there is enough time for private things."

A soft murmur goes through the room. Most of them seem quite relieved about the answer.

"Bring on the next question!" demands Jude and looks expectantly into the round.

Short silence. Then...

"Is it true what everyone says? Is studying here a joke compared to Balliol?"

I turn my head to James. He looks ahead with serious interest, where the three students are sitting and return his gaze perplexed.

"It's the same course of study," Jude begins hesitantly, his brow slightly furrowed. "But since I'm studying here and not there, I can't judge that. I can only tell you what it is like at St Hilda's."

"A 'yes' would have sufficed."

Stunned, I stare at James. I can't believe he just said that. Even in this terrible tone of voice, which he certainly learned from his father and which triggers a whole chain of angry reactions deep inside me.

The need to open my mouth grows by the second, and my protective shields crumble piece by piece.

Don't do it, don't do it, don't do it ...

I ignore my reason.

"That's so clear," I blurt out.

James turns slowly to me. "What's clear?"

"That St Hilda's isn't good enough for you just because your father didn't study here." I try to keep my voice calm, but I don't want to succeed. Not after this day. Not if he behaves like that.

Something like pain flares up in James' eyes. "That's not true," he says.

At this lie, the anger that I have held back with all my might in the last few weeks breaks out of me like a storm. I can't hold them back for a

second longer, and the words just bubble out of me, loud and without filters. "What's wrong? That St Hilda's isn't good enough for you, just as I'm not good enough for you because your parents want something else for you? That you always do what they want instead of just thinking about what you want out of life? You are such a coward!"

All of a sudden, it is eerily quiet in the common room. My breathing is heavy, my chest rises and falls rapidly, and I feel how it begins to tingle dangerously behind my eyes.

Oh no. No.

I'm not going to start crying in front of all these people and embarrass myself even more than I just did.

I get up with a jerk and leave the room without another word. I walk along the hallway and make it to the stairs, when I hear equally fast footsteps behind me. I take two steps at a time until I reach the top and turn into the hallway. James is right behind me. He overtakes me and stops in front of me, so that I have to stop.

"That's not true," he repeats breathlessly. His cheeks are reddened, his hair disheveled. Whenever I see him, it seems to me that my body is connected to his in an irrational way. The need to touch him grows the closer he gets to me, no matter how angry I am with him. That can't be. How can I still want him when he hurts me so much?

"What's wrong?" I can hardly get the words out because so many feelings have built up in me.

The pain in his gaze catches me completely unprepared. "That you're not good enough for me."

For a moment I stare at him perplexed. Then I clench my hands into fists, so tight that my nails dig into my skin. "Such fucking bullshit," I hiss.

He takes another step towards me. "Ruby—"

"No!" I interrupt him. "You can't do that to me. You can't break up with me and humiliate me in front of all your friends, only to just stroke my wrist and whisper 'Good luck' to me. You've made it abundantly clear to me that you don't want me in your oh-so-great life."

"That wasn't ... I—"

First he runs after me, and now he can't get a coherent sentence out. I would like to grab him by both shoulders and shake him. "That wasn't you?" My voice drips with mockery.

"I'm sorry for the way I've behaved. I'm so sorry, Ruby. But I can... Just don't. It won't do."

I raise my arms in the air. "Then why the hell are you here? Why are you talking to me at all?"

"Because I—" Again he interrupts himself. He knits his brows together as if he doesn't know the answer himself. Then he opens his mouth and closes it again. It looks as if he is keeping himself from saying the words that are actually on the tip of his tongue.

"You don't know what you want from me. You don't know what you want out of life. I don't think you know anything at all."

His cheeks grow even redder. Now his posture is a reflection of mine – stiff shoulders, clenched fists. I've never seen him like this before. He takes an angry step towards me, and I feel the heat emanating from him.

"I know exactly what I want." The stammering has disappeared, instead he suddenly sounds determined.

"Then why don't you take it?"

"Because my will has never played a role."

The last remnant of my control has hung by a thread, which he finally cuts with his words.

"For me, yes! Your will has always played a role for me!" I scream, bumping both hands against his chest.

James reacts in a flash and grabs my wrists. He holds my hands firmly pressed to his chest.

We breathe. Fast and jerky. I can feel his thumping heartbeat under my fingers. His heart beats so fast. For my sake. Because of what is between us, what has been growing between us for months.

We move at the same time, James grabs me, and I jump towards him. Our mouths meet. Enraged, I run my hands into his hair, pull on it, and he grabs my thighs and digs his fingers firmly into my skin. I bite his lower lip because I'm so angry. He moans deeply and slides one hand to my ass. With the other he moves my back up and puts it on my neck. All the weeks in which I ignored him with all my might and fought against my feelings break over me like a tornado.

Our kiss is a continuation of the argument, a fight that turns the anger in me into something else and elicits a sound from me that I have never made before. A desperate moan that almost sounds like a sob. I run my tongue over his lower lip and enjoy his taste.

The next moment, James grabs my neck and kisses me deeply and deeply. Now his kiss suddenly feels like an apology. I can feel on his quivering fingers how long he had wanted to do this and how much strength it must have cost him to forbid himself. He kisses me like he wants to drown inside me, it's a mixture of desire, despair, hatred and all the feelings in between, and it drives me crazy, but at the same time I haven't felt this alive in weeks. I don't understand how this is possible. I don't understand how someone you actually want to hate can do something like that to you.

James grabs me by the waist, lifts me up and staggers down the hallway with me in his arms, all without us ever taking our lips off each other. I bang my back against James' room door and breathe in sharply. Angrily, I scratch his neck. James moans into my mouth and pushes against me, his hard body is the only thing that prevents me from falling to the ground. His hand runs from my waist over my thigh, then disappears, and I can hear the jingling of keys right after. The next moment he holds me tighter again, and the door opens behind me. James carries me over the threshold and kicks the door shut. I only perceive the bang casually. Nothing seems to be relevant anymore, there is only him and me at this moment and the feelings that guide us. This time no one will interrupt us. No one will destroy what is between us.

Only the two of us have the power over what happens next.

My movements become smoother, but no less passionate. In a few steps we are at the bed, and James lets himself fall on it. He slides an arm under my back to cushion the impact and pushes himself against me at the same moment, so perfect that I moan and wrap my legs around his hips.

His mouth moves tenderly over every millimeter of my face. He kisses my cheeks and the corners of my mouth. The tip of my nose. His lips glide over my jaw. I hold on to his shoulders and close my eyes. Stars explode behind my eyelids as he sucks on my neck and presses his lips to the spot where my pulse beats faster and faster.

"Ruby—" He whispers my name, just like that night over a month ago when we kissed on the steps of the school. The memory comes over me suddenly and violently, and with it the despair and pain. I can't hold back the burning behind my eyes. Hot tears form in my eyes and run down my face.

James freezes. He leans a little away from me and looks at me under heavy eyelids. With his dilated pupils and red cheeks, he looks like he's on

drugs. He tenderly caresses my face and continues to whisper my name.

I cover my face with one arm so he can't see my tears, but James takes my hand and carefully lifts it up. He interlaces our fingers and places them on the bed next to my head. With his other hand, he brushes a stray strand of hair out of my forehead. Then he slowly runs his index finger over the sensitive skin under my eyes to wipe away the wetness there.

"I'm sorry," he whispers at my temple and presses a kiss to my hairline.

He doesn't stop caressing my face. It's as if his arms form a protective space just for the two of us. When I look up, I see how swollen his lower lip is. You can clearly see where I bit and I get a guilty conscience. I tenderly stroke the red skin, and James closes his eyes. I touch his jaw, run my finger over his contracted eyebrows and trace the scattered freckles on his cheek. Now in winter, they have become so pale that you can only see them up close.

"I'm so sorry," he whispers, and it sounds as if his voice would break at any moment.

"That's not enough for me," I reply just as quietly.

He leans forward and presses his hot forehead against mine. "Neither do I."

We remain in this position for a while. His weight on me feels so good, and I wrap my arms around his back, claw my fingers into his shirt, and just hold on to him. I can feel his heartbeat, as fast and uneven as my own, and enjoy the all-encompassing feeling of being so close to him.

But all this does not change the things that have happened between us. Because of what he threw at my head and how he treated me. I can't forget that. Not if I don't get more from him than a whispered apology. I want an explanation, and I think I deserve it.

"It can't go on like this, James."

He smiles. The corners of his mouth only move slightly upwards, but I can still see it clearly. In addition, the tension in his body decreases. The furrows on his forehead are smoothing out, and everything about him seems to be softening.

"What's there to smile about?"

He pulls back a bit and looks at me. His gaze is hopeful. "You haven't said my name for ages. Feels good."

Shaking my head, I take his face in my hands, lean forward and kiss him carefully. It feels like a dream that I can just do it, when I was so sure

that I would never get the opportunity to do it again. His mouth has the perfect shape to fit mine. It feels right, like a puzzle piece that is put in the right place. James' hand travels from my face over my neck and shoulder. A hot tingle runs down my spine as he caresses my side and finally embraces my waist. His body trembles over mine. I want to pick up exactly where we just left off, but I can't do that without knowing where we are.

James seems to sense this and gently pulls away from me. I told you that you can't lose anything that doesn't belong to you."

The memory of his words gives me a sting. I want to look away, but I can't. For that, too many of the feelings I feel at that moment are reflected in James' eyes.

"That was a lie. I've been yours since you threw my money at me, Ruby Bell."

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James

Her eyes widen at my words. I roll off her and pull her with me so that we can both lie on our sides and look at each other. I leave my hand at her waist, caress her there. I would love to touch her everywhere, immediately, forever. I missed her so much that it almost killed me, and now it feels like I have air in my lungs for the first time in weeks.

But I have to do this right. I'm not going to risk losing Ruby just because I can't bring myself to tell her what's wrong with me. Why I am the way I am and why I make decisions that hurt both of us so much. It's hard to find the right words, especially because the fear that I won't be forgiven is choking my throat. I don't know what I would do then.

Ruby looks at me calmly, waits. Her hair is messed up and her cheeks and lips are red. She is so beautiful that I have to avert my gaze and stare at my hand on her waist when I finally clear my throat.

"I told you that I would join the company after I graduated. And... it's important to my parents that I have a woman by my side. That's part of it for her. They would like to betroth me to someone right now, so that nothing can go wrong."

Ruby makes an indefinable sound, and when I look up, she wrinkles her nose. It's good to know that she doesn't like the idea – I can't imagine what I would do if Ruby's parents set her up with someone who isn't me.

"You were very special to me from the beginning. I have changed. I didn't notice it myself, but my friends and family did. I had to listen to questions for weeks about what was wrong with me, why my thoughts were constantly somewhere else, and so on. When my father saw us together in the tailor's shop, he had a hunch. And when he caught us on Halloween ..." I swallow hard. "He was sure of that."

"Is that why you had a cracked lip? Did he hit you?" she asks, carefully raising her fingers to my mouth. The place where she bit me is still throbbing – but not in a bad way.

"Yes," I say quietly. I've never talked to anyone about my father. Not even with Lydia, who notices a lot, but by no means everything. I'm sure my friends have an idea of what's going on at home, but they've never asked me about it when I've shown up at their place with a black eye or a cracked lip. It's as if at some point we decided together that this issue doesn't exist, and everyone sticks to it. This is very convenient for me.

"Does he hit you often, James?" whispers Ruby.

I can't answer her, especially when she looks at me with so much compassion in her eyes. But that's not the point here. All I want is to explain to her why I behaved so terribly towards her – something I am still one hundred percent responsible for, no matter how overwhelming my situation may be.

"That's not important," I answer belatedly. My voice has taken on a rough sound, and I have to clear my throat again. "At any rate, my parents saw a danger in you. They noticed how important you are to me. Much more important than this company."

Something in Ruby's gaze changes. It becomes so intense and haunting that I have the feeling that she can see into my soul. There is no way to hide from her – and at that moment I realize that I don't want to. My parents were right to worry. Ruby is dangerous to them and everything they have imagined for me and my future.

I can't believe I'm only realizing this now.

I'm in love with Ruby Jemima Bell.

What I feel for them is all-encompassing and overwhelming and will not go away, no matter how much I try to ignore it – I have clearly noticed this in the last few weeks. Ruby has crept into my life, thrown everything overboard, and deserves a place in the mess she's wreaked havoc.

I don't care who I have to face, and I don't care if my father puts me on the street for it. Lydia once asked me if Ruby was worth the stress. I let myself be influenced by my environment and believed that she wasn't. It was the stupidest decision I've ever made, and I hate myself for pushing Ruby away from me like that. I know I can't undo it, but I have to at least try.

"You're right—I really don't know what I want from life. I was always predetermined what to do and what not to do. Sometimes it feels like I'm an extra in a script that was written for me and that I'm not allowed to change."

Ruby growls softly.

"After my father caught us, he freaked out. For him, it's out of the question that I spend time with someone who doesn't correspond to what he imagined for me."

At my words she flinches almost imperceptibly, and immediately I take her hand in mine and hold it tightly.

"I thought about what it would be like for us in the future and just saw all the problems. My parents are dictators when it comes to their children's lives. And you... you told me back then that you were preparing for a successful career. I couldn't stand the idea of my father getting in your way just because he doesn't like you being with his son. I got scared because I know I couldn't do anything. I could never protect you from him."

My heart is beating up to my throat. I know myself that I sound like a pathetic idiot, but I want to be honest with her, at all costs.

"You're going to conquer the world, Ruby. And you should be with someone who supports you on your journey and whose family welcomes you with open arms. But I can't offer you that. I can't offer you anything but a bunch of problems that I don't know how to solve."

Ruby looks at me silently, and I don't dare to breathe. I expect her to get up and leave the room without comment. I would have deserved it, I know that. But Ruby makes no move to leave me. Instead, she leans forward and presses her lips to mine.

I'm so perplexed that I don't return the kiss at all.

"Oh, James," she murmurs. She frees her hand from mine and lets it wander up my chest until it lies on my heart. "You... stupid imbecile."

Okay, I didn't expect that.

"Why are you worrying about the future when we have now?" she asks quietly.

"Because you deserve better. My future is destined to be shit. Not yours."

It grips my cheeks tightly. "That's not true," she whispers insistently. "You have just as many options as anyone else. You just have to take it, James."

I love it when she says my name. Her voice wraps softly around the letters, and I would like to close my eyes and ask her to say it again.

"Why didn't you just tell me that?" she asks, shaking her head. "Instead of pushing me away without an explanation from you."

In her eyes, I can see the pain I must have caused her with my behavior. I put my hand over hers and interlace our fingers on my chest. "I'm so sorry, Ruby. I really thought we were better off without each other."

"But it didn't feel any better," she whispers hoarsely. "You just ignored me and gave me the heaviest basket in human history."

"I know. God, Ruby. I'm so sorry."

I close my eyes. I don't know what I'm going to do if she doesn't forgive me. When she decides that the stress I've brought into her life is too much for her. If I can never be as close to her as I am now.

I hold her hand, press it against my heart, which beats like crazy, and can't bring myself to look at her.

"James," says Ruby. She begins to pull her hand away, and I would like to hold her, but I know that I have no right to do so. If Ruby wants to go, I have to let her go. But then I feel her fingers in my hair. It runs gently over my head, again and again.

I don't know how long we'll be lying there like this, but I don't dare to move for fear of destroying the moment. Being so close to Ruby is the best feeling in the world. I would give up everything for that. I don't know why it took me so much time to realize that.

"James," Ruby murmurs again after a long while. She kisses my temple. "It's okay. I forgive you."

I take a deep breath to mumble another apology, but freeze when the meaning of her words reaches me. I open my eyes. Ruby has leaned back a bit and looks at me with a steady gaze.

"What?" I ask in a hoarse voice.

"It's okay. I forgive you," she repeats slowly, stroking my chest. That doesn't mean I forget how you behaved. If you pull something like that off again..." She shrugs her shoulders vaguely. When I realize what she has just said and I see her cautious smile, I am almost overwhelmed by the relief I feel. I wrap my arms around her, pull her to my body and murmur breathlessly against her lips: "I won't. I won't, I promise."

Then I kiss her.

I try to show her how grateful I am and share with her all the feelings that are raging inside me. Ruby rolls on top of me, and I hold her tight. She teases me with her tongue and strokes my still throbbing lower lip. A growl comes from deep in my chest, and I suck on her tongue, which in turn elicits a gasp from her.

I have no idea how we got here, but this second I feel like I'm flying and not falling. Ruby forgives me. She forgives me and wants to stay in my life.

The next moment, she releases her mouth from me and begins to unbutton my shirt.

"What are you doing?" I ask roughly.

"Undress."

She continues until the last button is unbuttoned and she has a clear view of my naked upper body. She bites her lower lip and touches my stomach hesitantly, then a little more courageously. The look with which she devours my body makes me grateful for the many extra hours of training I have done in the last month.

As Ruby leans in and kisses a trace across my stomach, I inhale sharply. Then I can suddenly feel her tongue on my groin, and I straighten up on both elbows. "What are you doing?"

She looks up at me through half-lowered eyelids. "Isn't that what couples do when they reconcile?"

"Is that us?"

"Well, you're certainly not going to be my bonus friend. I don't feel like that."

I grin. "Bonus friend?"

"You know what I mean."

"How can a person have an IQ as high as you and then utter a word like 'bonus friend' in all seriousness?" I murmur amused, earning a punch in the pit of my stomach that makes me groan painfully. "I liked it better when you used your tongue."

One more blow, then she comes back up to me until her face is only a hand's breadth away from mine. "Do you really think you should be so cheeky again now?"

I feel like my chest is going to be blown up by my pounding heart at any moment. Ruby sits on top of me with her legs apart, her torso pressed against mine and the buttons of her blouse scratch lightly over my skin. My boner presses almost painfully against the fabric of my pants, and I close my eyes for a moment as Ruby moves her hips.

I want you.

I want her more than I've ever wanted anything before.

"I'm everything you want," I croak, meaning every word seriously. "Friend, bonus friend, everything." I don't care what my parents say or what will happen in the future. Ruby is right – we have now. And I can't deny for a second what I feel about Ruby.

"Everything, really?" she whispers.

"Everything," I repeat, running my hands up her thighs. Something lights up in Ruby's moss-green eyes. When I stroke the inside of her thighs with my thumbs, she audibly gasps. A triumphant smile steals onto my lips. She's damn sensitive. I repeat the touch, this time even higher. Ruby closes her eyes. She looks beautiful with her wavy hair, dark, long eyelashes and her cute blouse, which is finished with a bow at the collar. I would like to pull on the black ribbon, but I don't dare. If we really take this to the next level, then she should take the next step.

As if she had read my mind, Ruby leans forward until her mouth is close to my ear. The next moment she runs her lips along my auricle down and takes my earlobe between her teeth. My body reacts violently to her: I get goosebumps everywhere, and I almost get dizzy with excitement. She continues to tease me, pulling a trail of kisses down my neck and sucking on the crook of my neck.

I let out a quiet curse.

Ruby pulls away from me and looks at me seriously. "Don't you like that?"

"Yes." My voice sounds rough and scratchy with desire. "Yes, I like it."

I wanted to give her time and not rush her, I wanted to be patient and act like a gentleman, but... I can't take it anymore. I want to show her what she does to me. With trembling hands, I grasp her face and press my lips to hers. Ruby groans in surprise as I roll around and pin her under me. The moment I press my boner against her, she gasps into my mouth and claws at my back. If she's like this now, I can't wait to be in her.

The next second, she slips the shirt off my arms until it falls to the floor next to the bed. Her hands wander over my back, hesitantly at first, then she scratches lightly with her nails along my spine until she has reached my butt and squeezes it firmly.

"Damn it, Ruby," I growl.

"I've wanted to do this for so long," she replies and gives him a slap. I let out a breathless laugh on her neck and bite her lightly as punishment.

She reacts by wrapping both legs around my waist and pressing herself tighter against me. Good God, she's going to kill me.

I lean back a bit and then take the ribbon of the bow on her collar between my fingers. I look into her eyes as I slowly wind it up. Ruby swallows hard and watches as if hypnotized as I open the buttons afterwards. She sits up so that I can pull the fabric off her shoulders. I don't know where I'm going to throw the blouse, because I only have eyes for Ruby. The light of the lantern outside casts a few bright streaks on her skin and the skin-colored bra she wears. Ruby has a beautiful body, curvy and soft, with a voluptuous bust. At school, you can tell that Ruby knows exactly what she wants – the fact that it's apparently the same in bed makes my throat dry.

I lean forward and spread a series of kisses on her cleavage. I grasp her breasts and caress them, which elicits a surprised gasp from Ruby. I would like to tear the rest of her clothes off her body and sink into her, but I hold back.

This is our first time. I want us both to be able to remember how beautiful it was years later.

So I take my time as I explore her upper body. I take every patch of skin between my lips and teeth, licking over her breasts and gripping them tighter. I walk further down and run my teeth over her rib arch. Her soft panting and the way she tenses up are like a guide for her body. When I arrive at her waistband, she buries her fingers in my hair. I look up at her questioningly. She has me in her hand, she alone determines what happens next.

"Keep going," she whispers, barely audible.

That's all I need.

First I take off her shoes, then the socks. Ruby watches me, a slight smile on her lips. Finally, I open her pants and help her pull them off her legs. Then she lies in front of me in her underwear, and I hold my breath. I don't know how I deserved this. No idea. Maybe that's what people call karma all the time. According to the motto: Hey, everything is going shit in your life? Here, for this you get the most amazing girl in the world. She forgives you and likes you and lets you undress even though you don't deserve it.

Or so.

Whatever the reason Ruby allows me to do this, I'm going to show her how much I appreciate her.

I lean forward and kiss up a mark on her legs. Now there is no more thinking, only feeling. I run both hands to Ruby's hips. Gently I caress her sides, gliding my hand over her belly and to the waistband of her panties. Ruby's breathing becomes faster and heavier.

Keep going, an echo of her words sounds in my head.

I continue. I hook my fingers under her panties and pull them down. She lies naked in front of me, and I can no longer think clearly. I don't hesitate for a second, but begin to drag a teasing trail down her groin. As I press my mouth to her center, Ruby curses loudly. She buries her hands in my hair again, and for a moment I don't know if she wants to pull me away or have me even closer to her. I move my mouth, press a kiss on her heat. As I let my tongue pop out, it squirms, and I put a hand on her stomach to hold it tight. I enjoy how she scratches my scalp with her fingers and shows me where she wants me and with what intensity. As her breathing accelerates and her legs become stiffer, I slide a finger into her humid heat. I suck on her and move my finger slowly and evenly. It doesn't take long for Ruby to call my name and rebel under me.

I continue to lick and kiss her until the tremors that go through her body become weaker. She's completely breathless when I finally pull away from her and slide up on the bed to look at her. Her hair is disheveled, and her cheeks are reddened. She stares at the ceiling and needs a few minutes for her breathing to return to normal.

Then she wraps her arms around my neck and grins at me.

"You definitely have to do that again," she says.

I return her grin and at the same moment I firmly resolve to spend a whole night with my head between Ruby's legs at some point.

"Your insolent mouth will be of great benefit to you down there."

Shaking my head, I look at her and then press a light kiss on her lips. Ruby doesn't allow the kiss to remain superficial. On the contrary, she pulls me closer to her and penetrates my mouth with her tongue. I'm surprised by the stormy way she kisses me. Apparently, she likes to taste herself on my lips. She wraps a leg around me and pushes herself against me. A hot tingle shoots through my body, and I moan into her mouth and thrust my hips forward, eliciting a soft "Oh" from Ruby. The next moment, her hands are

on my belt. Their movements are uncoordinated and driven by lust. I really like to experience them like this.

After she unzips my pants, she wants to push them down, but I stop them. "Wait," I murmur and pull my wallet out of the back pocket. I open it and take out the condom that's inside. I put it down next to the pillow and then take off my pants and socks. I drop everything next to the bed, immediately afterwards I'm back over Ruby. I slide my hand under her back and open the clasp of her bra. I help her to strip it off, and then there is not a single millimeter of fabric between us. Ruby moans softly as I grasp her breast with one hand and start caressing her.

I love how Ruby reacts to my every touch. I've never been with a girl like her. Their reactions make me so hot that I can hardly stand it. When she reaches under the fabric of my boxer shorts and slips them over my butt, it almost drives me crazy.

"How do you want me?" I murmur and kiss myself up to her face again. I brush her hair out of her forehead and run my fingers over her jaw. I want to show her how much she means to me with every touch.

"Just like that," Ruby whispers back and caresses my back tenderly. I nod and reach for the plastic sheet. My hands tremble as I roll over the condom. Ruby straightens up on both elbows and watches my every move with a sparkling curiosity in her eyes. Without further ado, I grab her hand and put it around my shaft. He twitches in her hand, and Ruby looks at me with dark eyes. She swallows hard. I let go of her hand, and she begins to move it alone, at first cautiously, then more and more confidently. When she squeezes in exactly the right place, I gasp.

"Ruby—" I whisper.

The next moment she lets go of me and lies down again.

Her dark hair is spread out like a fan on the white pillow, her green eyes sparkle like in a dream as I cover her body with mine and take the place between her legs. It almost happens by itself, I slide the tip into her and hold my breath while Ruby sighs under me. It is incredibly narrow, but damp enough that I dare to push forward carefully. I touch her cheek, running my thumb over her lower lip before pressing my mouth to hers. I kiss her slowly and full of feeling as I pull out of her a bit and then penetrate her further with a gentle thrust. Just then, Ruby changes the angle of her hip – and the resistance subsides. I sink into it to the root, and we both groan. A thought wants to push itself to the surface of my

consciousness, which is overlaid with feelings, but I can't really grasp it. There is no more room in my head. It's full of Ruby, her flavor, and her heat that surrounds me. I thrust again, and Ruby lets out a breathless gasp. She wraps one leg around my waist, and I grasp her thigh.

It feels so perfect that I wish we had done this sooner instead of having obstacles put in our way. I dig my fingers into her thigh and hold it in place as I try to find a reasonably steady rhythm. Ruby's hands are all over me, she leans in and kisses my chest, pushing herself towards me with each thrust as if she can't get enough of me. I feel the same way. It feels so good that it's damn hard for me not to lose control of my movements.

"You're shaking," she whispers, stroking my back upwards. She holds on to my shoulders while I suck on the spot behind her ear and slowly thrust into her.

"Because I have to control myself."

"Is that the James Beaufort who destroys waterbeds during sex?" she asks breathlessly.

I bite her neck. "I told you it wasn't a waterbed."

Ruby ignores what I say and wraps her second leg around me as well. She moves her hips so that I slide deeper into her. I moan, and almost by itself my body follows her indirect request. I wrap a hand around Ruby's neck and hold her tightly so that she doesn't hit her head against the bed. Then I penetrate them, harder and faster than before. Ruby scratches my back and makes sure that I gradually lose control with each of her touches. It doesn't take long until the headboard audibly slams against the wall and I can no longer suppress the sounds coming from deep in my chest. Ruby's breath goes faster and faster, her nails dig into my skin. Her eyes are closed, but I really need to see what's happening to her right now.

"Look at me," I gasp.

She complies with my request, and our eyes meet. The connection between us is more intense than ever before. I can't look away anymore, and Ruby seems to feel the same way. We move in unison, as if we were made for exactly that. I thrust into her, over and over again, until I hit a point in her that makes her moan loudly. Her muscles contract around me, and suddenly it's too much. The bed doesn't squeak loud enough to drown out our noises as we climax together. My world explodes, and what remains is a universe of colorful stars and lights, in which there is only room for Ruby.

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Ruby

"You should have told me before." James runs a finger along my spine, and I shiver.

"Why?"

I lie with my head on his chest and stroke his hard belly, lost in thought. Our legs are intertwined, and we are still naked, but James has spread the blanket over us.

"Because I would have been gentler then," he murmurs, pressing his lips to my hairline.

"I think it would have scared you off, and then you would have run away."

"I wouldn't be. I just would have been more careful."

I put my head back and look into his face. A wrinkle has formed between his brows – he looks seriously worried

"But I didn't want it to be gentle and cautious."

One corner of his mouth lifts slightly, and a dark sparkle enters his eyes. It disappears just as quickly as it came. "Perhaps I would have thought about a change of location. You shouldn't lose your virginity in a dorm room with a squeaky bed."

Indignant, I sit up. For a split second, James' gaze lands on my breasts, but then he immediately looks me in the face again. "Hello? If I lose my virginity anywhere, it will be in Oxford."

He shakes his head with a smile. The next moment, he grabs my elbows and pulls me forward until I fall on top of him. He wraps his arms around me and presses me tightly to his warm body. "You're crazy, Ruby Bell."

A little maybe, I agree with him in my thoughts.

But it all felt right. James and I – maybe it will never be easy for us, and maybe James' father will continue to do everything he can to get me out of his son's life, but I'm willing to fight for James. What is between us is something special. Since today I know that, and in the way he looks at me

and touches me, I feel that he feels the same way. We will make it. Never before have I been so sure of something.

"How was it with you?" I ask after a while, without looking him in the eye.

"Huh?"

I focus on the pattern I draw on his belly. "I mean... how was your first time?"

He audibly lets the air escape, and his stomach sinks under my hand. "Do you really want to know?"

Now I look at him. "Of course."

"It was okay. I was fourteen, drunk and pretty fucked up."

"Fourteen?" Oh God, then he's had practice for over four years. I'd rather not think about how many girls he's slept with to be so good at it.

"Wren and I made a bet, so I did it. It took about two minutes and didn't feel good."

"Then you are probably not the person who should throw around advice for a successful defloration," I say quietly.

"If you ever tell your story, I hope this will come off better."

I press a kiss on his chest. "Absolutely. It was perfect."

I don't understand why, but it feels completely normal to lie here with him. As if I belonged exactly in this place. I haven't felt this good in weeks, and even the slightly painful throbbing between my legs doesn't bother me. I meant what I said: It was perfect. And I couldn't have imagined a better place or moment to do it.

"You seemed totally distraught this morning," James says suddenly, putting a damper on my mood instantly.

"The interview went really badly," I murmur.

His mouth wanders over my hairline again and brushes my forehead. "The two lecturers were idiots. I think this is their ploy to deliberately unsettle applicants. You must have been great." He says this with such certainty that I almost believe it myself. But only almost.

"Really not. I answered one question completely wrong. I noticed very clearly that they didn't like what I said."

"In what way?"

I tell him about the debacle in the morning.

"As I said, I'm sure that's their ploy. Don't worry so much. If you can't make it to Oxford, no one will." He sounds more confident than I feel, but

it's good to talk to someone about it at all. Especially because James knows how much Oxford means to me.

"Thank you for saying that."

In response, he kisses me on the mouth. It takes me an effort not to lose myself in him, but to withdraw my head at some point and ask him: "How did it go for you?"

He makes a hum that is difficult to interpret and suddenly has that expression on his face again, which always appears as soon as the conversation turns to Beaufort, Oxford or his future. He looks hopeless. And it hurts my heart.

"Talk to me," I whisper.

James returns my gaze scowling. In the end, he gives in and takes a deep breath. "I know Oxford is the most important thing to you, so it's hard for me to talk to you about it, but... I think this circus here is so stupid."

I try not to let that affect me. Not everyone has the same dreams and goals. The fact that James feels this way has nothing to do with me, but only with himself.

"When I was in this interview earlier ... It all just passed me by. Like in a black-and-white film that you fast-forward and in which I'm the only one who doesn't move from the spot."

"If you really don't want to study here or join your parents' company, what would you rather do?"

He shakes his head, and I see panic in his eyes. "Please don't ask me that."

"Why not?" I stroke his cheek and feel how rough the skin is there. There are a few stubbles that he will definitely shave tomorrow morning. James certainly looks great with beard shadow.

"You were right when you said that I don't know what I want out of life. I don't worry about what I could do, because if I allow myself to dream, it will only be more depressing afterwards."

He still thinks that he has no chance to decide for himself what his life should look like. But how could he, when such an inheritance awaits him and lies like a huge burden on his shoulders?

"Dreams matter, James," I whisper.

"Then you're my dream."

It takes my breath away for a moment, but I quickly realize that this is just a lazy attempt by him not to have to react to what I said.

"Unfortunately, that's not how it works."

He smiles at me crookedly. "That would have been too easy."

"What do you like? What are you passionate about?"

He has to think about that for a moment. I feel that he is suddenly tense, and kiss his chest, as if to tell him that it is okay and that he should take his time.

"I like sports," he finally begins hesitantly. Art. Good music. Oh, and spicy food. Spicy Asian food, to be exact. I'd like to travel to Bangkok and try all kinds of things at the street markets there."

I grin at his skin. "Something like fried grasshoppers?"

"Exactly." Slowly, the tension subsides.

"That all sounds like it's within the realm of possibility."

"These are things you do when you have a vacation, not something you can consider a goal in life."

I stroke his belly in gentle circles. "It's a start. You can do all this if you stop standing in your own way."

James says nothing.

I have an idea. Without further ado, I get up and look for my underwear on the floor. I find everything in the immediate vicinity of the bed and slip first into the panties, then into the bra. I discover a gray shirt of James on the chair at the desk. I put it on and then look around the desk.

"What are you doing?" James asks behind me. I grab his black notebook with the curved B and a ballpoint pen before turning to him. He has also put on his boxer shorts again.

"We're going to make a list now," I answer and climb back into bed with the notebook.

James looks at me questioningly. I knock on the seat next to me. The bed is still warm, and James' smell surrounds me. Slowly and with a suspicious look, he comes to me. The mattress sinks under his weight as he sits down.

I lean over him and turn on the bedside lamp next to the bed. Then I open his notebook on my lap.

"Whenever I'm feeling bad, I make lists. Even as a child, this helped me to stay motivated and keep a clear head. Even if things aren't going so well right now," I explain. I pick out inspiring quotes or write down things that I really want to do or change later in the world or something." I lift the

pen. "Normally I make the whole thing a little more colorful, but this one will have to do it."

The mistrust disappears from his gaze, and he begins to smile. "You want to make such a list for me?"

I nod. "Maybe she'll motivate you then, too."

He looks at the blank page of his notebook and finally nods. "Okay."

Grinning, I put the pen to work. Then I write To-do in squiggly letters in the top center. I underline the headline with a wavy line. Then I write 1. Travel to Bangkok. I look at James expectantly. "What's next?"

He rubs his chin thoughtfully.

"It can be anything," I remind him.

"I want to keep playing lacrosse," he says quietly.

"Oh yes," I murmur, noting the second item on the list. Right next to it, I draw a small lacrosse stick and James' jersey with the number 17. When I look up again, his gaze is so warm that it makes my stomach tingle.

"So, what's next?"

Again, he needs a moment to think. I don't want to push him, so I wait patiently.

"I want to read more," he says. "Even outside my usual genre."

"What do you usually read?"

"Reference books that my father gives me. Biographies of successful entrepreneurs.« He frowns. "But there is so much more. For example, I would like to try my hand at manga." He smiles meaningfully at me.

"I could put together a list of recommendations for you," I say, returning his smile.

"I would devour everything at once."

Grinning, I bend over the list and write down 3. Read more and more diversely. "What else?"

James swallows hard. "Of course, I would like to do something professionally that fulfills me. I don't know yet what that could be, or if it's even possible, but—" He shrugs his shoulders. It seems as if he wants to say more, but does not allow himself to do so. I put the pen down and grasp his cheek. Tenderly, I stroke his warm skin with my thumb and finally lean forward to kiss him. He closes his eyes and sighs softly.

"Anything is possible, James," I whisper and lean back again. I take the pen and write down 4. Then I look at my work thoughtfully.

"One point is still missing," says James suddenly, reaching for his notebook. He takes the pen from me and writes something down.

"Done," he murmurs, holding the book in front of him. I slide close to him until my bare thigh touches his, and read what he added.

5. Ruby

I hold my breath and look back and forth between the list and James.

"When you're with me, I have the feeling that I can do anything," he says roughly. "That's why you definitely belong on a list that is there to make me happy."

I don't know what to say. So I just climb on his lap and wrap my arms around his neck. He puts his hand on the back of my head and kisses me. Together we sink into the pillows, with merged mouths and his dreams in our hands.

James

Unfortunately, the best night of my life by far ends at some point. Ruby and I tried to go through it, but fell asleep around four in the morning, only to be startled up three hours later because we thought we had overslept and Ruby's parents might be waiting outside the door. Fortunately, it was a false alarm, but we don't have much time left.

It's incredibly difficult for me to let Ruby go into her room. I don't want to say goodbye to her, I keep pulling her close to me and kissing her as if I wouldn't see her again for at least a month. We'll meet again tomorrow at school at the latest and maybe even tonight if I manage to get away from home. The chances are even quite good: The fact that I was invited to St Hilda's was tantamount to an insult to my father. He even suggested that Lydia and I swap places because, unlike me, she received an invitation from Balliol. Words like "shame" and "good-for-nothing" are still buzzing around in my head. I don't think he's interested in how my conversations went.

In the early morning I am picked up by Percy. He takes the suitcase from me and stows it in the trunk of the Rolls-Royce before he gets back in and we pick up Lydia. The partition is raised and the speaker is switched off, apparently he doesn't feel like talking to me. This suits me quite well, because I can look at Ruby's list again. I don't know how realistic what is written on it really is, but at least it will always remind me of last night.

I've put on the gray shirt Ruby has been wearing until this morning, and her smell sticks to me. I feel like I can still taste her on my tongue, and I get goosebumps when I think of the way she moaned my name. I definitely want to repeat that. Preferably immediately.

When Lydia gets into the car with me, she immediately sees that something has changed. With narrowed eyes, she looks down at me and up again into my face. Then a knowing grin spreads across her face. "You look like you've had a great night." She knows me too well.

I fold the list back up and put it back in my wallet. It replaces the fuck card that I tore up and threw away while I was still in the dormitory.

"Will I get details?"

The question surprises me. Even though Lydia recently confided in me about Mr. Sutton, we're not exactly open with each other when it comes to our love life.

I look at her skeptically. "Since when have you been interested in what I do at night?"

She shrugs her shoulders. "Since Ruby is the one you make out with."

The word "making out" seems to me to be absolutely inadequate for what is between Ruby and me. First, who says it was Ruby I spent the night with? And secondly, I thought you couldn't stand her."

Lydia rolls her eyes. "First of all, I'm not stupid. And secondly, I like them if you like them. Quite simply."

"That's good. I think you won't just see her at school in the future."

Lydia's mouth opens. "You're serious about her?"

I can't do anything about the smile that spreads on my face. The next moment, Lydia slaps my arm. "I don't believe it! James!"

"What?"

"If Dad finds out about it, he'll go crazy," she says, shaking her head. Her hand is still on my arm. She squeezes briefly. "But you look very happy. I'm happy for you."

I didn't know it would be like that. I didn't know what it felt like to be in love, or that just the thought of Ruby would make my heart race. I'd love to tell Percy to go straight to her, because I'm afraid I can't stand it a second longer without her.

"What's wrong with Percy?" asks Lydia suddenly, as if she had read my mind. She speaks more quietly than before and nods in the direction of the driver's cab.

"I don't know."

"He didn't even ask me how it went," she murmurs.

"You can tell me," I offer her, but Lydia wrinkles her nose.

"You're funny when you're in love."

I just grimace.

We spend the rest of the journey in amicable silence. Lydia is typing away on her phone, and I look out the window and think about last night.

When we get home, I walk around the car to help Percy with the suitcases. He stops me with a wave of his hand and looks at me seriously.

"You should go in, Mr. Beaufort." He hasn't spoken to me so harshly since I spilled Coke on the newly installed back seat at seven. Percy looks back and forth between me and Lydia, then swallows hard and turns to the suitcases. Lydia and I look at each other confused and walk up the steps to the entrance.

"What's the matter with him?" whispers Lydia, even though we're already out of earshot.

"I don't know. Have you talked to Dad since yesterday?"

She shakes her head, and I unlock the door and enter the entrance hall next to her. Lydia puts her bag down on the small table that stands directly behind the door when Mary, one of our domestic helpers, enters the hall. When she discovers us, she turns pale. I'm just about to greet her when she turns around and hurries towards the salon. Lydia and I exchange another look. Together we walk through the hall and into the room where Mary has run.

Dad is standing in front of the fireplace. He has his back turned to us, but I can see that he is holding a glass of light brown liquid in his hand, even though it is not even noon. The fire in the fireplace crackles softly, and Mary murmurs something to him before she disappears again with quick steps.

"Dad?" I ask.

He turns around, his face expressionless, as I'm used to. Nevertheless, I have an uneasy feeling when I see the rings under his eyes.

"Sit down." He points with his hand to the sofa with green velvet upholstery as he walks to the armchair right next to it.

I don't want to sit down. I want to know what the hell is going on here. Lydia takes a seat while I continue to stand in the entrance to the salon and stare at my father. He puts the glass on and downs the rest of the Scotch that is in it. Then he puts it down on the side table.

"Sit down, James." This is an order, no longer a request. But I can't move from the spot. The tension is too great. Something happened, I felt it the moment I entered the house.

"Where's Mum?" asks Lydia. She still sounds forcedly happy, as if she wants to mend the mood between Dad and me. But she must also know that something is wrong here.

"Your mother had a stroke."

My father sits leaning back in the armchair, his arms on the backrests and his legs crossed so that his ankle rests on his knee. His expression is steely. Unmoved. Just like always.

"That . . . what... what do you mean?" Lydia stammers.

"Cordelia had a stroke." He repeats the words as if he had rehearsed them. "She's dead."

Lydia puts her hands in front of her mouth and sobs. It seems to me that I am not really present. My mind has separated from my body, and I look at the scene from somewhere else entirely.

Dad continues to talk, but I only understand a few snippets of words.

Vessel burst ... arrived too late... Hospital... do nothing more for them.

His mouth moves, but his words mingle with the plaintive sound that Lydia utters. In addition, there is a sound. A fast and loud gasp.

I think it comes from me.

I press my hand firmly on my chest and try to suppress it. It doesn't work. I'm breathing faster and faster, but still can't seem to breathe. All the tips I've read about panic on the internet can't help me at this moment. My body switches to autopilot and causes me to break out in a cold sweat.

Mum is dead.

She's dead.

My father doesn't pull a face. Maybe it's a bad joke after all. As punishment for not being invited to Balliol.

"When?" I manage to breathe heavily. I'm getting dizzy. The ground beneath my feet is shaking. I have to hold on somewhere, but I don't know how to command my arms to move.

My father looks at me, his gaze is unfathomable. "On Monday afternoon."

My heart. It is guaranteed to stop or explode in my chest at any moment. At first I don't realize what my father has said because I'm too busy trying to get air into my lungs. But after a few choppy breaths, the meaning of his words reaches me.

On Monday afternoon.

Today is Wednesday.

"Let me sum this up," I manage in a trembling voice. "Mum had a stroke two days ago, and you're only telling us now?"

I shouldn't have to ask that question. I should rather go to my sister and take her in my arms. We should cry together. But it doesn't seem true to me. It still feels like this isn't really happening to me – it's happening to someone else who briefly gained power over my body, and I'm just watching. Powerless and completely stunned.

Dad drums his fingers on the back of the chair. "I didn't want you to spoil the interviews."

I can't explain what happens next. It's like a blazing bolt of lightning strikes my head. The next moment I jump up to my father and ram my fist into his face. My blow is so violent that the chair tips over backwards and my father and I fall to the ground. Lydia lets out a shrill scream. Something slams to the ground and splinters. Again my fist hits my father's indifferent visage. Blood spurts from his nose, and a bone in my hand crunches dangerously. There are shards all around us. My hand burns and throbs, but I still swing out again.

"James, stop!" screams Lydia.

Someone grabs me from behind and tears me away from my father. I fight against the firm grip like a wild animal. I want to make my father pay. For everything.

Dad gets up from the floor with Lydia's help. Blood runs from his nose and one corner of his mouth. He touches his face with his fingers and looks at the dark red. Then he looks at Percy, who is still holding me back. "Get him out of here until he calms down."

Percy pulls me around and drags me down the hallway. His arms are wrapped so tightly around my chest that I can't breathe at all. He drags me down the hallway, bumping into a chest of drawers and breaking something else. Only outside Percy drops me off again. I turn around and want to go back to the house immediately.

"Mr. Beaufort, stop," Percy says, grabbing me by the shoulders. I push his hands away and give him a thrust in the chest.

"Out of the way, Percy."

"No." His voice is determined, and his fingers dig firmly into the fabric of my jacket.

"He kept it from us. You didn't tell us," I manage to say. Again I push him. "My mother is dead, and you didn't tell me." The words feel like acid, and suddenly the burning is everywhere: in my mouth, my throat, my chest and my eyes. My vision blurs.

"My mother is dead."

A dull pain spreads rapidly through my body. It hurts so much. I don't think I can stand it. He brings me to my knees, and I still can't breathe properly. It has to stop. I have to silence this pain.

My hands shake so violently that they slip off Percy's jacket. The next moment I turn around and walk towards the garage.

"Mr. Beaufort!"

I make a defensive hand gesture. Percy follows me as I run into the garage. My feet carry me to my car. I dig the key out of my pants with trembling hands and tear open the driver's door. The edges of my field of vision are getting darker, and it feels like I'm going to tip over at any moment. All the same. Simply everything doesn't matter. I start the car. Percy stands right in front of it. That doesn't matter either. I press the accelerator pedal and he jumps out of the way at the last moment. I drive off with screeching tires while wiping my wet cheeks with the back of my hand.

Ruby

The doorbell rings just as I pull out a block of wood while playing Jenga. I cringe, and the twitch of my arm causes the whole tower to collapse. Mum, Dad, and Ember boo me, and I curse softly.

"You're out for the next round," says Mum, rubbing his hands. She is the best of us and hardly ever loses.

After telling my family about my trip and showing them a little Oxford slideshow on my laptop, we had dinner together and then decided to have an afternoon of games. This is now our third round of Jenga – and I've already lost twice. I admit my defeat and get up. While the others start to stack the small wooden parts on top of each other again, I go to the door. My eyes widen when I see who is standing there. "Lydia?"

She looks devastated. Her cheeks are flushed and her eyes are swollen. I take a step towards her, but she immediately raises a hand to stop me. "Is James here?"

I shake my head. "No. What happened?" I ask, alarmed.

Lydia doesn't seem to hear me properly. She takes her cell phone out of her jacket pocket and dials a number before holding it to her ear. I go outside to her in socks and grab her arm. I look at her insistently. "What happened?"

She just shakes her head.

"Cy? "It's me," she says suddenly. Is James with you?"

When Cyril says something on the other end of the phone, relief spreads across her face. "Thank God."

Again, I hear Cyril's voice on the other end, but I don't understand what he's saying. Whatever it is – it ensures that Lydia's expression darkens again.

"Okay. No, I'm coming." He says something else, and Lydia gives me a quick look. "Yes. See you soon."

After she hangs up, she wants to turn around and walk back to the car Percy is leaning against. He also looks so worried that a queasy feeling

spreads through my stomach.

"Lydia, please tell me what happened," I repeat.

She stops and glances over my shoulder. "I can't."

"Let me come with you," I say suddenly.

She opens her mouth and closes it again. "I don't think that's a good idea."

I make a gesture that she should wait for a moment. Then I run back into the house, slip into my boots, grab my coat and the knitted scarf Dad made me. I call out to my family that I have to leave for a moment and take my key from the hook next to the front door. As I walk, I wrap the scarf around my neck. Lydia looks as if she would like to hold me back, but simply can't muster the strength to do so.

Without another word, she disappears into the car. I greet Percy, who nods to me curtly, then I get into the car as well. Lydia sits in the seat that James usually occupies. Her gaze is glazed over, and she fiddles with the hem of her red coat. I would like to reach for her hand, but I don't dare.

"The offer is still standing. If you want to talk, I mean," I say quietly.

Lydia flinches as if I had yelled at her. She looks up, and tears shimmer in her eyes. With every second in her presence, the sinking feeling in my stomach gets worse. What must have happened that she is so devastated. Suddenly a terrible thought comes to me. I take a look up. The red light doesn't light up, which means Percy can't hear us. I lean forward a bit.

"Is everything okay with the baby?" I whisper.

Lydia glances at the driver's cab in panic, but the partition wall is also raised. Then she turns back to me. "Yes," she says in a hoarse voice. "We had at home—" She pauses and seems to think about how much she can confide in me. "There was an argument."

Since James told me about his father last night, I can get an idea of what "strife" means in the Beaufort house. Goosebumps cover my whole body.

"Is James okay, Lydia?" I whisper, unable to suppress the panic in my voice.

Lydia shrugs her shoulders helplessly. "Cyril says yes."

The next quarter of an hour feels like an eternity. I claw my fingers into the hem of my jacket and try not to go crazy with worry. I don't know what all this is supposed to mean, and Lydia avoids my gaze and just

strokes her belly, lost in thought. Every now and then she blinks violently, as if she wants to prevent tears. Once her cell phone vibrates. When she reads the message, she presses her lips tightly together and afterwards no longer seems at all as if she wants to talk.

When she arrives at Cyril's house, Lydia jumps out of the car and hurries to the front door. She slips on the icy stairs, and I get to grab her arm at the last moment so that she doesn't fall. She thanks her with a murmur.

Cyril is already standing in the doorway. When Lydia arrives at his place, he greets her with outstretched arms. "Look at who enriches the party with his presence."

He takes her in his arms, but she just stands there and lets it go over her like a lifeless doll. It takes a while for Cyril to break away from her. Then he discovers me. "And you even brought a plus-one with you. How nice." He utters the last words in a tone that leaves no doubt that he actually means exactly the opposite. Then he takes a step to the side, and we enter. Already here you can hear the booming music that is played further back in the house. Cyril still has an arm wrapped around Lydia's shoulder. I wonder if he knows what happened or is just tactful enough not to talk to Lydia about it.

We cross the hall through which I also walked last time. This time there are no guests on the gallery, the party seems to take place completely in the salon. As we enter, music blares at us, and I look around. It's not as crowded as the last time I was here. In fact, the party is quite manageable. I don't know why, but that only makes me more restless. A few people I don't know are dancing in their underwear in the middle of the room. Alistair sits on one of the sofas and smooches around with a tattooed, beefy guy. Further back at the drinks cart I discover Kesh, who watches the two with narrowed eyes and empties his glass in one gulp.

My neck starts to tingle ... and then I discover James. He sits on one of the sofas near the pool. My shoulders stiffen as I let my gaze wander over him. He looks completely exhausted. His hair is disheveled, the sleeves of his shirt are rolled up, and I can see a few red spots on his gray shirt—the shirt I wore last night. My heart is sinking into my pants.

I'm just about to go to him, when I see him bending over. He tilts his head over the table, presses one side of his nose shut with one finger and pulls up a white substance through the other nostril. My mouth opens. He didn't just ...

A blonde girl, who looks vaguely familiar to me, climbs out of the pool and strolls towards James. She bends a finger and gestures for him to come to her. He stands up and tilts his head. She walks the last meter towards him and stops close to him. Then she raises her hands and begins to unbutton his shirt. At that moment I recognize her. The girl groping my boyfriend is Elaine Ellington. A cold shiver chases down my spine, and I feel a painful stinging in my stomach. I'm frozen.

"How long has he been like this?" asks Lydia Cyril.

"Since noon today. He shot himself completely."

Lydia lets out a hissing curse. The two continue to talk, but I can't hear them over the noise in my ears. Elaine pulls James' shirt off his shoulders until it falls to the floor. Then she starts working on his belt.

That's enough.

At this moment, my anger is greater than my fear of the water. In a few long steps I am with them.

"What the hell are you doing?" I hiss.

James turns his head to me, but he doesn't look at me, but right through me.

He seems completely foreign to me. His face is petrified, his pupils so huge that they take up most of his iris and I can no longer really see the extraordinary turquoise blue. His cheeks are pale and his eyes are rimmed with red.

This is not my James. It's the guy he was months ago, the guy who bribes people with money, gets drunk with his friends every weekend, and gets laid one girl after another. It's the guy who doesn't feel anything and doesn't care about anything.

"James," I whisper and take his hand. His skin is ice cold.

For a second, something flickers in his gaze. It is dark and consuming and seems to eat away at him from the inside out. He inhales audibly, closes his eyes briefly – and when he opens them again, the expression has disappeared again. "You have no business here, Ruby."

"But I—"

While I'm still talking, he turns around and jumps into the pool. The loud splashing makes me flinch. Small splashes of water land on my face, and I take a leap back. Elaine and a few other guests, dressed only in underwear, follow James into the water. Wren is also among them. He

bawls as he reappears and sprays James even wetter. He shakes the water out of his hair with a grin.

Just everything here feels unspeakably wrong. I'd love to talk to James, but that's not possible for various reasons. My fear doesn't allow me to get any closer to the water, and besides, I don't think you can say anything to him in this state that he understands. James seems so uninvolved. As if the world rushed past him and he just let himself be carried away in a daze.

Elaine moves towards James. He swims backwards until he reaches the wall, and she follows him with a smile. My heart beats faster and faster. I don't understand what's happening here. It seems like a bad dream to me. Under the water, I can see the blurred outline of her body pressing against his. She is now standing between his legs, leaning forward and whispering something in his ear. The two seem familiar. As if this wasn't the first time this has happened. Everything in me commands me to go there and drag her away from him, but I can't move. James doesn't do anything when Elaine takes his face between both hands and kisses him.

Something is splintering inside me. Small shards of glass penetrate my chest and make their way deeper into my interior until I can hardly breathe.

Suddenly, someone puts a hand on my shoulder. "Well, that's the James Beaufort I know," Cyril murmurs close to my ear.

I want to say: But it's not the James Beaufort I know.

You have no idea what he's really like.

He's my friend, you stupid asshole.

But that's not true. If James Beaufort were my friend, he wouldn't do that. If he were my friend, he would have come to me when there was a problem and confided in me instead of distracting himself from his pain with alcohol and drugs with his superficial friends. If he were my friend, there wouldn't be another girl's tongue stuck in his throat.

I turn on my heel. I slip on the wet ground, but just manage to catch myself. As fast as I can, I make my way through the salon. My footsteps bang on the floor of the huge hall as I run to the exit. I have to get out of here as soon as possible. Unfortunately, I don't think there's a place in the world where I can forget what just happened.

"Ruby!" calls Lydia behind me. I stop and look over my shoulder. When I see how desperate she is, a guilty conscience germinates in me.

"I'm really sorry that your family situation is so shitty, Lydia," I say in a trembling voice. "But I can't. Not like that, not after—" After what? After

I thought we had overcome exactly that? After we've slept together? I can't possibly tell her.

"He needs you now," she begs me.

I let out a bitter laugh and tilt my head back to look at the ceiling. This hall is so exaggeratedly decadent. Gold as far as the eye can see, priceless oil paintings, expensive antique vases – things that suddenly seem completely trivial to me. I turn around and continue my way through the hall until I finally arrive at the exit. Lydia calls something after me, but I don't hear her anymore.

When the heavy door closes behind me, I see it as a symbol.

For a brief moment, I really thought that this could work with James and me if we both wanted it enough. But now something becomes clear to me:

I will never be a part of his world.

Unfortunately, I only realize this now, when it is much too late.

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Thanksgiving

Many people were involved in the creation of Save Me, whom I would like to thank:

My husband Christian, who is at my side with words and deeds and always encourages me.

Jerome Scheuren, who applied to Oxford and was such a great help to me in plotting.

My test readers Laura Janßen, Ivy Bekoe and Saskia Weyel, whose comments were worth their weight in gold.

Kim Nina Ocker, the official book godmother of Ruby and James, for her infectious enthusiasm and the days of writing together.

My friends Lucie Kallies and Maren Haase, who always have an open ear for me and with whom life is so much more fun.

My agents Gesa Weiß and Kristina Langenbuch, who are a great support for me.

To my editor Stephanie Bublely for plotting together, for listening to my random flashes of inspiration, for dealing with K-Pop for me, and for working closely together on the lyrics. In addition, everlasting thanks to the entire team at LYX-Verlag, especially Ruza Kelava and Simon Decot, who made it possible for me to write this new series.

And finally, I would like to thank all readers for taking this book in their hands. You are wonderful and I'm sorry about the end ... luckily, Ruby and James' story will soon continue!

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Ruby and James' story
continues:

SAVE

MONA KASTEN

YOU

ROMAN

LYX

(to be published on 25.05.2018)

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This title has also been published as an audio book.

Original edition

Copyright © 2018 by Bastei Lübbe AG, Cologne

Text editing: Stephanie Bublely

Cover design: Sandra Taufer, Munich

Cover image: © Shutterstock/Shebeko

Typesetting and e-book: Greiner & Reichel, Cologne

ISBN 978-3-7363-0643-1

You can find us on the Internet at: www.lyx-verlag.de

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