

SAVE

MONA KASTEN

YOU

ROMAN

Content

1. [Title](#)
2. [About this book](#)
3. [Dedication](#)
4. [Playlist](#)
5. [Quote](#)
6. [1](#)
7. [2](#)
8. [3](#)
9. [4](#)
10. [5](#)
11. [6](#)
12. [7](#)
13. [8](#)
14. [9](#)
15. [10](#)
16. [11](#)
17. [12](#)
18. [13](#)
19. [14](#)
20. [15](#)
21. [16](#)
22. [17](#)
23. [18](#)
24. [19](#)
25. [20](#)
26. [21](#)
27. [22](#)
28. [23](#)
29. [24](#)
30. [25](#)
31. [26](#)

32. [27](#)
33. [28](#)
34. [29](#)
35. [30](#)
36. [Epilogue](#)
37. [Thanksgiving](#)
38. [The Author](#)
39. [The novels of Mona Kasten at LYX](#)
40. [Imprint](#)

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MONA BOX

Save You

Novel



LYX

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About this book

Ruby thought that she and James could master everything together. But when James' family is shaken by a heavy blow of fate, they have to admit that their love never really had a chance. Because instead of trusting her, James broke her heart. Ruby has so many questions. But she also knows that James' answers wouldn't change anything. They belong to different worlds, and the sooner Ruby returns to her old life, the better. Especially since her biggest goal – studying at Oxford – is now within reach and she can't afford any more distractions anyway. But forgetting James is anything but easy. It's not just the memories of their time together that always catch up with Ruby when she least expects it. There is also James, who knows that his behavior was unforgivable, and yet he does everything he can to win Ruby back. But can she dare to put her heart on the line again?

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For Kim

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Playlist

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

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All the promises that we made,
it means nothing.

GERSEY, IT MEANS NOTHING

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Lydia

James is drunk. Or drugged up. Or both.

He has not been properly responsive for three days. He doesn't do anything, except have a kind of permanent party in our salon, empty one bottle of alcohol after the other and pretend that nothing has happened. I don't understand how he can be like that. Apparently, he doesn't care at all that our family is now finally in ruins.

"I think that's his way of mourning."

I look at Cyril from the side. He is the only one who knows what happened. I told him the night James got drunk at his party and made out with Elaine in front of Ruby. Someone had to help me bring James home without Percy or Dad knowing what condition he was in. Since our families are close friends, Cy and I have known each other since childhood. And even though Dad made me promise not to tell anyone about the Mum thing before the official press release, I know that I can trust him and that he keeps the secret to himself – even from Wren, Keshav and Alistair.

Without his help, I would not have made it through the last few days. He has persuaded Dad to leave James alone for a few days and made it clear to the other boys that they shouldn't ask any questions for now. They stick to it, although I have the feeling that with each passing day it is harder for them to watch James destroy himself.

While my brother is doing everything he can to cloud his mind, I can only think about how things should go on for me now. My mum is dead. Graham's mother died seven years ago. The little boy growing inside me will not have a grandma.

Seriously. That's what's going through my head in a continuous loop. Instead of grieving, I ponder the fact that my baby will never experience the embrace of a loving grandmother. What's wrong with me?

But I can't do anything about it. The thoughts in my head take on a life of their own – one follows the next until I finally sink into horror scenarios and get so afraid of the future that I can't think of anything else. It's as if I've

been in shock for three days. Something probably broke terribly in both James and me when Dad told us what had happened.

"I don't know how to help him," I whisper as I watch James tilt his head back and empty his glass. It hurts to watch how much he suffers. He can't go on like this forever. At some point, he will have to face reality. And in my opinion, there is only one person in this world who can help him with this.

Once again, I take out my phone and dial Ruby's number, but she doesn't pick up again. I want to be mad at her, but I can't. If I had caught Graham with someone else, I wouldn't want to have anything to do with him or anyone in his environment.

"Are you calling her again?" asks Cy with a skeptical look at my phone. When I nod, he frowns disapprovingly. His reaction does not surprise me. Cyril is of the opinion that Ruby is nothing more than a gold digger who is after James' legacy. I know that's not true, but once Cyril has made up his mind about someone, it's hard to convince him otherwise. And as much as that frustrates me, I can't blame him. Because that's nothing more than his way of taking care of his friends.

"He doesn't listen to any of us. I think she could prevent him from going completely crazy." My voice sounds strange to my own ears. So cold and soundless – but it looks completely different inside me.

I can hardly stand upright in pain. It's as if someone has tied me up and I haven't been able to tie the knots of the ropes for days. As if my thoughts were moving in a carousel that doesn't want to stop and from which I just can't jump. Nothing seems to make sense anymore, and the more I fight against the helplessness growing in me, the more comprehensive it becomes.

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

At the thought of Mum's funeral, my throat tightens. I can't breathe anymore, my eyes start to burn. I hastily turn away, but Cyril notices.

"Lydia ..." he whispers and gently reaches for my hand.

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

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

The pale glow of the lamps illuminates the countless shelves on which time-honored leather-bound books stand. I lean on the shelves as I cross the room with shaky knees. At the very back of the window is an armchair covered in dark red velvet. Even as a child, this was my favorite place in our house. This is where I hid when I wanted to have my peace and quiet – from the boys, from my dad, from the expectations that the name Beaufort brings with it.

The sight of this little reading corner makes my tears flow even more violently. I let myself fall into the chair, pull my legs up and wrap my arms around them. Then I bury my face at the knees and cry softly.

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

While I wipe my eyes with one hand, I take my cell phone out of my pocket with the other. When I unlock the display, I discover nothing but black mascara traces on the back of my hand.

I go into my contacts. Graham is still stored directly under James in my favorites, even though I haven't spoken to him for months. He doesn't know anything about our baby, let alone that my mum died. I complied with his wish and did not call him again. Never in my life has anything been so

difficult for me. For more than two years, we had almost daily contact with each other – and then suddenly it stopped, from one day to the next. At the time, it seemed like cold turkey to me.

And now... I have a relapse. As if by magic, I dial his number and listen to the dial tone with bated breath. After a moment, it disappears. I close my eyes and try hard to hear whether he has taken off or not. At this moment, I have the feeling that I could drown in the lonely helplessness that I have felt for days.

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

But it is too late for that.

"Lydia?"

I sense the panic in his voice, but I can't say anything, just shake my head. My breath is uncontrolled and much too fast.

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

I always felt safe with Graham. For a long time he was my rock. I have him to thank for the fact that I was able to put the Gregg thing behind me at some point and look forward again.

And although I'm completely exhausted, this feeling of security is just fighting its way back up. Just hearing his voice helps me to become somewhat conscious. I don't know how long I've been sitting there like this, but little by little my tears are drying up.

"What's going on?" he finally whispers.

I can't answer. All I can do is make a helpless sound.

He remains silent for a minute. I can hear him inhale a few times, as if he wants to say something, but at the last moment he always holds back. When he finally speaks, his voice is low and painful: "There is nothing I would rather do than go to you now and be there for you."

I close my eyes and imagine him sitting in his apartment, at the old wooden table that looks like it would break apart at any moment. Graham describes it as "antique", but in reality he simply took it from the bulky waste and repainted it.

"I know," I whisper.

"But you know I can't, don't you?"

Something breaks in the salon. I hear the clinking of glass, and immediately afterwards someone shouts loudly. Whether it's out of pain or for fun, I can't say, but nevertheless I straighten up immediately. I can't let James get physically injured now.

"I'm sorry I called," I whisper in a broken voice and end the conversation.

My heart stings as I rise and leave the sheltered little corner to check on my brother.

Ember

My sister is sick.

Under normal circumstances, I would say that this is nothing unusual – after all, it's December, it's sub-zero temperatures outside, and no matter where you go, people sniffle and cough. So it's actually only a matter of time before you get infected.

Only – my sister is never ill. Really never.

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

Today is Saturday, and in the meantime I'm really worried. Ruby has hardly left her room. She lies in her bed, reads one book after the other and pretends that a cold is to blame for her red eyes. But she can't fool me. Something bad happened, and it drives me crazy that she doesn't tell me what.

At the moment, I'm watching her through the crack in the door as she stirs her soup without eating any of it. I can't remember ever having

experienced her like this before. Her face is pale, and there are bluish circles under her eyes that are getting darker with each passing day. Her hair is greasy and hangs down uncombed on both sides of her face, and she also wears the same baggy clothes as yesterday and the day before yesterday. Normally, Ruby is the definition of "ordered". Not only when it comes to their planner or the school, but also when it comes to their appearance. I didn't even know she had baggy clothes at all.

"Stop crouching in front of my door," she says suddenly, and I cringe when caught. I pretend that I wanted to enter her room anyway and push myself through the door.

Ruby looks at me with a raised eyebrow. Then she puts the soup next to the bed on the tray on which I brought it to her. I suppress a sigh.

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

"Don't force yourself."

With a frustrated sound, I sink onto the edge of her bed. "I have left you alone with all my difficulty in the last few days, because I have noticed that you are not particularly keen on talking, but ... I'm really worried about you."

Ruby pulls her blanket up to her chin so that only her head peeks out. Her gaze is cloudy and sad, as if what has happened is catching up with her at this moment with full force. But then she blinks and is back – or at least pretends to. Since last Wednesday, there has been a strange expression in her eyes. It seems to me that she is only physically present, but mentally somewhere else entirely.

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

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

"Lin is calling you," I murmur.

"I don't care," it comes back muffled.

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

My sister just grumbles.

Mum told me to give her time, but it's getting harder and harder every day to watch Ruby suffer. You don't have to be a genius to put one and one together and come to the conclusion that James Beaufort and his stupid friends probably have their fingers in the whole thing.

However, I thought that Ruby had long since ticked off the topic of Beaufort. So what happened? And when?

I tried to analyze the situation as Ruby would do in my place, and made a list in my mind:

1. Ruby was in Oxford for the applicant interviews.
2. When she came back, everything was still in perfect order.
3. In the evening, Lydia Beaufort showed up at our door, and Ruby disappeared with her.
4. After that, everything was different: Ruby hid away and hardly spoke a word since.
5. Why???

Ok. Ruby's list would probably be a lot more structured, but at least I've put things in a logical order and know: Whatever it was, it must have happened on Wednesday night.

But where did Lydia go with her?

My gaze wanders from Ruby, of whom only the hairline is now sticking out from under the blanket, to the cell phone and back again. He certainly won't miss her, I'm pretty sure of that.

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

When I close the door quietly behind me, I breathe a sigh of relief – and immediately have a guilty conscience. My gaze twitches to the wall, as if Ruby could see me from her bed. She will probably never speak a word to me again if she finds out that I have disregarded her privacy so much. At the same time, as a sister, it is also my duty to find out how I can help her. Or?

I go to my desk and sit down on the creaking chair. Then I take the cell phone out of my sleeve. My sister makes a huge secret of what's going on at school, but of course I know what kind of people she goes to Maxton Hall with: boys and girls whose parents are aristocrats, actors, politicians or entrepreneurs and have so much influence in our country that they are often mentioned in the news. I've been following a few of Ruby's classmates on Instagram for a while now and I've also noticed the rumors about them. Just the idea of what these people could have done to Ruby turns my stomach.

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

"Ruby," I hear Lin say breathlessly. "At last. How are you?"

"Lin—it's me, Ember," I interrupt before she can continue.

"Ember? What—"

"Ruby isn't doing very well."

Lin falls silent for a moment. Then she says slowly: "That's understandable, after what happened."

"What happened?" I burst out. "What the hell happened, Lin? Ruby doesn't talk to me, and I'm incredibly worried. Did Beaufort do something to her? If so, I'll be this toad—"

"Ember." Now she's the one who interrupts me. "What are you talking about?"

I furrow my forehead. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the fact that Ruby wrote to me on Wednesday that she had gotten along with James Beaufort, and I learned today that his mother died the Monday before."

Ruby

Ember is knocking on my door again.

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

"Ruby, Lin is on the phone."

Frowning, I pull the blanket off my face and turn around. Ember stands in front of my bed and holds a cell phone in her outstretched hand. I squint my eyes. This is my cell phone. And on the display, Lin's name shines at me.

"You took my cell phone?" I ask wearily. I feel how deep indignation wants to germinate inside me, but the feeling disappears just as quickly as it came. In the last few days, my body has felt like a black hole that has swallowed up any emotions before they have even had a chance to reach me.

Nothing really gets through to me anymore, I don't feel like anything. Getting out of my bed exhausts me every time as if I had run a marathon, I haven't gone down the stairs for three days. Since I've been visiting Maxton Hall, I haven't missed a day of class, but just the idea of showering, getting dressed and being around people for six to ten hours overwhelms me. Not to mention that I couldn't bear to see James. I would probably collapse like a withered flower at the sight of him. Or I would burst into tears.

"Tell her I'll call her back," I murmur. My voice is scratchy because I have spoken so little in the last few days.

Ember doesn't budge. "But you should talk to her now."

"But I don't want to talk to her now." What I want is a little time to get back on my feet. Three days are not enough to ask Lin and her questions. I only wrote her a short message on Wednesday. She doesn't know exactly what happened between me and James at Oxford, and I don't have the strength to tell her about it at the moment. Or of what happened afterwards. I would like to forget the whole last week and pretend that everything is as

usual. Unfortunately, this is not possible as long as I don't even manage to get out of my bed.

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

I scowl at Ember, but when I see her determined expression, I know I've lost. She won't disappear from my room until I talk to Lin. In some things we are just too similar, and stubbornness is definitely one of them.

Resigned, I stretch out my hand and take the cell phone.

"Lin?"

"Ruby, sweetie, we need to talk urgently."

Her tone of voice tells me that she knows.

She knows what James did.

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

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

"I don't want to talk about James," I croak. "I don't ever want to talk about him again, okay?"

For a moment, Lin is completely silent. Then she takes a deep breath. "Ember told me you left with Lydia on Wednesday night."

I don't say anything, but just fiddle around with my free hand on the hem of my blanket.

"Did you find out there?"

I let out a soundless laugh. "What do you mean? That he's an asshole?"

Lin sighs. "Has Lydia really not told you anything?"

"What was she supposed to have told me?" I ask hesitantly.

"Ruby... Did you see my message just now?"

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

Lin takes a deep breath. "Then you really don't know yet."

"What don't I know yet?"

"Ruby, are you sitting?"

I sit up in bed.

You don't ask anyone this question unless something absolutely terrible has happened. All of a sudden, the image of James together with

Elaine, stoned in this pool, is replaced by a much more gruesome image. James, who crashed and injured himself. James, who is in hospital.

"What's going on?" I croak.

"Cordelia Beaufort died last Monday."

It takes me a moment to realize what Lin just said.

Cordelia Beaufort died last Monday.

An unbearable silence spreads between us.

James' mother is dead. Since Monday.

I remember our intimate kisses, his hands restlessly running over my naked body, the overwhelming feeling when he was inside me.

It's impossible that James already knew that evening – that night. Even he is not such a good actor. No, he and Lydia must have found out for themselves on Wednesday.

I hear Lin speaking, but I can't concentrate on her words. I am too busy in my mind to ask myself whether it can really be that Mortimer Beaufort concealed from his children for two days that their mother had died. And if so, how terrible must James and Lydia have felt when they came home on Wednesday and found out?

I remember Lydia's swollen, red eyes when she stood at my door and asked if James was with me. Of the empty and emotionless look with which James looked at me. And the moment when he jumped into the pool and destroyed everything that had been created between us the night before.

A painful throbbing spreads through my body. I take the cell phone off my ear and turn on the speaker. Then I click through my messages. I open the history that appears under an unknown number. Three unread messages open:

Ruby. I'm so sorry. I can explain everything to you.

Please come back to Cyril or tell me where you are so Percy can pick you up.

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

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

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

Silence spreads between us again. Thousands of thoughts are swirling around in my head at once. Nothing seems to make sense anymore. Nothing

but this one feeling that comes over me so suddenly and violently that the next words bubble out of me as if by themselves: "I have to go to him."

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

"Rats like that," Lin murmurs, bringing her car to a stop a few meters in front of them. Immediately the reporters start moving and come running towards us.

Lin leans forward and presses the button that locks the car doors from the inside. "Call Lydia to open the gate."

I am so grateful that she is by my side at this moment and keeps a clear head. She asked me, without even a second's hesitation, if she should drive me, and was standing in front of my house less than half an hour after our phone call. Any doubt about how deep Lins and my friendship goes has vanished into thin air at that moment.

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

It takes a few seconds for Lydia to pick up.

"Hello?" Her voice sounds just as nasal as on Wednesday evening when we drove together to Cyril's house.

"I am standing in front of your house. Could you open the gate?" I ask, trying to cover my face with one arm at the same time. I don't know if this has the desired effect. The reporters are now standing directly at Lin's car and shouting questions to us that I don't understand.

"Ruby? What...?"

Someone starts banging on my window. Lin and I flinch violently.

"As soon as possible, perhaps?"

"Wait a minute," Lydia replies, then hangs up.

It takes about half a minute until the gate opens and someone approaches our car. Only when the person is only a few meters away from us do I recognize him.

It's Percy.

The sight of the chauffeur makes my heart skip a beat. Without warning, memories come over me. Memories of a day in London that started beautifully but ended badly. And of a night when James lovingly

took care of me because his friends had misbehaved and pushed me into a pool.

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

"Go through the gate to the front of the house, miss. These people are liable to prosecution if they enter the property. They will not follow you."

Lin nods, and after Percy gets the reporters to move aside, she steers the car onto the sprawling property. In terms of its width and length, the driveway is actually more like a country road surrounded by a park-like green area covered in frost. In the distance, I can make out a large house: it is rectangular and consists of two floors and several gables. The gray slate hipped roof is just as dreary as the rest of the façade, which was built of brick but clad in granite. Despite the desolation that the house conveys, you can see at first glance that wealthy people live in it. I think it fits Mortimer Beaufort because it looks cold and so massive. However, I can hardly imagine Lydia and James in it.

Lin steers the car across the courtyard and stops behind a black sports car parked on the side of the house in front of a garage entrance.

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

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

"Thank you for bringing me here," I manage breathlessly. I don't know what to expect in this house. The fact that Lin is with me takes away some of my fear and is incredibly good for me. Three and a half months ago, this would have been unthinkable – back then, I kept my personal life strictly separate from my school life and told Lin next to nothing personal. All that has changed. Especially through James.

"That's a matter of course." She grabs my hand and squeezes it briefly.

"Thank you," I whisper again.

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

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

She bites her lower lip hard and lowers her gaze to the floor. At this moment, I don't care that we don't actually know each other well or are close in any way. I stumble up the last step and hug her. Her body starts

shaking as soon as I wrap my arms around her, and I can't help but think of Wednesday. If I had known what had happened and how bad she was, there was no way I would have left her alone.

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

Lydia claws her fingers into my sweater and buries her face on my collarbone. I hold her tightly and caress her back as I feel her tears soaking my sweater. I can't imagine what must be going on in her mind at this moment. If my mother were to die... I don't know how I'm going to survive that.

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

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

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

She shakes her head. "Just make sure my brother becomes himself again. He is completely beside himself. I—" Her voice is scratchy and hoarse from crying, and she has to clear her throat before she can continue. "I've never seen him like this before. He's destroying himself, and I just don't know how to help him."

At her words, my heart begins to beat painfully. The need to see James and to hug him like Lydia is overwhelming – even if I dread the encounter.

"Where is he?"

"Cyril and I have taken him to his room. He fell over just now."

I wince at her words.

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

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

Lydia and I walk up the wide dark brown wooden stairs together. I notice that it looks much friendlier in the Beauforts' house than it seems from the outside. The foyer is bright and inviting. Although there are no family photos on the walls like in our country, at least no oil paintings of

family members who have died centuries ago in golden frames like in the Vegas. The pictures that have been placed here are colorful and impressionistic, and even if they don't make a particularly personal impression, they convey a welcome atmosphere.

At the top we turn into a hallway that is darker and so long that I inevitably wonder what is hidden behind all the doors we pass. And how it is possible that only one family lives here.

"Here we are," Lydia murmurs suddenly and stops in front of a large door. We both stare at it for a moment, then she turns to me. "I know it's a lot to ask, but I feel like he really needs you right now."

I can hardly sort out my thoughts and feelings. My body seems to know that James is behind the door – I'm attracted to him like a magnet. And even though I'm not sure if I can help him in the way Lydia hopes, I still want to be there for him.

Lydia touches my arm briefly. "Ruby... There was nothing between James and Elaine but this kiss."

I stiffen.

"James came out of the pool immediately afterwards and collapsed on a chair. I know he can be cruel, but—"

"Lydia," I interrupt.

»... he was not himself."

I shake my head. "That's not the reason why I came here."

I can't think about that at the moment. Because if I do that – if I allow myself to think about James and Elaine – the anger and the disappointment will prevail, and then I won't be able to walk through that door.

"I can't hear that right now."

For a moment, Lydia looks as if she wants to contradict, but finally she just sighs. "I just wanted you to know that."

Then she turns around and walks back down the long hallway to the stairwell. I watch her until she arrives at the stairs, where a long trail of light is cast on the expensive carpet. When she has completely disappeared from my field of vision, I turn back to the door.

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

With bated breath, I stand on the threshold of James's room.

The space has high ceilings and is sure to encompass the size of the entire upper floor of our tiny townhouse. To my right is a desk with a brown leather chair in front of it. To my left are shelves on the wall, filled with book covers, notebooks, and in between a few fictional figures that remind me of the ones I saw in the branch at Beaufort back then. Besides the door I just came through, there are two more on either side of the room. They are made of solid wood, and I suspect that one leads into the bathroom, the other – slightly smaller – into James' wardrobe. In the middle of the room is a sitting area with a sofa, a living room table on a Persian rug and a wing chair.

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

I spotted James immediately.

He lies in bed, above him a dark gray blanket that covers a large part of his body. Carefully I approach until I can see his face.

Panting, I gasp for air.

I thought James was sleeping... but his eyes are open. And his gaze sends an ice-cold shiver down my spine.

James' eyes – usually always so expressive – are lifeless. His face is completely empty.

I take another step towards him. He does not react, gives no sign that he has noticed my presence. Instead, he stares right through me. His pupils are unnaturally dilated, and the smell of alcohol is heavy in the air. Involuntarily, I have to think of Wednesday evening, but I push back the memory. I didn't come here to think about my hurt feelings. I came here because James lost his mum. No one should go through something like this alone. Especially not someone who – despite everything – cares so much about me.

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

"Hey, James," I whisper.

He flinches as if he had fallen in a dream and now hit the ground painfully. The next moment he turns his head slightly in my direction. There are dark circles under his eyes, his hair hangs stringy in his forehead. His

lips are dry and cracked in some places. He looks as if he has only been eating alcohol for days.

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

Carefully I raise my hand and brush the reddish-blond strands out of James' forehead. I gently run my fingertips down his cheek and place my palm on his cold face. It feels like I'm holding something infinitely fragile in my hand.

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

James' breath hitches.

For a moment we are frozen in this position, none of us dares to move.

Then I sit up again and withdraw my hand.

The next second, James grabs me by the hips. He claws into it with his fingers and literally rushes forward. I am so frightened by the sudden movement that I freeze. James wraps his arms around me and buries his face at the crook of my neck. His whole body is shaken by a deep sobbing.

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

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

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

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

3

James

The walls are turning. I don't know where up and down is, I can only feel that Ruby's hands are there and anchor me halfway in reality. She sits on my bed, her back leaning against the headboard, while I lie half on top of her. Her arm is wrapped tightly around me, she gently strokes my head with her hand. All I focus on is the warmth of her body, her steady breath and her touch.

I have no idea how many days have passed in the meantime. As soon as I try to remember anything, there is nothing but fog. Dense gray fog and two thoughts that penetrate me again and again in short moments of clarity:

First: My mum is dead.

Second, I kissed another girl in front of Ruby.

No matter how much alcohol I pour into myself or what I take, I will never forget Ruby's expression at that moment. She looked so incredulous and hurt. As if I had destroyed their world.

I bury the face again at Ruby's waist. On the one hand, because I'm afraid that she will get up and leave at any moment. On the other hand, because I'm afraid that the tears will come back at any moment. However, neither of these things happens. Ruby stays, and I obviously have no liquid left in me that I can do without.

I have the feeling that there is nothing left in me at all. Maybe my soul died along with my mother. How else could I have done this to Ruby?

How could I do this to Ruby?

What's wrong with me?

What the hell is wrong with me?

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

With her words, I realize that I have actually stopped breathing. I'm not sure how long it has been.

I take a deep breath and slowly let it escape again. Not so difficult.

"What will happen to me?" Whispering these words is so exhausting that it feels like I've yelled them.

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

"But why?"

I just forgot to breathe – now my breathing is much too fast. I sit up jerkily. My chest hurts, as do my limbs, which feel like I've exercised too much. In the last few days, I have done nothing but suppress what is happening to my life right now.

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

"Why I'm sad, I mean. I didn't even like my mum very much."

Even before I have spoken the words, I freeze. Did I really just say that?

Ruby grabs my hand and holds it tightly. "You have lost your mother. It's normal to be completely exhausted when someone so important to you dies."

She doesn't sound as confident and convinced as usual. I think Ruby herself has no idea how to behave in such a situation. The fact that she is still here and tries almost seems like a dream to me.

Maybe it even is.

"What happened here?" she whispers suddenly, carefully raising my right hand.

I follow her gaze. My knuckles are still bloodied where they burst, the rest of the skin is full of red and blue spots.

Maybe it's not a dream after all. Or if so, then a very realistic one.

"I beat my father." The words come out of my mouth without any judgment. I don't feel anything when I say it. Something else wrong with me. After all, every halfway normal person knows that you never raise your hand against your parents. But that moment when my father broke the news of Mum's death to Lydia and me – so toneless and cold – that was the moment when I just couldn't take it anymore.

Ruby raises my hand to her mouth and presses her lips to the back of my hand. My heart starts beating faster, and a tremor goes through my body. Her touch feels so good, even if her gentleness kills me. Everything about it feels wrong and right at the same time.

My parents drummed into me as a child that I shouldn't let my feelings show. That's how people get to know you and can assess you from a certain point. As soon as you show weakness, you make yourself vulnerable – and you can't afford that as a managing director of a large company. But they

didn't prepare me for such a situation. What do you do when you lose your mother at the age of eighteen? For me, there was only one answer to this: They try to suppress the truth with alcohol and drugs and pretend that none of this has happened.

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

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

But there's one thing I know for sure: Ruby doesn't deserve my behavior. She always gave me the feeling that I could do anything. And no matter what happened... I should never have let Elaine kiss me just to prove to myself and everyone else that I'm an emotionally cold asshole who doesn't care – not even the death of my mother. Pushing Ruby away from me in this way was cowardly. And it was the biggest mistake I've ever made in my life.

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

Ruby's entire body stiffens. Minutes pass in which she does not move. I think she even stopped breathing.

"Ruby—"

She just shakes her head. "Don't. That's not why I'm here."

"I know what a mistake I made, I—"

"James, stop," she whispers urgently.

"I know you have no reason to forgive me. But I—"

Ruby's hand trembles as she pulls it away from me. Then she gets up from the bed. She first smooths her sweater and then pushes her bangs down. It seems as if she wants to restore her neat appearance, the one with which she did not attract my attention for two years. Far too much has happened between us for that. There is nothing that could ever make her invisible to me again.

"I can't do that now, James," she murmurs. "I'm sorry."

The next moment she crosses my room. She doesn't turn to me again and doesn't look at me as she leaves my room and quietly closes the door behind her.

I clench my teeth tightly as the burning sensation returns behind my eyes and my shoulders begin to shake again.

I don't know how long I've been lying in my bed staring at the wall, but at some point I pull myself together and go downstairs. It's long since gotten dark outside, and I wonder if the boys are still here at all. Just before I enter the salon, I can hear their quiet voices. The door is open a crack, and I pause with my hand on the handle.

"That's not normal anymore," Alistair murmurs. "If he continues like this, he will eventually drink himself into a coma. I don't understand why he doesn't talk to us."

"I wouldn't have the nerve to talk in his situation either." Keshav. It doesn't surprise me that he, of all people, says that.

"But you also know your limits. I'm not so sure about James anymore."

"We shouldn't have let it get this far," Wren chimed in. "Until yesterday, I really thought he just wanted to celebrate Oxford."

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

Alistair snorts. "And continue to watch him destroy himself? Hardly."

"You can take the alcohol and drugs away from him," Wren murmurs. "But his mother is dead. And as long as he doesn't accept that, we're powerless, as shitty as that is."

An ice-cold shiver runs down my spine. You already know. The idea of having to look into their pitying faces right away turns my stomach. I don't want that. I want everything to be the same as before. But if Ruby's visit showed me one thing, it's that now is the time to face it.

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

Alistair is about to reply, but presses his lips tightly together when he spots me. I go straight to the drinks cart and get out a bottle of whiskey. I can't get through what I'm about to do sober. I pour myself a glass full and drink it in one gulp. Then I turn it off and turn to the boys. Everyone except Cyril is present. Alistair swirls the last remnant of liquid in his glass back and forth, his gaze fixed on the floor. Kesh looks at me with dark eyes, just like Wren. Although they already know it, it feels important to say the following words out loud:

"My mum's dead."

It's the first time I've said that.

And it hurts even more than I expected. Even alcohol can't do anything about it. That's exactly why I avoided talking to them. Talking only causes more pain. I avert my gaze and stare at my shoes so as not to have to watch her reactions. I have never felt so vulnerable as I did in this second.

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

Tired, I let my forehead sink onto his shoulder. My arms are heavy as lead, and I can't return the hug. Nevertheless, Wren won't let me go. Shortly afterwards, Kesh and Alistair also come to us and put their hands on my shoulders.

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

"This sucks," Alistair murmurs and sits down next to me. "And I'm so sorry, James."

I can't manage to return his gaze or say anything in response, so I just nod.

"What happened?" asks Kesh after a while.

I sip my glass hesitantly. The cold water is surprisingly good. "You... she had a stroke while we were at Oxford."

Be silent. I don't think any of the boys even take a breath. They may have known that Mum died, but this information is obviously new to them.

"My father didn't tell us until we were back here. He didn't want us to mess up the interviews." When I remember the conversation with Dad, I feel cold. I look at my blue hand, clench it into a fist and loosen it again.

Wren puts a hand on my shoulder. "We suspected that something bad must have happened," he murmurs after a while. "I've never seen you like this before. But Lydia didn't say anything, and you were hardly responsive —"

Keshav clears his throat. "There was a press release from Beaufort this afternoon. That's when we found out."

I swallow hard. "I just didn't want to think. Above... nothing at all."

"It's okay, James," Wren says quietly.

"And I was afraid that it would become reality if I said it."

Finally I raise my eyes and look into the affected faces of my friends. Keshav's eyes gleam suspiciously, while Alistair's cheeks no longer have any color. I didn't consider at all that my boys had known my mum since childhood and that the news of her death would probably take them with them as well. Suddenly I realize how selfish my reaction was. Not only did I ignore reality and hurt Ruby, but I also pushed my friends and Lydia away from me with my actions.

"You'll get through this. You're going to get through this," says Wren. I follow his gaze and discover Cyril and Lydia standing in the doorway. Lydia's cheeks and eyes are reddened. I certainly look the same.

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

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

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Lydia

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

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

I look at my reflection. Dad's funeral planner not only took care of everything organizational, but also made sure that Dad, James and I were prepared by a stylist this morning. "Waterproof mascara – it'll help you get through today, sweetie," the young woman chirped.

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

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

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

"No," I answer Percy's question after what feels like an eternity, but I turn around anyway and walk briskly to the exit. Percy follows me in silence. At the cloakroom, he wants to help me into my coat, but I turn away from him. His gaze is so compassionate that I can't stand it at this moment, so I slip into my sleeves on my own and then step outside. The entire forecourt of our property is covered in frost, which glistens slightly in the sun. Carefully I walk down the steps of the entrance stairs and to the

black limousine parked directly in front of it. Percy opens the door for me, and I thank him before I get in and fall into the back seat next to James.

The mood in the car is depressed. Neither James nor my father, who is sitting on the bench to the side of us, take notice of me. While I am wearing a black sheath dress with flounces on the long sleeves, they are both dressed in black suits that were made especially for this day. The dark color of the fabric makes my brother look even paler than he already is. The stylist tried to put a little color on his face, but it didn't work. In Dad's case, on the other hand, the make-up has worked wonders: there is no longer any sign of the bruises around his eye.

I shake my head as I look at the two of them. My family is a shambles.

The drive to the cemetery passes me by as if in a frenzy. I try to do the same as my father and brother and mentally move to another place, but that's impossible from the moment we come to a stop and Percy curses quietly.

The entrance to the cemetery is besieged by reporters.

I squint at James, but his face is completely blank as he puts on his sunglasses and waits for the door of the car to open. I swallow hard and pull the coat tighter. Then I put my own sunglasses on my nose. The sight of the jostling reporters makes me really sick. I try to breathe in deeply through my nose and then exhale through my mouth.

Two of the security men hired by Julia help us get out. My knees are soft and shaky, and as we walk to the chapel, it feels like I'm in shock. The journalists and paparazzi call after us, but apart from my and James' name, I don't understand any of their words. I ignore her and walk on with my shoulders toned at a fast pace. Arriving at the chapel, employees of the cemetery open the doors for us so that we can enter without waiting.

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

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

"Aunt Ophelia?" I croak and take a step towards her.

She turns around. Ophelia is five years younger than Mum, and even though her features are softer and her facial expression is not so serious, you can see at first glance that she is her sister.

"Lydia." In her eyes I can see the same deep sadness that I have felt for days.

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

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

The funeral procession is accompanied by over a dozen security people who walk alongside us and make sure that the reporters don't get too close to us. Most of them are tactful enough to position themselves at the edge of the path, but some hold the cameras so close to our faces that I would only have to stretch out my hand to touch them.

After a while, I look at James, who is walking next to me, staring stoically at our father's back. His face is set in stone, hard and expressionless, and I wish I could look into his eyes. Then perhaps I would know what is going on in his mind. I wonder if he was coking or drinking before we came here. In the last few days – to be precise, since the evening Ruby was with us – he has withdrawn completely and has not spoken to me or the boys. I can't blame him. We tick the same way in many ways. I, too, could have needed something to help me get through those seemingly endless, terrible days.

During the never-ending eulogy in the chapel, I mentally disengaged. If I had listened to what the pastor said about Mum, I would probably have collapsed. Instead, I put up an invisible wall between myself and my emotions and focused only on not sobbing out loud. I can imagine how my father would have found that.

I try to conjure up this wall again when we finally come to a stop in front of Mum's grave. I stare at the black hole dug into the ground, consistently pushing any emotion away from me. For a moment, I believe it

works. The pastor begins to speak again, but I don't listen and don't think about anything.

But when the coffin is lowered into the grave, I suddenly have the feeling that I can't breathe anymore. It feels like something powerful, dark is rising inside me that is constricting my throat. All the thoughts that I have tried to suppress in the last hour fight their way to the surface of my consciousness.

Mum's lifeless body lies in this coffin.

She will not come back.

She's dead.

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

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

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

It costs me my last strength to pull myself together. I try not to think about Mum. Of the fact that I can never ask her for advice again. Of the fact that she will never bring me tea in my room again if I have sat at my desk for too long and studied for school. Of the fact that she will never hug me again. In the fact that she will never meet her grandchild. The fact that I'm completely alone and I'm afraid of losing James and Dad as well, because our family is falling apart a little bit more every day.

A soft sob frees itself from my throat. I press my trembling lips together tightly so as not to make another noise.

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

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

"Fuck Dad," he whispers to me. "If you want to cry, please wine. Okay?"

This familiarity in his eyes and the honesty of his words ensure that the wall in me finally goes to pieces. I allow the feelings inside me to turn into a whirlwind, because James is there to hold me. He puts an arm around my shoulder and pulls me close to his side. I bury the face on his chest. It feels like home, and my heavy heart becomes a little lighter. While my tears fall inexorably on his coat, we watch together as the coffin is lowered further and further until it has reached the bottom.

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Ruby

I'm going back to school on Wednesday. I took a break for over a week and am now feeling the consequences. Although Lin provided me with her notes on the weekend, I have difficulty following the lessons. Twice I am called up in history and cannot give a reasonable answer. While I stare at my planner in dismay, Mr. Sutton hardly seems to notice. He looks as if he is completely beside himself and his thoughts are somewhere else. I wonder if he thinks about Lydia as much as I do about James.

When the morning is over, I'm exhausted. I would like to sit down in the library and look at the material again for the following hours, but my stomach growls too much to skip lunch.

On the way to the cafeteria, Lin hooks up with me. "Are you okay?" she asks, glancing sideways at me.

"I'll never miss a single day again," I grumble as we walk together in the direction of the cafeteria. "It's the most terrible feeling in the world when you have no idea what the teachers want from you."

Lin pats my arm. "You've done well. Next week at the latest, you'll have caught up again."

"Mh," I say as we turn. "Nevertheless it was—"

I pause on the heel.

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

The stairs where James kissed me for the first time.

The memory of how he put his hand around my neck and pressed his lips to mine comes over me without warning. It plays like a movie in my mind's eye: his mouth gliding over mine, his hands holding me, his confident movements that make my knees go soft. But suddenly my face begins to change – it deforms until it is completely transformed. James no longer holds me, but Elaine in his arms and kisses her passionately.

A violent stabbing goes into my stomach, and it costs me a lot of effort not to curl up.

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

I take a deep breath. This whole school day has been nothing but a roller coaster ride so far. Every time I go up and arrive at the ridge – thinking that everything is normal and I can do it somehow – I suddenly see something that reminds me of James and am pulled back into the depths, into a whirlpool of pain.

"Ruby?" says Lin next to me, judging by her worried expression, not for the first time in the last few minutes. "Are you okay?"

I force a smile on my face and nod.

Lin frowns, but doesn't press further. Instead, she does what she has been trying to do all morning: distract me. As she leads me to the entrance of the cafeteria, she tells me about the new series of Tsugumi Ohba and Takeshi Obata that she has devoured. She is so enthusiastic about it that I immediately take out my bullet journal and put the manga on my reading list.

After we finish eating, we take our trays to the dishes return. Leaning against the wall next to it is a girl I don't know. She is talking to a guy, but falls silent when she sees me. Her eyes get big, and she rams her elbow into his side – not even particularly inconspicuously. I try to ignore the two.

"Aren't you the girl who was thrown into the pool at Cyril Vega's party?" she asks, taking a step towards me.

I wince at her words. For me, this damn pool is only associated with horrible memories that I would like to have removed from my brain with a lobotomy.

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

"James Beaufort carried you outside back then. There are rumors going around that you are his secret girlfriend. Is that true?" she continues.

It feels like the walls of the cafeteria are slowly but surely moving towards me. Surely they would crush me under them every second.

"If she were his girlfriend, she would have been at the funeral," the guy replies just loud enough for me to hear.

"Well, that's why the emphasis is on secret. Perhaps it is one of his dirty secrets. You know how many of them he has."

A loud clinking sounds.

I dropped the tray.

There are shards everywhere at my feet. I stare at a few peas rolling across the floor and can't manage to move to pick them up. My body is frozen.

"Stop talking such dirt," a dark voice sounds next to me. The next moment, an arm wraps around my shoulder, and I am escorted out of the cafeteria. Behind me I can hear Lin shouting something as if from far away, but Dark Voice continues undeterred and takes me away from the cafeteria to the stairwell. Only then does the arm disappear from my shoulder, and the person steps in front of me. I look up at the beige trousers over the dark blue blazer in ... Keshav Patel's face.

I have to blink several times until I realize that it is actually him who is standing in front of me. He has tied his black hair in a deep bun and is just brushing back a strand that has come loose from it. Then he directs his dark brown, almost black eyes on me.

"Are you okay?" he asks quietly.

I think I can count on one hand how many times I've heard Keshav talk. Of James' friends, he is the one who is the quietest. While I can now at least assess Alistair, Cyril and Wren a little, he is a closed book for me.

"Yes," I finally croak and clear my throat immediately afterwards.

I look around and realize where we are. My first real encounter with James took place here: under the stairs, hidden from the eyes of curious people. Here he tried to bribe me, and I threw his stupid money around his ears. I wonder if everything in this cursed school will remind me of James from now on.

"Good," says Keshav. The next moment he turns around, buries his hands in his pockets and leaves. I look after him until he has disappeared from my field of vision. After less than half a minute, Lin hurries out of the cafeteria with a scowl on his face and looks around searchingly.

"I'm here, Lin," I say, stepping out from behind the stairs.

"I told them what I thought," she growls as she approaches me. "Such idiots. What was the matter with Keshav?"

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

The first to-do of the event team this afternoon is to wrap the Secret Santa gifts. In the last two weeks, the students had the opportunity to hand in gifts

to us, which are then traditionally distributed in the classes on the last day before the Christmas holidays.

I usually love tying the letters and sweets together and packing them into the little Santa Claus bags that our lower school postmen then use to go from classroom to classroom. But despite the Christmas carols that we have switched on, this time the mood is depressed.

This is probably due to the fact that an above-average number of the letters are addressed to the Beauforts and we can't decide what to do with them at first. James and Lydia are out of school at the moment, so they can't receive them in person, and I doubt if they would be comfortable if we sent them to their home. I wish I could just ask them if they want the letters or not. But since this is not an option, we decide by vote in the team and decide to hold it back for the time being. After all, we don't know what's in them and whether anyone might have allowed themselves a tasteless joke.

For the rest of the meeting, I find myself staring at the empty chair James sat on as he served his sentence with us. Apparently, everything would remind me of him from now on, but I would prefer to just forget him and what we experienced together. Every time I think of him, it feels like someone is pushing a hand into my chest, putting their fingers around my heart, and squeezing hard.

I'm so unspeakably angry with him.

How could he do this to me?

How?

While the thought of letting someone else get as close to me as I do makes me feel sick, he kissed someone else without hesitation.

And the worst thing is that it's not just anger that I feel for James at the moment, but also grief and pity. He's lost his mum, and every time I'm filled with red-hot anger at him, I feel bad. But I know that I don't really have a reason for that.

It is unfair and exhausting, and when I come home in the evening, I am completely exhausted by the struggle that all these contradictory feelings are waging inside me. The school day has robbed me of all my energy, and I can't bring myself to put on a happy façade for my family. Ever since Mum learned of Cordelia Beaufort's death, she has treated me like a raw egg. I didn't tell her what happened between James and me, but like any mother, she has this instinct that tells her certain things. For example, when your own daughter is lovesick.

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

With a curse, I throw the blanket aside and get up. It's so cold that goosebumps creep down my arms as I run to my desk and grab my laptop. I go back to the bed and pull the blanket as high as I can. With the cushions adjusted in my back, I open the laptop and open the browser.

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

J-a-m-e-s-B-e-a-u-f-o-r-t.

Enter.

There are 1,930,760 results in 0.50 seconds.

Oh man.

Images are displayed directly below the search box. Images of James in bespoke Beaufort suits and James golfing with his father and his friends. On them, he looks neat and dressed up, as if the world were at his feet.

But when I see the entire picture results, you can also see another, less perfect side of him. There are a series of blurred cell phone photos in which a younger version of James bends tightly over a table and a line of white powder. Photos of him entering and leaving clubs with women in his arms, who are certainly older than him. Photos in which he is completely distraught and obviously drunk. The difference between this James and the one who stands next to his parents and Lydia at some gala couldn't be greater.

I click back to the normal search results. Directly below the series of pictures are countless new articles, most of them about Cordelia Beaufort's sudden death. I don't want to read through them. They are none of my business, and enough has already been reported in the news. I keep scrolling until James' Instagram account appears among the results. As if by itself, I open the page.

His profile is a colorful mix of different photos. It shows books, the reflective façade of a skyscraper, a close-up of a stucco-covered wall, benches, winding steps, London photographed from above from an airplane, his feet stuck in leather shoes on a train platform, a window

through which the morning sun shines. If there weren't always photos of him with his friends or Lydia in between, I would never have assigned this profile to James.

In the pictures with the boys, James has the grin on his face that has always driven me crazy – the grin that is so incredibly arrogant, but at the same time so effortlessly attractive that you just have to get a tingling in the stomach.

One photo in particular catches my eye. It's from James and Lydia, and they both laugh. A rare sight. I don't remember ever hearing Lydia laugh. With James, on the other hand, I only need to look at the picture to have the familiar sound in my ears. The tingling in my stomach is replaced by a wistful pull. I miss James' laughter. I miss his manner, his voice, our conversations ... just everything.

Without further ado, I save the image on my desktop. I know how stupid that is, but I don't care. I always proceed thoughtfully and rationally in all areas of my life. This time I allow myself to be guided by my feelings.

The top photos on James' profile are flooded with condolences. I skim through the comments and swallow hard. Some are not only tactless, but downright cruel. Does James even read through all this? What does he feel about it? If I think it's terrible, then I don't want to know what must be going on in him.

One comment in particular catches my eye because it can hardly be surpassed in tastelessness.

Xnzlg: If you want photos of the Beaufort funeral, take a look at my profile

My finger lingers over the touchpad, and a furious heat spreads across my cheeks. I click on the profile to report it – and freeze.

xnzlg's entire Instagram feed consists of pictures of James and Lydia. The two, dressed in black, in the cemetery. They stand leaning against each other and give each other support. James has an arm wrapped around Lydia and holds her close to his side, her chin resting on her head.

Tears shoot into my eyes.

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

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

That's the only thing I can do right now, but it's not enough. The photos have stirred up all the feelings that have accumulated in me over the last week, so that I can hardly control them. The pity I feel for James and Lydia is overwhelming.

I fold my laptop and slide it back into the padded case, then I reach for my phone and open a new message. I decide to write to Lydia.

I don't know if she has told her family about her pregnancy in the meantime, but she should definitely know that nothing has changed and that I am still there for her when she needs me. I open a new message and type:

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

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

It's hard to believe that his first message to me was a little more than three months ago. It feels like years have passed since the night James invited me to Beaufort in London. I remember the moment when we were just trying on the Victorian costumes and his parents showed up unexpectedly. My first thought when I saw Cordelia Beaufort was "I want to be like her".

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

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

My gaze twitches to my closet. Without further ado, I go over to open the door. Then I bend down. At the very bottom, in the last compartment, hidden behind an old gym bag, lies James' sweater. The one he put on me after Cyril's party. Carefully I take it out and bury my face in it briefly. In the meantime, it hardly smells of James' detergent, but the soft fabric still

awakens memories in me. I close the closet door and go back to the bed. As I walk, I put on my sweater and pull the sleeves over my fingers.

I don't understand how it can be that the anger at him eats away at me inside, but at the same time I suffer so much with James that in some moments I feel like I can't stand it for a second longer.

Just like now.

Undecided, I pick up my cell phone again. I turn it back and forth. I want to write to James, but at the same time I don't want to. I want to comfort him and yell at him at the same time, hug him and hit him at the same time.

Finally, I type a short message.

I'm thinking of you.

I look at the words and take a deep breath. Then I press "Send". Then I put the phone aside. My gaze falls on the alarm clock on my bedside table. It's past midnight now, and I'm still wide awake. Even if I turn off the light now, I won't be able to sleep, I know that exactly.

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

I miss you.

Goosebumps spread across my body. I don't know what I expected. At least not such an answer. While I am still staring at the three words, a second message arrives.

I want to see you.

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

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

But that is not possible. Deep inside I feel that I am not ready for this under any circumstances. Not after what happened. After what he did to me. It just hurts too much.

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

I can't.

OceanofPDF.com

Ruby

Christmas is my favorite holiday.

I love the lavish decorations that turn the whole world into a wonderland. I love the good food, the music, the movies – and of course the Christmas cookies. I love to choose or make gifts for my family and then lovingly wrap them. Usually, the time before Christmas feels magical – as if Santa Claus, Jack Frost or some other character had let magic dust trickle down on the world.

This year everything is different.

Although, no. This year everything is exactly as always. Only I am different.

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

There are days when I would prefer not to leave my bed and wish I had a way to travel in time. I want to live in a world again where no one in Maxton Hall knows my name, least of all James. Sometimes I lie in bed at night and look at the picture of him laughing, or the invitation to the Halloween party where we are pictured together. I remember the feel of his fingers around my hand. Of his kisses. Of his small voice whispering my name.

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

Fortunately, my family is very good at distracting. Mum and Dad squabble in the kitchen and need me at least once a day as a referee, who has to decide whether the cookies Mum bakes taste better with or without

the exotic spice note Dad has added. In the years before, I was on Mum's side in most cases, but I'm surprised to find that this time I can also get something out of Dad's creations.

The rest of the time, Ember uses me for all kinds of other tasks. We do what feels like two thousand shoots for her blog, even though I'm sure that half of the photos didn't turn out because my fingers were shaking way too much in the cold. She also came up with the gifts for our family this year, which is usually my favorite thing to do before Christmas. Their ideas were great: Our grandparents get a calendar that we pasted with family photos, and mum gets a wellness basket that we personally put together. For Dad, Ember found a nice new spice rack from the sixties in the classifieds, which the former owner gave us for just ten pounds after a bit of haggling.

"You're tough as nails," says Ember as we clean it in our small garage. With a wrinkled nose, she removes the cobwebs from the back of the shelf. "Maybe you should reorient yourself professionally."

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

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

"Wouldn't you like to speak to me at last?"

"About what?" I reply tonelessly.

She lets out a short laugh. "About the fact why you act like a robot? About everything that oppresses you?"

I wince at her words. Until that moment, Ember had not asked me about my behavior, but pretended that it was normal that I only leave my room in an extreme emergency and hardly speak a word to anyone. She didn't press me and didn't ask me any questions, for which I'm incredibly grateful to her.

Apparently, this grace period is now over.

She doesn't know what happened between James and me in Oxford, let alone that he kissed Elaine afterwards. I felt like I had to work this whole thing out with myself before I could talk to anyone about it. Getting through the days at school has already cost me strength enough. But Ember is not only my sister, but also my best friend. I know I can trust her. And maybe it's time for me to stop carrying this burden all by myself.

I take a deep breath. "I slept with James."

That wasn't really the first thing I wanted to say, but okay.

Ember drops the dust catcher. "You have what?"

Without looking at them, I start to take the face masks out of the packaging and arrange them. I tug at the rubber bands that are attached behind the ears.

"A day later, he made out with another girl," I say in a brittle voice. I stare at the white ribbons of the face mask when Ember comes to me and kneels next to me on the newspaper. "Ruby," she says quietly. Carefully, she puts a hand between my shoulder blades, and I feel my last resistance crumble.

Ember and I haven't always been as close as we are now. We only grew close together after Dad's accident, when we gave each other support when he was in a bad way and he was once again angry with the whole world. Even though we could understand him, this time was not easy for us. Only together did we get through it.

What connects us since then is not something I'll ever have with another person, and when Ember squeezes my shoulder, the words just burst out of me. I tell her everything: about the Halloween party, about James' father and the expectations he has of his son, about how much James suffers from this pressure, about Oxford and everything he and I have shared. About the evening when Lydia came to us and drove with me to Cyril's. Of James, who coked and then jumped into the pool. And by Elaine Ellington.

As I talk, a wide variety of emotions flit across Ember's face: compassion, indignation, skepticism, excitement and, in the end, horrific anger. After I'm done, she just looks at me with big eyes for a minute, then, without saying a word, she takes me in her arms and holds me tight. For the first time in days, I don't feel the impulse to cry. Instead, something warm spreads inside me that lays over my stormy feelings and seems to calm her down at least a little bit.

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

Ember pulls away from me and takes a deep breath. She brushes my hair from my cheek and behind my ear. Then she gently runs her warm hand over my head. "I'm so sorry, Ruby."

I swallow hard and gather all my courage to say the following words. "I hate him for it."

Ember's green eyes are full of compassion and affection. "So do I."

"At the same time, I wonder if I'm even allowed to do that."

Frowning, she shakes her head. "It's your right to feel that way, Ruby. You act as if there are fixed rules for such situations, but there are none. You feel what you feel."

I grumble indecisively.

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

It takes me a moment to process Ember's words. "I just have the feeling," I start slowly, "that nothing will change, no matter what feelings I allow. Either it hurts because of his mum or because he cheated on me. That's why I'm trying—"

»... to feel nothing at all," Ember quietly finishes my sentence.

I nod.

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

I stare at my hands as silence spreads between us.

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

"I really thought I'd ended up in the wrong movie. He was like... Substituted."

"That just sounds terrible."

"I don't understand why he didn't just come to me. He could have talked to me about anything. We would have—" I shrug my shoulders helplessly. I have no idea what I would have done if James had come to me. In any case, none of this would have happened. I'm sure of that.

"I don't think talking was probably what he wanted that night," Ember begins hesitantly. "It sounds to me more like he tried to destroy his life even further, regardless of the losses."

I breathe in haltingly.

"I certainly understand why you feel that way. It's perfectly fine how you feel. I hate him for doing that to you, too."

Ember wraps her arms around me again, and this time I push her back just as hard. "Thank you, Ember," I whisper.

After a long moment, she pushes me back and smiles warmly at me. She points to the spice rack.

Glad not to have to talk more about my feelings, I nod. We put on the face masks and then look for suitable music. Ember decides on the Michael Bublé Christmas album, and together we start painting the shelf.

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

I cheer and indicate a bow to her. "You're a queen."

"I'm thinking about applying to various fashion companies in London during the summer holidays." Ember doesn't look at me when she says that, but devotes herself to the upper corner of the shelf, which has actually been painted long ago. I can hardly see anything of her face because of the face mask, but I'm pretty sure she's turning red.

"Shall I help you apply?"

Ember pauses and dares to look in my direction. "So you think that's a good idea?"

I nod affirmatively. "You've known for years that you want to do something with fashion. I'd say the sooner you start, the better."

She continues to paint in silence.

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

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

I nod. "Yes, but it's also important to get professional experience. And at least you can look at everything and think about how you're going to do it differently one day."

"Nevertheless, I have a stomachache with it," she says with a sigh. "I wonder all the time if my instinct might be trying to dissuade me?"

"Maybe it's just the excitement. Just remember that there are a lot of people behind you. Your blog has so many readers. They all believe in you and your vision."

"It's nice that you say that."

"I don't say that just to be nice. I'm serious. I firmly believe that you will later found your own fashion empire and take off with it."

Ember is beaming from ear to ear – I can tell by her sparkling eyes despite the face mask.

"We could take advantage of the holidays and make a list of English companies that could be considered, or what do you think?" I ask as I run my brush over the inside of the shelf.

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

I'm just about to answer that our agreement is in place, when there is a knock on the side garage door.

"Ruby?"

Ember and I freeze. Mum must not see what we are doing here. She can't keep any secrets to herself, especially not when it comes to gifts for Dad. We have had to find this out more than once in recent years.

"Woe betide you if you come in!" Ember shouts in panic and takes a quick step in front of the spice rack so that Mum doesn't see it, should she stick her head through the door.

"I didn't intend to do that," we hear her call out in a muffled voice. "Ruby, you've got a visitor."

Ember and I exchange a confused look.

"Lin, perhaps?" she asks.

I shake my head. "No, she's spending the Christmas holidays with her mother in China to visit relatives."

Ember's eyes widen. "Do you think it's ...?" She doesn't pronounce his name, but my heart still skips a beat.

"Who is it, Mum?" I ask aloud.

"Can you just get out? I have no desire to talk to you through the door."

I roll my eyes and pull one loop of the mouthguard off my ear so that it hangs halfway down and I feel like a doctor who is taking a break from an important operation. I open the door a crack and push my way through. Mum looks at me and the face mask with raised eyebrows, and I catch her standing on her tiptoes to catch a glimpse through the crack in the door. As fast as possible, I pull the door shut behind me.

"Who is it?" I ask quietly.

From one moment to the next, Mum's face becomes serious again. "The Beaufort girl."

My heart is sinking into my pants. I have a sense of déjà vu from the night Lydia was looking for James here. Something bad can't have happened again.

Not again. Please, not again.

"Where is she?" I ask.

Mum points in the direction of the hallway. "In the living room. Your father and I are in the kitchen, in case you need us."

I nod and take off my face mask completely. Cautiously, I walk through the hallway towards the living room. This time I brace myself, Ember's wise words still fresh in my memory.

Lydia sits on our old flowered sofa, her hands clasped in her lap, her gaze fixed on the living room table. She wears a loosely falling chiffon blouse with a black pleated skirt and has her hair tied up in her typical ponytail. Not a single one of the curly hair sticks out, as always, Lydia gives the impression that everything about her is in perfect order.

However, the apathetic look in her eyes says otherwise.

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

Lydia raises her head and sees me in the doorway. She struggles to smile tiredly. "Hi, Ruby."

For a moment I am undecided what to do, but decide to go to her and sit next to her on the sofa. I suppress the impulse to make small talk and ask her how she's doing or if everything is okay. Instead, I wait.

After a while, Lydia swallows hard. "You told me to get in touch if I needed something."

I look at her perplexed for a moment, then nod quickly. "Yes, of course. No matter what it is."

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

"What's it about?" I ask quietly.

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

It takes a few seconds for me to realize what she just said. "You want me to come with you?" I ask, puzzled.

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

"Is there anything going on? Do you have any complaints or something?"

Lydia shakes her head. "No, it's just a precautionary examination. But I want to... don't go there alone."

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

For me, there is only one answer to her question, and it comes out of me as a matter of course:

"Of course I'll accompany you."

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

We sit on the two chairs at the desk and watch the doctor Dr. Hearst as she types something into her computer at the speed of light.

At the beginning it was a bit strange to come here with Lydia. But at the latest when she was asked by a doctor's assistant to pee in a cup, it was clear to me that we had both missed the right time for shame.

Now Lydia is tugging at her checkered scarf next to me, while she keeps glancing at the door. Maybe she's toying with the idea of jumping up and fleeing. When her gaze brushes mine, I smile confidently at her – or at least try to. I don't know what exactly my job is here, so I do what I would like my companion to do in this situation. It seems to work, because Lydia's shoulders relax a little bit.

After Dr. Hearst is done with the entry on the PC, she puts her hands folded on the table in front of her and leans forward a bit. Her face looks friendly, although her dark hair is tied back in a strict bun. She has many laugh lines, warm brown eyes and a pleasant, calm voice.

"Ms Beaufort, how are you?" she asks.

I look at Lydia, who in turn looks at the doctor.

Suddenly she lets out a hysterical-sounding sound, which is probably supposed to be something like a laugh. However, she quickly composes herself and clears her throat as if nothing had happened. "Quite okay, I guess."

Dr. Hearst nods understandingly. "At your last examination you complained of bad nausea. What does it look like today?"

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

Dr. Hearst smiles. "That's nothing to worry about. Her mother ligaments are stretching enormously right now because they have to make room for the baby. I can prescribe magnesium for the pain."

"Okay, that sounds good," Lydia replies, relieved.

After the conversation, Dr. Hearst sends her behind the curtain to free herself. I stay in my chair and look at the painting hanging above the desk during the examination. I try to find out what the many shapes and colors could represent – but no chance. It's a wild bunch of yellow, red, and blue, and it's probably one of the weirdest images I've ever seen. I wonder if it was perhaps painted by a child.

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

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

"You are welcome to come and join us now, Ms. Bell."

In the meantime, Lydia has laid down on the couch next to the treatment chair and pushed her blouse up. Her fingers rest on her bare belly, and I notice that you can already see a clear bulge by now.

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

"So, do you want to see your baby, Ms. Beaufort?"

Lydia nods, visibly tense, and I move a little closer to her.

The doctor applies a transparent gel to Lydia's stomach and then presses the head of the ultrasound machine onto it. I stare at the screen as if spellbound, but at first I don't recognize anything in the jumble of black and

white. But Dr. Hearst continues to drive over Lydia's skin undeterred, and at some point the picture changes. Little by little it becomes clearer, and ...

My breath catches. Next to me, Lydia lets out a soft "Oh".

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

"There it is," says Dr. Hearst, pointing to the picture with his finger. As she moves the device further, the baby becomes more and more clear. Now I can even see tiny arms and legs. It's so, so cool and by far the most fascinating thing I've ever seen in my life.

"Wow," I whisper, whereupon the doctor gives me a smile.

I dare to look at Lydia. Her eyes are huge as she stares at the screen in disbelief.

"Wait," Dr. Hearst says suddenly, leaning a little closer to the screen. For a moment, only black-and-white chaos can be seen again, then the small bubble reappears.

"Everything okay?" asks Lydia uncertainly. I put my hand on her shoulder. The doctor's hesitation also makes me nervous. The child moved, I saw that very clearly. She can't give us bad news now – not now. Lydia won't be able to cope with that.

"Ms Beaufort, may I introduce you?" Dr. Hearst beams at Lydia. She points to a dot on the screen. "It hides a bit next to its sibling, so you can't see it so well yet."

Lydia gasps. Stunned, she stares at the monitor as Dr. Hearst zooms in on the second small bubble and enlarges the image. Even if I don't see anything, I know that she is telling the truth.

Twins.

Lydia is expecting not just one child, but two.

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

Dr. Hearst and I exchange a look that says we can't blame her for this reaction. Lydia is probably in shock. After everything she's been through in the last few weeks, I wouldn't be surprised if she goes crazy at some point.

"That's crazy," she gasps after a while and turns her head in my direction. "That's easy... I am at a loss for words."

Dr. Hearst presses a few buttons on the device and smiles first at Lydia, then at me. They are well developed, everything looks wonderful. Have there ever been twin pregnancies in your family, Ms. Beaufort?"

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

"She's a twin herself," I jump in quietly, trying to push the image of Lydia's brother out of my mind. James has absolutely nothing to do in my head now.

"You don't have to be afraid," Dr. Hearst tries to reassure Lydia, but it doesn't seem to me that any of the words even get through to her. "We're going to keep a closer eye on you, and I recommend a sugar load test to prevent gestational diabetes. Just make an appointment in front of you ...« She gives a short lecture about healthy nutrition and upcoming examinations, but I realize that Lydia is no longer listening.

I look at her pale face. She urgently needs something to calm her down a little now. And I already have a rough idea of how I can do that.

OceanofPDF.com

Ruby

From the outside, Smith's Bakery doesn't look like much. The bakery is located in the basement of a terraced house, between my favorite thrift store and an Italian delivery service that closes every time I walk by. The façade of the bakery is repainted every year, but due to the English weather, the paint peels off weeks later, and then it looks as if the building has not been cleaned from the outside for years. The cursive green-gold lettering of the bakery is fixed directly above the large window, through which you can catch a glimpse of the delicacies that are freshly prepared every day as you pass by. From homemade white bread to scones and rolls to bakewell pudding and pies, there is everything your heart desires here.

"Whenever I'm feeling bad, I come here," I say to Lydia, who is eyeing the entrance of the bakery skeptically. I go up the step in front of her and then hold the door open for her. Even here, the pleasant air of the oven flows towards us, and the smell of freshly baked bread and cinnamon rises to my nose.

"That's my favorite smell," I say to Lydia. "If there were perfume that smelled of warm bread and cinnamon, I would buy up the entire stock and bathe in it until I never smelled of anything else again."

The corners of Lydia's mouth twitch slightly. At least a small stirring – the first since we left Dr. Hearst's practice.

Phil, my mum's colleague, is serving a customer when we step up to the counter. On the wall behind him are a row of wooden shelves on which loaves of bread and baguettes are stacked. On the sales counter are two small baskets containing pieces of bread spread with butter, which you can taste as a customer. As I pass, I take two out, and while I shove one into my mouth, I hand the other to Lydia.

"Try it," I say with my mouth full. "The bread is really delicious."

Lydia hesitantly follows my request.

The bakery is small and cramped. Actually, the room is not designed to make yourself comfortable with a coffee, but there are still two tables with

seating. One next to the door to the kitchen, where the dough is prepared, and one that is so close to the sales counter that customers inevitably bump into it when it gets a little crowded.

I point to the small bench and the battered wooden table at the back of the room. While Lydia slides onto the bench, she looks around the bakery. She doesn't seem to know what to think of the place. Her almost skeptical look reminds me of her mother and the way she looked at me when we first faced each other.

I shake the memory out of my head. "Do you already know what you want?" I ask.

Lydia looks past me and looks at the various cakes with her head tilted. "What can you recommend?"

"My favorite is the Bakewell pudding."

"Then I'll take it."

I nod with a smile and walk forward to the counter, just as Mum comes out of the kitchen. She beams when she sees me and wipes her hands on her apron, which she wears over the striped shirt with the lettering of the bakery.

"Hi, Mum, I'm here with Lydia," I say quickly, pointing to our table with my thumb over my shoulder. "She's had a rough day, and I thought Bakewell pudding and a hot chocolate would cheer her up," I whisper, hoping Lydia won't hear me.

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

"Thank you, Mum."

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

"For as long as I can remember. She started right after school."

She smiles slightly. "That must have been cool as a child."

"There were cookies all the time," I say with wobbly eyebrows.

Lydia's smile gets a little wider.

"Do you already know what you want to do later?" I ask after a while.

Now her gaze darkens. "What?"

"Lydia, just because you're having a baby doesn't mean your entire future is fucked up."

She lowers her eyes and runs her finger over the quirks in the tabletop. "Babies," she murmurs after a long while.

"What?" I ask, confused.

"My future isn't fucked just because I'm having babies. plural." The smile is back, narrower, but I still can't help but return it.

I don't know what will happen next, but suddenly we both start laughing, hesitantly at first, then louder. Lydia slaps a hand in front of her mouth as if she herself can't really believe what she's doing. This in turn mutates her laughter into a half-stifled snort, and we have to laugh even harder.

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

Lydia presses her lips together and closes her eyes until she has herself under control again. Then she looks at Mum and says in a perfectly calm voice, "Ruby and I just laugh at the oddities of life, Mrs. Bell." She leans forward and holds her nose over the steaming cup. "It smells wonderful, by the way."

Mum blinks perplexed. Then she raises her hand and strokes Lydia's arm. She knows that Lydia recently lost her mother, and knowing her, she would like to do more for her than bring her hot chocolate and cake. "Enjoy it."

Lydia looks after my mum as she goes back to the counter to serve the next customer. Then she sighs softly, pulls the cup with the hot chocolate closer to her and puts both hands around it.

"I used to always want to be a designer at Beaufort," she answers my question.

"You can...", still, I want to say, but one look from Lydia is enough to silence me.

She takes the spoon and stirs around in the hot chocolate for a few seconds. "In the past, I couldn't have imagined anything better than bringing my creativity to Beaufort, but Mum and Dad felt that my ideas were too modern and not traditional enough," she continues. "I was constantly clashing with them because I wanted to play a bigger role than they had planned for me. Unlike James, I would really like to take over the company. But for her, there was always only him. That was clear since we were born.

No matter what we both want." She takes the spoon out of the cup and puts it in her mouth. Then she sighs with pleasure.

"I hate that you were at the mercy of this pressure. And still are. I imagine it would be so difficult," I murmur and devote myself to my own chocolate. The warmth is incredibly good, and my cold fingers are gradually thawing again.

Lydia looks so sad and hopeless that I would like to take her in my arms. "When you look at our family from the outside, it seems like Mum and Dad love us more than anything and always want the best for us. Wanted. Anyway." She clears her throat. "I can't complain about growing up like that. I am not entitled to do that. I don't know how much James told you, but... there are some things that just went wrong that can't be undone."

Inevitably, I wonder if she means her father. And whether he only gets violent with James as soon as something doesn't suit him, or also with Lydia. If the latter is the case, I am even more worried about them.

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

Although I know that Lydia knows him better than anyone else in this world, I cannot say what he has confided in me. Even after everything that has happened, I cannot deceive him in this way.

"He's better, by the way. He hasn't drunk anything since the funeral. Instead, he's now training like a man possessed."

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

"And the thing between him and your dad?" I ask cautiously.

"You know about the fight?"

I nod.

"Dad acts as if nothing had happened. He's hardly ever at home, and when he's there, he calls James into his office to prepare him for meetings with the Beaufort board."

On the one hand, I'm glad that the relationship between James and his father didn't escalate further, but on the other hand, I also know how James feels about the company and what a burden working at Beaufort must be for him. I feel sorry for him that the whole thing is now starting earlier than he expected.

"Maybe you can get over it, Ruby."

I look into Lydia's turquoise blue eyes. The eyes that look exactly like James's.

Tired, I shake my head. "I don't think so. To be honest, I don't want that at all."

It's the first time I've said that. But it is the truth. I don't think you can ever put what James and I went through behind you. And I don't want it at all. Especially not when I think of everything that will come to me in the future. It seems like there's a shadow over all my dreams, and that's just because I entrusted them to James and got so hurt by him afterward.

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

"I understand that the news of your mum's death threw him off track, but—" Helplessly, I raise my shoulders. "It doesn't change anything. I hate him for what he did."

"Still, you were there when he needed you. That means something, doesn't it?"

I stir around in the chocolate and take a deep breath. "I still care about him, yes. But at the same time, I've never been so angry with anyone. And I don't think that anger will simply evaporate."

We are silent. The beeping of the oven seems much louder to me than just a few minutes ago, as does the small bell on the door announcing the coming and going of customers.

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

I jerk my head. "No!"

A blush appears on Lydia's cheeks, and all of a sudden she seems almost shy. I wonder what's going on in her head right now. "If I had known how you felt about it, I wouldn't have come back to your offer. I—"

"Lydia," I interrupt her in a soft voice and reach across the table for her hand. Her eyes widen, and she stares at our intertwined fingers. "What I said to you was in earnest. I want to be there for you. Our friendship has nothing to do with James. Clear?"

She looks at me again, and I think I see a suspicious gleam in her eyes. She doesn't answer my words, but she squeezes my hand briefly. And that's more than enough.

James

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

I stand in front of the multi-gym, clutching the short bar that is attached to the top with carabiners. I keep my elbows close to my body and bring my forearms up, then I stretch them down, over and over again. Sweat drips from my forehead onto my t-shirt, and my arm muscles tremble, but I don't care. I just keep going. At some point there will come a point where I'm so exhausted that there is only a loud, meaningless noise in my head and thoughts of Beaufort, my mum or Ruby have fallen silent. After I have completed the unit for arms, I sit down on the cushion of the multi-gym. I grab the poles and slowly push them forward. As I leave it at a slow pace, a pull starts to feel in my pectoral muscles.

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

Idiot.

I wonder what I've done again. Since the funeral, I have hardly ever left the house and have not touched a drop of alcohol. Especially in moments when I couldn't stop the dark thoughts, I found it difficult. But I persevered, also because of Lydia, whose trembling body at Mum's funeral reminded me that it was my job as a brother to be there for her. So I can't explain why she's standing in front of me at the moment with reddened cheeks and talking to me energetically. Although I have to admit that her mouth-to-mouth together with the booming music actually makes a quite amusing picture in my ears. It almost looks as if it is lipsyncing.

Suddenly, Lydia takes a step forward and pulls an earplug out of my ear. "James!"

"What's wrong?" I ask her and take out the second plug as well. The sudden calm seems threatening to me. Lately, I always need sounds around me, because otherwise I start to think.

"I wanted to talk to you about Ruby."

I take my hands off the bars and reach for my towel. I wipe it over my face and then over my neck, where the sweat has collected. I avoid looking at Lydia.

"I don't know what you—"

"Come on, James."

It feels like I'm wearing a tie that is tied too tightly and tightens around my neck. I clear my throat. "I don't feel like talking about it."

Lydia looks at me shaking her head. The corners of her mouth are twisted downwards and she has her arms crossed in front of her chest. In this second, she reminds me so much of Mum that I have to avert my gaze for a moment. I look at the towel and wipe my hands on it, even though they have long since dried.

"I'd love to help you. You."

I can only laugh bitterly about that. "There is no us, Lydia. And that never happened. I messed up."

"If you explain to her—" Lydia begins again, but I interrupt her.

"She does not want to hear my explanation. And I can't blame her for that at all."

Lydia sighs. "I still believe that you still have a chance. I wish you would seize it instead of entrenching yourself here and feeling sorry for yourself."

I remember Ruby's message:

I can't.

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

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

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

"Ruby doesn't want me back, and I certainly won't force myself on her. You shouldn't either, by the way." I get up and want to go to the two treadmills, which are set up in front of a large panoramic window through which you have a view of the back of our property. But I don't get far – Lydia pulls me back by the elbow. I drive around and glare at her angrily.

"Don't look at me like that. It's time for you to finally become yourself again," she hisses. Then she stabs me firmly in the chest with a finger. "You can't push everything and everyone away from you."

"I won't push you away from me," I manage between clenched teeth.

"James—"

I try to conjure up the mask of aloofness that has always been my second face at school and at public appointments with my family. But this is Lydia standing in front of me. I've never had to hide anything from her, and that's why I just don't want to succeed. Frustrated, I throw the towel aside.

"What do you want to hear from me, Lydia?" I ask feebly.

"That we will get through this together. You and me. Just like always." She swallows and touches my arm lightly. "But if you can't talk to me honestly and withdraw like that, it won't work."

I snort contemptuously. "You pretend to talk to me about everything. As if you were the open person of the two of us. I always had to squeeze everything out of you. I only found out about your affair with Sutton because you were caught." I push her hand away and look coldly into her eyes. "Just because Mum is dead doesn't mean we have to conspire with each other against the rest of the world now. Don't make us something we never were, Lydia."

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

Ruby

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

I miss James.

It's absurd.

Absurd and insane.

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

Christmas comes and goes, and for the first time in my life, I can't enjoy the holidays at all. The movies we watch seem colorless to me, and the songs we listen to all sound the same. Although I know that Mum and Dad have worked hard to cook, the food tastes bland. And to make matters worse, my relatives keep asking me why I'm so depressed and if it has anything to do with the boy who gave me this pretty bag on my birthday. At some point I can't take it anymore and crawl into my room alone.

When New Year's Eve is just around the corner, I decide that I can't go on like this for a minute longer. I'm tired of feeling this way. I've always been a positive person who looked forward to new beginnings. I refuse to let James take that attitude away from me.

So I jump into the shower without further ado, put on one of my favorite outfits – a tight plaid skirt and a loose-fitting, cream-colored blouse – grab my new bullet journal and go downstairs, determined to announce my New Year's resolutions to Ember and my parents.

But when I enter the living room, I freeze.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, surprised.

Ember drives around to me, startled, as does Lin, who was just handing out colorful umbrellas in glasses. Lydia also stops abruptly in her

movement – but the streamer in her hand makes itself independent and rolls off on its own. Silently we watch as she lands on the floor in a sad little pile.

Then Ember builds up in front of me. "Why are you coming out of your shell today of all days?" she asks angrily. "You can set the clock according to when you leave your room – and right now, when I'm planning a surprise girls' night out for you, you come down earlier. That's easy... Man, Ruby!"

I look back and forth between the three. Then a slow smile spreads on my lips.

"We're celebrating New Year's Eve together?" I ask cautiously.

Lin returns my smile. "That was the plan."

When the realization really trickles through to me, I hug Ember tightly. "Thank you," I murmur on her shoulder. "I think that's exactly what I need now." And the fact that Ember knew that shows me once again that she knows me better than anyone else in the world.

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

I nod. For the first time since all this happened to James, I feel sincere joy. "Thank you," I say to Lin and Lydia as well, hugging them tightly one after the other. "I'm so glad."

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

"I thought we'd first write down our best moments from last year and share them with each other. Then we'll watch a movie – which one we'll decide right away – and eat this mountain of popcorn." She points to a huge bowl that stands on the living room table. Dad usually uses them to make layered salad, which he always brings with too big family gatherings. Now it's filled to the brim with popcorn, whose buttery sweet scent fills the entire living room. My mouth waters.

"Then we eat the main course," Ember continues. "Dad made quiche for all of us. Then there's dessert, and we're at, I suppose, Ruby's favorite

piece."

Lin holds up a semi-transparent bag in which I can see small books and some pens.

I don't even pretend to have to think. »We write down our resolutions for 2018!«

Ember nods with a laugh. "As soon as it's midnight, we'll probably either be in a food coma or have a dance party."

"One of the two, for sure," says Lydia and takes a handful of popcorn. She flicks a first small ball into her mouth, and a slight smile comes to her lips. "That sounds like a nice plan, doesn't it, Ruby?"

"Nice plan? That's the best I've heard in a long time. Thank you, guys."

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

"Okay," Ember begins. »One of my biggest highlights this year was working on my blog and having so many new people join.« She notes the whole thing on her note.

"One of my highlights was that my mum's gallery is finally in the green. We're doing really well at the moment, and I hope it will stay that way next year," says Lin, fixing the pen in her hand instead of us. I'm surprised that she shares something so private with us.

She and Lydia don't know each other very well, and I could understand if they are uncomfortable with this situation. However, this does not seem to be the case with either of them, which makes me very happy.

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

Lin looks up in surprise. "Really?"

Lydia nods. "It's really beautiful and totally stylish. I'm keeping my fingers crossed that things will go even better next year. I know how hard that can be, especially when you have to start from scratch."

The two exchange a smile before Lydia clears her throat. "I took a short trip to the Alps with my mum in January. We stayed in a wellness hotel and had a really good time – just the two of us. We hadn't done that for ages. I think that's my best memory of this year."

"That sounds really nice," I say quietly and put my hand on her knee for a moment. I don't know what else to say, but I want to show her how much I appreciate her openness.

"And with you, Ruby?" asks Lin.

For a moment my head is empty, and I have no idea what to write on my note. But then I review the year month by month and realize how beautiful it was overall. Although I've been sad since the thing with James, a lot has happened since September alone, for which I can be grateful.

I became head of the events team, got great grades at school and was invited to Oxford. I got to know Lin better, grew closer to Ember and even made a new friend. And for the first time in my life, I fell in love.

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

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

"I don't know where to begin. I think the trip to Oxford was the most beautiful. I've dreamed of going for a walk there with my family for so long. And then to be there... I'll remember that forever," I say hoarsely and then force myself to smile.

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

I nod, draw a small bubble and write down Excursion Oxford in it.

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

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

Ember had wanted the movie for Christmas because she thinks Rebel Wilson is so great, and when the credits start rolling two hours later, I understand why. Even Lydia had to laugh out loud at some points – even if

she looked every time as if she could hardly believe she had made this sound herself.

Even during the credits, we get to grips with Dad's quiche.

"You're fine, Ruby." Lin holds a fork loaded with quiche in front of her face and looks at it closely. "Your mum works in a bakery, and your father is a cook. If I were you, I'd just be in seventh heaven. I miss our cook."

"You once had a cook?" asks Ember with wide eyes.

"Yes," Lin says, shrugging his shoulders as if it were a matter of course. "But then everything changed for us, and I had to learn all the basics first. Mum's cooking skills were also a bit rusty, but she still taught me a lot of great Chinese recipes that she knew from her grandma. In the meantime, we really enjoy cooking together."

I take a bite of the quiche and let it melt in my mouth.

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

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

"Oh, how pretty," I say as Lin hands out the little books to us. They are simple and have a black cover with fine gold accents, dotted creamy white pages and two ribbons – just the way I like it best.

"This will be my first bullet journal," says Lydia, looking first at her book and then at us, a little perplexed.

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

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

But while I devote myself to the last details of my headline and outline the number of the coming year with a light gray, my heart suddenly

becomes heavy again. Next year at this time everything will be different:

In just seven months, I will – hopefully – have my degree from Maxton Hall College in my pocket. And after that, I will – hopefully – study at Oxford. I will have new lecturers and new fellow students. A dorm room in a new environment and new friends.

A new, exciting life.

A life without James Beaufort.

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

Intentions:

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

But as I write down one point after the other, I realize that it doesn't feel right. This list is not honest enough, and if I listen to myself, I know why.

Last year I fell in love for the first time – and my heart was broken in the worst possible way. This matter cannot simply be wiped away. It will take me quite a while to process this. Because lovesickness doesn't disappear just because you've rung in a new year.

So far, I didn't want to see James. I had the hope that I would be able to simply forget about him at some point. But now I realize that I can't write down my resolutions as long as this matter is still unresolved between us. There is far too much I want to tell him. And I don't think until I have done that, I won't be able to start the new year. I won't be able to start over if James continues to occupy such a big place in my thoughts, my feelings and in my life.

"Ruby?" Lin's voice reaches my ear as if from far away.

I look at her and make a decision.

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

James

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

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

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

Wren tried several times to persuade me to go away with him and the guys again this year, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Just imagining myself sitting in a London club with deafening music and champagne makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I can't go on as before. Not after my life has turned one hundred and eighty degrees in the last quarter of the year. Not when it looks completely different inside me than it used to.

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

Over the past few weeks, I've realized how frustrating it is that we haven't made enough memories together. There are no photos of the two of us, nothing that could remind me of what we experienced together. The only thing left is the bag I had made for her birthday. She still stands next to my desk and taunts me every day. I can't count how many times I've picked it up and looked to see if Ruby might have forgotten something in it. A note or anything that gives an indication that she really used it and was happy about it.

I feel like my memories are slowly starting to fade. The feeling of Ruby's skin on mine, our conversations, her laughter. Everything is becoming more and more vague and intangible, even the day she was here and comforted me. The only thing that I still have clearly in my mind and that plays over and over again in my head is the expression on her face when she saw me with Elaine. I will never forget him. And I will never forget what he did to me – even through the alcohol and drug cloud. At that moment, but also all the days after.

Actually, the plan was to sleep into the New Year, but now it's past one, and I'm getting more and more awake. Without further ado, I decide to go to the gym again. Maybe an hour on the treadmill will not only make my body tired, but also silence my head.

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

Lydia is probably back home.

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

My sister is not alone in the hallway.

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

Ruby is standing in our hallway.

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

Ruby speaks softly to my sister, whereupon she nods. She gives me a quick look, but immediately looks away and disappears into her room. It's good to know that I've scared my sister away so much that she can't even bring herself to wish me a Happy New Year.

"Can we talk?" Ruby finally asks.

I swallow hard. I haven't seen or heard her for so long, and now she's standing just under three meters away from me. Her closeness makes my heart beat wildly, I would like to bridge the distance between us and take her in my arms. Finally, I just nod, turn around and go back to my room. Ruby follows me hesitantly. I turn on the light and sigh. It has definitely looked better in here. In the middle of the floor lies the checked pyjama pants that I just took off, magazines are flying everywhere, the bed is unmade, and it probably smells of greasy delivery food.

In addition, Ruby's bag is totally conspicuous on my desk.

Ruby looks around and seems indecisive. In the end, she takes a seat on the smaller of the two sofas. My sweater is on her lap.

Why does the room suddenly seem so damn warm to me? I think I urgently need a sip of water.

"Would you like to have a drink?" I ask.

"No, thank you."

I pour myself water, but when I want to lift the glass, I notice that my hand is shaking. So I leave it on the desk and look at Ruby instead.

She is silent.

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

Ruby pulls her brows together. "Yes," she says simply.

Nothing more.

It has never been so difficult for me to find the right words as it is at this second. It seems to me that I have forgotten how to form reasonable sentences. After thinking so much about what I want to say to Ruby, there is now a black hole in my head that gets bigger and bigger the longer we sit across from each other in silence. I can only look at Ruby. The desire to sit next to her is overwhelming. But I fight against it and instead pull the desk chair to the couch so that I can sit opposite her and we can look at each other.

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

I wait until she continues speaking.

"I noticed that there are still too many things that are unresolved between us. I can't start the new year with a good feeling like this."

My pulse goes up. I was definitely not prepared for that. I have to clear my throat. "Okay."

Ruby lowers her gaze to the sweater in her lap. She strokes the fabric with her hand, a gesture lost in thought. Then she takes it in her hand and places it on the small round table that stands between us.

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

"I'm so incredibly disappointed in you, James," she whispers suddenly.

My chest contracts painfully. "I know," I whisper back.

She shakes her head. "No. You don't know how that felt. You ripped my fucking heart out. And I hate you for it."

"I know," I repeat in a hushed voice.

Ruby takes a deep breath. "But I love you too, and that makes it so much harder."

"I—" Only after a few seconds do I realize what she just said. Speechless, I stare at her.

But Ruby just keeps talking, as if her words weren't meaningful. "I don't think it would ever have worked with us. It was nice, even if we only had this short time together, but now I have to..."

"You love me?" I whisper.

Ruby flinches. Then she sits down bolt upright. "That doesn't change anything. The way you treated me... You kissed another one the day after we slept together."

"I'm so sorry, Ruby," I say urgently, even though I know my words aren't enough.

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

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

"That will never happen again... I'll never do anything like that again," I blurt out breathlessly.

"I really hope so for your next friend."

I feel panic rising in me. "There won't be any other, damn it!"

She just shakes her head. "That thing with us would never have worked anyway, James. Let's be honest."

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

Ruby stands up and runs her hands over her plaid skirt several times. "I have to go home, my parents wait." She goes to the door, and the knowledge that I can't stop her from leaving almost kills me. I stare at her, unable to move. This moment feels like a final goodbye, and I'm not ready for that. "I need a clear cut. Can you understand that?" she asks, glancing over my shoulder with her hand on the doorknob.

I nod, even though everything in my body screams the opposite. "Yes, I understand that."

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

"I... I wish you a Happy New Year, James." Ruby's eyes reflect the same pain that paralyzes my body.

"Ruby, please—" I manage.

But she opens the door and leaves.

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Lydia

On the Monday after the Christmas holidays, James and I have to go back to school. Dad says that after just under a month, it's time to get back to everyday life. The situation at home is anything but ordinary. Without Mum, who used to build one bridge after another between us, dinners with Dad are pure torture. And the atmosphere between James and me is still tense. We hardly talk and avoid each other most of the time. He is usually the person in whose company I feel most comfortable.

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

After Percy has stopped in front of the entrance of Maxton Hall, he drives down the partition wall and turns to us. "Are you all right?"

I nod wordlessly and try to smile. I sometimes wonder if I still look the same as I used to. Before all that has happened.

"If anything happens," he says in a deep, calm voice, "I'm on call. And if reporters show up, report to the rector. He knows and makes sure that you are not bothered."

His words almost sound as if he had learned them by heart.

I've had the suspicion for a long time that Percy didn't put the thing with Mum away as easily as he would like us to believe. After all, he had known her for over twenty years. He rarely jokes anymore, and sometimes when he feels unobserved, he looks so sad and lost that it hurts my own heart.

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

At least Percy gives me a tired smile before he turns to James. "Take good care of your sister, Mr. Beaufort."

James blinks and looks around. His face immediately turns to stone when he realizes that we are already standing in front of the school. Without another word, he takes his bag and opens the door. I give Percy an

apologetic look before I follow James outside. He has already crossed half the parking lot when I catch up with him. Cyril, Alistair, Kesh and Wren are waiting on the stairs to the main entrance.

"Beaufort!" Wren holds out his fist to him and grins broadly. "It's about time you finally show up here again."

James pulls up one corner of his mouth slightly and bumps his fist against Wren's.

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

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

"Good morning," I say tiredly.

Cyril's ice-blue gaze glides questioningly over my face. Finally, he puts an arm around my shoulder, and together with the others we go up the stairs and through the massive double doors of Maxton Hall.

Our friends have formed a strange formation around us, presumably to protect us from the questions of our classmates, but that is not necessary. Nobody will talk to us. James glances over my shoulder, and we react exactly the same. We push our backs and walk through the school as we have always done.

The assembly drags on as usual, and at some point my neck hurts from staring straight ahead. We sit in the last row, and not a minute goes by in which someone doesn't turn around to look at us and then start whispering to the person next to them. I ignore them all. Only when Lexington declares the meeting over and we leave Boyd Hall can I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Did you hear?" asks Alistair as we go up the stairs in the main building. "George wrecked his cart the day after his eighteenth."

"Which George?" I ask.

"Evans," Wren and Alistair reply at the same time. "You know: the captain of the football team?"

"Ah. Has anything happened to him?"

"He only had a scratch on his forehead. That damned idiot has more luck than brains."

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

"Then the sex wasn't particularly overwhelming," James says dryly.

Everyone looks at him in surprise. He sounded just as usual—bored, with a hint of arrogance in his voice. Almost like old James.

"Well, to be honest," Cyril breaks our silence. "I almost fell asleep once."

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

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

Cyril grins. "Not only that."

"Guys, we're at school. Could we perhaps keep the conversations a little more youth-free?" I suggest.

Alistair turns to me with a raised eyebrow. He shakes the golden curls out of his forehead and takes the next few steps backwards. "Lydia Beaufort and suitable for young people? You are worse than all of us together."

"Well. I wouldn't say worse than James," Kesh thinks aloud.

"Or than me." Wren wiggles his eyebrows.

"You share second place on the list." Alistair pokes him in the side with an elbow, and Wren laughs.

Grinning, I shake my head. I love the boys for behaving completely normally. It almost makes me feel as if nothing has changed. It also distracts me, and that's exactly what I need now. My first lesson on Mondays takes place in this term at Graham's, and the idea of what it will be like between us makes me nervous. Since the terrible phone call we had shortly after Mum's death, I haven't spoken to him.

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

Before we say goodbye in front of the classroom, James looks at me closely. It's still hard for me to gauge what he's thinking, but the spark of concern in his eyes doesn't escape me. Although we haven't spoken in days, he knows how dreaded I am of the moment to face Graham again.

"It's okay," I croak.

James looks at me for a moment, then nods. "Get in touch if you need anything," Cyril murmurs and hugs me again. "See you at lunchtime." I

close my eyes and allow myself a few seconds to enjoy the feeling of being held and not alone. He breaks away from me and takes a step to the side.

And then I see Graham.

He is standing directly behind the boys who are blocking the way to the classroom. His hair is slightly wavy and a bit longer than I remember. He wears a checked shirt under a cardigan and has a huge stack of leaves in his hands. He looks through the gap between Cyril's head and James', and his golden-brown gaze, which has always fascinated me, is right on top of me.

A shiver goes over my body. The moment seems to be frozen, and I don't dare to move for fear of losing my composure. But suddenly Graham takes his eyes off me and looks at Cyril instead. The expression that then appears on his face I have never seen on him before. It's a mixture of relief and coldness that I don't understand and can't classify.

"Come now," says James, who has been looking back and forth between me and Graham. He nods in the direction of the hallway where he and the others are about to have lessons. The boys raise their hands to say goodbye, then they leave.

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

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

I shake my head. "Not."

Then I turn around, go into the classroom and sit down in my seat. I stare at the grained wooden table in front of me for the entire ninety minutes so as not to have to look ahead.

James

The school day does not want to end. If I weren't worried about Lydia, I would have disappeared long ago. The lessons go by at a snail's pace, and I couldn't be more indifferent to what the teachers are telling in front. During the breaks, one classmate after the other expresses his sympathy for me, which is certainly meant nicely, but at some point it gets on my nerves so much that I tell poor Roger Cree to shut up and leave me alone. After that, word gets around that it's better not to get too close to me at first.

However, the day reaches its lowest point at the beginning of the first block, when I meet Ruby in the hallway. We both freeze – she on one side, I on the other – and look at each other.

I hate you for that. But I love you too, and that makes it so much harder, I remember her words.

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

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

She loves me.

She loves me, damn it.

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

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

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

Lydia is already there, and she looks exactly how I feel.

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

"That was exhausting, wasn't it?" I hear Lydia say softly.

I hate the caution in her voice. As if she was afraid to talk to me at all. I know it's my own fault, but at the same time I'm aware of how wrong it is that my own sister no longer dares to talk to me. I eye the minibar. I've endured a long time without a drink, but right now, after this terrible day, the need to numb myself germinates – no matter how.

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

"You're not going to get drunk just because you've had a day," she says calmly.

She's right, I know that. Nevertheless, I ignore them and try to gently but firmly free myself from their grip – but without success. She has her fingers firmly clawed into my arm. I pull her away from me with a jerk. Lydia slides forward, and her bag is catapulted onto the floor of the car.

"You idiot," she hisses and immediately begins to collect her belongings, which are now scattered everywhere.

Sighing, I lean down and help her. "Sorry. I didn't want that."

While Lydia clenches her stuff together with her lips pressed together, I collect a few pens and hold them out to her. She takes it from me without looking at me. Then I pick up her appointment planner, a few tampons and a round white plastic tin that looks like a chewing gum wrapper. The lid has loosened, and I'm about to tighten it when my eyes fall on the lettering.

Prenatal vitamins: DHA, omega-3s, cholins and vitamin D

Lemon, raspberry and orange flavor

Right next to the lettering is the silhouette of a woman holding her rounded belly.

It feels as if Percy is steering the car straight over a pothole, but we are still standing in the parking lot. The blood rushes in my ears.

"What's that?" I croak, looking from my sister to the package and back again.

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

"What's that, Lydia?" I repeat, this time in a firmer voice.

"I—" Lydia just shakes her head.

I read the lettering again, then again. I understand the words, but they don't make sense. Again I look at Lydia and open my mouth to ask the same question again, because...

"They don't belong to me," she blurts out.

I exhale jerkily. "Then to whom do they belong?"

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

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

Tears gather in her eyes. She slaps her hands in front of her face and begins to sob. At that moment I know. I know the truth without Lydia having to say anything. Deep inside me, I feel shock, panic and fear germinating at the same time, but I push them back and take a deep breath.

Then I sit down next to Lydia again. "They're your vitamins, aren't they?" I murmur.

Her shoulders shake so much that I can hardly understand her stammered "Yes". And then I do the only thing that seems sensible to me in this situation: I take her in my arms and just hold her.

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James

Lydia sits on her bed and fiddles with the pillow that lies on her lap. Once again, I try to catch a glimpse of her belly as inconspicuously as possible. After walking up and down the room for half an hour, trying to calm my pulse, I eventually dropped into one of her armchairs.

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

How?

How the hell are we supposed to take care of a baby?

How can we hide it from Dad?

Can you study at Oxford if you have a baby?

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

I look up. The tension under which Lydia stands is unmistakable. Her cheeks are reddened, her shoulders stiff.

"I... I don't know what to say."

I feel so infinitely stupid. At the same time, I realize how selfish I have been in the past few weeks. I only lamented my own fate, my loss, my guilty conscience, my broken heart. All this time, my sister knew she was pregnant and thought she couldn't tell me. Of course, there are things that we withhold from each other, but not something like this. Not something that is so overly big and life-changing.

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

I shake my head. "It does me—"

"No," she interrupts me. "I don't want pity, James. Not from you."

I claw my fingers into the backs of the chair to keep myself from jumping back up and marching across the room. The fabric crunches under my unyielding grip.

The gulf that arose between Lydia and me when I threw these unforgivable words at her head seems insurmountable to me. I'm unsure what I can and can't ask them. On top of that, I don't know anything about pregnancies.

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

Finally, I clear my throat. "How did you find out?"

Lydia looks up in surprise. She hesitates for a moment, then begins to talk. "I have... um... I don't have a regular cycle anyway, so I didn't think anything of it at the beginning when my period didn't come. But after some time I became suspicious, because I was also feeling very strange. Overall." She shrugs her shoulders. "So I bought a test. We were in London. I did it in the toilet of a restaurant and almost fell over when it was positive."

Shaking my head, I look at her. "When was that?"

"In November."

I swallow hard. Two months ago. For two months Lydia has been guarding this secret, probably completely frightened and believing that she is completely alone. If this revelation already throws me off track – how has it fared in the last few weeks? In addition to everything else that happened?

All of a sudden, I want nothing more than to overcome the distance between us. "I can't imagine what that must have been like for you."

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

"Does he know about it?" I ask cautiously.

"No."

Lydia is visibly trying not to break down, but I can see her hopelessness. She has probably done nothing but pull herself together in the last two months, constantly trying to keep her secret to herself and not show her true feelings to anyone. I hate myself for letting her down like that. Instead, I only thought of myself.

This is now over. I have no idea what will happen to Lydia in the coming months. But in this second it is one hundred percent clear to me that she will not go through this alone.

I take a deep breath and get up.

As I sit down next to her on the bed, I push everything aside – the grief, the pain, the anger I felt. Carefully, I reach for her hand.

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

Lydia swallows hard. "That's all you say. And the next time you're angry, you'll just slam mean words at my head again." Tears run down her

cheeks, and her body trembles as she suppresses a sobbing with all her might. It kills me to see her like that.

"I'm serious, Lydia. I will be there for you." I take a deep breath. "The person I was after Dad told us what happened — I'm not. I don't want to be that. That was easy... It was too much for me. I wasn't strong enough, and I'm sorry about that."

"You're crushing my hand," Lydia murmurs.

For a moment I stand on the hose. But when I follow Lydia's gaze, I switch gears and let go of her immediately. "I'm sorry about that, too." I smile at her apologetically.

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

I gently stroke the back of her head.

We used to sit there a lot. As a five-year-old, Lydia came to bed with me when there was lightning and thunder outside, as a ten-year-old when Dad yelled at us because our grades weren't good enough for him, and even as a fifteen-year-old she knocked on my door some nights after the affair with Gregg and then lay down next to me in bed without a word. I always stroked her head and said that everything would be fine, even though I was never convinced of it myself.

I wonder if she still remembers those moments or if it's a part of our past that she's repressed. We Beaufort are pretty good at suppressing.

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

Lydia freezes next to me, and with every second she doesn't react, I feel more exposed. I desperately look for something I could add to lighten the mood a bit, but I can't think of anything. So without further ado I decide on one of the questions that have been buzzing around in my head for over an hour.

"Have you been to the doctor yet? I have no idea how that works. Is everything all right? And what are these vitamins for—does that mean you're deficient or something?"

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

"I got the vitamins right at the first examination, I think almost every pregnant woman gets them at the beginning. And at the last examination

everything was in perfect order." She hesitates. "There was only a small surprise."

I raise an eyebrow. "Another one?"

"They're going to be twins."

I stare at Lydia in disbelief. "You're joking."

She shakes her head and pulls out her cell phone. She opens the gallery and shows me a picture on which the light outline of a small body can be seen on a dark background. Then she calls up the next picture. Actually, it looks exactly the same – except that I can clearly see a second outline right next to the first one.

Something jumps in my stomach, and all of a sudden I feel very strange. At the same time, I let out an incredulous laugh. "That's too crazy to be true."

Lydia grins. "I had to laugh at first because I couldn't believe it. Well, although ... Actually, I laughed and cried at the same time. Ruby must have thought I was having a nervous breakdown."

At Ruby's name, I automatically straighten up a bit. "Ruby went to the doctor with you?"

Lydia avoids my gaze and instead looks intensively at the cell phone in her hand. "Yes. She has known it for quite a while."

I rub my hand over my chin. My throat suddenly feels dry.

"I asked her to keep it to herself. Please don't be mad at her."

I can only shake my head. Then I let myself sink backwards and slap my arms in front of my face.

Ruby knew.

Ruby was there for my sister. After all I have done, she has not left Lydia alone. Unlike me.

I can't breathe.

"James?" whispers Lydia.

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

My sister pulls my arms away and looks at me worriedly. Then she drops down next to me, and together we look up at the chandelier that hangs in the middle of her room.

"Lydia," I murmur into the silence. "I messed up."

Lydia

I've never seen my brother like this before.

I knew that this affected him with Ruby, but I had no idea how much he really suffered.

Now that he has dropped his mask, I can see the shame in his eyes, but also the deep sadness and pain that the separation from Ruby causes him. It is the first time that he openly shows me what it looks like inside him.

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

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

James turns his head to me. "I tried to apologize to her," he says in a hushed voice. "She can't, she said."

We are silent for a moment.

"I can understand her," I finally begin, and James flinches imperceptibly. "But at the same time... I don't know either. I just wish you could get over it."

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

"Since when are you someone who just gives up?"

James snorts.

"What?"

"I didn't give up just like that. I think of her non-stop and I'm sure I'll never have feelings for anyone else again, damn it. But if she doesn't want me anymore, then—"

I grab one of the sketch pads on my bedside table and fry James with it.

He sits up jerkily. "Ouch, what's the matter?"

I do the same and ignore the black dots that appear in front of my eyes. "You have to show her that too, James! Show her how important she is to you and how much you regret it."

"You didn't notice how she looked at me on New Year's Eve. And what she said—" He shakes his head. "She's determined to start this year without me—so I can't burden her again with what I feel for her. She thinks we have nothing in common and that it would never have worked with us."

"You shouldn't go to her and assail her with confessions of love. But until she knows how sorry you are for what you've done, she can't forgive

you."

I see how it starts to work behind its eyes and go one better. "You must show her. Not with mere words. But with your behavior. If she says you have nothing in common, convince her otherwise."

He swallows hard and exhales heavily. He is currently fighting against himself, I can see that very clearly.

I remember our journey back together from Oxford. The morning before everything has changed. James looked so happy. He also radiated an inner peace that I didn't know from him. As if he were at peace with himself for the first time. As if the invisible burden that he usually carries around with him has disappeared. I hope that he gets that back.

Nevertheless, there is one thing he should know. "James," I say, waiting patiently for him to look at me. "If you kiss someone who isn't Ruby again, I'll cut your tongue out myself."

James blinks in surprise. Then he slowly shakes his head. "I don't know why I didn't think of you spending a lot of time with Ruby before."

I am tempted to smile for a moment, but hold it back. "I'm serious. I really want you to get that right."

James exhales audibly. "I want that too. More than anything else."

"Then fight for her, damn it."

For quite some time he says nothing, but only stares at the ceiling with a strangely enraptured gaze. I wish I could read his mind and learn what he's thinking at that moment.

"I will," he says quietly at last.

I put my hand on his shoulder and squeeze briefly. "Good."

One corner of his mouth contorts slightly upwards. The movement is so minimal that anyone else probably wouldn't have noticed it.

"But first I need a plan."

Ruby

"I wonder if Beaufort was flenching" is the first thing I hear when I enter the library's work area on Wednesday afternoon. The meeting of the events committee starts in half an hour, and I wanted to use the time to borrow a book that has been on my Oxford reading list for months.

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

"Well, he should cry out to me at any time."

I stand on my tiptoes to peer over the row of books through the gap on the shelf. I see two girls sitting next to each other at one of the work tables, their heads together over a book. It is obvious that they do not learn. They don't even bother to be quiet.

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

"Since he inherited the company's shares, he's gotten a lot hotter," sighs the other. "Maybe I'll try my luck."

Anger boils up in me. Aside from the fact that they're in a library and I'm disgusted by the disrespectful way they talk about James, it drives me crazy that I can't go anywhere in this school without hearing James' name.

On the way here, I passed three groups of students who were talking about him, and it's been like this for the whole week.

There are a whole range of other rumors that my classmates could pounce on just as greedily. Alistair was once again caught making out in the men's room with a guy who doesn't even go to our school. And Jessalyn is now actually dating the guy who allegedly fell asleep on her first night together. I still don't know if I should believe that, especially when I see Jessalyn's happy smile that she has had on her face non-stop ever since. There is also a rumor that Lydia threw herself into Cyril's arms after the death of her mum and would have a friendship plus with him. Apart from the fact that Lydia is clearly busy with more important things, I strongly doubt that she has more than friendly feelings for him. But when the rumor makes the rounds in Bio and I turn to Cyril, he has his arms crossed behind

his head with a satisfied grin, so that I don't know what to believe for a short moment.

But it's James that people want to talk about the most. Everywhere and always.

Have you seen the photos of James Beaufort?

The poor guy.

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

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

With a jerk, I pull out the book and walk around the shelf into the work area. The girls flinch when they realize that they are not alone. As I march towards them, I think about whether I should say something, but then my energy is too bad. I give them a contemptuous look and walk past them in the direction of our group room.

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

"Hey."

I open my eyes wide.

James sits on the other side of the room. On the chair he always sat on in the last term, when he was forced by Rector Lexington to participate in the events committee.

He looks changed. There are dark circles under his eyes, and I can see a slight shadow on his jaw that reveals that he hasn't shaved. His hair is more tousled than usual, probably because it has grown.

I wonder if I look changed in his eyes.

The seconds pass, and none of us moves. I don't know how to behave in his presence. In the corridor between school lessons I just ignored him, but now we are the only ones in this room. "What are you doing here?"

My voice sounds hoarse. I don't want to give the impression that he still has an effect on me. On the contrary, he should think that I don't mind being in the same room with him at all.

"I read." He holds up a book – no, a manga. Frowning, I look at the lettering, although I have already recognized the picture on the cover.

James reads Death Note. Volume three.

I once told him that this is my favorite series.

Confused, I look at him.

"We're about to have our team meeting. So if you were to find a new place to read—" I push myself off the door and walk to my seat, as if my pulse wasn't pounding loudly in my ears right now.

I slowly get my stuff out and spread it out on the table, then I go to the whiteboard and write the date in the top right corner. I wish there was anything else for me to do, but Lin has both the laptop and our notes for the agenda in her bag. So I sit down and pretend to be reading an entry in my bullet journal with concentration.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see James putting the manga down on the table in front of him. His movements are slow. It almost seems to me as if he is afraid of scaring me away. I feel his eyes on me and automatically hold my breath.

"I would like to participate in the meetings of the event committee again in this term."

I freeze. Without looking up from my planner, I ask, "What?"

"If that's okay for you and Lin, I'll let Lexington nod it off," James continues.

I look up in disbelief. "You can't be in earnest."

James calmly returns my gaze. Now I know what seems so different about him to me. Although he looks tired, there is no longer that hopelessness in his eyes that I saw on New Year's Eve. In its place has come a calmness that totally scratches me up at this second. When he's feeling bad, I can be strong. When he's calm, it makes me nervous. Is that what everyone means by "complementing each other"? Or do we simply throw each other off balance?

"I enjoyed working here, even if I didn't expect it at first. I want to continue to get involved."

I can't stop staring at him. "I just don't believe it."

"You said yourself that I like organizing and that I will be missing from the team. We also got a new training plan. Lacrosse and the meetings only coincide once a week. For Coach Freeman, that's fine."

I take my backpack off the floor and start rummaging through it, just so I don't have to look at James any further. I have no idea what that means.

I'm not stupid – James isn't here because he's rediscovered his love for Maxton Hall events. He's guaranteed to be here because of me. However, he is also right about what he says. When I think about the last term and how

he went out of his way for the Halloween party, I have to admit that the team would definitely not be disadvantaged by James' presence. On the contrary, the party was also a complete success because of his ideas and hard work.

If I send him away now, I have to reconcile it with my conscience for the rest of the school year, whenever we don't have a helping hand or a thinking head enough. As the leader of the team, I have a clear mission – not to mention that I also have to justify to Lexington why I turned James down.

"The others have to vote on it," I say finally.

"Okay."

I swallow hard. Even if James were to join the team again, it doesn't mean that I didn't mean my words from New Year's Eve seriously. Separating private and school life has always been my specialty. And even though I've blurred some boundaries in the last few months, that won't happen to me again in the future.

"I'll vote against," I continue, looking at him with a steady gaze.

He rests his arms on the table and returns my gaze resolutely. "I know."

It takes less than five minutes, and the others have voted for James to be reinstated as an old-new team member. Meanwhile, I sit in the front with hot cheeks and try not to let it be known how much the idea of spending three days a week in the same room with him from now on upsets me.

Lin hands out the handouts and starts straight away with the first point.

"Can someone give Beaufort a summary of the preparations for the charity gala so far?" she asks the group.

I let my gaze wander over my team. Normally, these meetings are routine for me, but that's probably history now. James' mere presence is enough to throw me completely off my game and trigger an avalanche of memories that makes my whole body tingle. I remember the feeling of his hands on my legs, stomach and breasts. The way he whispered my name. His mouth and how it felt on my lips and skin.

I feel my face getting even redder and try desperately to suppress the thoughts. They have no business here. For two years, I was a master at separating private and school life – it's time for me to start doing it again.

"The charity gala will take place in February," Jessalyn answers Lin's question. "The parents' board has decided that we will collect for the Pemwick Family Center this year. They want to expand their psychoanalytic offerings, and for that they still lack a large sum."

"Like every year, the party should be opulent," Kieran adds. "The dress code is black tie, and we have a high budget at our disposal. Lexington trusts us to inspire guests and encourage them to donate." I write down opulent parties and high budgets on my notepad. This doesn't make sense, because I've known all this for a long time, but at least I have an excuse to keep my eyes down and not have to look in James' direction.

"The event will take place in Boyd Hall. There is a drink in advance, finger food and the banquet of a five-star chef who used to use the services of the family center himself and does it all for free. That means we were able to spend a little more money on decoration and entertainment," explains Lin. "We hired a pianist from London to accompany the evening, and the highlight will be the performance of a group of acrobats recommended to us by Camille's parents."

"Some of them were once on Cirque du Soleil," Camille's self-satisfied voice sounds. I'm about to write down Cirque du Soleil when I realize how stupid I'm acting. I can't sit here for the entire hour and a half staring at my piece of paper just because James is present. Without further ado, I put my pen aside and look at Camille, who continues to speak. "They are supposed to create a mystical atmosphere."

Lin next to me sighs. "We just still have the problem of finding sponsors who want to come to the gala and are also willing to make a donation there. We can't just invite Maxton Hall parents. We also need laudators to speak in front of the guests. The best would be people who have been helped by the family center in the past. That looks particularly authentic."

"We said last week that we would continue to ask around," I finally speak up. "Have any of you made any progress?"

I only have to look at the disgruntled faces of my team members to know what their answers will be.

"My e-mails are ignored, and on the phone they either put me off until next year or tell me sometimes more, sometimes less clearly that I should finally leave them alone," says Kieran. "No one wants to make his story of suffering public. Especially not in Maxton Hall."

The others nod in agreement.

"Maybe we need to expand our radius a bit," Jessalyn suggests. "And also contact people who have not visited this family center, but also another."

"Good idea," I say. "We could also ask universities if there is anyone in the relevant departments who is willing to give a speech." My smile is more confident than I feel. "We'll make it. And there's still a little time."

Murmurs of agreement are heard.

"Now that you're back in the team, you're welcome to take over the handling with the decoration studio and also sort everything out with janitor Jones," Lin suddenly says to James. "He's always glad to have someone help him prepare Boyd Hall."

I dare to look in James' direction.

He blinks irritably, but then utters a toneless "It's okay."

It takes me the greatest effort to suppress the grin that tries to fight its way onto my face. Cleaning and preparing the hall - that is the task that no one ever does voluntarily. The fact that Lin simply delegates it to James is funny. And it shows me once again what a magical person she is.

The rest of the meeting goes according to plan, but I'm happy when the ninety minutes have passed. Lin and I distribute the to-dos among each other, while the others say goodbye to us and leave the room – everyone except James and Camille, who seem to be packing their things extra slowly. I try not to pay attention to her, but I don't succeed. I hear every word of Camille's murmured condolences. My stomach cramps, and immediately afterwards I admonish myself. I didn't want to feel any more pain because of James and I didn't want to feel any more pain for James. Actually, I didn't want to feel anything at all when it came to James Beaufort.

"I'll get out of here," I murmur to Lin.

She nods and shoos me away with her hand. I shoulder my backpack and walk to the door, my gaze fixed straight ahead. Just as I reach for the pommel, a hand closes around it – and mine lands directly over it. I look up into James' face. We are only a few centimeters apart. I can smell its familiar smell, spicy and a bit like honey, and also the warmth it radiates.

"Ruby," he whispers.

I withdraw my hand as if I had burned myself. Then I look at him expectantly so that he either takes away his or opens the door. He hesitates

for a moment, but finally turns the knob.

I breathe a sigh of relief. "See you then, Lin," I say hurriedly and leave the room.

I walk to the school bus faster than ever before, while the echo of his voice echoes in my head and through my entire body.

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Lydia

"Unbelievable," James groans in frustration. He jerkily pushes the laptop away from him and turns to me on the desk chair. "Two people have turned me down again."

From the couch I look at my brother. When he told me about his plan to participate in the event committee again, I was surprised at first. But the longer I think about it, the better I think his decision is.

Ruby loves working on this team. Showing her that he not only understands her passion, but also shares it, is a good first step. In addition, James realized in the last term how much fun he has organizing these parties – even if he would never admit it out loud.

"You have to be more persistent. Appeal to her conscience, not her wallet. Then they'll come to the gala," I say, sipping the cup of tea I hold with my cold fingers. I think our housekeeper knows about my pregnancy. She put the jug down in front of me without being asked and whispered to me with a conspiratorial look that he would certainly do me good.

James nods absently and pulls the laptop a little closer to him again. At the same moment, a quiet ping announces a new email. While James reads it with squinted eyes, I reach for a cookie. A few crumbs fall on the couch as he bites off, but James is too busy typing an answer to notice. Fortunately – he hates crumbs very much.

"Have you talked to Ruby yet?" I ask after a while.

The sound confirming the sending of a message sounds, and James turns back to me. "No." He rubs his hand over his face. "She couldn't even look at me properly this week."

"You can't force it, that's clear. But at some point you have to talk to each other," I say gently. The more time passes, the wider the gap between you becomes. Believe me."

My brother gives me a long look. Obviously, he put one and one together. "So you still haven't spoken to Sutton?"

I shrug my shoulders. "What is there to discuss? We both know it's better that way."

"Yes, but he knows nothing about the pregnancy. That changes everything."

"He wants nothing more to do with me." I shove the remaining cookie into my mouth and chew leisurely. "He has told me that more than once. In the first place, I am too proud to talk to him."

"And secondly?"

I return James' gaze. "Secondly, I'm afraid to tell him. I don't want to know how he reacts. I have to deal with it myself first, and then I can deal with what I do if his reaction doesn't turn out the way I wanted."

"Lydia—" James' cell phone rings. He makes no move to answer, but continues to look at me intensively.

"Go for it!" I say urgently. "He's certainly one of the sponsors."

He hesitates for a moment. Then he takes the cell phone and takes a look at the display. "Owen," he says loudly after he has taken off. "How nice to hear from you."

I feign a silent choking. Owen Murray is chairman of the board of a telecommunications company and a close friend of Dad's. Neither James nor I like him, and I'm pretty sure it's mutual.

"Given the circumstances, yes," says James. All of a sudden, his tone is firm and cool. "No, I didn't call on behalf of Beaufort, but on behalf of Maxton Hall College. At the beginning of February, we will celebrate a charity gala for the Pemwick Family Center, and we are still looking for sponsors."

I can hear soft murmurs on the other end of the line.

"Of course, I'll send you the details. That would be fantastic, Owen, thank you."

James ends the conversation and types something into his cell phone. Then he turns to me again. "Until you tell Sutton, you won't know how he reacts."

"So you advise me to tell him."

He nods. "Yes. And I think he has a right to know."

I stare into my cup. Through the rest of the pink liquid, I try to recognize a pattern in the tea grounds.

No more calls. We had agreed on that.

Even if he decides that he will be there for me and the babies from now on – what does that mean? Only that he feels guilty, nothing more. I want nothing more than to be with Graham because he wants to. Of his own free will and not because he is forced to do so by pregnancy.

James' cell phone rings again. He holds out a finger to me to indicate that our conversation is not over yet, then he picks up.

I drink the rest of my tea and set the empty cup down on the table. After that, I take my own phone and open my messages. Graham's number is still stored. I just couldn't bring myself to delete them. Just having her there and knowing that I could write to him if I wanted to is enough for me.

I scroll up our history. It contains not only everyday messages and photos, but also some in which we have confided in our deepest fears and worries. Any normal person would have deleted these messages instead of keeping them and leafing through them over and over again like an old photo album.

Apparently, I'm not a normal person.

This is the only thing I have left of him. And I'm just not ready to break away from him for good. To be honest, I don't know if I ever will. I miss him so much. I miss our phone calls, his laughter at bad action comedies, our intertwined fingers under the table of a café. The knowledge that I can't have that back almost drives me crazy.

"That sounds wonderful," James' voice reaches my ear. He sounds so enthusiastic that I look at him with a raised eyebrow. "Yes, of course. Thank you, Alice, see you then." James exhales audibly and stretches out both arms above his head.

"Alice? Alice Campbell?" I ask.

It turns in my direction. "She owes me another favour."

"I'd rather not know why."

He smiles boldly. "Ruby thinks Alice is great."

No wonder. Alice Campbell studied at Oxford and founded her own cultural foundation while still a student.

"You're really putting in a lot of effort," I comment. I immediately regret it when James' gaze becomes serious.

"Back to the topic," he says, but I shake my head.

"I can't tell him. How am I supposed to sit in his class?"

"You can switch to my history course."

"That's totally striking."

James shrugs his shoulders. "People change all the time for all kinds of reasons. I don't think that's particularly noticeable. We could give the reason that you'd rather study with me."

"I don't know," I murmur.

"No matter what you do," says James. "I'll help you." He looks at me seriously for a moment, then turns back to his laptop.

I feel a slight tingling in my stomach and put my hand on it to feel if it is one of the little ones. In the meantime, slight movements from them are noticeable – almost as if I had butterflies in my stomach.

Now that James knows, I'm much better off than before, but that doesn't change the fact that I'm expecting two children, will be a single mother and will probably have to drop out of school. Whereby... maybe I'll manage to write my final exams before it all comes to light.

I force myself to take three deep, calm breaths. I must not lose myself in thoughts of an already uncertain future. I have to tackle one day at a time. Because if I worry from morning to night, it doesn't do anyone any good – especially not the little worms, which must now be my priority.

"Fuck," James exclaims suddenly. He has both arms crossed behind his head and stares at his screen with wide eyes.

"What's the matter?"

James is frozen. Gripped by restlessness, I get up and walk over to his desk. I stand behind his chair and grasp the leather backrest. Then I lean forward a bit.

The first thing I see is the word Oxford.

The second is congratulations, James Beaufort.

"You've been taken!" I blurt out.

Since James still doesn't react, I turn his chair around to me. Pure shock is written all over his face.

"James, you've been taken. That's great!" I grab him by the shoulders and pull him up to hug him. He stumbles, and it takes a moment for him to return the hug.

"Fuck," he repeats.

I don't know if he's happy or if he's going crazy inside. While I hold it, I wonder if there is an e-mail waiting for me in my inbox. Old Lydia would now run to her cell phone like a possessed woman and see if she was also taken. The new Lydia, on the other hand, does not want to know whether she has just been offered a future that she cannot pursue anyway.

I hug James a little tighter and am happy that at least one of us can realize his plans.

James

"It's a difficult time behind us, I don't really need to mention that. But from now on, we can look forward again. For that is what Cordelia would have wanted."

I suppress the urge to roll my eyes or make any sound. My father has no idea what my mother would have really wanted. Certainly not this theater he is performing in front of him.

It is the first official speech he has given as managing director to the Beaufort board and the department heads, and they are already eating out of his hand. The twelve men and women hang on his lips with hopeful expressions while I sit at the side of the long conference table and think about how I can get out my cell phone as inconspicuously as possible.

"If we pull together, we can bring Beaufort out of the emotional low and move the company forward. In the coming period, you will have to make some changes for which I depend on your support. In this context, I would like to thank you in advance – you are our most important asset. In the coming period, it will therefore be important to me to use your expertise more than ever before."

I slide my hand into my pocket and take out my cell phone. In the past few hours, the guys have sent me countless messages trying to persuade me to go out partying tonight. It's my first day in my new role on Beaufort's board of directors, and in their world, that's something we definitely need to toast to.

Unfortunately, I'm not in a party mood at all. I know that the opportunities to meet up with my friends will become fewer and fewer in the future and I should use the time we have left. They're already mad at me because I only come to training twice a week.

Nevertheless, there is only one person I want to see today.

And this person has been ignoring me for weeks because I pushed him away from me.

Although I see Ruby regularly at school, I miss her.

I want her to be able to look at me again without flinching in pain.

I want to be able to talk to her, anytime and anywhere.

I want to know if it was taken at Oxford.

"Despite the death of my wife, nothing will change in Beaufort's corporate culture," my father continues undeterred. "It is the foundation of our successes. Cordelia told me what it meant to join this company when we met, and I intend to honour her memory."

Applause erupts. I clap my hands twice, then I inconspicuously read the message Cyril has just written to me. Are at Wren, when are you finally coming? He sends a photo in which they raise their middle fingers.

I guess I have no choice. I will have to go to them after this appointment. I've offended them often enough lately, and it can't hurt to be distracted by them. From this meeting. But first and foremost also from Ruby. No matter what I do, it's always in my head. She's the only person who would understand how cruel it is to sit here and listen to my dad manage my mum's life's work. That night in Oxford I confided everything to her. It was the first time that I spoke out loud the thoughts that I had always forbidden myself.

Ruby understood me. She didn't appeal to my sense of duty or the meaning of my name. She listened to me and encouraged me. Courage for a future that is my own.

The longer I sit here, the stronger my desire to see Ruby becomes. And the more often I tell myself that this is not possible, the more intense the longing that grows in me.

I have to see them.

I just have to.

"This project will not only come from me, but also from my son James, who is now being prepared for his future position at Beaufort and who, by the way, received his commitment from Oxford this week."

When I hear my name and the applause that follows, I look up. Some of the colleagues nod at me in a friendly way, others see very clearly that I am holding my mobile phone in my hand under the table and twist the corners of their mouths disapprovingly. I return her gaze coolly, without putting the phone away

"Would you like to say a few words, James?" my father asks.

I look at him, trying not to let the surprise show. He did not mention anything about a speech on my part before the meeting. His gaze is ice-cold and persistent. If I don't speak now, my father will give me hell.

That damn bastard. He knew very well that I would not have come with him if he had revealed to me beforehand that he wanted to show me off like a racehorse. Instead, he now lets me run into the open knife.

I get up slowly and push the phone back into my pocket. For a moment I glance at my untouched glass of water and regret not having drunk anything before. My throat feels constricted as I look around the group. Some of these people I've known since I was a child, others I saw for the first time at my mum's funeral.

I have to clear my throat. It feels like my mind has separated from my body, when words come out of my mouth that mean nothing to me at all.

"My mother would have been proud to be here today and to see how much courage and commitment you put into our company."

I have no idea if Mum would have really thought that. I didn't even really know her.

Something contracts in my chest. For a moment I consider just running out without another word, but that doesn't work. The only way out is to survive the next hour. No matter how.

"I'm happy to be able to do in the future what my mother did and loved all her life. The footsteps I'm going to follow can never be filled—but I can at least try."

My gaze crosses my father's. I wonder if he can see the lie in my eyes and if he realizes that I'm just putting on a show here. Because that's all it is. A show where everything is rehearsed and nothing is real.

There doesn't seem to be enough room in my chest for oxygen, it's so tight all of a sudden, it's so hard for me to take a breath. Again I think of Ruby. Ruby, who tells me I can do whatever I want. Ruby, who planted in me the belief in a self-determined life full of possibilities.

"I can say with full conviction: With you as a colleague, the future can only be crowned with success."

I nod to the employees before I sit down again. A few of the disapproving expressions have softened during my words, and there is applause again.

I dare to look at my father, and a shiver runs through my body. He nods at me, obviously satisfied with my speech. I've never felt more like a puppet.

Ruby

I read the e-mail once.

Once again.

Then a third time.

I read them again and again until the letters blur before my eyes and I have to blink.

"Mum," I say.

My mother makes a questioning sound. She sits next to me at the kitchen table and leafs through a living room catalogue, lost in thought.

"Mum," I repeat, this time more insistently, and push the laptop with the open mail in her direction.

Now she looks up. "What?"

I hold my breath as I point energetically at my laptop. Mum's gaze follows my finger. Her eyes flit across the screen. She pauses and looks at me, then back again. The next moment she slaps her hand in front of her mouth. "No," she exclaims muffled.

I nod. "Yes, I think so."

"No!"

"Yes!"

Mum jumps up and throws her arms around my neck. "I'm so proud of you!"

I wrap my arms around my mother and close my eyes. I try to do what I always did as a child: I concentrate very remembering this moment forever. I memorize Mum's smell, the sound of the oven, the smell of freshly baked scones and the immeasurable joy that floods through me when I realize that my greatest dream is just within reach.

"I'm so happy," I murmur on her shoulder.

Mum strokes my back. "You deserve it, Ruby."

"I have to look for scholarships," I say, without letting go of them.

Their embrace becomes even tighter. "Those are thoughts for later. Not for now. Now—"

She is interrupted by the ringing of the doorbell.

"Are you opening the door?" she asks, pulling away from me. Then you can tell her the great news right away."

I nod and turn into the hallway so hurriedly that the carpet slips over the wooden floor and I bump my shoulder on the coat rack. But even that can't stop me from tearing open the door with a smile ...

... which instantly freezes to ice.

James is on my doorstep. He is just about to run a hand through his hair and, like me, freezes in the middle of the movement. His cheeks are slightly reddened, and his breath forms small clouds in the icy winter air. He wears a gray checkered suit with a black tie. Apparently he has just come from an important appointment or is on his way there.

I want to slam the door in his face.

At the same time, I want to throw my arms around his neck.

Maybe it's a good thing that I'm not able to do anything. I just stare at him while I feel my heartbeat getting faster and faster at the sight of him.

"I—" he begins, but his voice dies.

I remember the day he came here under the pretext of bringing me the dress for the Halloween party. At that time, he fought a similar battle against himself before my eyes – the feelings want to be let out of his inner self, but somehow he never manages to let that happen.

"I can't take it anymore, Ruby," he blurts out suddenly. Shaking his head, he looks up at me. "I can't go on any longer."

He sounds broken and tired. Sad and shattered. As if something had happened from which there is no turning back.

It is clear that he cannot be alone right now. But at the same time, I'm annoyed that he's here. I'm the last person he should go to if he's struggling. Why does he ruin this moment for me? I just got my commitment to Oxford, damn it. I should run through the house dancing instead of letting his pain drag me down like that. The thing between us is over – he has ended it. And we shouldn't take two steps back and desperately cling to something that no longer exists.

"What can't you do anymore?"

"I have just come from a meeting at Beaufort's. Lydia is pregnant. And I was accepted at Oxford. I... I'm going crazy."

James' chest rises and falls quickly as if he had run a marathon. It probably feels that way to him. I know how terribly he suffers from the

pressure his father puts on him, and at this moment it looks like he's going to buckle at any moment.

I take a deep breath. "I understand how bad that must be for you. But... I'm not the person you should turn to when you're feeling bad," I reply as gently as possible.

He takes the steps of the entrance stairs with quick steps until he stands directly in front of me. His eyes are dark, his gaze desperate. I've never seen him like that before.

"I can't stay away from you any longer. You're the only person who really understands me. I need you. And I want to fight for us, because I belong to you. I'll always be yours, Ruby."

I cling to the door frame and stare at him, completely stunned. My body is gripped by hope, pain and anger at the same time, a chaotic mix that makes my heart race and my thoughts swirl wildly.

I can't believe he just said that.

I can't believe he's trying to turn my life upside down again.

All of a sudden, I get incredibly angry. How dare he to participate in the event committee again? How dare he ruin this moment for me?

"No," I manage with difficulty. At the same time, I shake my head. "No."

"Please, Ruby, I—"

"Do you know what I need, James?" I interrupt. "I need peace. I need time for myself to get over you. I wish that you will be happy at some point and realize that you don't have to let your father determine your life. Only I can't help you with that."

He shakes his head. "I'm better off when you're with me. Then I'm just... happy."

"It's not my job to make you happy, damn it!" I yell.

James flinches and takes a step back. He slips off the top step, and for a moment it looks as if he is losing his balance, but at the last moment he manages to catch himself. He stares at me, and the unspeakable shock in his eyes takes his breath away.

"James," I croak.

He shakes his head. "No, you're right. I... I shouldn't have come here."

Without another word, he turns around and runs down the stairs. He crosses our front yard at a quick pace until he arrives at the small wooden gate. He opens it, steps through it and then looks at me again. His eyes are

glassy, as if there were tears in them – whether that's because of my words or because of the cutting wind, I don't know. Before I can say anything, he turns around and leaves.

James

The colorful lights of the club dance to the beat over the faces of my friends, while the bass of the song booms in my ears and shakes my whole body.

I sit in the lounge on one of the comfortable couches and watch Alistair, Kesh and Cyril dancing with a group of girls not far from me. Wren also remained seated. I think the boys took a look at my face and decided that I couldn't be left alone that evening. Like I'm a fucking toddler.

"All right, man?" Wren yells abruptly in my ear.

I raise an eyebrow. Usually, Wren is the last person who wants to talk about feelings. On the contrary. We have both perfected the suppression of problems for years. It's one of the reasons why we're best friends.

"Don't look like that. I'm just worried about you."

I hardly understand him, but his look says it all. When I entered the club earlier, it was clear to everyone that something must have happened. Without saying a word, Cyril pressed a glass of gin and tonic into my hand, which I still haven't touched now, a good hour later. The desire to drink it in one gulp is great. Maybe then Ruby's words would finally fall silent, repeating themselves in a continuous loop in my head.

It's not my job to make you happy, damn it!

I can understand her anger – she has every right to yell at me. Going to her was a kind of knee-jerk reaction that I can't explain myself in retrospect.

I hate this situation. I hate that I didn't go to her on that Wednesday, but to Cyril, and not a day goes by that I don't wish I had a time machine to undo everything that happened. Because while I could have talked to Ruby, my friends and I have always lived by one motto: forget as soon as possible, whatever the cost.

I avert my gaze from Wren and stare at my glass. The booming music is not enough to silence my thoughts, and for a moment I wrestle with myself. I look at the others. Cyril and Alistair dance with two girls, while Kesh leans against a wall next to them and sips his drink. I briefly consider getting up and walking to them, but it feels like lead weights are hanging

from my body. It takes almost all the strength I have to lean forward and place the glass untouched on the small wooden table in front of me.

"My whole fucking life is going down the drain," I say finally. I don't know if Wren understood me. Apart from the fact that the music is deafeningly loud, he also has quite a bit of alcohol in his mind. But his dark brown eyes are vigilantly on me as I continue. "And I can't do anything about it."

Apparently he heard me, because he leans a bit towards me, grabs my shoulder and squeezes briefly. "You're doing what you've been doing all your life, man."

"What?"

The corners of Wren's mouth twist into a grim smile. "You go on. If there's one thing I've learned from you in recent years, it's this."

I swallow hard.

"Whenever I'm about to give up, I think about it. In the last few days, this has helped me," he continues.

Again my gaze falls on the full glass of gin and tonic. I wonder what "moving on" means in my case. Forgot Ruby and pretend that none of this ever happened? Or fight for them?

"I know you're going through a lot at the moment, but now it's actually your job to ask what's been going on with me in the last few days," he says.

Wren's words make me look up. "What?" I ask, confused.

He returns my gaze with a frown. Finally, he exhales jerkily and rubs his neck. "It's okay. Forget it." He stands up and nods in the direction of the dance floor, to our friends, who are bathed in blue and purple light. Their movements are exuberant, as if they have not a single worry in this world.

For as long as I can remember, this has been our specialty. To pretend that nothing and no one can harm us. As if life were just a game in which nothing is of long duration or importance. In the last few weeks I have learned that we have indulged in an illusion. Everyone is vulnerable, and everyone has something to lose.

I shake my head, but Wren doesn't accept a no. He grabs my hand, pulls me up from the sofa and onto the dance floor. The boys cheer when they see us and open the circle so that we can stand with them. I try to move to the beat for a while, but it doesn't work.

I'm just about to apologize to the others and announce that I'm leaving again when someone dances at me from behind and wraps an arm around

my stomach. Frowning, I turn around – and look into Elaine Ellington's face.

"James!" she calls over the music and smiles at me. Her honey-blond hair is curly and frames her face, which is slightly reddened by dancing. As fast as I can, I push her arm away from me and leave the dance floor to head back to our lounge. When I get there, I feel strangely out of breath. I order a water and let myself fall onto the sofa.

The sight of Elaine felt like a punch in my stomach. The memories of the evening in Cyril's pool, which I already carry around with me twenty-four hours a day, were so present from one moment to the next that a wave of nausea came over me.

But I did the math without Elaine. After a while she comes to me and sits down next to me with her legs crossed.

"What kind of greeting was that?" she asks, running her fingers through her hair. Her eyes sparkle in amusement. She sits so close to me that we almost touch. She slides a little closer to me. My whole body freezes as the smell of her perfume penetrates my nose.

"I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am for what happened to your mum. If you want to talk or something – I always have an open ear for you." She places her hand on my leg and slowly runs it up over the fabric of my pants.

"Elaine, stop," I say firmly, pushing her hand away. At the same time, I slide to the side and look at her seriously.

"Did I do something wrong?" she asks, surprised.

I shake my head. "No. I'm the one who did everything wrong," I reply.

Elaine raises an eyebrow. "What's the matter with you?"

I shrug my shoulders, but say nothing.

She just looks at me for a moment, then shakes her head. "You've been in a better mood before."

"I'm sorry," I say. "But I can't do that anymore."

She slips away from me a bit. "It's a pity," she says and then stands up. "It was always fun with you."

She stays in place for a moment, as if she's waiting for me to hold her back. When I don't move and look straight ahead, she goes back to the dance floor without another word.

I sink backwards and stare at the ceiling of the club. For the first time I notice that there are small lights there, which are probably supposed to

represent stars. As if by magic, I reach into my pocket to get my wallet out. I unfold it erratically and reach for the piece of paper hidden behind my identity card. For the past few weeks, I've avoided looking at the list for fear that I'd feel even more exhausted afterwards than before. I hold up the piece of paper so that the small lights from the ceiling almost shine through. Point by point, I read what Ruby wrote down together with me. I swallow hard and notice how scratchy my throat suddenly is.

In my life, there has never been anyone who has been as interested in me as Ruby. I've never had someone I think of first thing in the morning and whose face I have in front of my eyes when I go to sleep. And there has never been anyone who has wanted to make my dreams come true.

Everything that has happened has changed me. I'm not the same person I was before. But if there's one thing I want to fight for – it's Ruby.

With that in mind, I fold the list back up and hold it tightly in my hand as I leave the club.

Ruby

"Ruby!" shouts Dad loudly.

"And Lin," I add, smiling broadly at my friend.

"And Lin!" repeat Mum, Dad and Ember in chorus.

It was Dad's idea to have a small Oxford party at our home and toast our success together with Lin. When Mum and I told him, he didn't believe a word we said at first and finally demanded that we show him the mail. While he was reading it, he mumbled "No" over and over again, only to hug me so tightly that my ribs still hurt a little four hours later.

"I can't believe we were taken," I whisper to Lin over the rim of my champagne glass.

"Neither do I."

The thought of being able to spend the next three years with my girlfriend leaves a bunch of excited butterflies in my stomach. I'm so excited that it feels unreal.

"We've got to work harder now, Lin," I say.

"Can't you just be happy for at least one evening?" asks Ember.

Mum and Dad laugh as Lin and I exchange a remorseful smile. "You're right," I say. "But so much can go wrong!" asks Ember.

Lin puts her champagne glass on the living room table and takes a nacho, the only finger food we could conjure up in a hurry. "We have to pass all our subjects with an A, only then will we get the firm commitment."

"And then I have to be selected for one of the scholarships," I quietly add, trying to push back the panic that wants to fight its way up in me at the thought. The student advisor at Maxton Hall has assured me more than once that my chances of doing so are above average and that she wouldn't worry at all if she were me. But that's easier said than done.

Lin's cheeks turn pale, and she places the bitten nacho next to her glass. "What if I get a worse grade in some subject? My grandmother will certainly withdraw her offer to help me with my studies."

"Girls, you should celebrate and not worry about death!" Mum sits opposite Lin and me on our flowered armchair and looks at us, shaking her head.

Lin and I exchange a worried look before we take the champagne glasses and take a big sip at the same time.

"You probably wouldn't have been taken if you were in a different mood, would you?" says Ember with a grin. She wasn't surprised by the acceptance and tried to be happy for me, but I also noticed how sad it makes her that I'm going to move out. Because even though Oxford is not far away, it makes a difference whether half a hallway or a two-hour train ride separates us from each other. Ember hates change, and I'm pretty sure that if it were up to her, we'd always stay at home – until the end of our lives.

But even though her mood has rubbed off on me a bit during the day and I get wistful at the thought of moving out, the joy of the acceptance far outweighs it. And since James was here, I have decided not to let anything or anyone take this joy away from me today.

After the champagne bottle is empty, Lin and I leave my parents to the TV program and go upstairs to my room.

"Oh shit," Lin murmurs as I close the door behind us. She has her eyes fixed on her cell phone and, without looking up, takes a seat on my desk chair.

"What?" I ask.

"Nothing."

Her answer comes so quickly that I prick up my ears. "What's the matter?"

She shrugs her shoulders. "Cyril was apparently taken too."

I hesitate for a moment, then whisper, "James too."

"Really? Then half the Beaufort clique is in Oxford. Alistair and Wren also posted on Instagram." Lin is still typing away on her phone. I catch a glimpse of the display and see the picture of a half-naked guy, who I'm pretty sure is Cyril.

Okay, I can't stand it for a second longer. For months I have suspected that something is going on between Lin and Cyril that no one knows about. The way the two treat each other speaks volumes. For a long time, I thought they loathed each other – but now I'm sure that these are sparks that fly between them when they engage in verbal battles.

"What are you doing?" I ask cautiously as I sit cross-legged on my bed.

Caught, she looks up. "Nothing."

"You've said 'nothing' twice so fast that I don't believe a word you say."

Lin bites her lower lip and looks at her phone again. Her cheeks are fiery red.

"Lin, come here," I say and knock energetically on the seat next to me. Skeptically, she looks at the place where my hand is resting, but then slowly stands up and taps towards me. While she leans her back against the headboard of the bed, pulls her knees up and wraps both arms around her, I turn to her and look at her expectantly. She brushes one of her black strands of hair behind her ear. It seems to me that she doesn't know how to start.

"I know you don't like to talk about such things," I say softly. "But you can always tell me if something is on your mind."

Lin swallows hard. "There's not much to tell," she whispers.

She looks almost shy – an expression I don't know from her at all. Lin is such a strong, confident person who always stands up for herself and her opinion without worrying about what others might think. Seeing her like this now suddenly makes me restless.

"I've loved Cyril since I was thirteen."

My eyes widen. "Really?"

She nods slowly. "When I got to Maxton Hall, Cyril and I were sitting next to each other in a couple of compartments. He... It wasn't always like it is today. At that time he was attentive and sweet. He could really make me laugh. I can't explain exactly what it was that fascinated me so much, but I liked him from the beginning."

For a short moment she is silent and stares at her knees. I'd like to say something encouraging to her, but I'm holding back. This is the first time she's told me about her love life, and I need to give her the time she needs to do it without interrupting her.

"However, Cyril had been in love with Lydia since I had known him, so it was clear to me even then that it couldn't work out with us. Nevertheless, I was devastated when she started something with him. They never made it official, but you know how quickly something like that goes around at school. After she dumps him ... I comforted him. One thing led to another, and—" She shrugs her shoulders awkwardly, and the grip on her knees tightens.

She looks so sad that I wonder how I could have missed it.

"Was it just a one-time thing or more?" I ask cautiously.

Lin shakes his head and lets out a breathless laugh. "We've been sleeping together every few weeks for two years."

My mouth opens. And closed again. I can't believe she hid it from me for so long. "I... Does anyone know about it?"

Lin shakes his head again. "No. I realize that there is only Lydia for Cy. That's fine too, but that's why I don't want it to come out. I want to keep at least a little dignity, and we've never been together or anything." She hesitates for a moment. "Besides, it's probably done now anyway."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"He hasn't contacted me since Cordelia Beaufort died. Probably because he's too busy comforting Lydia." She shrugs her shoulders. "He ignores my messages and now always hangs out with her at school."

"I—" I interrupt myself and shake my head. "Was it strange for you to spend New Year's Eve with Lydia?"

Lin smiles narrowly. "I like Lydia. And she can't help it that I love the guy who is hopelessly in love with her."

"I don't know what to say."

"That's not bad, Ruby, really. I just wish he would just be honest with me. I don't think I deserve this radio silence. He could have just told me that Lydia was giving him another chance. «

"I don't think that's the reason."

She shrugs her shoulders again. "I shouldn't care. It's not as if I'm madly in love with him."

Her tone is carefree, but her sad look belies her.

"Cyril is a pig if he doesn't get in touch with you and you don't know where you stand," I say angrily.

"I know it must sound like that. But we both knew what we were getting into. He never promised me anything, just as I didn't promise him. And he can be really great – self-confident, funny. And tenderly—" Lin turns bright red and buries his face in his hands.

"That clearly sounds like more than just something physical, Lin."

"I know!" she moans, peeking between her slightly spread fingers. "I've only noticed that now, when I haven't seen him outside of school for an eternity. I miss him."

At the last words she sounds so disgusted that I have to grin.

"Have you ever talked about it? Really, I mean?" I ask gently.

She shakes her head and turns bright red. "Cyril and I never talk much when we see each other."

Oh man.

"We've been friends for so long, and I didn't know anything about it. I feel like an insanely bad friend right now."

"You're a great friend. I just didn't want to tell anyone about it because... oh, I don't know. There was something about the secrecy. But now that the whole thing seems to be over for him, it's killing me." She sighs deeply. "We're totally the same, Ruby. Neither of us wanted to do anything serious before we went to Oxford."

Also one of the many things that connect Lin and me.

"And now both James and Cyril have been taken at Oxford," I murmur.

"Yes."

For a while we are quiet and indulge in our own thoughts. When I moved to Maxton Hall, I lost all my friends from my old high school. After that, I resolved to maintain only superficial acquaintances and not to get involved in more. I didn't want to put energy into something that would then be taken away from me.

But that changed when I met Lin. Although I am still afraid that this friendship is also fleeting, I am willing to take the risk – this conversation has made that clear to me once again.

I reach for Lin's hand and squeeze it lightly. "You can talk to me about anything, Lin. Always. I want you to know that."

I've never said that to her before, and it's surprisingly difficult for me to get the words out of my mouth. Not because they are not sincere, but because they mean so much to me.

"Thank you. Likewise," Lin croaks, visibly moved. She twists her hand so that we can intertwine our fingers. "I mean that, by the way. You can also talk to me about James at any time. Or about everything else."

I chew on the inside of my cheek and think about the moment at noon today when James stood at the door and said all these things to me.

I'll always be yours, Ruby.

His words have made the ground shake under my feet. He looked so determined, as if there was nothing more important in his life than winning me back.

"James was here at noon today," I begin after a while.

Lin continues to hold my hand and looks at me questioningly.

I shrug my shoulders. "He said he needed me. That I'm the only person who understands him. And that he could be happy with me."

Lin takes a sharp breath. "And?"

I shrug my shoulders.

I meant what I said. It's not my job to make sure James is happy. Nevertheless, I regret yelling at him like that. He was obviously in a bad way, and I'm probably really the only person who can understand why. In Oxford, he told me that he had never spoken to anyone before about his fears for the future, and I can imagine what must have gone through his mind after he was accepted for Oxford and had an appointment with Beaufort. Nevertheless... We're not together anymore. He can't burden me with that. I can't be the only thing in his life that makes sense to him. That's not the purpose of a relationship.

"I want to be there for him, but at the same time I don't know if I can do it," I whisper.

"I understand that," Lin replies. "But... I also see him looking at you at our meetings. I think he is determined to win you back."

I shake my head. "That's what he wants now. James is so erratic – I'm bound to have something happen in two weeks that will turn his life upside down, and then he'll disappear, go crazy, or do something that sabotages us, and I'm just not ready for that. I won't let him hurt me like that again."

The last words come out of me so energetically that Lin looks at me in surprise.

"That's exactly what I admire you for."

I blink irritated. "What?"

She gives me a little smile. "I can see exactly how exhausted it has been with James. How much you suffer with him and his family. You were there for him after he hurt you deeply – and now you stay strong and focused on yourself. I think that's admirable."

Coming out of her mouth, it all sounds much more heroic than I feel. I exhale tremblingly. "I threw some really bad things at him just now."

"Do you still have feelings for him?" asks Lin suddenly.

Now I'm the one who flinches.

I think of what I said to him on New Year's Eve. I can't just not love James anymore. These feelings don't go away, no matter how much I want them to.

"Yes," I whisper.

Lin smiles sadly at me. "It's stupid that you can't just turn it off, right?"

I growl in agreement. "It doesn't matter. I think it's time for us to return to the real purpose of this evening: We wanted to celebrate."

She nods vigorously and squeezes my hand one last time before releasing it. "You're right."

I grab my laptop and open the Oxford page. In the next hour, we look at the dormitories, click through forums and make a list of things we want to do together once we are enrolled in Oxford.

But no matter how hard I try to distract myself, James' words resonate in my head throughout the evening.

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Ruby

I spent the entire weekend alternately rejoicing in my Oxford commitment and wondering if James would be coming to the event team meeting on Monday – and what I should do if he showed up. In the meantime, I have reached a point where I have to admit that my New Year's Eve resolution – to make a clear cut – has failed. James is everywhere. If not as a person, then in my thoughts, and I don't see how that will change in the future, especially since the memory of James' words still sends an excited tingling through my body two days later.

I feel exactly this tingling sensation when Lin and I enter the room after the lunch break and James sits in his usual seat, as always lately with a book in his hand. This time it's John Green's latest novel, as I curiously realize, before I quickly avert my gaze and ask Lin to go through the agenda with me again until the others have arrived.

The minutes drag on like chewing gum, but at some point Camille strolls through the door and we can start the meeting.

"Doug," Lin begins. "The posters are very well received. We've already received a lot of praise."

Doug gives Lin a minimal smile, which is more than any of us have gotten during the last few meetings.

"Maybe we can even draw the attention of one or the other sponsor to us."

I nod. "Otherwise, the guest list now looks really good. Only the fact that we are still missing laudators gives me a bit of a stomachache. We don't have much longer," I say. Kieran, has the professor you wanted to ask come forward?"

"Yes," says Kieran, but he looks pretty contrite. I guess what's coming next. "Unfortunately he doesn't have time. But at least he has agreed to make a generous donation."

"Okay, then that's the way it is. At least something." I smile at him encouragingly. "Has anyone else been successful?"

The others are silent.

"Well, then—"

James clears his throat.

For a moment I fight with myself. I don't want to look at him. But I can't ignore him either. That would only raise questions for the others that I don't want to answer. Or can.

"Yes, Beaufort?" Lin jumps in to help me.

"Alice Campbell has agreed to give the closing speech."

I jerk my head up.

James catches my gaze. Only now do I see how pale his face is. In addition, there are dark circles under his eyes, as if he hadn't slept since Saturday.

I still regret having thrown those words at him. He didn't deserve that, and I wish I could talk to him again in peace and explain to him why I got so angry when he showed up at my front door.

The guilty conscience must be written all over my face, because James' eyes narrow before he continues to speak as if nothing had happened. "The family center helped her and her family a lot a few years ago to get back on their feet. She would be happy to support us at the gala. I told her that you would contact her to discuss the details with her."

I stare at him in disbelief, and at the latest when a small but satisfied smile spreads across his face, I know that this can't be a coincidence. He actually remembered that I once mentioned in a half-sentence how much I admire Alice Campbell and her work.

I don't know what to do with this information. The longer I think about it, the greater the desire to talk to him again in peace.

I feverishly think about how I could hold him back for a moment after the meeting.

"Really great, Beaufort," Lin says after I've been silent for too long. "Thank you. If you have more people we can contact, please let me know."

James clears his throat again. "Boyd Hall, by the way, is so far prepared. Janitor Jones knows that the decoration company is coming next Friday at sixteen."

For a moment it is very quiet in the group room.

"For the fact that you loathed the work here so much at the beginning, you put in a lot of effort," Jessalyn interjects.

James doesn't answer anything, but just gives me a look that gives my arms goosebumps.

"That's right after our meeting," says Lin. "I'd say we'll just go over together, wouldn't we?"

Murmurs of agreement go through the room.

"The next item is the photo booth," Lin says, tearing me out of my thoughts.

Suddenly an idea flashes in my head. It seems risky to me, but also exciting. It would give me the opportunity to talk to James and apologize to him. Far away from Lin's critical eye and Camille's curious ears.

"Exactly." I clear my throat. "I can have my parents' car on Saturday and would pick them up with it. However, the individual parts are said to be quite heavy."

I gather all my courage and look at James again.

"James," I say in a firm voice. "Would you please come and pick up the photo booth with me?"

For a fraction of a second, surprise flashes in his eyes.

But then he nods and says, "Yes, of course," as if my question had been nothing special.

I ignore both the soft noise Camille makes and the meaningful look Lin gives me. Instead, I spend the rest of the session staring at my planner and wondering what the hell I just did.

When I drive into the Maxton Hall parking lot on Saturday, James is already waiting for me. He wears jeans, a black coat and a gray scarf. He is just blowing his hands to warm them up, and I automatically wonder how long he has been standing there.

When he spots me, he drops his hands and smiles at me uncertainly. I have no idea what that smile means. It's a new smile. One in which his posture is rigid and his eyes are sad. One that came about after our separation – after the death of his mother and everything that has happened since then.

I miss his old smile.

I suppress the thought as I come to a stop in front of James. If I want to get this day halfway successful behind me, I have to pull myself together.

"Good morning," he says and drops into the passenger seat of our minivan. Our car is old and quite rickety, but it drives, and that's the most

important thing. Luckily, I cleaned it up again with Ember last night, because now I realize that there is something strangely intimate about how James looks around inside the car.

When he takes a look at the Yankee Candle scent tree dangling from the rear-view mirror, I finally start the engine again.

"My mother loves these things," I explain. "She's totally into floral scents, which always drives my sister crazy. Ember hates the smell of roses, but Mum loves it."

I should stop saying confused stuff. After all, it was not without reason that I asked James to go on this trip with me today. However, I also find it difficult to direct the conversation directly to our failed relationship. Especially when you consider how long we will be sitting together in this car.

"My mum always liked flowery smells, too."

It takes me a lot of effort to keep my eyes on the road instead of turning my head abruptly to him. Obviously, James has no problems skipping the small talk.

"Do you miss it?" I ask quietly.

It takes him a moment to growl in agreement. "Somehow, yes. It's different without her."

"In what way?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I see that he shrugs his shoulders. "There is no longer a buffer between my father and me. Lydia wants to take the position now, but I try everything to prevent it from happening. She shouldn't be caught between two stools—especially not now."

"How is she? I have hardly seen her this week."

"Quite well. I think so." He hesitates for a moment. "I would like her to finally tell Sutton. At the same time, I understand why she doesn't."

"The whole situation is just totally shitty."

"Yes." He is silent for a moment, then clears his throat. "And how are you?"

I have no idea how it can be that a conversation feels so normal and strange at the same time.

"Good. I... um. I was also taken at Oxford."

"I knew it. They would have been pretty stupid to reject you," he replies. "Congratulations, Ruby."

Surprised, I give him a look. He reciprocates it seriously.

I don't understand how he always does it. One day he's devastated and standing trembling at my front door, the next he's in Maxton Hall summoning up the strength to pretend nothing has happened. And even now he seems completely composed, although I know that last Saturday did not leave him unscathed.

"Thank you," I murmur. For a moment, I search for the right words for what I want to say to him next. Although I've had time to think about it since Monday, my head is now empty. "I'm sorry for what I said to you last weekend," I finally begin.

"Ruby," James wants to interrupt me, but I shake my head.

"I want to get over you," I say quietly. "But that won't be any easier if I'm mean to you. I'm really sorry. And it was important to me that you know that."

"There's nothing you need to apologize for," he says quietly.

I don't know what to answer to that. The words sound bitter as he utters them, and I would like to contradict him, but on the other hand, I am also afraid that the conversation will then go in a direction for which I am not yet ready. I wanted to apologize, and I did. I don't think I have the strength for more at the moment.

So I remain silent and step on the accelerator. The silence between us becomes more oppressive the longer it lasts, and at some point I can't take it anymore and turn up the radio. The upbeat pop music playing on the station Mum always listens to is a stark contrast to the charged vibe between James and me. Although we spend the rest of the fifteen-minute drive in silence, I am aware of James' presence every second. I hear his soft breathing and feel when he moves next to me. And even though the heating isn't set high, I get warm when I think about the fact that all I have to do is reach out to touch him.

I am infinitely happy when we arrive at the old industrial site and I can finally get out of the car. The cold air feels like a treat on my hot cheeks.

"We have to go in over there," I say, pointing to a garage above which a colorful sign with the name of the rental company is attached. James steps next to me, and as we walk off together, I brush his arm once.

We both wear thick coats.

Nevertheless, the touch feels like an electric shock.

As inconspicuously as possible, I take a step to the side and hurry towards the side entrance of the garage. I push my way through the door

and enter the small hall.

I look around. On the website, this shop looked much more inviting. Faint yellow light illuminates just the bare necessities, and the ceilings are low and full of cobwebs. A wide variety of electronic devices stand and lie around, but most of the space is taken up by the photo booths, of which there are at least twenty. Quiet electro beats sound from small speakers, to which a bald man sitting at a desk behind a narrow counter moves his head back and forth to the beat.

"You picked out a nice shop there," James murmurs, but before I can reply, the man spots us and rises with a smile.

"You're probably Ruby," he says as he approaches us.

"Exactly," I answer with a nod and grab his outstretched hand. "And this is James."

The two also strike.

"I'm Hank and I'll give you a short briefing on the photo booth. Will you ever come around?" He makes a circular hand gesture around the counter and then points to one of the boxes.

"You chose this one, right?" he asks as we come to a stop in front of it.

I take a look at the model. The walls are black, the entrance is suspended with a red curtain. On one side is a narrow opening above which an illuminated sign is attached that says "Photos". Right next to the entrance hangs a small board on which there is some information about the filters you can use when taking pictures with white marker. The hand-lettered font that was used is beautifully squiggly.

"Here I would like to write something about our gala. Is that possible, Hank?" I ask, pointing to the small board.

He nods. "I still have a marker somewhere that I can give you."

I smile at him. "Perfect, thank you very much."

"So, and now for the explanation: There is a single-lens reflex camera built in here, which is triggered via the touchscreen. It's actually quite easy, to release the shutter you just have to press the camera icon. Then you have three seconds and the picture is taken. Then you can edit it with the filters or – if it didn't work out – delete it and make a new one."

I push the red curtain aside a bit and look at the touchscreen. "It really looks child's play."

"Do you want to try it?" asks Hank with an almost boyish grin.

Before I can say no, James answers, "Yes, please."

I raise an eyebrow, but he doesn't pay attention to me and goes into the box. He holds the curtain open and looks at me expectantly.

"What are you waiting for? In with you!" says Hank next to me.

Without further ado, I go into the small cabin and look at James skeptically. He, in turn, looks at the touchscreen with concentration. "We have to check whether everything is intact, or not?" he asks quietly.

It irritates me that I didn't think of it myself, but was too busy keeping at least an arm's length away from James.

"Ruby, you're covering the camera."

I push my back along the wall until I stand behind James, who has taken a seat on the small stool in front of the camera.

"Take a look in there," James says suddenly, pointing to the small black hole above the touchscreen.

I lean down to him until I can look over his shoulder and into the camera. Now I also appear on the screen, but I can hardly concentrate on the blurry image of our faces.

One of James' strands of hair tickles my cheek, and his familiar smell penetrates my nose. In my coat I suddenly get much warmer. James next to me seems to be frozen, I even think that he has stopped breathing. Slowly I turn my head and look at him. I'm so close to him that I could brush his skin with my mouth if I wanted to.

At that moment, James presses the shutter button.

The soft click tears me out of my trance, and I flinch back. Suddenly I realize again why we are actually here – and what I almost did right now.

"Everything seems to be working," says James, as if he hadn't noticed the sparks that flew between us a few seconds ago.

Did I just imagine the heat between us?

As fast as I can, I push myself outside, where Hank is already waiting for us with the photo strip in his hand.

"A strange pose, but at least you seem to have managed to pull it off with the shutter release," he says and presses the four small photos into my hand.

No, I clearly didn't imagine the heat.

In the photo, I have my head turned to James while he looks directly into the camera. And his gaze ...

I swallow dry.

I know this look. And also this line around his mouth.

James must have felt it too. I'm absolutely sure of that at this second.

"Very nice," I croak and want to give the pictures back to Hank, but before I can do that, James takes them out of my hand. Without even looking at them, he slips them into his coat pocket.

"Where do we have to sign?" he asks in the same businesslike tone he used when we were at Beaufort.

Hank leads us back to the counter, where I sign three forms and get a small manual for operating and refilling the pictures. Then the three of us heave the parts of the box into the trunk of my car. I'm happy to be outside in the fresh air again. It is a welcome cooling for me and my hot cheeks.

On the way back, I turn on the radio again, a little louder than before. Why on earth did I think it was a good idea to ask James to come here with me? It should have been clear to me how difficult it would be to be so close to him over such a long period of time.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see James untie his coat and then unwrap the scarf from his neck.

"If you're too warm, I can turn the ventilation a little colder," I manage with difficulty.

"Ruby." The way he whispers my name is so familiar to me.

I clutch the steering wheel tightly while trying with all my strength to concentrate on the road. The air between us is becoming more and more charged, but I try to suppress it with all my might.

The traffic light in front of us turns red, and I brake slowly and let the car roll to the stop line. Then I risk a look in his direction. James looks at me, and in his eyes I see countless feelings that trigger the impulse in me to reach for him, to hug him and to hold him.

"I just wanted to say that it's—"

"Please don't," I interrupt him imploringly and shake my head.

He clenches his teeth so hard that a muscle in his jaw begins to twitch. We look at each other for a moment, and there are so many unspoken words between us.

But I can't talk to him now. It just doesn't work. Not when I feel like I'm going to give in at any moment.

In the next moment, James averts his gaze and looks ahead again. "It's green."

I step on the gas pedal. The way to school has never seemed so long to me.

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Ruby

"I think I would like it to be a little more minty," says Ember thoughtfully.

I drag the cursor on the color swatch further to the top left until the moss green becomes lighter and goes in a bluer direction. "So?"

My sister makes an approving sound. I save the color and go to the preview view in Wordpress so that we can look at our work.

Ember's blog Bellbird has been rebranded, with a new logo, a more modern WordPress theme, and a fresh color palette. At the top is the latest post – a guide to ethical plus-size fashion – and just below it are thumbnails of the most popular posts in three smaller windows. On the right side, she has included the links to her social media profiles as well as a picture I took of her last summer. In it, she stands in a field of flowers and wears a summery maxi dress with a floral pattern and a deep neckline. I can still remember the exact moment when a grasshopper jumped on her and I photographed her trying to get rid of it – it was screaming. Unfortunately, she didn't take the picture in which she screams as a display picture, but one in which she laughs heartily and brushes a strand of hair out of her face. Directly below the picture is written:

Hi, I'm Ember! Plus-size fashion blogger, lover of words and cake, and inspired by all things beautiful. Have fun on my blog!

"It looks great," I say reverently. "Really professional."

"You say that every time," Ember replies, scanning the page with squinted eyes. As far as her blog is concerned, she is as perfectionist as I am with my bullet journal.

"I know, but it's the truth." I'm browsing through her latest outfit posts. Although it was me who took the pictures, I could look at them again and again. Ember looks beautiful on them. Once again, I wish Mum and Dad weren't quite so critical of the topic of social media. They are concerned that Ember might reveal too much private information, but Bellbird

approaches her impressively professionally. In the meantime, she even has a few brands with whom she works regularly and who send her things.

"By the way, I saw a dress that was made for you," my sister says suddenly. "You needed another one for the gala, didn't you?"

I nod. "Show me."

She pulls the laptop a little in her direction, and her tiny desk wobbles dangerously. I quickly clutch my glass of orange juice so that it doesn't fall over. We've been sitting here for two hours now, side by side, working on her blog, while Frank Ocean's melodic voice sounds from the small speakers of the laptop.

Ember opens one of her bookmarks, and together we watch as the page slowly builds up and finally a dress is displayed that elicits a soft sigh from me. It has a V-neckline, is black and is made of a flowing fabric that is tight at the waist and falls down in soft waves from the hips.

"Are there any more pictures of this?" I ask, but at this moment my eyes fall on the price. "Oh God. It costs over two hundred pounds," I say, raising a finger to close the window at once. Why do you show me something like that?"

Ember catches my hand with hers and says with a grin, "Not for us. The company has offered me a cooperation."

I hesitate. I know that Ember now gets a lot of requests for collaborations with some shops, but that doesn't mean that she has to accept every single one of them.

"You've been looking for an eternity," my sister continues. "And this would be perfect for such a fancy occasion, wouldn't it? I could ask it."

I shake my head immediately. "No, I can't accept that."

"Why not?"

I shrug my shoulders indecisively. "I don't know. Isn't it somehow strange to get something for free?"

"Do you think actors pay for the clothes they borrow from designers for premieres and award ceremonies?"

"To be honest, I've never thought about that," I admit.

"Then you know now," says my sister. "They offered me three dresses to try out and even a payment if I write an honest review, in terms of fits and so on. I'd just like to take a picture of the two of us wearing and showing off the dresses – if that's okay with you."

Again I look at the dress. I click through the next pictures and fall more in love with the sweeping skirt, the soft-looking fabric and the small appliqués that line the décolleté with each photo. I've never worn such an elegant dress before – apart from the one the Beauforts lent me for Halloween last October.

"I don't need to ask, do I?" says Ember suddenly, and when I turn my head to her in confusion, she avoids my gaze. She smiles resignedly. "You probably don't want to take me with you again, right?"

"Ember," I sigh and take a breath to give my automatic answer. Then I pause.

In the last few weeks, Ember has been there for me day and night. She took care of me and didn't say a word to Mum and Dad about what happened to James, no matter how persistently they probed.

I know how much Ember wishes to go to one of our parties one day. And when I think about it, the charity gala is probably even a better occasion than all the other parties that are celebrated in Maxton Hall. It is the one event in the year where the students without exception show their best side. Too many big names and influential people are present for anyone to allow themselves to attract negative attention. Therefore, the mood is dignified and the chance that something could happen is relatively low.

Ember watches me attentively. She is completely motionless, as if she does not dare to move a single muscle for fear of provoking a negative response.

"I'll take you with me," I say finally.

Ember's eyes widen. "Are you serious?" she asks incredulously.

I take a deep breath. It's our last months together, and I want to spend it as beautifully as possible with her. Soon we wouldn't see each other every day, and even though I'm very happy about Oxford, the thought scares me.

"There will be a few conditions," I follow up in a firm voice, because I want Ember to know that I mean business. She makes a hand gesture for me to continue. "You will stay with me all night. And you only talk to people I know and approve beforehand. I really don't want you to run into someone weird. Agreed?"

Ember falls so hard around my neck that I almost slip off my chair and have to cling to her desk.

"You are the best! I won't leave your side for a second," she shouts. I return her hug and close my eyes for a moment. A twinge of worry comes

over me, and I wonder if I've made the right decision. After all, I know best what can happen at these parties. On the other hand, Ember will soon be seventeen. She is smart and self-confident and knows what she wants. I probably just need to have more faith in her.

I'm convinced that I made the right decision when Ember breaks away from me and beams at me with shining eyes. "That means we can now officially shop for clothes. And I even have an occasion for which I could wear it! In addition, this will be the best blog entry ever. I'm so excited!"

I return her smile and feel her excitement and honest joy spill over to me. It's the first time in a long time that I feel so carefree. "I'm glad if you are happy."

At my words, my sister's smile suddenly fades.

"What?" I ask.

Ember avoids my gaze. She starts calling up pages in her Internet browser, but doesn't really seem to know what she's doing. "It's not so important. I just can't believe that these are actually our last months together."

"Just because I'm moving out doesn't mean we won't see each other again, Ember," I say softly.

Ember continues to stare at the screen of her laptop. "Yes, and you know it."

I shake my head energetically. "Things will change a bit, but that doesn't mean we don't see each other at all. I will come home every weekend, and I will continue to work with you on your blog. We'll talk on the phone and Skype, and I'll send you embarrassing pictures of my lunch and tell you what books I'm reading, and—"

She interrupts me with a laugh. "You've got to promise me, Ruby," she says earnestly.

I put an arm around my little sister's shoulder and pull her to my side. "I promise."

James

The week before the gala is one of the most stressful in my life.

I still have to catch up on all the school material that Lydia and I missed before Christmas, and there is still so much to prepare for the celebration that at some point I don't know where my head is. On Monday,

Ruby and Camille decide to replace the light bulbs in Boyd Hall with ones that emit a dimmed light and thus create an atmospheric atmosphere. So I have to get light bulbs. On Tuesdays, the pianist decides that he suddenly wants a much higher wage for ridiculously little music. So I have to go to him together with Kieran and negotiate him down. On the way, Kieran convinces me to listen to the school choir's rehearsals on Wednesday and check their song list, because Ruby doesn't have time and Lin doesn't understand the intricacies of classical music (his words). The highlight, however, is on Thursday, when the team is called together to polish the silver cutlery (not my favorite task) and fold napkins into bishop's hats (pure hate). I have always considered myself a very nimble person – but apparently not when it comes to following instructions for napkin folding.

The guys look at me strangely when I come to lacrosse practice completely exhausted or even have to skip it altogether, but they don't ask any questions. I also wouldn't know how to explain what's going on with me right now.

It feels like I'm clutching at a straw and refusing to let go. On the way back to school, Ruby made it clear to me that she wasn't ready for what I had to say. And I respect that. But that moment in the photo booth – when we were so close, Ruby's lips just a few inches from my jaw, and I could feel her faltering breath on my skin ... At that moment, I realized that I am not fighting in vain.

And as long as there is even a spark of hope for us, I will not give up. I've never been a particularly patient person, but when it comes to Ruby, I have all the time in the world – or will take it. Ruby is worth it.

Nevertheless, I breathe a sigh of relief when I can put on my sports clothes on Friday and finally get back on the field. The circuit course that the coach lets us go through is hard, but the physical exertion is good for me and distracts me. Right now we have to piggyback each other across the sports field. Alistair, while quite strong, fails under my weight after ten minutes, and we both fall to the ground.

"Damn," I growl and roll onto my back. Although February is now within reach and the beginning of spring is within reach, it is still freezing cold outside and the ground is damn hard. I'm pretty sure that I just hit both knees.

"Keep going!" barks Coach Freeman and blows his whistle vigorously.

"And let's move on," says Alistair, clapping his hands.

He positions himself in front of me again, while Kesh and Wren dive past us in pairs.

"It's my turn," I reply, pointing to my back. Alistair rolls his eyes, but complies with my request and jumps up. The next moment, I sprint off, past my teammates, as fast as I can, until every muscle in my body burns and the distance to Kesh and Wren becomes smaller and smaller.

When we are at the same level, Wren groans. "Not again!" He hits Kesh in the side to make him faster. "Dig in, man."

With a grim expression on his face, Kesh picks up the pace, and I follow suit under a shout from Alistair. Because I miss one training session a week, I'm under observation anyway. Not only from my friends, but also from Coach Freeman. I can't afford to let up now, even though my chest burns like hell with every breath.

In the end, Kesh and I arrive almost at the same time. I'm so out of breath that I can only barely manage not to fall on all fours. Kesh holds out his fist to me, and I cut him off while Wren pushes me. "You're a beast. How did you catch up so quickly, Beaufort?"

I shrug my shoulders, still much too exhausted to utter a word.

"You did really well today, boys!" shouts Coach Freeman and claps his hands several times. He lets his gaze roam over each and every one of us, then a smile spreads on his lips. "To celebrate the day, I'm going to do a round."

We cheer. Although the coach takes us hard during circuit training, this only happens twice a term, and in most cases he invites us to a pub near the school afterwards and provides us with burgers and fries – which makes us forget every time how much he made us suffer the hours before.

"What does Lexington want here?" Cyril asks suddenly, his gaze fixed on the entrance to the sports field.

The entire team turns around. I don't think I've ever seen Principal Lexington on the training ground.

"Have you done any shit again?" I hear someone behind me say as the coach walks up to Lexington and has a quick chat with him. Of course, the question is addressed to me and my boys, but none of us answers. Instead, my thoughts are overturning. Something must have happened when the principal comes to us. I just wonder what.

A little later, Coach Freeman jogs back to us and claps his hands. "Change of plan, boys! Go to Boyd Hall. The organizing committee needs

help setting up for tomorrow night's gala."

I freeze. It is eighteen o'clock. The decoration company should have finished setting it up long ago.

An angry murmur goes through the round, and Coach Freeman's gaze darkens. "Have I not expressed myself clearly enough? Off to Boyd Hall, at once."

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Ruby

I don't think Lin and I have ever been so close to a nervous breakdown as we are today. As discussed with James and the others, we went to Boyd Hall at sixteen o'clock to get the hall ready for tomorrow evening together with the decoration company. But there we found no one except janitor Jones, who cursed loudly and not X-rated into a phone, only to tell us that the company had accidentally booked twice and decided on the more lucrative of the two orders.

I was just in shock for a few minutes, then I turned to Lin. One look into her eyes was enough to see that she was going through all the options we had left in her mind.

Janitor Jones told us that after some back and forth, the company had at least agreed to drive us the decoration material we had ordered from them in the next hour. Nevertheless, there were far too few of us to prepare everything adequately in the short time.

When Principal Lexington suddenly stood next to us and looked around the empty and undecorated hall completely stunned, I would have liked to sink into the ground. Remorseful, I explained what had happened, expecting him to shake his head in disappointment and find a new leader for the event team, but to my surprise, he just looked at me resolutely and announced that he would take care of help.

A little later, the doors to Boyd Hall opened, and the entire lacrosse team entered the room. James, without casting a glance in our direction, marched directly to janitor Jones with a grim expression on his face, while I watched in fascination as Principal Lexington stood up in front of the rest of the team, pointed at me and Lin and announced that all further instructions would come from us from now on.

After that, I switched to autopilot and tried to distribute the various tasks to the boys in the most structured way possible. That was an hour and a half ago, and in the meantime I've moved away from the brink of a nervous breakdown – just like Lin.

"It's taking more and more shape, don't you think?" she says next to me as we roll out a cable from the stage across the hall to the technical desk.

I look up and look at Boyd Hall. Much of the decoration is already attached to the walls, the stage is almost completely set up, and Alistair and Wren have set up all the tables in pairs on the open space in front of it.

"Another bit to the right, Ellington," I suddenly hear Coach Freeman say and take a closer look at the arrangement.

Oh no. There is far too little distance between the tables. I walk up to Coach Freeman and smile diplomatically at him. "Thank you for your help, Coach Freeman, but when the tables are so close together, no one can get through."

He blinks perplexed. Then he clears his throat and pulls his cap deeper into his forehead. He takes a step back and gives way to me with his other hand.

"Alistair," I say. "Wait a minute." I go to him and explain how big the distance between the tables must be at least so that the guests have enough space. "The front row must not be too close to the stage either. We can't expect people to donate much when they're sitting so close to the loudspeakers and probably won't hear anything after the event."

Alistair stares at me as Wren groans. "Does that mean we have to move all thirty tables? Do you know what kind of training we have already done today? I can't feel my arms anymore."

I smile friendly but determined and look at her expectantly until Alistair shakes her head with a sigh. "You're really tough, Ruby."

While Wren and Alistair move the tables to the right places, Lin and I start checking the connections on the desk.

"If this continues, we'll actually be finished," Lin says, but I hardly hear her because James is coming in through the large front door at this moment.

He carries a table and looks briefly at the map Jessalyn holds out to him. He looks around and then walks purposefully to the outer edge of the hall, where he places the table in exactly the right place. Then he wipes his forehead with the back of his hand.

Alistair wasn't exaggerating when he said that he can't feel his arms anymore – all lacrosse players look really exhausted now. Today it was Coach Freeman's infamous circuit training. Since training with our sports

teacher already ensures that I get sore muscles like hell, I don't want to know how the boys will feel tomorrow.

I watch James accept a bottle of water from Doug and take a few sips. A strange fluttering spreads in my stomach. With his damp hair, workout clothes, and flushed cheeks, James really doesn't make a bad sight. Rather the opposite. I swallow hard. Suddenly, I remember the last time I saw him breathless, sweaty and red-faced. At that time he was naked, whispered familiar things in my ear and kissed me unconsciously.

"Earth to Ruby," Lin interrupts my trance. "Can you give me the cable?"

"Yes." I hastily avert my gaze and try to steer my thoughts back into innocent territory.

We don't finish setting up until late in the evening. It took what felt like an eternity to stretch the fabric panels along the windows and set up the illuminated columns next to the stage, which took us several attempts. There was an incident when part of the stage broke away and almost killed Doug – but luckily he got away with a shock and a scratch on his arm, which Camille surprisingly cared for.

We had to make a few compromises – for example, we couldn't decorate the ceiling – but all in all, the result is impressive. Especially now that it is dark and the chandeliers illuminate the hall with their warm glow.

The round tables are all ready-set: We have spread silver table runners on the white tablecloth and distributed tall silver candle holders, accurately folded napkins and the finest porcelain tableware on them. At each table there is a sign with the respective table number, which Jessalyn has made. On the sides of the stage hang two screens. While the presentation about the family center that Doug created is running on the left, the right one doesn't seem to work yet. But I'll take a look at it again later and, if necessary, arrange a meeting with the Maxton Hall technician for tomorrow morning. The light bulbs that James organized at the beginning of the week bathe the room in bluish purple light in places, and the projector spotlight casts small glowing circles on the walls.

Although the whole thing took twice as long as if the company's employees had installed and set it up, and it doesn't look as professional as I would have liked, I'm still proud of our result.

I can already imagine what the atmosphere will be like tomorrow evening – the elegantly dressed guests, the good-smelling food, the classical music and the smiling face of our satisfied headmaster.

I look around for the guys who are about to pour water down in greedy sips. Without them, we would never have been able to do it. Resolutely, I go to them and clear my throat. Twenty heads turn in my direction. The tingling in my neck tells me that James is also looking at me.

"Thank you for your help," I begin, looking each and every one of them in the eye. Only James I skip. I'm still shocked by the thoughts he evoked in me earlier, and I don't want to risk turning bright red in front of the assembled lacrosse team. "You have something good with us."

"How about you give us one tomorrow? Here at the gala," Cyril suggests with a grin. That would be ... Funny."

"My offer from earlier is still standing," Coach Freeman interrupts. "We wanted to end the successful training in a pub," he says to me.

"A great suggestion, Coach," Alistair interjects, clapping his hands. "So we're sticking to our original plan? Black Fox?"

A murmur of approval goes through the ranks of the lacrosse boys.

"And the first round is still on me," says Coach Freeman, adjusting his cap. After all, you worked just as hard."

"I wouldn't necessarily call it that. Without us, they would have fucked up..." murmurs a guy I've never seen in my life.

"Be quiet, Kenton," James says menacingly quietly.

Kenton presses his lips tightly together.

"Let's go," Coach Freeman calls and nods his head towards the exit.

The others leave, and Doug, Camille, and the rest of my team follow them. I never thought I'd see the lacrosse team and the organizing committee go out for a drink together – voluntarily.

Lin nudges her elbow lightly into my side. "I'm finally going to confront Cyril," she whispers with a determined look. "Then at least I have clarity."

I nod. "Good idea."

"You're not coming with me, are you?"

I shake my head, and the determination in Lin's eyes disappears.

"Then I'm not going either," she says, nodding at my clipboard. "I'll help you."

"Nonsense," I reply and press the clipboard to my chest so that she can't see the points that have not yet been ticked off. "It's not another chance like this in a hurry. Go and try to find out what his silence is all about. And if he is stupid, give him his opinion."

Lin hesitates for a moment, but when I point energetically towards the exit, she finally turns on her heel and runs after the others. The clacking of her soles echoes through the hall, followed by a loud bang as the door closes behind her.

Then I turn back to my list. I sigh softly as I feel that this feeling that I have been carrying around with me for weeks – in my chest, in my stomach and in my whole body – has become heavier instead of lighter. I wonder if this will stop at some point. I shake off the thought and start working through the items on my list.

First, I go to the grand piano that has been set up on the right side of the stage and gradually remove the fingerprints of the helpers that can be seen on the shiny black surface. Then I turn on soft music on my phone and slide it into my back pocket. While listening to the soothing voice of Vancouver Sleep Clinic, I check each table for correctness of the name tags and number of place settings.

"You didn't come with me," a voice suddenly sounds behind me.

I drive around and see James standing on the threshold of Boyd Hall. He is still wearing his workout clothes and has both hands buried in his black sweatpants. His gaze is unfathomable.

"I still have a little work to do," I answer, lifting the clipboard.

James enters the hall, and my heart skips a beat, even though he is still a few meters away from me. "Can I help you?"

As if by magic, I shake my head. "No, you don't. Thank you." Then I turn to the table next to me, although I'm pretty sure I've just checked it.

"You don't have to do the rest alone." His voice sounds a little closer than before. "I feel bad about the company anyway."

"That wasn't your fault," I murmur.

I don't know if I can be alone in a room with him. When James stands in front of me and looks at me with his dark gaze, even the large Boyd Hall suddenly seems tiny. As if there were not five meters between us, but only millimeters. My entire body is attracted to it without me being able to do anything about it.

I suppress the impulse to turn around and go to him, even though I know how much better I would feel then. Even now, after all these weeks and after everything that has happened. I take a deep breath and look at my clipboard. If James has set his mind on helping me, he won't disappear anytime soon. He has proven that in recent weeks.

"The projector has to be checked again. There's no picture on the right screen," I say after a while, risking a glance in his direction.

He still looks at me with that look that I can't interpret. Finally, he nods. "Okay."

He goes to the technical desk in the middle of the hall, and I follow him at a distance. God, why am I so tense? This is not how it should be between us. Although I myself don't know what exactly should be between us and how.

The thing with us is over.

Over. Over. Over.

I just have to convince my heart of it. And my body.

James steps behind the technical desk and looks at the many plugs that are connected via several distributors. He looks at each cable with a concentrated gaze and then begins to trace each one with his hand to see where it belongs. Then he checks the back of the right projector. He pulls out a cable and plugs it back in, presses the button to turn it on and off and fears when nothing happens.

Then he looks at me again.

"Ruby, I have something to tell you," he murmurs.

Again my heart skips a beat. "What?" I manage barely audibly.

James lifts the cable and wiggles it. "The cable is broken."

I blink several times and then look at the cable in his hand. In fact, it is broken at one point. Small colorful wires peek out of the rubber jacket. "Oh."

James slowly lowers the cable. "It almost sounds like you expected me to say something different."

This tone of voice. So deep and velvety and pleasantly calm. I get goosebumps, but at the same moment I shake my head. But before I can say anything, James continues. "Because if you're ready to listen to me now, I'll finally say it."

I hold my breath. I can only stare at James – I'm not capable of more at this second.

"I'm sorry," he says suddenly.

"James—" I whisper.

"There's so much I want to tell you," he replies just as quietly, shortening the distance between us a little bit. I don't think he's even really aware of it, his body is moving towards mine as if I'm pulling him in like a magnet.

That's exactly how I feel, I want to say. James fills all my senses, just by standing in front of me and looking at me like that. My knees suddenly feel very soft, the ground under my feet liquefies.

There is also so much I want to say to him, so many words, but I can't utter a single one when he looks at me like that. My throat becomes dry, and I have to clear my throat. "We're here for the gala. Because of the event committee. Not to talk."

"But I have to talk to you. Damn it, Ruby, I can't stand this for a second longer." His words are passionate, but his voice is still infinitely soft. As if he was afraid to chase me away with every sound that is louder.

Behind his blue-green eyes, I can see the thoughts whirling around. He immediately forms them into words. I can feel that – the air around us is electrified.

"Please, Ruby. You don't have to say anything. Just listen to me, please," he begs.

I can't move. I just stand there, with stiff shoulders and trembling hands, as he gets a little closer. Now I have to tilt my head back to be able to look up at him.

His dark gaze glides over my face, and it feels like he's running his fingers over my skin. His skin on my skin, his fingertips running over my cheek, my nose and my mouth. My body still remembers his touches exactly.

"I'm sorry," he whispers.

"What exactly?" I reply hoarsely after a few seconds.

On New Year's Eve I decided to close the chapter "James Beaufort", but now ... Now it feels like we're about to open a new one.

"Everything." The answer comes immediately. "Just everything."

My breathing accelerates. How does James make me feel lost and found at the same time? His words turn my world upside down. At the same time, I feel like I'm in a fairy tale – the hall is so beautifully decorated, and in front of me stands the boy who means so much to me.

Instead, I should concentrate on the gala. Not to these feelings. Not to the fact that it seems to me that I am right in a fairy tale, because the hall is so beautifully decorated and in front of me stands the boy who means so much to me.

"I'm sorry," James repeats. Although his gaze is wistful and full of pain, he is also completely open for the first time since all this happened. At this moment, James holds nothing back – I see hope and affection in his eyes and something that makes me take a sharp breath.

This is my James.

My James.

No matter what happens between us, he will always be a part of me, just as I am a part of him.

The thought shakes me and shakes my tightly closed heart.

"I acted like an idiot," he whispers, raising his hand to my face.

All the words on the tip of my tongue disappear as I feel the warmth of his hand on my cheek. I have to close my eyes because the moment overwhelms me so much.

"When my father told me about Mum's death, it felt like the world was collapsing on top of me and burying me. I couldn't think straight anymore, and I destroyed it with us, and I'm so sorry."

Deep inside me, something breaks open – a wave of feelings floods me that I actually thought I had overcome long ago.

Slowly I open my eyes again.

"You hurt me so much," I whisper.

James looks at me desperately. "I regret so much that I hurt you, Ruby. I wish I could undo that."

I shake my head. "I don't know if I can ever forget it."

"You don't have to. And I won't either. What I did that evening was the biggest mistake of my life." He takes a shaky breath. "I understand if you can't forgive me. But I want you to know that I'm sorry, with all my heart." He presses his lips together and looks down briefly. Then he blinks several times. I can see that he is fighting back tears. My eyes also began to burn at his words.

It takes James a moment to regain his composure. "I realize you're not in charge of making me happy, Ruby. I didn't mean it that way. I don't see in you a miracle cure for my sorrow. It all came out totally wrong." He runs his hand over his face. "You don't have to forgive me. And we don't have to

get back together. I just want you to know how much you mean to me. I don't want to live a life that you're not a part of. No matter in which way."

James' chest rises and falls quickly, his eyes are glassy. "The person you met at Oxford... That's me. And I'd like to have more days with you where I can prove that to you."

Our night in Oxford was the best of my life, but I haven't allowed myself to even think about it since, because I was afraid of breaking it. But now I take the liberty of reminiscing. I remember our conversations. The way he told me about his fears and dreams. How we held each other.

Seeing James like this reminds me of Oxford. At that moment, he is again the man he showed me there for the first time. The man I fell in love with.

Carefully, I take a step forward and wrap my arms around his waist.

James stiffens as if this were the last thing he expected. I'm very quiet as he carefully wraps his trembling arms around me, as if he's forgotten how to hold me properly. I close my eyes as he gently runs his hands over my back and whispers another apology.

After a while, I let my hands sink to his hips and close my fists around the fabric of his jersey. The fabric crackles slightly under my fingers as James moves his mouth to my temple. "I'm so sorry," he murmurs again.

"I know," I whisper.

So we are standing under the chandelier in the middle of Boyd Hall, directly in front of the technical desk. James holds me gently so that I could have freed myself from his embrace at any moment if I had wanted to. But it doesn't come to that, because nothing has felt right for ages – as if I had finally arrived home after a long journey.

James's hands on my back are gentle, his breath tickles my hair, and his chest rises and falls in unison with mine, while his whispered words give me the feeling that there might still be hope for us after all.

Ember

Maxton Hall is fucking madness.

Of course, when Ruby applied for the scholarship, I looked at photos of the school on the Internet, but to see the imposing building in real life, with the towers, the high façade and the soft window arches, is something completely different.

Ruby hasn't even gotten out of the car completely, when I almost crossed the parking lot. It is only with difficulty that I manage to keep the long hem of my dark green dress out of the mud. It rained last night, and the traces of it are still everywhere. Even though we've already taken the pictures for the blog entry, I don't want to enter my first Maxton Hall party in a dirty dress.

"Wait a minute, Ember," I hear Ruby call as I arrive at the large wrought-iron gate that leads to the courtyard of Maxton Hall. It is decorated with ornate decorative elements that form the initials of the school at the highest point of the arch.

The sight is breathtaking.

I take out my phone, turn on the front camera and hold it up. I try to get as much of myself, the gate and the school in the background into the picture as possible, but I don't succeed the way I imagined.

"Can you take another picture of me?" I ask Ruby when she arrives at my place. Without waiting for her answer, I slip out of my jacket and hold it out to her together with my cell phone. "It would be perfect if the school was in the background. It's so beautifully lit."

"A photo," says Ruby and gets into position. "Then we'll go in."

I nod. "Yes, sir."

Ruby counts to three, and I beam into the camera.

Then Ruby gives me the jacket back, waits for me to put it back on, and then hands me the phone.

"You look so beautiful," says my sister.

"And you first," I reply as if by itself. Then I lift the phone, turn on the front camera again, and pull Ruby close to my side. "Say 'cheese!'"

Together we grin into the camera. After pressing the shutter button at least ten times, Ruby pulls away from me, and I quickly go through the images.

The photos of me in front of school make me smile.

Just three years ago, it was pure torture for me to find clothes that not only fit, but also look good. Plus-size stuff is often cut strangely, because even though I'm fat, I have a waist, and most designers seem to think that all overweight people have the same physique. But that does not correspond to reality. That's why I'm all the happier about the progress I'm making with my blog. Because it allows me to wear such a dress on an evening like today and feel more glamorous than ever before.

If I had to describe my feelings in letters, the whole thing would look something like this:

KDJGDHUSGÜAOHBS!

Which makes me think I'm probably spending a little too much time on my laptop.

"Ember? Are you coming?"

I quickly catch up with Ruby, who is glancing at the clock on her phone. We are well on time, probably even too early, but my sister is still totally excited. That's how she is always before the events she organizes for Maxton Hall. I wonder where she gets the energy reserves to prepare for these parties. I'm already busy with my homework and my blog around the clock and don't have to prepare for final exams and studying at Oxford on the side. Sometimes it seems to me as if it were a machine – a machine that sometimes has quite dark circles under its eyes. Mum often asks her if it's not all a bit much at once, but Ruby assures her that she enjoys the work. And I believe her too.

"It'll be all right," I say, but I'm afraid my voice doesn't have the calming effect I wanted to achieve. I'm far too distracted and jittery for that.

"Thank you." Ruby gives me an uneasy look from the side. "You're thinking of our deal, aren't you?"

"I'll stay close to you and only talk to people you approve beforehand," I quote them.

Ruby nods contentedly.

I roll my eyes. Ruby is terrified that I might make friends with people she doesn't think are good. But that's what I'm looking forward to the most. Sons and daughters of politicians, actors, aristocrats and bankers go to this school, and it is the perfect opportunity to make contacts. I'm good at making small talk and making friends with people as soon as they're ready to see me and don't pigeonhole me because of my weight from the start.

As we enter Boyd Hall, Ruby hooks up with me.

"Whoa," I murmur and look around.

The entrance area of the hall is more magnificent than any building I have ever been to. It's hard to believe that this is part of a school. While my high school's events take place in a sports hall, the floor here is not vomit-green linoleum, but shiny marble. The white walls are certainly five meters high and decorated with white stucco and fine golden accents. In the middle, a wide staircase with a wooden, curved railing leads to an upper floor with a gallery.

I don't even know where to look first. My vision is full of expensive suits and haute couture dresses made of chiffon, silk and tulle, and my heart is beating faster and faster. But this is only the entrance.

We hand in our jackets at the cloakroom, then I pull Ruby into the actual event hall, where it completely takes my breath away.

Boyd Hall looks like it came out of a fairy tale. Ruby told me on the way here how much work they had yesterday and what they had set up and decorated, but I never expected it to be so fantastic.

Waiters meander between the tables with trays on which champagne flutes with champagne and orange juice are placed, and at a black grand piano on the stage sits a pianist in tailcoats, playing a classical melody that fills the entire hall.

"I can't believe you've organized all this," I whisper, nudging my elbow lightly into Ruby's side.

"That was the whole team," she replies as if by herself. She narrows her eyes and looks at the round tables in the middle of the hall, where a few guests have already taken their seats, then at the long tables on the left side, where the buffet will probably be set up later. I know this look very well – Ruby checks that everything is exactly as she imagined.

"Ruby!" comes a voice that I definitely don't know.

I turn my head and discover a pale boy with half-long, dark hair and handsome onyx eyes framed by thick eyelashes. He has a prominent jaw

and high cheekbones that somehow don't want to match the boyish grin and his cheerfully shining eyes.

"Kieran, hi," Ruby replies, putting on a smile I've never seen on her before. It's polite, professional, but at the same time somehow reserved. Definitely not my sister's smile.

"The caterers arrived ten minutes ago and are already setting up in the next room," says Kieran before his gaze falls on me. "Hi. I'm Kieran. You must be Ember." He holds out his hand to me, and automatically I take it. Perplexed, I look at Ruby. Actually, I had assumed that no one in this school knew about me or our family, after all, Ruby always made such a huge secret out of Maxton Hall at home. I thought that she strictly follows this separation between private and school life on both sides. So the fact that this boy here knows my name irritates me a bit.

"Glad to meet you, Kieran," I say.

When Kieran lets go of my hand, he smiles at Ruby, and his cheeks turn unmistakably red.

A-ha.

Obviously, Ruby still has an admirer at this school. I'm not surprised she didn't tell me about it. Ruby hardly ever talks about her feelings. I sometimes wonder how Ruby can be like this without exploding. I could never hold back what I feel like that—neither the good nor the bad feelings. If something doesn't suit me, I say it loudly. When I'm happy, I automatically carry that to the outside world. Ruby is more controlled than I am and much less impulsive.

I'm so lost in thought that I don't even notice how Ruby and Kieran continue to walk towards the stage. I quickly follow them, only to listen for ten minutes to what else needs to be thought of in the course of the evening. I look around furtively, but Ruby keeps looking over at me, as if she's afraid that at the first opportunity I'll run away and throw myself into the arms of a random Maxton Hall student. I wonder how long it will take for her to be a little more relaxed, or at least too busy, to watch every step I take like an eagle.

When the gala finally officially begins, I sit at a half-empty table at the very back, so that I can hardly see anything of what is happening on stage. These are the seats for the event committee, as Kieran explains to me a little later, and in fact a handful of students come to us at irregular intervals, sit

down briefly and have a drink, only to jump up again three minutes later and disappear.

At the moment, a young man is giving a lecture about his depression and tells how he only got back on his feet with the help of the family center. It is a very moving speech that captivates the entire hall. I can see some guests dabbing their eyes with cloth handkerchiefs or nodding with concentrated furrowed brows. Kieran next to me also seems to be absolutely captivated.

"Hey," I whisper to him. "I'm going to get something to drink for a moment. Would you like something too?"

"I can come with you," he says immediately and makes preparations to get up.

"Nonsense," I wave it off. "I can do it on my own. Do you want something?"

Kieran hesitates for a moment, and his gaze darts back and forth between me and the speaker, then he shakes his head. "No, thank you."

I nod and walk to the bar, where one of the waiters smiles at me and asks what I want to drink.

"A glass of champagne, please," I say, as if it were a matter of course, but either you see my sixteen—almost seventeen! – years, or he has the instruction not to serve alcohol at all to any students, because he is slowly shaking his head.

I sigh. Then I have no choice but to try the children's punch that is set up on the buffet next to the bar. I take one of the pretty crystal glasses, hold it up to the light and look at the kaleidoscopic colorful points of light that bathe the room in soft colors.

At the same moment as I begin to scoop punch from the large bowl into my glass, thunderous applause breaks out in the hall. Obviously, the speech is over.

I take a few steps to the side so as not to block the other guests' way to the buffet.

"Hello, beauty," a voice sounds close to me.

I freeze. Then I grit my teeth.

It's not the first time I've been addressed like this. Some boys in my school have made bets in the past on who will get me around the fastest with which pick-up line – just for fun, of course.

I automatically close down and turn around with the glass in my hand.

In front of me stands a young man. He has an attractive face, a beautiful full mouth, dark brown skin and almost black-looking eyes with eyelashes, which I am a bit jealous of because they are so curved. He's a little bit taller than me, his hair is short and frizzy, and he has a minimal beard shadow. He also wears a suit, but he looks much less peeled from the egg than the other guests. His tie is a bit too loose, and the tailored black jacket is open. It seems as if he has put a lot of effort into looking as deranged as possible. As if he was attending too many of these events and had grown tired of them over time.

He probably speaks to me because he is bored.

As inconspicuously as possible, I look around. Normally, in such a situation, there is always a group of boys waiting for their boyfriend a few meters away and having a great time with me. Now, however, no one seems to be watching us, which almost makes me even more skeptical.

"Hello," I reply. My voice sounds harsh and dismissive and is the reflection of my emotions.

The guy lets his gaze wander over my entire body, only to linger on the deep neckline of my dress for a little too long.

"I've never seen you here before," he continues, looking me in the eye again. And when his mouth slowly twists into a smile, it clicks.

I know this guy.

Okay, I don't know-know him, but I follow him on Instagram. His username there is kingfitz, but I know his real name is Wren Fitzgerald. His feed is full of pictures of luxury items, parties and girls, and in his stories he uploads videos and photos in which he is half-naked and pretends to be still sleepy. However, I never believe him. No one who has just woken up can look so good.

"I guess that's because I don't go to Maxton Hall," I reply, taking a sip from the glass. My mouth feels dry, and my heart beats pretty fast. Why the hell am I excited just because I'm being flirted with by this guy?

"I thought so," Wren murmurs, and I see a hint of a smile in the corners of his mouth. The gesture seems casual and almost as if he is too lazy to bring himself to smile properly. As if that would waste too much of the energy he prefers to save for something else, dirtier. The thought warms me.

"I'm Wren," he finally says, holding out his hand to me.

I hesitate for a moment. Again I look around – his friends must be somewhere. I don't think this is not a joke. I mean, yes, I'm confident. And the idea of being approached at a party doesn't seem completely absurd to me. But not by a guy like him.

"Where are they?" I ask.

He blinks irritated and lets his hand fall. "Where's who?"

"The friends who incited you to dig me."

"Why do you think I have to be incited to talk to you?"

I raise an eyebrow mockingly. "Come on."

We look at each other and both frown. On stage, the pianist has started to play again, but the melody doesn't really want to get through to me. I'm too busy trying to figure out Wren's intentions.

"Believe me, I can also talk to a beautiful girl on my own," he says finally.

I open my mouth and close it again. Then I take a closer look at Wren again. The corners of his mouth don't twitch like those of the boys who approached me at the school parties, and there's no sneer in his eyes either.

Maybe he really wants to flirt with me. Not because someone goaded him, not because it's a stupid joke, but simply because he finds me as attractive as I find him.

I'm pretty sure he's the last person I should talk to that night. I don't know what to think of this, and I can't judge it at all – but that's exactly what makes me curious.

"My name is Ember," I say belatedly.

"Nice to meet you, Ember."

I like the way he pronounces my name. Almost a little unsure, as if he wanted to practice it first.

"Likewise, Wren."

Actually, I'm good at small talk. But at this moment, I have absolutely no idea what to say. I know what image Wren has online, but at the same time I know how I come across to my followers – always happy, optimistic and up for any fun. There are countless evenings when I am simply depressed and secretly cry in my room. Nobody knows about it, not even my sister. That's why I'm hesitant when it comes to judging people by what they reveal about themselves online. And it makes me curious about what Wren is really like – and whether there is more to this façade.

Maybe I should give myself a jolt and push back my reservations a little. A conversation with him can't hurt.

"What school do you go to?" asks Wren, and at the same moment grabs a glass of orange juice from a tray that a waiter brings to us. "To the East View, perhaps?"

I shake my head. "I'm going to high school in Gormsey."

For a fraction of a second, Wren seems to freeze. He pauses in the middle of drinking and looks at me with wide eyes, then he blinks, and the moment is over. "That sounds exotic."

I wonder if I was just imagining his strange reaction. "Nobody knows the village," I say slowly. "You're definitely not the only one."

"So you're here as a plus one with anyone?" he asks, watching me with interest.

"I'm here with my sister. She's been attending Maxton Hall for over two years."

"I can be really happy about that," says Wren.

For a moment I think about what he means by that. "Why?"

Now Wren is smiling properly – a smile with teeth and small notches around his mouth. "Well, if your sister hadn't gone to school, we would never have met. And that would really be a shame. Or not?"

He whispers the last two words and sounds so familiar that I get goosebumps. I can only nod as if he has hypnotized me, even though all the alarm bells are ringing in my head and admonishing me to be careful.

"What are you looking at me, Ember?" he asks softly, and the smile slowly fades and turns into something else. He takes a step towards me until we almost touch. I would only have to stretch out my hand minimally to reach for his. I wonder how that would feel. Whether his skin is warm.

I have to clear my throat. "I—"

Wren is getting even closer. So dense that I can feel his breath on my temple. Again, I have the impulse to look around, but I suppress it.

"Perhaps we want to disappear somewhere where we can feel a little better—"

"Wren," a deep voice interrupts him, and I am torn out of my torpor. Immediately I take a step back and turn around.

It is James Beaufort.

The James who broke my big sister's heart.

The James who kissed another girl and made sure that Ruby behaved like a lovesick zombie over Christmas.

A wave of anger seizes me, and he continues to speak.

"I see you've met Ruby's sister," he says, his voice without any intonation.

A strange expression enters Wren's eyes. "Ruby's sister, huh?"

I nod slowly and look back and forth between the two of them, confused.

"I seem to have good taste," he continues, in an almost teasing tone that has nothing to do with the familiar murmur of a moment ago. "If you still feel like it—"

"I don't think Ember feels like it. No matter what. Get out, Wren," James interrupts again. His tone is authoritarian and does not allow for any contradiction. I wonder if he always talks to his friends like that, and if so, how can it be that he still has so many of them.

The smile disappears from Wren's face, and all of a sudden he looks pretty pissed off. He shakes his head and mumbles an adult curse. Then he looks at me again. "I really wish we could have continued our conversation, Ember."

The next moment, he leans forward and presses his lips to my cheek. When he pulls away from me, he doesn't look at me, but at James.

Before I can say anything else, he turns around and disappears into the crowd. I touch my cheek where his lips have touched while James Wren stares angrily after him. Why do I have the feeling that Wren only kissed me to get one over on James?

"I'm sorry, Ember," James murmurs.

Then he runs after Wren, and I am left alone at the bar.

James

I find Wren outside in the entrance hall, together with the boys. As I approach her small circle, Cyril raises his hand.

"Beaufort! What does the honour give us?"

I ignore him and fix Wren with my gaze.

"What were you thinking?" I snap at him.

He doesn't answer my question, but takes a big sip from a hip flask.

"Wren."

He rolls his eyes. "I was only talking to her. Don't make a big deal out of it."

"She's Ruby's sister, damn it. Keep your hands off her."

Wren lets out a contemptuous snort. "I'm getting tired of being considerate of you all the time."

I raise an eyebrow mockingly. "Consideration? Where have you ever been considerate?"

"Do you know what, Beaufort? "Fuck you," he replies, downing the rest of the contents of the hip flask in one gulp and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Wren," Kesh says warningly.

"No, Kesh. I'm tired of being considerate of James's feelings." Wren turns to me again. "Everything you preached to us in the summer was just empty talk. Now you skip training because you're on the events committee, you leave parties to visit your girlfriend and make a prude when I want to pick someone up. I have the feeling that you don't give a about us by now. You don't even listen anymore when someone tries to tell you something."

"Such bullshit," I reply.

He just shakes his head. "You know what? Take care of your own stuff. After all, that's what you're doing best at the moment."

I look at him confused. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Wren turns around, takes two steps, only to turn around on his heel and point his finger at me energetically. "That's exactly what I mean," he hisses. "I've been trying to have a normal conversation with you for ages, but you don't care at all."

"Come on, Wren."

Deep down, I know he's right. The last time we were partying together, he made a hint that I just ignored because I was too much in my mind with Ruby. Now the guilty conscience is germinating in me.

"What, come on? I'm right, and you know that very well. The only thing you have on your mind is Ruby. There's nothing else in your life," he says angrily.

"I—" My voice fails. At the same time, anger flares up in my stomach. "I've got a lot on my plate right now, but it has nothing to do with her." I wish I could make that clear to him in some other way.

"You've only been like this since you met her, so don't try to protect her. It's just sickening, I don't know you like that at all."

"Now come down, Wren," Kesh interrupts, but Wren pushes him out of the way and takes an angry step toward me.

"You act as if Ruby is a cure for your oh-so-bad life. Something like a saint. But it's not," he hisses.

I look at him frowning. "I understand you're angry. I was a shitty friend, and I'm sorry about that – but keep Ruby out of it. You don't know her."

Wren shakes his head disparagingly. "In fact, I know Ruby pretty well. If you'd listened to me for more than two seconds lately, I'd have told you how well I know her."

I open my mouth, but the words get stuck in my throat.

I know this tone. And I know what it means.

Wren also seems to understand that he just said too much. He clenches his teeth so hard that his jawbones protrude.

"What are you saying?"

"This may not be the place for such a conversation," Alistair murmurs, but I shake my head.

"What were you talking about just now?" I press further.

Wren hesitates, but my gaze is unyielding. After a few seconds, he clears his throat. "Ruby and I once had something together at a back-to-school party."

My heart begins to race, my throat is as if constricted.

"Well, that's a surprise," says Cyril, sounding almost pleased. "Ruby kept it a secret from you the whole time that she made out with your best friend."

"Shut up, Cy," I growl.

"Apparently she's not just the dear girl next door," he continues, unperturbed. "Maybe you'll finally stop idealizing her like that."

"One word more, Cy, and I swear—"

"He's right," Wren interrupts. "If you were as important to her as she is to you, she would have told you about it long ago."

I drive around to him and grab him tightly by his lapel. He doesn't resist my grip, but just looks at me with dark eyes.

"You know I'm telling the truth. Otherwise you wouldn't freak out so much."

His words repeat themselves in my head, my breath chops off. At any moment, the fabric of Wren's suit tears, I grip it so tightly.

I was really only thinking about Ruby. All the while, I tried to win her back and neglected everything else around me. Not only Lydia – but also my friends. And for what?

For what, damn it?

"What are you doing there?" an energetic whisper sounds next to us.

Ruby.

I turn my head to her and feel a painful sting in my chest. I'm completely overwhelmed with the situation. Only in passing do I notice that there are some gala visitors behind Ruby, who are following the events with dismayed expressions.

Ruby stands right next to us. "What are you doing?" she whispers insistently, looking from me to Wren and back.

"James has just heard of our little secret, Ruby."

All color fades from Ruby's face.

For a moment I feel the desire to punch Wren in the face. But then I have my father's clenched fist in front of my eyes. I tear my hands away from Wren. I can't stand it a second longer in this hall.

"James—" Ruby whispers.

I just shake my head, turn around and leave.

Ember

I'm a bit disappointed.

Ruby always kept these parties such a secret that I prepared for everything but to stand around alone for most of the evening and get bored. While Ruby runs from one corner of the room to the other and who knows what discusses with who knows whom, I managed to engage someone in a conversation with me exactly twice. One person was the daughter of an entrepreneur who owns his own café chain. Her dress fascinated me so much that I had to ask her about the designer and take a picture of her. The other person was the student representative of Maxton Hall, who gave a great opening speech, for which I wanted to congratulate her. However, she didn't seem to care much about my opinion, because during our conversation her gaze twitched the entire time at the people standing around us, as if she was looking for someone more important to talk to.

Kieran hardly leaves my side the entire evening. Ruby ordered him to take care of me, I'm one hundred percent sure of that. He is nice and attentive, but at some point we have exhausted all small talk topics and both stare silently at the stage or into our glasses. I feel a little sorry for him. Surely he has better things to do than babysit the little sister of his team leader.

While the last laudator on stage makes a fiery plea for more charity, I look around for Wren once again inconspicuously. He is the only one of all the people here who looked at me with honest interest that evening. And the interest is mutual. Something about him fascinated me, and I would have liked to have had the chance to talk to him longer and learn more about him.

The applause of the audience tears me out of my thoughts. The laudator thanks her and finally leaves the stage. Ruby is already standing at the foot of the small staircase and receives it. I am taken aback when I look at her face – something is different. The radiance does not reach her eyes and seems fake to me. When I think about it, I haven't seen her once in the

last hour. Has anything happened? It can't have anything to do with the gala, everything in here is going according to the script. I'm just thinking about whether I should go to her when she and the laudator disappear together in an adjoining room.

I sigh.

And at that moment I see Wren.

He leans against the wall next to the large entrance door. And he smiles over at me. For a moment I am tempted to turn around to make sure that his gaze is really on me, but ... No, he looks at me directly. Just like before.

I think about it for exactly two seconds. Then I apologize to Kieran and, ignoring his protest, go to Wren. His gaze does not leave me as I slowly approach him, and suddenly the path seems much longer than it actually is.

"You're back," I say as I stop at a distance in front of him.

He nods with a smile. "We weren't done with each other yet. Isn't it?"

I don't know if he intentionally makes it sound so ambiguous. Did I convey something wrong to him by going to him? Because while he has just clearly flirted with me, I just want to talk to him – nothing more.

"No, we weren't," I answer anyway. The attention and interest in Wren's gaze are a welcome change from the indifferent expressions of the rest of the guests. Maybe this evening won't be a total flop after all.

Be careful anyway, whispers a voice in the back of my head.

The next moment, Wren reaches for my hand. Surprised, I look first at our intertwined fingers and then up at his face. He raises an eyebrow, at the same time he squeezes my hand as if it were the most natural thing in the world. It's incredibly difficult for me to assess him.

Wren nods towards the exit.

I think for a moment and glance over my shoulder. Ruby has not yet reappeared, and Kieran has also disappeared.

Wren gently squeezes my hand again. I don't think I've ever seen such an interesting boy like him. His Instagram account doesn't do him justice, I think. His pictures seem intentional – intentionally cheerful, intentionally cool – but in reality his personality is much more engaging. And quite mysterious. I really want to know what the thing from earlier was all about. Why he fakes this casual smile, but his gaze is gloomy at the same time.

Finally, I nod, and together we go to the entrance area of Boyd Hall. A woman in a stunningly beautiful burgundy dress walks past us, and I turn

around to look at her. When I see the back neckline lined with fine lace, I sigh softly.

Wren gives me a sideways glance.

"I have a weakness for fashion. And all the clothes that people wear here ... I would like to get the patterns from all of them to sew them."

I look at Wren to see if he finds it strange, but his eyes sparkle. He points to the curved staircase that leads to the upper floor. "I have an idea."

I follow him, trying not to step on the hem of my dress, as we walk up the wide steps. At the top, Wren turns left and leads me down a long, dark hallway.

The corridors in my school are dirty, the white paint of the walls has long since yellowed. The dark green paint has been peeling off the lockers for years, and the few pictures between the doors to the classrooms have been painted by students with markers. The difference to this corridor could not be greater. Here, expensive-looking paintings hang in heavy frames, as well as photos of well-known graduates of Maxton Hall. There are glass cases in which there are pieces of jewellery sponsored by the school, and also a few sculptures built in art class.

I'm so busy looking around that I almost run into Wren when he suddenly stops. He looks around briefly and then sits down on a wooden bench. He knocks on the empty seat next to him, and I sit down.

"Look," he says with a nod to the railing directly in front of us.

Curiously, I look through the gap between the wooden sticks.

A smile spreads across my face. From here you have the best view of the entrance area of Boyd Hall and can watch the people without them noticing. I doubt that we would be recognized if you looked up here from below. This part of the gallery is too dark for that.

"You're a genius," I say, beaming.

Wren grins. "No one has ever called me that before."

"Then I hereby solemnly bestow this title on you." I pretend to knight him by suggesting a sword strike on his shoulders. At the same moment, Wren grabs my hand again and holds it tightly. His grin gives way to a completely different facial expression. All of a sudden, his eyes are serious and his gaze is meaningful. It awakens a tingling sensation in my stomach that spreads in all directions.

No one has ever looked at me like that. Really never.

Where I come from, there are no guys like Wren. In the eyes of my classmates, I'm just Ember. Most of them have known me since kindergarten or preschool, and none of them look at me as if I were valuable or desirable. I have serious problems breathing evenly.

Wren's gaze wanders to my mouth, back to my eyes, and back down again. He still holds my hand in his. With the other, he brushes a strand of hair out of my face. His thumb brushes my temple, and a shiver goes through my body.

There is a crackle between us, and it gets more violent with every second. I've never experienced anything like it. Every second – every breath – feels forbidden good and exciting at the same time.

"Sorry I disappeared so suddenly earlier," he says quietly. "Some people seem to think they have to protect you from me."

"Why do they think that?" I whisper back.

He doesn't take his eyes off my face. "Because they know me."

That's the only thing he says before he comes closer and presses his lips to mine. I make a surprised sound, and Wren puts an arm around my back to pull me closer to him. His lips become softer and open slightly. And then I taste it.

Alcohol.

I immediately push it away from me with both hands and slide a bit to the side. Then I shake my head. "Wren."

He looks at me irritated. "What?"

My heart is beating like crazy. Even though this was probably the shortest kiss in human history, I can still feel his lips on mine.

"This is not how I imagined my first kiss," I reply quietly. My hands are shaking. I fold it in my lap and avert my gaze so as not to have to see Wren's reaction to my words. Instead, I look down through the railing again. There, a young woman is coming through the front door, her dark blue dress almost looking like the night sky. Small glitter particles are incorporated into the train, so that it sparkles in the light with every step.

"Your first kiss, huh?" Wren's tone is suddenly very gentle.

The man at the woman's side puts his hand on her lower back, and I watch them as they enter the hall together. "Yes."

For a moment he says nothing. Then... "I'm sorry."

The couple disappears between the other people, and I look at Wren again.

"My week has been pretty shitty. I thought we could cheer each other up a bit."

"If you like, we can talk about it," I say. "But I'm not open to more. Especially not when you're drunk."

"I'm not drunk. At most a little tipsy. So I know exactly what I just did. And I would want to do that without having drunk a single sip of alcohol," he says with knitted eyebrows. Just so you know."

"Okay."

Wren nods once and then sinks back on the bench. He folds his arms in front of his chest and looks at the chandelier that illuminates the entrance hall.

"Why was your week so stupid?" I ask him after a while.

He holds his breath. The way his body suddenly tenses up tells me that he didn't expect the question and that he first has to decide for himself whether he wants to answer it or not.

The soft singing of the school choir reaches us, but I only perceive the gentle harmonies on the margins.

Finally, Wren takes a deep breath and closes his eyes. "My parents went bankrupt a while ago."

"What happened?"

Wren shrugs his shoulders almost imperceptibly. "My dad speculated on stocks. He has lost almost all his fortune."

Oh man. I can imagine what it must be like for someone at Maxton Hall to lose almost everything from one day to the next.

"I'm sorry about that."

Wren presses his lips tightly together and stares at the railing.

"What does this mean for you?" I ask cautiously.

"We're moving. What happens after that, I don't know. I've got a commitment from Oxford – I don't know how I'm going to pay the tuition fees."

"There are scholarships and stuff like that. My sister is also applying for some. Maybe that would be an option for you?" I suggest.

He nods absently. "Yes. Perhaps."

For a few minutes we listen to the choir singing the cover of a pop song below. The moment between us seems almost peaceful to me – as if Wren hadn't just confided in me something so sad.

Suddenly he turns his upper body to me and looks at me again. I don't know how much strength that cost him, but from one second to the next his gaze is no longer lost, but as curious as at the beginning of the evening.

"It's your turn," he says. "Tell me something about yourself. So far, all I know is that Ruby is your sister and you're interested in fashion."

I smile at him, unsure of what I want to confide in him. "I've had a fashion blog for plus-size fashion for a year and a half. His name is Bellbird," I begin with the most important and innocuous thing at the same time. As far as I'm concerned, the whole world can know about my blog. I'm proud of what I'm doing, especially now after the rebranding.

The smile returns to Wren's face. "That sounds cool. How did you come to do it?"

His question surprises me, but in a pleasant way. I moisten my lips. "I've been fat all my life." I pause for a moment, curious to see if Wren reacts to this statement in any way, but he surprises me a second time by just looking at me intently and waiting for me to continue. "It's not because I eat excessively, as people always think. It's just the way it is. And I have huge problems finding beautiful fashion for my physique. So at some point I started sewing my own garments. I've been sharing them on my blog ever since. In addition, I write articles in which I want to encourage people to accept themselves as they are."

Wren's smile doesn't slip a bit. On the contrary, it will even be a little wider. "You sound like a superhero, Ember."

I feel heat creeping into my cheeks. But false modesty isn't really my thing either, so I say: "I'm a superheroine."

Now he laughs. The sound is raw and beautiful, and I think I'll remember it all night long. For a moment, I regret breaking off the kiss. But deep down I know that it was the right decision. If I hadn't done it, I would have regretted it much more, I'm sure.

"I already know what I'm going to do tonight," Wren says after a while.

"What?"

A sparkle enters his dark eyes. "I'll read through all the contributions. Every single one."

Now I have to smile too. "You've got quite a lot of plans. I've been posting at least two posts a week for over a year and a half."

"Okay," he says, dragging out the word. "Then I'll probably need a little longer."

The choir ends at this moment, and I break out into a mini-applause. A man below stops abruptly and turns his head in our direction. I quickly duck and hope that he doesn't discover us. I have no idea if it's even allowed to be up here.

Wren laughs softly. "You look like you don't want to be caught with me."

"When my sister finds out that I spent time with a boy in a dark corner, she goes crazy."

Any amusement disappears from Wren's eyes. He opens his mouth and closes it again immediately afterwards. Whatever he wants to say, he can't bring himself to do it. In the end, he sighs.

"Then I should take you back downstairs. I hope Ruby hasn't noticed you're gone yet."

For a moment, disappointment spreads through me, but he is probably right.

Wren stands up and holds out his hand to me. As if by magic, I put mine in his and accompany him along the hallway and down the stairs until we face each other in front of the entrance to the hall.

"Thank you for saving my evening, Ember," Wren says, his words sounding sincere.

When he smiles at me one last time, I am overcome by the sudden desire to stop him from leaving. But by then he has already turned around.

Something contracts longingly in my stomach. I sincerely hope that this was not my last encounter with Wren Fitzgerald.

Ruby

I haven't slept a minute.

Instead, I spend the whole night thinking about what happened at the party. Just now, when James and I have cautiously approached each other again, such a setback happens. What frustrates me most is that I can't tell James in my own words what happened between me and Wren back then. At the party, I wrote to him that I would like to explain it to him, but he hasn't answered yet. I can understand that he is disappointed in me. On the other hand, his silence drives me crazy.

As I lie in bed, I stare absentmindedly at Oxford's commitment, which I have printed out and hung on the bulletin board above my desk. As always, my stomach does a little joyful somersault, but I also think of what James said to me two days ago.

The person you met in Oxford... That's me. And I'd like to have more days with you where I can prove that to you.

The thought that it might be too late for that now makes my throat tighten. With a frustrated moan, I get up and get dressed. I urgently need to leave this room and distract myself, otherwise I'll go crazy.

I sneak over to Ember, and when I see light under the door, I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Ember?" I ask.

"Come in," I hear her call and open the door.

My sister is lying on her stomach in her bed and smiling at her cell phone. When she notices my curious gaze, her cheeks turn red, and she hastily tucks it under the covers.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"I'm reading comments on my new post." Your answer will come immediately. If it weren't for the blush on her face, I would have believed her without batting an eyelid.

"You look like I've just caught you doing something very naughty," I say, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

"Well, I'm wearing my pyjamas. So it can't have been that indecent," she replies with wobbly eyebrows.

I return her grin. Then I nod in the direction of the hallway.

"Are you coming down for breakfast? I don't want to face Mum's and Dad's prying eyes alone. You must have a thousand more questions about yesterday."

Ember sighs, but climbs out of bed and slips into her slippers. She doesn't bother to change. Instead, she goes downstairs in her pajamas, which depict cute squirrels and nuts. She holds her cell phone tightly with one hand, and I can see it light up every now and then. I wonder if it's Kieran who is writing to you. The two seemed to have gotten along well last night.

"Good morning," Dad says when he sees us coming through the kitchen door, pushing up his reading glasses on his nose. He's reading a book on the Kindle, which we all share and therefore has all kinds of books on it. A mixture of contemporary novels, thrillers, fantasy and English classics.

"Tomorrow," Ember and I say and sit down with him at the kitchen table.

"Hey," Mum calls as she comes out of the kitchen. "You're awake already." Her eyes narrow when she sees me. "Did you even close your eyes, Ruby?"

Dad and Ember look at me curiously.

I avert my gaze and take a toast. "Of course."

"Well, I can understand you're done," Ember says suddenly. Surprised, I look up. "I would never have thought how much work goes into such a party and what you have to consider. It's really crazy."

I smile gratefully at her. "You're welcome to continue with the compliments."

Mum pushes the butter over to me and immediately afterwards the apple jam. "Tell me about your evening."

"It all went according to plan," I say as I begin to smear my toast. "I am satisfied."

Mum is used to my short answers about Maxton Hall and immediately turns her gaze to Ember. However, she is busy typing a message on her cell phone under the table and does not realize at all that Mum has spoken to her.

"Why are you grinning like that, Ember?" Dad asks suddenly, a second before I would have formulated the question.

Caught out, she looks up. "I don't grin at all."

Dad just raises an eyebrow, while Mum adds – a little more energetically – "Tell me what you experienced yesterday."

I bite into my toast with a shrug of my shoulders and look at Ember just as expectantly as Mum and Dad.

"It was really nice," she finally begins, sounding genuinely enthusiastic: "The school is so pretty – it doesn't really come across on the Internet. And the clothes that people wore! One more beautiful than the other."

Sighing, she pours herself a cup of tea.

"That's it? That's all I get?" asks Mum.

I wonder why she is so persistent. Is it just because she sensed her chance to finally squeeze someone out of a Maxton Hall party? Or is she worried about Ember? It took us a lot of persuasion this week before she allowed her to accompany me. But maybe there is a completely different reason behind it.

Ember does not let himself be disturbed. She calmly smears a toast with butter before raising her head. "I met a boy. Did you want to hear that, Mum?"

I turn to her with a jerk and stare at her. Please say it's Kieran."

"Who the hell is Kieran?" Dad interjects and puts the Kindle aside. He looks back and forth between Ember and me.

"A nice boy from the events committee."

Mum breathes a sigh of relief. "Thank God. And I thought we'd soon have the next lovesick beetle lying on the couch."

"Hey! I was not a lovesick beetle."

Mum and Dad exchange a long look that says more than a thousand words.

"If that's what you mean, honey," Mum says finally, but without her usual smile. "Well, Ember, tell us about the boy."

"Guys!" Ember exclaims, looking first at Mum and then at me angrily. Secondly, I am not accountable to any of you. And thirdly, ›getting to know each other‹ does not mean that I have a steady boyfriend. By the way, I gave him a basket and want to see how he's doing at all. So don't make such a big deal out of it right away."

I stare at my sister. "Who is it, Ember?"

Ember returns my gaze with raised eyebrows. "I won't tell you."

"Ember, I—"

"Forget it, Ruby. Can we please have breakfast in peace now?" She demonstratively bites off her toast.

The rest of the breakfast passes in agonizing slowness. Dad tries to lighten the mood after a few minutes, but he doesn't really succeed. The thoughts swirl around in my head. I go over the last evening in my memory and think about when Ember would have had the opportunity to talk to a boy who wasn't Kieran for more than five minutes. It can only have been him. But then she wouldn't make such a secret about it, would she?

After breakfast, Ember and I silently load the dishwasher and then go upstairs together. Before she disappears into her room, she throws me a small smile, which I tiredly reciprocate. Actually, we don't hit each other like that, but I can't shake the feeling that something happened last night that I should have protected Ember from.

Sighing, I open my room door at the exact moment my phone pings. Immediately I grab it from the bedside table. With trembling fingers, I open the message.

Can we talk?

I type my answer so fast that the touchscreen of the mobile phone can't keep up, the words are all misspelled and I have to start all over again.

Of course. When and where?

I count the seconds until James answers, holding my breath as my phone pings softly again.

I would drive off right away. Can I come to you?

I hesitate for a moment. I haven't even asked James into our house so far. Introducing him to my parents now would be an enormous step.

But I feel deep inside that I am ready for it. I can be in His presence again without breaking. And his desire to talk to me shows that despite everything that happened yesterday, he feels the same way as I do.

So I start an answer:

All right.

Then I walk back downstairs with the mobile phone in my hand. Mum and Dad are now sitting in the living room. Dad is already engrossed in his Kindle again, while Mum has started sorting through the week's mail. Carefully I step up to the two and clear my throat.

"Is it okay if James comes here right away?" I ask.

Mum pauses with the letter opener in her hand and exchanges a surprised look with Dad. Her words about lovesickness still resonate in my head, and it takes me quite a bit of effort to withstand her critical gaze.

"Honey, we only want the best for you," Dad begins slowly. "And we didn't miss how badly you felt all December."

"That wasn't my Ruby," Mum agrees quietly. "I don't really want you to meet this boy again."

I open my mouth and close it again.

My parents have never forbidden me anything. That's probably because I haven't had much to forbid so far. My life has always revolved around my family and Oxford. Something flares up in me. I think it's a mixture of irritation and anger because they said that.

"James is—" I'm looking for the right words. I have no idea how to explain to my parents what happened between James and me.

Maybe one day I can make them understand how much James means to me. And that my heart will always be attached to him. But I need more time until that happens. I don't know myself what is about to happen.

"Please just trust me," I finally say, looking at her imploringly.

Again, the two exchange a look.

Mum sighs. "You're eighteen, Ruby. We can hardly forbid you. But when this boy comes here, we also want to get the chance to meet him."

I nod. At the same time, I wonder if Mum might have researched James and the Beauforts on the Internet. The thought has never occurred to me before, but I wouldn't be surprised if her skepticism was also based on that – after all, I know what you can find online about James.

"Is the boy a vegetarian?" Dad suddenly asks, looking up at me questioningly.

I have to think about that for a moment. "I don't think so."

"Good. I wanted to make spaghetti bolognese today. James is invited." That's all Dad says about it. Then he turns back to the Kindle.

"That's a great idea," Mum agrees, smiling broadly at me. She tries hard not to look as tense as before, but a spark of skepticism remains in her gaze. She strokes Dad's arm fleetingly, then grabs the next letter and opens it.

I think the conversation is over, so I sneak backwards out of the living room. Then I go to the kitchen, because from there you can watch the cars turning into our street. As children, Ember and I always sat on the sideboard and looked out for our relatives when they announced their visit.

It takes ten minutes for the Rolls-Royce to come around the corner. Immediately I sprint off. Under no circumstances should James be greeted first by Dad, who would certainly watch him with eagle eyes.

I open the door before James has even gotten out of the car. The air is still fresh, and I step from one leg to the other to warm up, but it's no use. I stop when James appears in my field of vision. He opens the small wooden gate with practice and then looks up. When he discovers me, he stops almost imperceptibly. His steps slow down for a moment, then he walks up through the front yard and the stairs to our house until he stands in front of me.

"Hey," he says in a raspy voice.

I would love to hug him for that one puny word. There was a time when it drove me crazy that he greeted everyone like that, but now this word from his mouth seems familiar to me. And it seems almost normal.

"Good morning," I reply and hold the door open for him. With a nod, I invite him in.

The moment when he steps over the threshold of our house with a soft clearing of his throat seems incredibly significant to me. I wonder if he knows he's the first boy I'm bringing home. The first one who means so much to me and whom I trust enough – even now – that I will introduce him to my parents.

The sight of James in our small hallway is unusual, but at the same time I wonder how it can be that I was so afraid of this moment. Everything about this feels right.

James wears a gray coat that is subtly checked, underneath black pants made of a soft fabric and a simple wool sweater in the same color. His leather shoes are also black. As always, his reddish-blond hair is messed up and slightly wavy, as if he had just showered and let it air dry. I would love to touch it.

"Would you like to give me your coat?" I ask instead.

James nods absentmindedly as he looks around. His gaze is caught on the embarrassing childhood photos of Ember and me. On one we dance in the garden, on another we pick apples, and on yet another we sit beaming and toothless in our aunt's paddling pool. James looks at them all as he lets the coat slide off his shoulders in a smooth movement and then hands it to me.

I have to seriously concentrate not to stare at him too much. Since I have forbidden myself to do so so strictly in the last few weeks, it seems all the more tempting now.

I concentrate on hanging his jacket neatly on the coat rack and then go to the living room. James follows me, but before I open the door, I turn around in a flash and look up at him.

"Are you a vegetarian?"

James blinks several times. One corner of his mouth twitches as he slowly shakes his head. "No, I'm not."

I breathe a sigh of relief. "Good."

As I press the handle down and enter the living room with James close behind me, my stomach flutters nervously.

"Mum, Dad, this is James," I say, pointing to my companion.

James audibly takes a breath before he walks over to my mum and shakes her hand. "Glad to meet you, Mrs. Bell."

"Hello, James," says Mum, smiling warmly at him.

There is nothing left of her previous skepticism, and I wonder if she is really such an excellent actress or if she is lenient with James because she knows how much he must have been affected by the death of his mum, and she feels sorry for him.

"All right," says James. "Helen."

Dad isn't so good at hiding his suspicions. His gaze is cold and appraising, and it looks like he crushes James's hand as he shakes it. James doesn't pull a face.

Fortunately, Mum interrupts the unpleasant moment. "We'd like to invite you to dinner tonight, James," says Mum. "So that we can all get to know each other a bit."

I close my eyes and resist the urge to press my fingers to the bridge of my nose. I hope James is not already overwhelmed by my family.

"With pleasure," he replies, however, without hesitating for a second. "I have nothing more to do today."

"Fabulous," Dad says, without any emphasis in his voice.

After that, there is an awkward silence for a moment, and I hastily grab James by the arm to pull him up and into freedom. Already on the stairs, however, I realize what I have just done: I have simply touched James as if it were nothing special. As if we do this all the time because we are familiar with each other.

I quickly let go of him.

"I didn't clean up or anything," I explain as we come to a stop in front of my room.

James shakes his head. "Not bad. I practically attacked you."

I nod and then open the door. I give way to James and walk behind him. It's kind of strange to be with him in this space that is so familiar and protected to me. I automatically feel comfortable, but at the same time there is this tingling uncertainty in me about what this conversation – this whole day – would entail.

A soft noise interrupts my thoughts.

More precisely, a scratchy laugh.

I turn to James. His laugh sounds a bit rusty, as if he hadn't had anything he found funny for ages. When he sees my astonished look, he makes a hand gesture that encloses the entire room. "How does your room look tidy if this is messy, Ruby Bell?"

A warm feeling spreads first in my stomach and then in my whole body until I have to smile.

I really like seeing James here.

Seeing him laughing makes me happy.

A wave of longing comes over me. She wants to drive me to him, but I stay where I am and slowly pull the door shut behind me. James' smile dies at the soft click.

For a moment we just stand opposite each other and look at each other.

"I'm sorry about yesterday," I finally begin.

James slowly shakes his head.

"I should have told you that before. That—"

"Ruby," he interrupts me quietly. "You don't owe me an account."

He's right. I know that. Still, I wish I could turn back time to avoid a situation like yesterday.

"Why did you run away so quickly?" I ask cautiously.

He swallows hard. "I was simply overwhelmed by the whole situation. Wren and I haven't argued like this in a long time."

"I know your friendship with Wren means a lot to you," I say quietly. "I'm sorry."

James goes to my desk and runs his finger over the spines of the stack that has been piling up there since last week. "You don't need to apologize. I didn't come here to talk to you about Wren, either."

"About what, then?" I whisper. I have no idea where my voice has gone.

He gives me a quick look, then he looks at the chaos on my desk again with concentration. "Do you know why Wren got so angry?" he asks.

I shake my head and take the two steps it takes to stand next to him. "No."

"He was angry because he feels like you've become more important to me than anything else."

James pauses for a moment before continuing to speak. "And he's right."

He is still standing in front of my desk. And he doesn't look at me when he says those important words.

"James," I whisper to make him turn to me.

He follows my wish, and the look in his eyes overwhelms me. I recognize in it all the emotions that also flow through my body.

At that moment, I am overcome by such a violent wave of affection for him that I almost have to look away. Carefully I raise my hand and brush the tangled strands of hair from his forehead. Then I put my hand on his cheek. His face feels warm under my touch, and as I gently run my fingers over his skin, James clasps her in his hand.

It wasn't long ago that we were in the same position. I touched his cheek, scraped together all my courage and confessed to James that I didn't want to lose him. At that time, he took my hand off his face and turned away from me.

Now the opposite is the case.

James holds my hand tightly and closes his eyes. As I run my thumb over his skin, a tremor goes through his entire body. He opens his eyes again, and I hold my breath.

"I don't want anything between us anymore, Ruby," he murmurs.

I can hardly breathe because James is so close to me. His meaningful words are in the air, and in that second I realize that I feel the same way.

I don't want to be apart from him anymore.

I can no longer be angry or sad.

I finally want to feel that rush again that James and I put each other in. I finally want to talk to him again, write to him, share my fears and worries with him.

I want to love him.

Even after two months, the all-encompassing longing for him has not disappeared. On the contrary, it is getting stronger and stronger, day by day. And there's nothing I can do about it.

"I feel the same way," I whisper.

He makes a low, desperate-sounding sound, and the next moment he pulls me close. He wraps his arms tightly around me, while my eyes start to burn and tears run down my cheeks. James mumbles something into my hair. And even if I don't understand him, deep down I am aware of the meaning of his words.

James

I don't know how long we'll be standing like this. At some point, I'm half sitting on the work surface while Ruby leans against me. My heart beats so hard in my chest that I'm sure she needs to hear it. She has her arms wrapped tightly around my waist and buried her face on my collarbone. Their tears have slowly dried up over time, but I can still feel the wetness they left behind.

I take a deep breath, and Ruby's familiar sweet smell rises to my nose. I can't believe that this is really happening. In this second, my life is no longer a pile of shards. Everything just feels right. I could stand like this forever.

"I missed you so much," I murmur after a while, my lips brushing her hairline. I would love to let her wander somewhere else – but I forbade myself to do that. I won't kiss her. Not now, not today. That's why I didn't come here.

"You me too," she replies just as quietly, and my heart skips a beat.

I stroke Ruby's back, a large circle, then a smaller one. The light fabric of her blouse feels so delicate. And so after her.

"I'm sorry for what I said when I was here. I didn't mean to burden you with anything." I feel like I absolutely have to repeat that again.

"I'm sorry too. I shouldn't have been so mean."

Immediately I shake my head. "You weren't mean. You were right in what you said. I shouldn't be a burden to you. That's not how a relationship works," I reply.

At the word "relationship," Ruby raises her head and breaks away from me a bit. Her watchful gaze is on me, and the next words come as if by themselves.

"It's just that... When I look at you, it seems to me that everything in my life is going right. It feels like I'm at home – really at home, I mean. I've never felt anything like it, Ruby. With no one. You make me feel like I'm not alone. And that's what I've missed the most. This feeling ... to be whole."

Ruby inhales haltingly.

"I don't even know if that makes any sense at all," I add.

"It makes sense," Ruby replies. "Of course it makes sense."

"I don't want you to feel pressured."

Ruby lets her gaze glide over my face. I'm sure my cheeks are just as flushed as hers. I'm warm, and I've just fought back tears. But Ruby doesn't look at me as if she thinks I'm stupid or embarrassing.

Instead, there's a warmth in her green eyes that goes through my bones. She looks right into me, and I know she understands everything.

That's what Ruby is like: she finds solutions to the most difficult tasks. It finds meaning where there shouldn't be. And now she finds something in me that makes her wrap her arms around me.

"I don't," she whispers. "Not now."

The next moment, she stands on her tiptoes. She looks me in the eye for a heartbeat. And then she kisses me.

I let out a surprised sound. For a moment, I don't know what's happening to me at all, and I cling to the desk with one hand, my fingers clawing tighter into her back as if by themselves.

Ruby comes even closer until there is not a bit of space left between us.

That wasn't my goal when I came here. But now she's kissing me, and her hands are on my body, and her closeness is driving me crazy...

"James?" Ruby leans back a bit and looks at me uncertainly. Only then do I realize that I was too overwhelmed by the situation to return the kiss.

"I—"

Suddenly, Ruby's eyes widen, and she takes a little distance from me. She swallows hard and shakes her head. "I'm sorry. I thought... I wouldn't have liked that—"

"Ruby," I say. Awakened from my rigidity, I pull her back to me with both hands. Then I lean over to her, banish all thoughts from my head and kiss the girl I love for the first time in over two months.

I shove one hand to the back of her neck and wrap the other arm around her waist to pull her tightly to me. Ruby sighs into my mouth.

Oh man.

I missed this so much.

The way Ruby moves. Her beautiful mouth. The soft sound it emits as our tongues meet.

I stroke her neck, over her hairline, further down to her neck. Your skin is so warm and soft. I would love to let my mouth wander all over her body. Ruby gasps as if she had had the exact same thought.

The sound tears me out of my trance. Breathing heavily, I break away from her.

Although we are closer than we have been for a long time, we are not ready for more. There's still a line that can't be crossed overnight, and when Ruby buries her face on my neck and just holds me, I know she's thinking the same way I do.

I stroke her back and hold her tight – seconds, minutes, hours. It's as if it's just her and me at that moment. Just the two of us around the world.

I don't know how long we stand there like this, but when we finally let go, it feels like half an eternity has passed.

We look at each other and smile. Ruby smooths out her bangs, I my sweater. It's obvious that neither of us knows what's coming next.

I clear my throat. "I should—"

"How are you—" Ruby begins at the same moment, and we both have to laugh quietly.

"You first," I say.

Ruby smiles. "I just wanted to ask how Lydia is. I didn't see her last night."

"She's fine. She still struggles with nausea from time to time, so she suspended the gala."

Ruby frowns worriedly. "But otherwise everything is fine, isn't it?"

I nod. "Yes, that's quite normal."

It's good to know that with Ruby I don't have to be careful what I say and what I don't. She knows all our secrets, there's nothing I can't talk to her about. I don't know if I'll ever really be able to show her how much this means to me.

Suddenly, Ruby grabs my hand and pulls me to her bed. My stomach does a nervous somersault because for a moment I have no idea what this means. But then Ruby sits cross-legged on the bed and points to the spot next to her. A strange mixture of disappointment and relief spreads through me, and I sit down next to her.

"How are you doing with the Oxford acceptance?" she finally asks.

The warmth inside me is replaced by icy cold. Startled, I look at Ruby.

"Okay, that would probably be the answer," she says and gives me an understanding smile.

"You know how I feel about Oxford."

"That sounds like you have a relationship with the university."

I raise an eyebrow. "Says just the right one. Don't think I didn't see the hearts you drew on the printed pledge," I say, pointing to the bulletin board above the desk.

Ruby looks at me in surprise. Then she smiles. "Yes, good. Caught. You still didn't answer the question correctly."

I think for a moment. "I'm glad if you're happy about the acceptance. You're just happy for both of us," I say as diplomatically as possible.

Ruby rolls her eyes. Before I can react, she grabbed one of her pillows and put one on me. At first I just blink perplexed, the next I drive around to Ruby. "Lydia does that all the time, too. I can't defend myself with her for fear of breaking something. But with you—" In a flash, I grab a pillow and throw it at Ruby. "It's different with you."

She reacts faster than I thought possible. She grabs the pillow I threw at her and hits me twice with it. When she wants to try a third time, I grasp her wrist and hold her tight.

Ruby's cheeks are flushed, her breathing is quicker, and her hair is disheveled. Everything in me longs to bend over to her and kiss her again.

Without further ado, I let them go. I clear my throat and take a step back again.

"Will you accept the acceptance?" Ruby asks after a while.

I nod once. "Yes. I don't need to ask you, do I?"

I risk a glance at her as the heat that has crept up my throat has subsided a little. Ruby looks at me warmly, and even though she is obviously holding back, the sparkle in her eyes clearly shows me how happy she is.

"Of course I accept it." She hesitates. "However, I'm worried about what will happen if I don't get a scholarship. I've already gathered all kinds of information about funding opportunities, but an incredible number of students apply for the programs every year – I have no idea what my chances are. I can't afford to study without it." It almost hurts to see how joy gradually disappears from their eyes and is replaced by fear. "And then I don't know what to do."

"I'm sure your chances are good," I say confidently.

"I'm definitely going to fight for it until the end," she says determinedly, and at this moment I have no doubt that Ruby can do anything she sets her mind to.

"Mum has always been committed to ensuring that Beaufort supports various projects throughout the year. There are certainly scholarships among them. I can ask around if you like," I suggest cautiously. I'm not sure if I'm crossing a line with this. Hopefully not.

Ruby hesitates for a moment, but I'm relieved to see that she looks more thoughtful and not like she thinks the suggestion is outrageous.

"That would be nice," she says finally. "What's the situation like at home?"

Her gaze softened when I told her about my mum, so her sudden change of subject doesn't surprise me.

I think for a moment. "It's all right with Lydia, and my dad... is my dad. I don't see him much, and we haven't spoken much since December."

"That doesn't sound so good," Ruby murmurs.

Now I shrug my shoulders. "It's better that way. I'm still so angry with him. The fact that he didn't tell us what happened to Mum is something Lydia and I won't forget for the rest of our lives."

"I've never fought before, but I think I would have attacked him too."

I almost have to grin at the introduction. Unfortunately, the impulse quickly passes. "I'm annoyed by the way he treats Lydia," I say seriously. "Especially now that she has to deal with so many things at once."

"What is he doing?" she asks, frowning.

"He always makes her feel stupid, which upsets me like hell. He didn't even really notice that it was also taken at Oxford."

Ruby twists the corners of her mouth disapprovingly. "Everything you tell me about him makes me furious. No wonder you're happy when he's not at home."

Normally I hate such conversations. I usually distract from the topic or dodge, but with Ruby it feels quite normal to sit on the bed and talk about my family problems.

I think I could get used to this.

"What do you think?" Ruby asks suddenly.

I can only shake my head. There's a lump in my throat that won't go away, no matter how many times I try to clear my voice.

"James?" Ruby sounds insecure.

"I'm just glad to be here," I croak.

In the next moment, Ruby slides a little closer to me. She puts her hand on mine, and I interlace our fingers.

"I'm glad you're here, too," she whispers, and my whole body is flooded with warmth.

"I'm not going to leave anytime soon," I explain, looking at our hands. "Be prepared for it."

Ruby

James and I have about ten minutes left undisturbed before Ember knocks on the door excessively loudly and brings us cookies from downstairs with which Mum sent them upstairs. James jumps up from the bed as if a tarantula had stung him. When she disappears again, my sister leaves the door wide open with a meaningful look, whereupon I just roll my eyes. James and I just talked and didn't attack each other naked.

If Mum thinks that in all seriousness, then ... I don't know what to think of it.

James, who remains undecided in the middle of the room after Ember's departure, points to the books on my desk. "By when do you have to have

worked through them?" he asks.

I sigh. "Actually, I should have read almost all of it already. I'm totally behind because of the gala."

"Okay," James murmurs, holding up *The Utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill*. "This is just over a hundred pages, and I've already read it. We could go through it together, if you like."

I blink. "You want to do school stuff with me?"

"Sure," he says, pointing to the desk. "Do you have a second chair?"

I am so perplexed that I am at a loss for words for a moment.

Finally, I nod and slide off the bed. "I'll be right back. Don't move from the spot."

I sprint into Ember's room. She sits on the floor in front of her bed, her back leaning against the frame and her laptop on her lap. When she sees me, a meaningful grin comes to her lips, and she pulls the headphones off her head.

"Naaa?" she asks at length. Apparently, she has mentally finished with our discussion from the morning – or is simply too curious to give me the cold shoulder at this moment.

"Can I borrow your chair?" I ask.

Ember's grin gets even wider. "Of course you can borrow my chair."

I ignore her lewd tone and push the desk chair into my room. James has taken a seat in front of my table in the meantime, *utilitarianism* lies open in front of him.

"Are you sure you want to work through reading with me?" I ask as I sit down next to him.

He looks up, and a small smile spreads on his lips. "I want to do everything you let me do with you, Ruby." Almost at the moment when the words have left his mouth, he grimaces. "That . . . came out the wrong way somehow."

A blush spreads across James' face, and my cheeks warm too. I avert my gaze and turn to the first page of the book, then clear my throat. "Do you need a notepad?"

James next to me nods immediately. "Yes. Thank you."

And for the next two hours, we're actually going through *Utilitarianism* together. Although I find it difficult to concentrate at first – partly because James is sitting next to me, and partly because my thoughts are raging in my head – after a while I understand the theory and begin to form my own

opinion on the subject. James and I discuss each other's theses, and once again I notice how damn intelligent he is. Even if he doesn't feel like Oxford, I think when he starts his studies, he'll show everyone.

When we're done and I've marked one last keyword in my new booklet in color, I lean back with a sigh.

"And now?" asks James.

I frown. "What do you mean?"

"Well. When I've stuffed my head like that, I always have to distract myself with something before I can continue," he explains.

"What do you do then?" I ask curiously. How strange that I know James' darkest secrets, but know next to nothing about what his everyday life is like.

"Sport mostly." James shrugs his shoulders. "Sometimes I also watch videos of travel bloggers."

When I don't reply, he looks at me with raised eyebrows.

I hesitate for a moment. "Yes, yes. But it's really strange. You mustn't think me funny."

The corners of James' mouth twitch. "I'm so excited to see what's coming next."

"You've got to promise me, James."

James raises two fingers in honor and nods.

Finally, I reach for my laptop and open the favorites bar in the browser. I go to my relaxation folder and click on the first saved video there.

A blonde girl appears on the screen, whispering a greeting. The video starts with her opening a package and slowly stroking the paper in which the individual objects are wrapped. I risk a sideways glance at James, as I know the video by heart anyway. He looks at the screen and then at me. "What the hell is that? Why does she speak so softly?" His gaze twitches back again. In the video, the girl is scratching over a sponge with her long nails. "Why does she do that?"

"That's an ASMR video."

James' face is one big question mark.

"It's such an Internet phenomenon," I explain. "I really have no idea how to describe it. These are videos in which people speak quietly and make certain noises such as crackling or rustling."

"But why?" It's almost a bit cute how confused he is. I've never seen him like this before.

"That's supposed to calm down," I explain. "My brain reacts totally to it."

"That means you're watching this to relax?" he asks with a skeptical look.

I nod. "It gives me a kind of goosebumps on my head. Sometimes I watch it to fall asleep."

James grins. "I think you have to really get involved in it for it to work. Right now I think it's way too crazy to get goosebumps. It's... a little strange, really."

"There are hundreds of videos on this," I say and click on the next favorite in my list. Now a doctor appears on the screen, quietly instructing a patient to raise his arm and close his eyes.

It doesn't take long for a tingling sensation to spread across my scalp.

James shakes his head. "It's so fascinating. In a very twisted way."

"Watch one tonight before you go to sleep. And then you tell me if it worked," I say with a knowing grin.

"It would be cool if that worked out. I've been sleeping lousy for weeks."

The grin slips off my face. Actually, I don't want to kill the mood, but when he says something like that, I just can't get over it. I have to ask the question, even if it is sad.

"Is it because of your mum?" I ask cautiously.

James holds his breath. For a moment he is completely motionless, then he exhales audibly and finally nods. "Yes. I... dream of her sometimes."

"Would you like to talk about it?"

The doctor is still doing his examinations in the video, and I press the space bar to pause the video.

James is silent for a while, as if searching for the right words. Again I carefully reach for his hand, as I did before we were interrupted by Ember. James turns his palm upwards so that we can interlace our fingers.

"I didn't think it would feel like this," he finally begins.

"What do you mean?" I ask quietly.

He swallows hard. "Without my mum."

I squeeze his hand to encourage him to continue speaking. And he does.

James begins to tell me about the last two months. At first haltingly, then a little more fluently, until he finds himself in a real flow of speech. He tells me about the feelings of guilt towards his mother because he feels that he is grieving falsely. About the fear for Lydia, who accompanies him every day when he wakes up and goes to bed. Of the meetings at Beaufort, where it feels to him as if his soul is separated from his body and as if he is looking at everything as an outsider. He tells me that his father forbade him and Lydia to visit their aunt Ophelia. That Lydia urgently needs to look for a midwife, but is afraid that her secret could be exposed. And that he is sorry to have neglected his friends in recent months.

We sit in my room all day and talk. Not only about James' family, but about all kinds of things. School, Ember's blog, my conversation with Alice Campbell the night before, which I couldn't really process yet.

Shortly after five, Dad calls me on my cell phone. He prefers this method instead of yelling like Mum or sending Ember to my room.

"The meal is ready," I say.

Hand in hand we go to the door. Just as I'm about to open it, James pulls me back again. He hugs me and hugs me briefly.

"Thank you," he murmurs close to my ear.

I don't need to ask for what.

James

Mr Bells Bolognese fantastic.

The spaghetti is al dente, and the interplay of various herbs, tomatoes, garlic and a hint of red wine in the sauce tastes so good that I can't do anything about the pleasurable moans that come over my lips.

When I swallow my first bite, there are four pairs of eyes on top of me, and Ruby's entire family is looking at me. Especially Mr. Bell's look makes me nervous. Ever since I laid the cutlery the wrong way around while setting the table, he has been watching me with squinted eyes, as if he was just waiting for the next mistake from me, which shows him that I am not good enough for his daughter. I actually know exactly how to lay out cutlery correctly. At home, we sometimes have business dinners where three different sets of cutlery are on the tables. The fact that I didn't get it right earlier is certainly not because I'm stupid, but simply because of the excitement.

I clear my throat, sit up straight, and say with complete conviction, "This is the best Bolognese I've ever eaten."

Ruby's mother smiles at me. Ember mumbles something that sounds like "Schleimer" behind closed doors. At least Mr. Bell's face looks a bit friendlier afterwards. Now I can also see that Ruby and Ember have clearly inherited their eyes from him, and not only the color, but also the intensity that lies in their looks.

"James," says Mrs. Bell—Helen, as I correct myself in my mind—as I've just shoved another bite of pasta into my mouth. "Do you already know what you're going to do after school?"

I stiffen automatically. But then I see Ruby's expectant look, and he reminds me that these people are Ruby's family and I don't have to pretend to them.

"I've got a commitment from Oxford," I answer hesitantly, without the usual harshness in my voice. "And I am already a partner in Beaufort."

"Have you always wanted to do this?" Helen asks.

Ok. Maybe I don't have to pretend to them, but I also can't expose my entire inner life in front of these almost strangers. That just doesn't work. Slowly I chew the pasta and pretend to think so as not to have to answer immediately.

"Ruby knew so early on that she wanted to go to Oxford. Sometimes I wonder if that's what all Maxton Hall students look like," she adds, smiling at her daughter, who sits to my left, shifting restlessly back and forth in her chair.

I swallow and drink a sip of water. "Not everyone is like Ruby, I can assure you."

"What do you mean?" asks Ruby indignantly.

"I don't know anyone who has wanted Oxford as much as you do. My friends and I have been working towards this too, but I'm sure no one has worked as hard as you have." I think for a moment if this sounds too much like I'm trying to ingratiate myself with her family by praising Ruby in front of everyone. "But it may also be that I'm a bit biased."

Then everyone at the table laughs. Apparently, they thought it was really funny. I frown. Everything I said was meant to be absolutely honest. I didn't think they would laugh at it. An unfamiliar feeling spreads through my stomach, and I take another forkful of pasta to suppress it.

After dinner, I help clear the table. I would never do something like that at home – we have staff for that – but here everyone pitches in as a matter of course, so I don't hesitate for a second.

Besides, I really want Ruby's parents to like me.

I can understand that they are skeptical about me. I would be the same if I were in her place.

"Will you two come into the living room for a moment?" asks Helen when we're done. "Or do you have to go home, James?"

I shake my head. "No. No, I don't have to go home."

"If they ask you questions you don't want to answer, just don't say anything," Ruby whispers in my ear as we follow her mother out of the kitchen at a distance. "I'm sorry it was so unpleasant."

"Everything is okay," I reply just as quietly. "Don't worry. I like your parents. And Ember anyway."

This brings a smile to Ruby's lips. I would have liked to take her hand or touch her in some other way, but at this moment we enter the living

room, where the rest of the family has already made themselves comfortable.

I notice how spacious the room seems and how minimalist it is. Unlike Rubys, it is not crowded, but open with a lot of free space. I understand why this has to be the case as Mr. Bell maneuvers his wheelchair back and forth until it is parallel to the sofa. Then he takes a kind of remote control in his hand, and suddenly the sofa is lifted until it is the same height as the seat of the wheelchair. Mr Bell slides from one seat to the other. When he sees that I am watching him, I hastily want to avert my gaze at first, but resist the impulse. He shouldn't think that I find it unpleasant to see him like that – after all, it's a normal thing for him. So I hold his gaze and point to the sofa, which begins to lower again.

"I've never seen anything like it," I say honestly. "Is it built into the sofa, or...?"

Mr. Bell nods. If he is surprised by my question, he does not show it. "More precisely, under the sofa."

Ember drops down next to her father. She leans against his shoulder for a moment, and suddenly a loving expression spreads across his face, softening his entire facial expression. This is probably what a father looks like who does not see his child merely as a business partner whom he can instrumentalize for his own purposes.

"Sit down," says Helen. Undecided, I turn to Ruby, who takes the decision from me and points to the armchair opposite the sofa. She herself sits down next to Ember.

"Have you ever played Jenga, James?" Ember asks abruptly as her mum places a game in the middle of the living room table that looks like it's made entirely of wooden blocks. I eye it skeptically and shake my head. "No."

Ember's mouth opens briefly. "Okay. That's—" She clears her throat. "I don't know what to think of it."

I raise my shoulders. "Sorry."

"That's not bad," Ruby jumps in and gives Ember a look that clearly says that she should keep quiet now.

"Exactly," Helen agrees. "It's child's play."

Mr. Bell snorts. "You say that because you always win."

"Such nonsense." She smiles confidently at me and points to the tower she has just built from the wooden blocks. "We have to take turns pulling a

stone from this tower and then putting it back on top. You may only use one hand at a time to pull, and there must be at least one piece of wood in each row."

I nod once. "Understood."

"And the great thing is," she continues, looking at her husband, "there are always several winners and only one loser."

"That's not true," Ruby interrupts. "If you add up the last eighteen years, we're all losers, because Mum never knocks over the tower."

In response, Helen merely smiles to herself, and at that moment I realize that I must not be deceived by her warm nature, but must be wary of her.

The game begins. I'm right after Helen and pull out a small block of wood from the side. After me comes Mr. Bell, then Ember and finally Ruby. As soon as it's my turn for the second time, the tower collapses. Startled, I flinch back as blocks of wood fall in all directions. "Damn," I murmur.

"No offense, James, but you're really bad," says Ember.

"He just needs a little practice." Ruby sounds much more confident than I feel.

In the next round I hold out better, but this time I'm the one who makes the tower fall. And also in the round that followed. At least Ember and Mr Bell seem to be happy about it, so that's okay with me. Round four is already going better. I've tried copying Helen's technique, and in fact, the trick seems to be to use only the fingertips and not the whole hand. After that, I take my time, even though I can feel everyone's eyes on me. I try hard to pull the blocks out as slowly as possible, and this time it works really well.

In the end, the tower is so wobbly that Ruby shakes her head in despair when it's her turn. With slightly reddened cheeks and a concentrated gaze, she leans forward and pulls out a block of wood. The tower sways back and forth as she leans back, and we all wait spellbound. When the swaying becomes less and he finally stops, I breathe a sigh of relief. Ruby hears it and looks over the tower at me. I will never forget the smile that spreads on her face. Really, never. It fills my whole body, and for a moment I'm so caught up in the sight of her that I don't even realize how Helen stretches out her hand and...

With a crash, the tower collapses. Ember jumps up with a triumphant scream and points her finger at her mother. "Ha!"

"James made Mum lose," Ruby shouts, clapping her hands.

Mr. Bell also laughs quietly and looks at his wife full of amusement.

"I think we'll have to check that again now," says Helen, looking at me. Then she nods in the direction of the collapsed wooden blocks. "Help me set it up, James."

This family fascinates me. Her enthusiasm is contagious and makes me feel more carefree than I have in a long time.

"Gladly, Helen," I answer much too late, and rise to rebuild the tower. Block by block, piece by piece. Just like the one with Ruby and me. And everything else.

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Ruby

I've never been as excited before a Monday as I am today. The ride on the school bus seems twice as long as usual, and although I usually enjoy it, I'm far too jittery for it this morning. As we walk the last few meters to school and the bus finally comes to a stop, I remind myself to pull myself together.

This is a normal school day.

Everything is as usual.

Shift down a gear, pulse.

I'm the last one to leave the bus. And as I descend the stairs, I see him.

James leans against the fence at the sports field, directly opposite the bus stop. The smile with which he looks at me seems almost shy, even if there is nothing about his posture that gives that impression. I remember the morning more than three months ago when he also surprised me so much. At that time we had been at a party at Cyril's, and he had wanted to isolate me from our curious classmates so that they wouldn't ask me too many stupid questions.

This time he doesn't wait until I'm with him, but comes to meet me. His smile doesn't slip – on the contrary. Yesterday evening I noticed how often and genuinely he smiled when he played with my family. I can hardly believe that this is the same boy who lay crying in my arms in December. It feels good to see him like this.

"Hi," I greet him and flatten my bangs. It's windy, and I'm afraid my hair is sticking out in all directions. James still looks at me like I'm the best thing that ever happened to him.

"Good morning." He raises his hand and brushes one of the stray strands behind my ear. He stands so close to me that I can smell him. So familiar. Warm. A bit like honey. At some point I have to ask him which perfume he uses.

"Do we want to?" he asks with a nod in the direction of the main entrance.

My heart leaps. It all feels exciting and new – although he has already picked me up and taken me to the classroom.

"Yes," I say, wondering for a moment if I can reach for his hand. I don't know if we're there yet. Whether I'm allowed to do that – and how it might affect the others. James takes the decision from me and clasps my hand in his. A tingling sensation spreads from my fingers throughout my body.

"Is that okay?" he asks.

"More than okay," I reply, squeezing his hand.

Then we walk together towards Boyd Hall. On the way there, I hardly meet any people I know – but they all know James. And each of them seems to be interested in the fact that they are holding my hand. I hear a few of them whispering, some heads turning in our direction as they pass by. For a moment I am uncertain and feel a queasy feeling in my stomach. I give James a sideways glance – and the feeling fades a bit.

Because James looks like it's the most normal thing in the world to walk across the schoolyard with me holding hands.

"By the way, I want to invite you on a date," he whispers to me just before we enter Boyd Hall.

I suppress the smile that wants to spread across my face. Feigned, unimpressed, I raise an eyebrow. "Oh, yes?"

James nods. "Mhm. Next Saturday. If you have time."

I pretend to think, and James starts to smile. "You're keeping me in suspense, Ruby Bell."

Now I allow the smile.

"I'd love to go out with you, James Beaufort," I say, looking him in the eye so he knows how serious I am about what I'm saying.

As we walk through the front door of the hall, he whispers to me, "I was hoping you'd say that."

After the assembly, James takes me to my classroom. We reach the door the moment Alistair, Cyril and Wren enter the hallway behind us. Wren takes a look at our intertwined hands, turns around and disappears into one of the rooms. I feel James stiffen and automatically want to let go of his hand, but he continues to hold mine.

"Tomorrow, you two," Alistair says, giving me a minimal smile.

Cyril gives me a curt nod. I nod back just as curtly. I haven't forgotten what he said to me in December and how much his words hurt me. If James

is friends with him, that's his business. But that doesn't mean I have to like him.

"Tomorrow," James replies, his tone calm and without any emotion.

"Does that mean you're not so obnoxious anymore?" asks Alistair, looking at our clasped hands.

James raises his free hand and shows his friend the middle finger. Then he turns to me. "I'll see you later."

It sounds more like a question than a statement, so I nod.

"See you later," he murmurs and strokes the back of my hand once with his thumb. The small touch sends a tingling sensation through my entire body.

"See you later."

He lets go of my hand and begins to walk towards the room where he and his friends are about to have lessons. Cyril and Alistair follow him, and I look after them until James glances over his shoulder and smiles at me. I was supposed to go to my own classroom, but I'm frozen to the ground.

When I think back to our beginnings, I can't believe that we've arrived here by now: holding hands at school, in front of all the Maxton Hall students.

But it feels good.

And not only that: it feels right.

"It doesn't matter where I've gone today," Lin says in the afternoon, dropping down next to me on one of the chairs we've set up in a small circle for the last quarter of an hour. "There was no other topic of conversation but you and James."

I take a quick look at the door, but it's still closed. Apart from us, there is no one in the group room. "Really?"

Lin nods. "Yes. When I got myself a coffee during the break, about everyone in the cafeteria was talking about it."

I feel a slight hint of unease at her words, but I decide not to let them worry me. It was clear to me that I could finally forget my invisibility cloak when I walked through school holding hands with James Beaufort. So much has changed since the beginning of the school year anyway that I don't care whether people know me or talk about me. At least almost.

"I'm bursting with curiosity, by the way," Lin adds.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you," I say. "But I don't really know what happened myself. He came to my house yesterday, and—" I allow myself a small smile. "It was great."

"Have you spoken to each other? Above all?"

I nod. "Yes. It was really hard. And I don't think we can pretend that nothing happened. But—" I breathe in and out slowly. "Nevertheless, I somehow have hope that we can do it."

Between me and James, everything is far from being okay again. Too much has happened for that, and I'm still too afraid that he could hurt me again. But yesterday I just felt happy – and I want to hold on to this feeling as long as I can.

Lin sighs. "That sounds good. I'm honestly happy for you, Ruby."

Her wistful tone makes me pause. Then I remember that Lin went to the pub with the others on Friday night to confront Cyril. At the moment I have a guilty conscience. Because there was so much going on with me, I completely forgot to ask her about it on Saturday.

"Is there any news from you?" I ask cautiously.

Lin presses his lips together. For a moment it looks as if she wants to block the topic, but then she finally exhales jerkily. "Yes. There is news that from now on I will concentrate only on Oxford."

I look at her sympathetically. "What happened?"

She shrugs her shoulders. "Cyril gave me the pass."

I breathe in sharply. "Shit."

"It is exactly as I suspected. He's in love with Lydia," she goes on quietly. "And now he's getting his hopes up with her again."

"That's what he said?" I ask, stunned.

She nods slowly. "Pretty clearly, yes."

"I'm so sorry, Lin. If I can do anything for you—"

"No, but thank you. I think it's good that he finally told me that. Otherwise, I would probably have followed him to Oxford, and that would have ruined my start there. I just read too much into the matter."

I tentatively put a hand on her back.

"It's all right. Real. I'm kind of just relieved that I'm finally rid of this uncertainty."

I look at her indecisively for a moment, then I stroke her back briefly and let her go again. "We should have a girls' night out on Friday, what do you think?"

Lin seems indecisive, but manages to smile. "I'll let you know again, will I?"

For a while, we sit next to each other in silence and look at the tables that we have pushed to the back wall of the room to make room for our round of seats.

"Do you think the others will be happy?" Lin finally asks, her tone sounding cheerful.

"Certainly," I say. "I think we can all need a day to take a deep breath after the hustle and bustle of Friday."

Just as Lin is about to reply, the door opens, and Jessalyn and Kieran enter the room.

"What's going on here?" asks Jessalyn, irritated, looking around.

Kieran, on the other hand, just mumbles "Hi" and quickly sits down on one of the chairs. I wonder if I'm just imagining it or if he's really paler than usual today. He avoids looking at me and rummages through his bag with concentration.

I notice Lin looking at me, then at him, and then at me again, but I don't know what I can do to make this moment between us any less strange.

Fortunately, Camille and Doug also come through the door at this moment, who are also taken aback by the changed seating arrangement. The last person to walk into the room is James. He raises an eyebrow and looks around, then he walks across the circle of chairs and drops onto the chair opposite mine with a crooked smile.

Next to me, Lin clears her throat. "Ruby and I have come up with a little surprise for today," she says. I'm sure all of you know this – at some point in the school year there is this slump where everything suddenly becomes totally difficult." Murmuring approval goes through the small group. "I have the feeling that we are close to that point at the moment, especially after the chaos of last week. Unfortunately, we can't afford a real break because the spring ball is just around the corner."

"Still, we thought we could hold the meeting a little differently today," I add. "You all worked so hard, and the charity gala was a huge success. I think we all deserve to take it a little slower today."

Lin bends down and pulls out a large bag from under her chair. She opens it and brings out two large thermos flasks and several mugs. "We thought we'd hold our meeting today with coffee, tea and cake."

"Oh," Camille says, and Jessalyn next to her cheers. "How cool are you?"

While Lin hands out the drinks, I get up to get the cardboard boxes I've hidden in the corner of the room under Lin's and my jackets. "I brought muffins from my mum's bakery," I announce.

When I set it down in the middle of our small circle of chairs and lift the lid, Jessa immediately bends over the box. "Mhh. They smell wonderful."

"Help yourself."

While the others grab it, James leans over to me a bit. "But you didn't have it with you this morning."

"My mum drove her here during her lunch break," I say with a smile. "They are still very fresh."

"These are the most delicious muffins I've tried in a long time," says Camille, and next to her Doug nods in agreement.

"Where is this bakery?" she asks. "My mum has been looking for weeks for someone who can make the cake for her birthday. Maybe she should take a look around."

"In Gormsey," I answer. "It's quite small, but everything they make there is just delicious and made with a lot of love. I will gladly give you the card."

"That would be great," Camille says, and I'm surprised at how honest her words sound. Even during the last meetings, I noticed that something had changed about her. She has contributed more than usual and no longer gives the impression that she finds everything and everyone in this room unbearable. I wonder what the trigger was.

"That was really a great idea of yours," says Jessa. "Last week was just stressful. Apart from all the organizational stuff for the gala, I also had a presentation in English."

"And how did it go?" asks Lin.

"I totally screwed up. In between, I lost the thread so much that at some point nothing made sense anymore."

"I know that," says Kieran. "I also had a total blackout the other day. My head was swept empty."

"What was your report about?"

"About the Cold War." Kieran twists the corners of his mouth sullenly. "And yours?"

"A Midsummer Night's Dream by Shakespeare."

"You poor thing," says Camille. "I hate Shakespeare."

Jessa shrugs her shoulders. "The play wasn't so bad, I thought. By the way, I also watched the film and thought that would actually be a really good motto for the spring ball."

I pause with the muffin in front of my mouth. "That would be a great motto," I say slowly, turning my head to Lin.

"Yes..." She looks like she's thinking. "We have obtained several offers from decoration companies for the Halloween celebration in October. One had a kind of magic forest on offer. With fake trees and spotlights, a fog machine and so on."

"Were those the ones with the wooden swing on which you can have your picture taken?"

"Yes, exactly."

"I could really imagine that," says Jessa, while Camille sighs.

"That sounds really nice. What would be the dress code?"

"Everyone could dress up as elves," Doug immediately asks.

For a second we pause and stare at him. Who would have thought that the taciturn Doug would have a fondness for the fairy people?

"Yes," I say, but quickly add, "Or maybe just dresses with floral patterns for the women and black-tie with pastel shirts for the men?"

Jessa nods. "Perfect."

Lin and I exchange a look. Have we just decided on the motto for our next event by chance?

"What's our budget?" asks Kieran, frowning slightly. For the first time this afternoon, he looks directly at me.

"That's true, but we didn't have to pay the decoration company for the charity gala."

Opposite me, James snorts contemptuously. Obviously, the topic is a sore point with him. I don't know why, but somehow I think it's cute.

"So with the money that Lexington has promised us, we have a generous budget. That should be enough."

"Well, I'd be there," says Camille. "And you?"

"To be on the safe side, do we want to vote again?" suggests Lin. "Everyone who is in favor of the motto 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' raises the cups."

Not a single cup stays down.

When I look into the relaxed faces of my team members, a warm feeling spreads through me. I don't know why, but it seems to me that we have grown together quite a bit in the last half hour.

James

The week flies by, and it's the best five days I've ever experienced at Maxton Hall. Ruby and I spend as much time together as possible, which is not easy with our schedules, but in the end it works better than we both would have thought.

I pick her up from the bus every morning and accompany her to her classroom. That is, on Wednesday Ruby insists on accompanying me to my classroom, which is in the East Wing on this day of all days and leads to her having to sprint across the school to sit in her own seat in time for the first lesson. Our free hours overlap twice, and we spend them together in the library, where I try to concentrate on the material we have to learn, despite Ruby's hand in mine. On Thursday we manage to meet in the cafeteria for dinner, and I have the feeling that Lin is anything but enthusiastic about my presence. In the meantime, I'm afraid she might ram her spoon into my eye, but she seems to have a good grip on herself.

For the first time since my mum's death, not everything seems hopeless to me. It feels like a huge burden has been lifted off my shoulders, even though I could do without the gossip and the unashamedly curious looks of my classmates.

My boys, however, are more suspicious of Ruby than ever, and the mood remains tense after the Wren affair. On Friday evening, Alistair invites us to his home, a clear attempt to smooth the waters between all of us. Although I would have liked to spend the evening with Ruby, I know that I urgently need to talk to Wren. Apart from the fact that we haven't exchanged a word since last Saturday and I want to bury our argument, I also want to know what's going on at his house. And how I can help him.

Unfortunately, Alistair's brother Frederick invited himself to our little party and has been talking to me for half an hour without interruption. He is the twenty-two-year-old model son of the Ellingtons: engaged, a student at Oxford and – unlike Elaine and Alistair – willing to cultivate the family traditions. We all can't stand him, which is primarily due to the fact that

Frederick is idolized by his parents, while at the same time they pretend that Alistair doesn't exist.

"Is it true that you've already joined Beaufort?" asks Frederick, waving his half-full glass of whiskey in his hand.

"Yep," I reply without looking at him. I pull out my phone and see that I have a message from Ruby.

JAMES! Alice Campbell invited me to her office in London!

I feel Frederick's curious gaze on me and suppress the grin that wants to fight its way onto my face.

How did that happen?

"And how is it?" asks Frederick, who has apparently overlooked my clear indication that I don't want to face his Inquisition.

"Exciting," I mutter my standard answer as I wait for Ruby's answer. "A great honour."

I can hear Cyril snorting, although he tries to muffle the sound with his hand. He has understood the real meaning of my answer – please shut up – in contrast to Frederick, who presses again.

"Now have a little chat, Beaufort!"

At that moment, my iPhone lights up. Ruby sent me a screenshot of Alice's email. Directly above it is written:

Ahhh!

Dear Ruby, I found our conversation last Saturday at the gala very inspiring. If you are in London in the near future, I would be happy to see you in my office. Sincerely, Alice

My answer almost types itself.

When do we leave?

Suddenly, Frederick bumps into my shoulder. I turn my head in his direction and look at him with a raised eyebrow. He notices his mistake immediately and takes a step back. Then he clears his throat. "I mean, the

two of us are the only ones in this room who have something to show for it and have already achieved something in our lives. We have to stick together." He laughs as if he had said something particularly funny.

None of us agrees.

"There's only dirt coming out of your mouth, Frederick," Kesh speaks quietly.

Frederick gasps indignantly.

"Leave it alone, Kesh." Alistair's voice is monotonous. If his brother is there, I don't know him any different. Then he is cold and distant – the complete opposite of the Alistair we usually spend time with. If he had known that Frederick was coming home for the weekend, he would never have invited us to his place, but instead tried to stay with one of us.

"What have you accomplished?" asks Kesh, his voice so deep and so calm that an ice-cold shiver runs down my spine. "You were taken at Oxford—congratulations. And you're engaged – double congratulations. But that doesn't make you a high-flyer, but a useless doll that has no backbone." Slowly, Keshav takes a sip from the highball glass, without taking his dark brown eyes from Frederick for a moment.

"If you had even a shred of decency, you wouldn't say that," Frederick contradicts in a sharp voice. He tries to look bored, but I can see one eyelid twitching nervously.

"You don't have to tell me anything about decency. Unlike you, I know that you don't treat your family like scum. That you don't stand by your brother's side tells me everything I need to know about you, you wretch—"

"Keshav, damn it, shut up!" Alistair jumps up with clenched fists. He is bright red in the face.

"You have great friends there, Alistair. Mum and Dad have every reason to be proud of you," says Frederick, pulling his phone out of his pocket. He rises. "If you'll excuse me, please. My fiancée."

We can still hear him answering and greeting his girlfriend with a cheesy pet name before he rushes out of the salon and leaves us behind.

"What the hell is that, man?" hisses Alistair, still stock-stiff and clenched fists.

"He acted like an asshole," Kesh replies.

"And? If your family says something stupid to you – do I interfere? No!"

"That's because my family would never treat me the way yours does. Just be glad that I'm behind you."

Alistair snorts contemptuously. "You only stand behind me when it suits you. I can do without that, you damned hypocrite."

Kesh flinches as if Alistair had hit him. His gaze twitches briefly to Wren, Cyril and me, then back to Alistair. Frowning, I look back and forth between the two, but before I can interpret the situation or even get the chance to do so, Alistair turns around and disappears through the same door through which Frederick rushed.

"What the..." Wren begins, but at that moment Keshav also starts moving and runs after Alistair. The door slams loudly into the lock behind him.

»... Executioner was that?"

Wren, Cyril and I exchange a perplexed look.

Then Cyril moans and lets his head sink against the back of the chair. "That's not how I imagined the evening." He taps away on his cell phone and turns up the volume of music in the salon.

"I hope they don't kill themselves," I say after a while.

Cyril shakes his head with a grin. "I don't think so. And if I did, I'd bet on Alistair."

I hardly listen and still look at the door through which the two have just disappeared. I've never seen Alistair and Kesh arguing as intensely as I have just now.

When Alistair confessed his homosexuality and his parents treated him like a leper, he spent a lot of time with each of us because he couldn't stand it at home anymore. That has brought us all closer together, but Alistair and Kesh in particular. Kesh's parents are open and warm, and they have taken Alistair in like another son.

"Something is wrong with the two of them," Wren notes.

"I've noticed that too."

Wren raises an eyebrow, and for a brief moment it looks like he wants to say something, but then he holds back and takes a big sip of his whiskey Coke instead.

I sigh. "Wren," I begin.

He returns my gaze cautiously.

"I really haven't been a good friend in the last few weeks," I say. "I'm really sorry that I only cared about my own shit and wasn't there for you."

"You had reason to occupy yourself with yourself," Wren replies quietly. He exhales audibly. "Your mum died. I misbehaved. I'm sorry."

"I should have noticed that something was going on with you."

Wren shrugs his shoulders.

"Now, for example, would be a good time to tell me," I say. "That's why I came here tonight."

Wren seems indecisive. He looks at me over the rim of his glass. Then he closes his eyes for a moment, as if he had to summon his courage first.

"We... We're moving."

I lean a little towards him. Did I just misunderstand him? "What?"

"My parents have lost their fortune. Last week we found a buyer for the house. In March, we'll move into a semi-detached house."

I stare at Wren. The words repeat themselves in my head, but they don't make sense.

"Why the hell didn't you tell us about it?" asks Cyril. He gets up from his chair, comes over to us and drops down on the sofa next to Wren. "We could have helped."

That pulls me out of my state of shock. "Cy is right," I say. "There would certainly have been a way to keep the house."

Cyril nods. "My parents would have bought it immediately and let you continue to live there."

Wren raises his hands in reassurance. "You know exactly how proud my parents are. They would never accept alms. Besides, it would have been weird if your parents were our landlords," Wren says to Cyril. But he just shrugs his shoulders.

"How did that come about?" I ask.

Wren sighs and rubs his chin with his free hand. "Dad speculated on stocks. He put all his eggs in one basket – and lost."

"Fuck," I manage to say. I do not know how great the Fitzgeralds' fortune was, but I know the house in which they live, and all their holiday residences. I know which companies they have invested in. That they should actually have lost all that – and that in this short time – is inconceivable to me.

"Is there anything we can do?" I ask after a while.

Wren shrugs his shoulders indifferently. "At the moment, everything is a bit confused. And my dad... He's doing pretty badly."

"Just let us know if there's something," I say, and Cyril growls in agreement.

"There's so much going on right now that I can't keep up with the school stuff. And now I also have to think about scholarships for Oxford. I... I have no idea how I'm going to do that."

Wren buries his face in both hands, and Cyril and I exchange a look. I'm sure we think the same way. If push comes to shove, we would all pool up and give Wren a loan. Each of us would probably have given him the money without batting an eyelid, but we know him well enough to know that he would never accept it.

"You can do it. And we'll help you," I say, bumping my shoulder against Wren's. He slowly lowers his hands from his face.

"James, the Ruby—"

"It's been a long time," I interrupt.

At this moment, it's not about me or Ruby, it's about Wren carrying these worries around with him all the time without his best friend knowing about it. It shouldn't be like that, especially not with us.

Our quarrel no longer plays a role. All that matters to me now is that I want to help Wren. Even if I have no idea how.

Ruby

My heart beats up to my throat when I open the door. Percy stands in front of me and tilts his head slightly, a smile on his lips.

"Ms Bell, how nice to see you again."

"Likewise, Percy," I reply and follow him to the car, my silver clutch pressed tightly against me. James didn't want to tell me anything about our date the whole week, which is why I'm pretty much in the dark when it comes to clothing. But with Ember's help, I found an outfit that fits every occasion: a simple black dress, shoes with mini heels and the silver small bag. I put my hair half back and fixed my bangs with plenty of hairspray, in case we spend time outside and it's windy.

"We'll meet Mr. Beaufort on site," Percy explains as he opens the door for me and helps me into the Rolls-Royce. Smiling, I look up at him to thank him – but I am taken aback. Percy has dark circles under his eyes, and his skin is colorless and pale. He also looks as if his thoughts are not here, but somewhere else.

"How are you, Percy?" I ask.

"I'm fine, miss, thank you for asking," comes the mechanical answer. With a polite smile, Percy closes the door behind me and walks around the car. The partition is not raised, and I watch with a frown as he takes a seat behind the wheel. Does it just seem like that to me, or have the white strands in his hair become significantly more since Cordelia Beaufort's death?

"How long have you been working for the Beauforts?" I ask, sliding forward a bit in my seat.

"For more than twenty-five years, miss."

I nod sympathetically. "That's quite a long time."

"I drove Mrs. Beaufort when she was in her early twenties."

"What was she like?"

For a moment, Percy seems to be looking for the right words. "Fearless and courageous. She turned the company upside down during her studies,

much to the displeasure of her parents. But it was worth it." In the rear-view mirror, I see his eyes getting smaller, as if he's smiling. "She always had a feel for trends. Even when she was heavily pregnant, she still went to work and set everything in motion there. Nothing has borne the company's logo that has not been approved by her personally. You—" Percy interrupts himself. "She was a great woman," he finally ends in a hoarse voice.

A wave of compassion seizes me. Percy gives the impression that Mrs. Beaufort meant a lot to him. If I interpret the look in his eyes correctly, maybe even more than that.

"Are you really okay, Percy?" I whisper.

The chauffeur has to clear his throat. "I'll be all right sometime, miss. I just need a little time."

"Of course. If I can do anything for you—" I don't know how I could help Percy, but at this moment it feels right to offer him that.

"There is indeed something you could do for me." Our eyes meet in the rear-view mirror. "Please take good care of James."

My breath catches and I have to swallow.

"I will," I say after a short moment. "I promise."

After twenty minutes, the journey is over. While Percy parks the car, I look out of the window and look through the darkened window of the car at the façade of the restaurant in front of which we have come to a stop. The route we drove was definitely in the direction of Pemwick. Nevertheless, the surroundings do not seem familiar to me.

Percy opens the door and helps me get out. The sun is just setting and bathes the gray building in front of me in an orange-red light. The intricate lettering The Golden Cuisine is already glowing, and when Percy points to the entrance, my heart suddenly beats a little faster.

"Mr. Beaufort is waiting for you inside. Have fun, Ms Bell."

I thank Percy, then I walk nervously towards the entrance. When I step through the door, James is already waiting for me. As if by itself, a smile spreads across my face. I'm so relieved that I feel the same way with him now.

He wears a black shirt and a blue, coarsely checked Beaufort suit, which fits him like a glove. On the right breast pocket I can see the tiny monogram with his initials.

James returns my smile hesitantly and looks at me just as I do at him. My throat goes dry as his gaze slides down my body.

"You look beautiful," he murmurs.

I get goosebumps. "Thank you. So do you."

He offers me his arm and then leads me further inside the restaurant. It's full, and I can only see a single free table. I automatically assume that he belongs to us, but James goes through a side door to a staircase that leads to the upper floor.

When we reach the top, my breath catches. We are located in a glazed conservatory. In the middle of the room stands a tree with brightly colored lanterns dangling from its branches. Fairy lights are attached to the ceiling and along the windows, which give off a warm glow and give the conservatory a magical atmosphere. Only one of the small round tables is set.

James leads me to our table. He behaves like a gentleman, pulls my chair back and pushes it under my knees so that I can sit down.

While he takes a seat opposite me, I take a look through the windows. The view is breathtaking. You can still see the large fields around Pemwick, but I am sure that the green hilly landscape will be in the dark within the next half hour.

A waiter appears out of nowhere and puts a carafe of water on the table before placing the menus in front of us. I leaf through them and look up every now and then to look at James. I wonder if I'm so excited because this is my first official date with a boy – or because it's James sitting across from me and smiling at me over his glass.

I return the smile. "It's really nice here."

"I think so too. Mum sometimes went out to eat here with Lydia and me. I have many fond memories of this conservatory," he replies.

I feel so much affection for James at these words that I feel very warm. The fact that he wants to share this place with me touches me – especially because I know how difficult the relationship with his family is for him.

"Thank you for inviting me here."

Across the table, I reach for his hand and caress it gently. James' gaze darkens.

"I want to show you that spending time with me is not just a burden. But can be more."

"James—" I begin, but then the waiter comes back to our table and takes our orders. I opt for gnocchi with goat cheese, while James chooses stuffed chicken leg. After that, we are alone again, and I desperately think about how I can tie in with the conversation I just had. Sometimes I wish I was a small talk genius like Ember. She can think of an icebreaker in every situation, no matter how charged.

"By the way, I created an account on Goodreads," James says suddenly.

I listen up. "Really?"

He nods. "I want to tackle the list. The... which we did at Oxford." He clears his throat, and I can literally see the memory of that night flickering behind his eyes. "The books seemed to me to be a good first step."

"I think that's so great!" I blurt out. "What's on your reading list?"

The corners of James' mouth twitch suspiciously. Then he takes out his cell phone and opens the app. He taps around shortly afterwards and then looks up again.

"Okay, so I've read Death Note," he says.

"I saw it," I remark. "And what do you say?"

"It was brilliant. Only one thing bothered me extremely," he says seriously.

"I think I know what it is," I reply.

"That was easy... I couldn't believe it. After that, I almost broke off the series." James shrugs his shoulders. "But you were right in what you said."

I look at him questioningly.

"With the fact that you are missing an important part of general education if you haven't read it."

I pause. "Do you remember that?"

He tilts his head. "Of course I remember it. I remember everything, Ruby."

I swallow hard. "Me too," I say quietly.

There's something in James' turquoise blue eyes that I haven't seen in ages, and a desire germinates inside me, so suddenly and violently that I have to clear my throat and reach for my glass of water.

"Show me your reading list," I croak.

James blinks a few times, as if he too needs a moment to collect himself. Then he pushes his cell phone across the table to me. I look at his "read" list and am surprised at what is already listed there – some manga,

but also a whole series of classic children's and young adult books such as Harry Potter, Percy Jackson or the works of John Green and Stephen Chbosky.

"When did you read them all?" I ask him surprised.

He raises a shoulder indecisively. "Mostly at night, when I couldn't sleep. Or during breaks at school. I've been looking for something to distract myself with, and books work well. And now I've kind of gotten into the habit of reading before sleep."

"It's a great new habit." I continue scrolling through his account. "May I add a few books to your 'Want to Read' list?"

"Don't force yourself. I now also follow a few book bloggers, whose recommendations I sometimes look at.«

I shake my head with a smile. James and his blogs. He really has to sit down with Ember, I think, as I fill his list one by one.

"You're not going to stop," James remarks amusedly at some point.

"You said I shouldn't force myself."

James laughs. When the food arrives, I am surprised to find that we have been sitting here for an hour and talking without once having an unpleasant moment or desperately looking for a new topic of conversation. On the contrary, we talk to each other more openly than we have for a long time. Perhaps even like never before.

The time in the conservatory is wonderful – and over far too quickly. James says that he wants to make a good impression on my parents and therefore bring me back before midnight, which I grudgingly accept. If it had been up to me, we could have sat under the lanterns and talked forever.

Before I put on my jacket, I step back to the window on the side of the conservatory. It is now pitch dark, but the sight is still beautiful. The sky is free of clouds, and I can see stars in the firmament.

I have never experienced such a magical evening, and I really want to capture it for myself. So I take out my phone and take a picture. When I examine the result, however, I have to realize that you can't really see anything on it.

James steps behind me – so close that the hairs on my arms stand up. It is still not enough. I lean back and against him. Hesitantly, James raises an arm and wraps it around me. He hugs me while I let my head sink back. The moment is so beautiful, so intimate, that I have to close my eyes for a

moment. I listen to his breath and the music that echoes softly through the conservatory. Suddenly I have an idea.

"May I take a picture?" I ask quietly.

I can feel him nod as his strands of hair tickle my cheek. I pick up my phone and adjust the front camera.

"Smile," I tell James.

Together we smile into the camera, he with his arms around my body, behind us the tree hung with lanterns in this magical conservatory.

From now on, this picture will replace the one I stole from Instagram and secretly saved on my laptop, I decide. But the thought fades as James buries his face against my neck. He takes a deep breath and presses his lips to the crook of my neck. My breath hitches, at the same time a violent tingling runs through my body. I put my hand over his and hold it tightly, at the same time I am overcome by the insatiable desire to be even closer to him. I lean back further, almost pressing against him until I can hear him breathe in sharply.

All of a sudden, James doesn't move a bit. My own breath goes way too fast. When I squeeze his hand briefly, we don't need any more words. James turns me around to him, and in the next moment our lips find themselves as if by themselves.

James wraps both arms around me and holds me tight. My hands are on his chest, and I let them wander further down until they touch his belly, eliciting a moan from him. It sounds just as desperate as I feel. At this moment, I don't feel like there's a border between us anymore. We are simply us. Just like before and yet changed. Feeling James' lips on mine is still just as exciting as it was when we first kissed, but at the same time, I know him by now. I know this movement he makes with his tongue, the feeling of his teeth on my lower lip. As his hand slides to my butt and he pulls me even closer, I can feel his erection on my hip.

My knees are getting weak. I push myself against him until he almost stumbles backwards, kiss him more energetically, let myself be completely guided by my feelings and the hot burning inside me.

But then he suddenly tears his lips from mine. I'm still so intoxicated that I'm quite dizzy. James presses his forehead against mine, breathing heavily. His hand disappears from my butt, instead he puts it on the back of my head and strokes it gently.

"We have to stop."

It takes me a moment to understand what he just said. "Why?" I whisper.

He just shakes his head.

"Mr Beaufort?" the waiter's voice sounds suddenly.

James doesn't let me go, but only makes a hum.

"I just wanted to let you know that your driver is ready now," the waiter continues, visibly embarrassed.

James breaks away from me, and our hands find each other without my involvement. As if it were the most normal thing in the world, we leave the restaurant hand in hand, both with reddened cheeks and a murmured farewell greeting in the direction of the waiter, who no longer dares to look at us.

Outside, a gush of cold air comes towards me. Percy is already standing in front of the limousine and holds the door open for us. I thank him and get in, James close behind me. I sit down in the seat where I sat on the way there. James drops down next to me.

His eyes are dark and his lips are just as red and puffy as mine feel. I can still feel the slight throbbing in my lower lip – and not only there. I feel electrified, my whole body is electrified. I can hardly sit still, so great is the impulse to continue exactly where we left off.

The city lights of Pemwick pass us by as Percy steers the car onto the country road. The partition wall is raised, and I look up to see if the red light on the intercom is flashing.

It doesn't.

I turn my head to James, who has followed my gaze. His lips are slightly parted, and his chest rises and falls rapidly. The kiss affected him just as much as it did me, that's obvious.

"James," I whisper.

He holds his breath.

I move as if by itself. The attraction emanating from James is so all-encompassing that I can't possibly sit in this seat for twenty minutes without doing anything.

Surprise flickers in his eyes as I move closer to him.

"Kiss me, James," I whisper.

He just shakes his head, but in the same breath takes my face in his hands and presses his lips firmly to mine. We let out a sigh at the same time, and the sounds mix and vibrate in my body. The world around me is fading.

It's just James and me – no past, no future. Just us and the lights of the night rushing by.

"I've missed you," I whisper.

He makes an almost desperate-sounding sound and kisses me deeper.

I'm not prepared for what he does to me. I didn't think it could feel like this. No matter how many times James and I are together – it gets more and more overwhelming. The longing in me grows even more with each of his kisses, an insatiable desire for him and his closeness that I don't think will ever go away.

I claw my hands into his hair and pull him tighter to me. It's all happening way too fast, but I can't help it. James' hard body is pressed tightly against mine, and I need him. At this moment I need him as I have never needed anyone before.

I'm just about to say the words when James detaches himself from me a bit. He looks at me with a veiled gaze and caresses my cheek with one hand before letting his mouth wander down my neck.

"I missed you too," he murmurs at my throat. He sucks on the skin, and my breath catches. "Whenever I saw you at school, I wanted to do this."

I sigh and close my eyes. "You're welcome to do that next time. You have my permission," I manage breathlessly.

He lets out a rough laugh. "Good to know."

Slowly, James works his way down, but I want to feel his mouth on mine again, so I pull him up and hold him tight. His tongue plays around mine, and with the other hand I explore his body. All the clothes are clearly in the way, no matter how good he looks in this cursed suit. I open the first button of his shirt.

"Ruby," he interrupts me quietly.

I continue. At the third button, James grabs my wrist and holds it tightly. I raise my eyes and look into his dark eyes. James stares at me, breathing heavily.

I can see him swallowing. "You can usually undress me at any time. Real. Everywhere, as far as I'm concerned. But—" He interrupts himself and looks around the car. Then he looks at me again. "I actually wanted our next time to be something very special. And if we don't stop now, then ... then I don't know—"

I feel the heat shooting into my face. He's right. "I didn't think."

My cheeks are still hot as I begin to slowly button his shirt again. But even after I have closed the last button, I can't look him in the face again.

"Ruby," James murmurs suddenly.

I pretend to want to straighten the collar, but everything is actually in perfect order. "Mh?"

"Ruby," he repeats quietly. "Please look at me."

I breathe in and look up again. The first thing I notice is that James' face is just as red as mine feels. The second thing is the look in his eyes. He is incredibly tender. "I'm not ready yet... I think we should take it slowly."

"Because we have time," I say roughly.

"All the time in the world," confirms James.

I nod and exhale haltingly. Then I lean back in the seat with a sigh and close my eyes. For a few seconds we are silent.

At some point, James reaches for my hand. "Thank you for saying yes. On this date, I mean," he murmurs.

I squeeze his hand. "It was a nice date."

"I thought so, too."

There is something in his tone that makes me want to look at him again. His eyes sparkle boldly, and his smile is so hot that I feel disarmed for a moment.

Just two weeks ago, I would not have thought it possible that he would look at me like that again, let alone be able to experience something like this moment with him again. I would like to tell him so much more – but I can't. Not enough time has passed for that, the wounds are still too freshly healed. James seems to be serious, but the fear that he might turn away from me again is still there.

I'm trying to imagine it in a few years. More mature, more mature. More confident in his decisions, without this unpredictability that I have come to know in the past six months. What kind of person would it make of me if I only then allowed him to take a place in my life again? Do I even have the certainty that we will still be there for each other?

Whereby – who am I fooling here? For me, there will always be only James. I could never love anyone else the way I love them – in this all-engaging, devouring, passionate way.

"What are you thinking about?" he whispers suddenly, running his fingers over my skin.

Because I'm in love with you.

The fact that you're the only one for me.
Because it scares me.

"I was just thinking about the fact that we need to talk to each other more in the future. About our problems. So that not something ... Bad things happen," I answer hesitantly.

James looks at me insistently. There is a determination in his gaze that I have never seen in him before. "We can do it, Ruby."

I swallow hard. "Are you sure?"

He nods briefly. Just once. "Yes, I am."

Relief overcomes me. Hearing James say this with this certainty makes my doubts quieter.

For a while we just sit next to each other and look at our interlaced fingers. Then James leans back and grins at me.

"Best date in the world," he murmurs, raising our hands to kiss my fingers.

I nod. "I think so, too."

Suddenly, his eyes light up. "Come and visit us tomorrow evening," he says. "Me and Lydia. I know she'd be glad to see you, too."

I hesitate. "Your father—"

"Dad is in London all weekend. We could order sushi."

James seems so happy and at the same time so nervous at this moment that his excitement spreads directly to me. I have only been to his home once, and I only associate sad memories with this visit. I am ready to replace them with new – more beautiful ones.

"Sure. Tomorrow evening. I'll bring Ben & Jerry's with me."

"Perfect. Percy will pick you up." Suddenly James frowns. "Speaking of ..." He leans forward to press the button on the hands-free system. "Shouldn't we be in Gormsey by now, Percy?"

For a short moment we hear only a quiet noise. Then...

"I thought you might need a little more... Privacy, sir."

I look at James with widened eyes. He returns my gaze just as perplexed. Then I snort away.

James joins in my laughter and buries his face against my neck.

Ruby

I see Lydia's messages the moment Percy turns into the Beauforts' property.

Change of plan!

Our dad has just come home.

It's best to tell Percy to turn around.

Ruby?

She sent me the first one a good fifteen minutes ago, the last one three minutes ago, and I also have three missed calls from James on my cell phone. Panic rises in me as I stare at my phone and think about what to do. But before I even get a chance to think clearly, Percy stops the Rolls-Royce in front of the Beauforts' house.

With growing anxiety, I watch as he gets out, walks around the car and opens the door. Swallowing hard, I take the small bag in which I have stowed the three packs of Ben & Jerry's, grab the hand that Percy holds out to me, and let him help me outside. There I take a deep breath of the cool evening air and look around carefully.

Upstairs in front of the massive door I can see James and Lydia standing on the threshold and already waiting for me. James has both arms crossed in front of his chest, while Lydia waves at me briefly. I turn to Percy. "I don't know how long I can stay. Are you here a while longer?"

A small smile spreads on the chauffeur's lips. "I'm always here, Ms. Bell. Let Mr. Beaufort just let me know, and I'll drive you home." He lifts his cap slightly, then gets back into the car, presumably to drive it to the wide garages on the side of the house.

I quickly go up the stairs to the entrance.

"Hey," I whisper when the two are within earshot. "I saw the news only a minute ago. Your dad is here?"

James and Lydia nod. Although both look anything but happy, James pulls me into a short hug. "Hey," he murmurs into the crook of my neck,

and I get goosebumps all over my body.

After we have separated from each other, Lydia sighs. "Dad came home especially because he wants to have dinner with us."

"Then I'd better go again, wouldn't I?" I ask indecisively. I don't want to give them the feeling that I'm running away as soon as things get complicated. After all, James also endured a whole evening in the company of my family. But they look so unhappy about the fact that they have to spend time with their father that I don't want to complicate the situation with my presence.

James smiles at me crookedly. "I just want to spare you this torture."

At this very moment, Mortimer Beaufort appears in the hallway.

When he sees me, his eyes widen for a split second.

I stiffen.

"Ask your guest in and close the door, damn it, where do we live here?" his thunderous voice sounds. Lydia and James open their eyes wide and turn around.

We stare at each other for a second. Lydia is the first to react and gently pulls me into the house by the arm. She closes the door behind me, and then suddenly I'm only a few meters away from Mortimer Beaufort, who is looking at me from top to bottom.

I do the same. He wears a tailor-made dark blue suit, and his sand-colored hair is neatly combed to the side and fixed there with gel. It's gotten a little brighter since we last met, but the look in his eyes is unchanged – ice-cold, without a single emotion. I swallow hard. My throat feels like I've swallowed sand.

The next moment I ask myself why I allow this man to intimidate me so much. I don't care what he thinks of me, after all, I only feel anger, contempt and dislike for him – and no respect whatsoever.

So I straighten my back and meet his gaze. "Good evening, Mr. Beaufort," I say.

"Dad, I'm sure you remember Ruby," James adds.

Mr. Beaufort nods at me curtly. Then he turns to James. "The dinner is ready. Your... Girlfriend is invited."

He doesn't give me or Lydia another look before he turns around and disappears into a room at the other end of the entrance hall.

Next to me, I can hear Lydia exhale jerkily. "Oh God, Ruby," she says. "I'm so sorry about that. We wanted to have a nice evening, and now we

have to struggle with Dad. Instead of sushi, there's probably coq au vin now." She grimaces.

James' gaze is haunting as he looks at me. "You can still disappear."

"Your father has already seen me."

"It doesn't matter."

"Would you prefer me to disappear?"

James doesn't hesitate for a second. "No, of course not. The sooner Dad gets used to the idea that you belong to us, the better."

Warmth spreads through my body at his words. I grab James' arm and give him a quick squeeze. "I won't disappear. I also like coq au vin." I lift my bag. "And I've got ice cream with me."

"I'll quickly take this to the kitchen," says Lydia. "Go ahead of her."

James' hand rests on my lower back as we enter the dining room. The space is huge, with high walls and wide windows that look out onto the back of the Beaufort estate. The dark green in which the walls are painted is reflected in the covers of the chairs, and above the long dining table of shiny dark wood hangs an imposing chandelier that could easily compete with those in the ballrooms of Maxton Hall. The table is professionally set, with several sets of cutlery, pretty porcelain and wine glasses with gold accents.

But it's not just the décor and decoration that sets this dining room – if you can even call it that – from our home. First and foremost, it's the atmosphere that prevails here. It is tense and hypothermic and no comparison to the warm, relaxed atmosphere in which I grew up.

Just like back then in the tailor's shop in London, Mortimer Beaufort fills the entire room with his presence. His dismissive manner and the coldness in his gaze ensure that there is no chance of feeling even remotely comfortable. It's amazing.

I could never imagine living in the same house with this man.

We take a seat one after the other, Mr. Beaufort at the head of the table, James on his left, I right next to him and opposite us Lydia. Two kitchen assistants enter the room and place a deep plate of soup in front of each of us, from which a delicious smell emanates. I do the same as James and Lydia and spread the folded cloth napkin on my lap.

"Here's to a nice evening," says Mr. Beaufort, raising his glass.

James and Lydia murmur something in agreement, and I raise my glass as well.

This is already the most unpleasant evening I have experienced in a long time.

We spend the first ten minutes in silence. It's so quiet in the room that it seems unnaturally loud to me when I swallow or put my glass down on the table. I desperately wonder if there is anything I could say – or should say. But I can't think of anything with the best will in the world.

I dare to look at James, who gives me a small smile.

Finally, Lydia speaks up. "The charity gala went well, didn't it, Ruby? I only hear positive things."

I am relieved that she has chosen a topic that I am familiar with and can talk about. "Totally. More than two hundred thousand pounds have been raised, which has far exceeded our expectations."

"Wow," says Lydia. "Was Lexington satisfied?"

I nod. "Yes, fortunately he is usually satisfied with us."

"With a few exceptions," James murmurs.

When I turn my head to him, he smiles into his glass.

I know what he's thinking about right now. The day we sat next to each other in front of Lexington's desk and James was sentenced to the punishment work in the events committee is still as present in my memory as if it had happened only yesterday. I return his grin.

"Well, perhaps, with one exception. But that hardly had anything to do with me and my team."

"Ruby," Mr. Beaufort interrupts our conversation, and I feel the grin instantly slip off my face. "I hear you're very active at school."

"Yes. I've been on the event committee for two years."

He nods curtly. You can hardly see the emotion. "So."

"Ruby heads the events committee," says James, not looking up from his soup.

His father pays no attention to him. "And do you want to study too?"

"I'm going to Oxford in the autumn."

Mr. Beaufort looks up with interest, and for the first time that evening I have the feeling that he really notices me.

I hold my breath. Everything in me is reluctant to talk to this man about Oxford. This is something that is sacred to me, and I don't want to let it be ruined by someone who has no idea what the fact of being able to study at this university really means to me.

"Oh, really? Which course of study did you choose?"

"PPE," I reply.

"This is a solid course of study. And which college are you going to?"

"St Hilda's, sir."

He nods. "The same college that James accepted. How convenient."

I ignore his allusion. "It's a great college. The interviews there—" I fall silent. On the days during the interviews, Mrs. Beaufort died. I look at Lydia, who has paused halfway to her mouth with the spoon and is now staring into her soup, lost in thought. "I liked everything there very much, and I can't wait to finally start," I finish quickly. I can hardly imagine how painful it must be for James and Lydia to think back to that time. I risk a look at James, but he doesn't show anything and just continues to spoon his soup.

The appetizer alone takes over an hour. During the main course, Lydia and I try to make the best of the situation, talking about everything from movies and music to books and blogs. When Lydia tells her that she used to dance ballet, even Mr. Beaufort brings himself to a minimal smile. It disappears at least as quickly as it appeared, and after that I'm not sure if I was just imagining it after all.

"In *The Nutcracker*, I once had the smallest supporting role in the world, but I was so proud," Lydia recalls. She is currently cutting through her chicken, which has been finely decorated with grilled vegetables. The chef has put so much effort into arranging the plates that I almost don't dare to destroy his little work of art.

"I'd like to see photos, please."

"You don't want to," James murmurs next to me. "She was one of the little rats. The pictures are creepy."

"Why don't you tell Ruby that you also took ballet lessons back then?" Lydia teases across the table. When James gives her a scathing look, she puts a large fork in her mouth and shrugs her shoulders.

"Did you really?" I ask, surprised.

A muscle on James' jaw protrudes. "Lydia pretended it was mega hard. She whined every day. I just said she shouldn't act like that, after all, anyone could jump around in the air a bit."

"So he took part in three trial lessons," Lydia snorts. "You should have seen him. He really wasn't good."

"How long did you hold out?" I ask with a grin.

"Until Lydia promised me that she would no longer complain about the lessons at home."

"You were a really nice brother," I remark.

"You do what you can," James replies.

"Fortunately he only did that for these three hours. Otherwise, I probably would have stopped immediately and not lasted another two years," says Lydia.

"Why did you stop?" I ask.

"Lack of discipline," Mr. Beaufort replies, as if I had asked him the question and not Lydia. "My daughter generally only does things that are easy for her. As soon as she is faced with a challenge, she gives up."

An unpleasant, heavy silence settles over us like a dark cloud that thunders off at any moment.

Lydia's lips have turned into a pale line. James next to me clutches his cutlery so tightly that his knuckles stand out clearly. The only one who continues to eat in peace is Mr Beaufort. He doesn't even seem to notice that he has destroyed the mood at the table with his nasty comment.

How can you be so unresponsive to everything that happens around you? So ignorant of one's own children?

Lydia, with whom I have become friends, faces every challenge. I have the feeling that Mr. Beaufort does not know his own daughter when he speaks of her in this way.

"I'd still like to see the photos," I finally interrupt the oppressive silence in an effortlessly cheerful tone. "I'm sure you looked magical, even as a little rat." I've never had to stand as a bridge of mood between several people – at least not like I do now – and I have no idea if it's working or if I'm just making things worse. All I know is that I want to take some of the tension off James and Lydia.

"I'll show them to you after dinner," Lydia replies with a forced smile. She raises her head, and for a moment it looks as if she is looking at her father. But then I realize that she is looking past him at the huge family portrait that hangs on the wall above the old fireplace. The oil painting shows the entire Beaufort family, including Mrs. Beaufort with her fox-red hair. When it was painted, James and Lydia were maybe six, seven years old at most.

"Well," says Mr. Beaufort suddenly, dabbing his mouth with the cloth napkin and standing up. "I have a conference call today. Good evening." He

nods to us, then leaves the room.

Stunned, I look back and forth between James and Lydia, but the two of them don't seem to have been particularly surprised by their dad's abrupt departure.

"He just left," I whisper, glancing over my shoulder at the door through which Mr. Beaufort has just disappeared.

"That's normal, don't worry," Lydia explains, leaning back in her chair. With a smile, she caresses her belly. The fact that she can do this in our presence without thinking fills me with a warmth that is very welcome to me after the icy gaze of Mr. Beaufort.

"He always finds an excuse to escape unpleasant situations somehow," James notes and takes a big sip from his glass of water. "Even if he forced us to do it in the first place. I don't remember seeing him for more than two hours at a time." He snorts. "Not that I'm unhappy about it."

"I doubt he has a conference at all. Mum would never have allowed that," Lydia murmurs.

James holds his breath. After a moment, he audibly lets them escape. "If you like, you are hereby saved," he says, looking at me sideways.

I frown. "What do you mean?"

"We can end this depressing evening at this point and make up for it next week."

Lydia nods. "Yes, no one will hold it against you if you'd rather go."

Indignantly, I look back and forth between the two. "I'm not wasting this delicious food." With the fork I point first to my half-eaten chicken, then to Lydia. "Besides, I won't go until I've seen your ballet pictures."

Lydia laughs, and James shakes his head with a smile.

I devote myself to my food again and try not to let it show how much the encounter with Mortimer Beaufort has worried me.

The rest of the meal is much more relaxed, but I'm happy when we can go to Lydia's room after dessert and close the door behind us. Now we sit on her large, comfortable sofa and leaf through old photo albums.

"You were adorable," I sigh, pointing to a picture of James and Lydia embracing each other, their little chubby cheeks pressed tightly together.

"There are three of us in the picture. Look what curls I used to have," says Lydia, pointing to the small curls on her head.

"Aren't they like that anymore?" I ask.

She shakes her head and runs one hand over her ponytail. "No. Although I'm quite happy about that. Having to tame them every morning would probably drive me crazy."

"But they looked so pretty. James had no curls at all."

I look at James, who is sitting in one of the two armchairs opposite the couch, leafing through a travel magazine.

"His hair has always looked like it does now," Lydia tears me out of my thoughts.

I lean forward to take a closer look at the photo. "He used to have a serious look," I remark.

Lydia snorts and turns the page. On the next page, there is a picture of a pouting mini-James holding an empty ice cream cone in his hand.

"The ice cream fell out of his cone," Lydia explains with a grin.

"Poor baby James," I murmur and have to grin as well. When I look over at James, he just raised an eyebrow.

"Lydia, you don't have to pretend to feel sorry for you. I still have your malicious laugh in my ears," he says dryly.

"That's not true at all!"

"Oh, no? So you didn't laugh?" he replies mockingly.

"Yes, but after a short time I offered to share my ice cream with you."

"You had banana ice cream. What kind of person likes banana ice cream?"

"I don't," I interject.

James points to me. "You see."

"You've both got a screw loose," says Lydia, shaking her head and turning the pages on. In the next pictures, the twins are probably already six or seven, and now Alistair, Wren, Cyril or Keshav appear more and more often next to them.

"It's crazy that you've all known each other for so long," I say with admiration in my voice.

"Yes, isn't it? Sometimes it seems to me that we are all siblings."

I nod and look at a picture of a chubby-cheeked Alistair, whose golden blond curls stick out on all sides. Then my gaze wanders to a small version of James holding Mini-Wren in a headlock.

"Did you and Wren actually talk to each other?" I ask quietly to James.

"We talked about a few things." He hesitates. "There's a lot going on with him at the moment."

"Is it something bad?" asks Lydia immediately.

James shrugs his shoulders. "I promised him not to say anything."

Lydia frowns worriedly. I can see that she struggles with herself for a few seconds and actually wants to ask, but then she just nods. "All right. But do you think it's something that can be bent back again?"

James nods confidently. "Wren will get through it. After all, he has us."

Lydia and I exchange a skeptical look.

At the same time, I feel relief that the dispute between Wren and James seems to be buried. When James and I spoke on the phone on the night of my birthday, he confided in me how important it is to him to enjoy this last year at school with his friends. He wanted to spend it carefree and not worry about what comes after. His lightheartedness was taken away from him by the death of his mum, but that's why it's all the more important that he continues to have his friends he can count on. And vice versa.

A little later I say goodbye to Lydia, and James takes me home. That means Percy takes me home, but James gets into the Rolls-Royce with me. We are quiet as we leave the property towards Gormsey.

Even if I don't want to: It feels as if the encounter with Mortimer Beaufort lies over us like a shadow. I've seen the man three times in my life, and each time he tried to drive a wedge between James and me. I hope so much that James won't let that happen again. That what is emerging between us is stronger than his father's influence.

"What are you thinking about?" James asks suddenly, his voice deep and warm.

I look up and meet his turquoise blue gaze. A tingling sensation spreads through my stomach.

I take a deep breath. "The fact that I would like to have more weekends like this with you."

James' gaze slides back to my eyes and down again, as if he doesn't know how to defend himself.

"At the same time, I ask myself ..." I pause.

James waits and continues to look at me. "What are you wondering?" he asks after a while.

"I wonder how this is going to continue. For you," I whisper. With you and your dad, I mean. That he tells you how to live your life and lets him push you into a corner where you don't really want to be?"

James lowers his eyes and stares at the footwell of the Rolls-Royce as if there is something exciting to discover there. He takes a deep breath. Once again. Finally, he slowly shakes his head.

"It's not just about him," he begins after a while in a raspy voice. That's not my father's life's work that I'm going to take over." I swallow hard when he looks up again and looks directly at me. "I... I don't want to disappoint my mum."

I breathe in sharply.

I never thought about that. Of course, a lot has changed with the death of his mother. I believed all along that everything would be fine as long as James pursued his dreams and not his father's. But now I realize that it's no longer about that. James is not only bound to Beaufort through his father. First and foremost, it is now his mother who keeps him there.

"You won't disappoint your mum," I whisper.

"What if it does? What if I can't do it?" I recognize an emotion in his eyes that I have never seen there before: fear. It flickers in his gaze and suddenly seems to fill the entire limousine.

"I'm with you," I say. It's only four little words, but in this second I put everything I can give into these few syllables.

James looks at me for a long time. He seems to understand what else I want to say with these words. Little by little, the sheer panic disappears from his gaze and is replaced by confidence and the warmth with which he has been looking at me all evening.

The next moment, James grabs my hand. He interlaces his fingers with mine and squeezes gently.

"And I am with you. No matter what happens."

I sink back and lean my head against his shoulder.

My next breath is a little easier for me.

We will make it.

James

It's after half past two when a loud bang startles me. I jump up so fast that the e-reader slips off my bed and lands on the floor, but I don't care. Like a madman, I run across the hallway to Lydia's room. But when I tear open the door, she is just sitting in her bed and rubbing her tired eyes.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

She nods. "What was that?"

"Dad, I suppose," I reply, feeling my pulse pick up.

I don't want to go down.

I don't want to know what he's broken again.

I don't want to worry about him, damn it.

Although everything inside me is screaming that I should go back to my room, I make my way downstairs. Again something clinks. Whatever Dad does, he does it in the dining room.

Quietly I sneak through the hallway. The closer I get, the more clearly I can hear him. He mumbles something, and it sounds annoyed, as if he is talking to someone. Mary or Percy, perhaps?

Shortly before the dining room, I make a slight bend and finally press myself against the wall to the left of the door.

"Bitch," my father slurs. "You shouldn't have done that."

Frowning, I move a little closer. Who the hell is he talking to?

"I will never forgive you. Now I'm alone with them and I'm doing everything wrong, and it's your fucking fault!" He yells the last two words. I lean out of my hiding place and just see him fire a carafe full of whiskey against the family portrait above the dining table. I gasp dryly as the carafe shatters loudly, the clinking an echo in my ears. The brown liquid runs down Mum and over Lydia and me. The colors look as if they are dissolving. Mum's face melts like a melting wax figure that gradually turns into a monster. A grotesque grimace that looks down on my father from above and mocks him.

The anger at him, which is always slumbering in me, awakens to new life at this moment, and a heat runs through my veins that only he can trigger in me. I clench my hands into fists and am just about to go into the room and confront him, when suddenly he lets out another noise.

From behind I can see his shoulders shaking. He gasps for air several times, then suddenly his knees give way and he sinks to the ground. In the middle of the shards. He slaps his hands in front of his face, and then I hear it again.

My father is sobbing.

I can't move, but I'm frozen as I watch him cry. I think about all the times he made me cry. I think of the beatings and his roars, of his insults and the coldness with which he always looks at me. I think of the day of the

funeral, when he gave us instructions on how to behave. Of his silence after Mum's death.

And I realize that I don't feel the satisfaction I actually want to feel. On the contrary – my dad is suffering. What kind of person would it make me to turn around now and disappear into my room?

It's not easy for me to take the first step, but I do. I go into the dining room, being careful not to step into the shards of his outburst of rage, and stay behind him. Instinctively, I put a hand on Dad's shoulder and squeeze briefly. The sobbing ends abruptly, and he holds his breath.

Just as I am about to pull my hand away again, he reaches for it. He clings to it almost desperately, and I let him. A strange feeling comes over me. Something I haven't felt for my father for an eternity.

I look up at our picture. Dad has both hands on Lydia's shoulders while I stand in front of Mum and she holds me with both arms. Although the colors are mostly blurry, I still remember exactly what it was like back then. I still remember exactly what it felt like to be part of a family.

The feeling that is germinating in me right now is only a shadow of it, but I hold on to it.

Lydia

I have to order a dress on the internet for the first time in my life. Instead of walking down Bond Street in London and getting a taste of each of the shops at least once, I now sit on Ruby's bed and click through one online shop after another. It's fun, especially because I don't have to do it alone, but I'm already looking forward to going back to my favorite stores and touching the clothes and looking at them up close.

However, this will not be an option for me for the next few months. Most of the shopkeepers there know me, and the likelihood that they will take a look at my belly and put one and one together is far too high for me. Because then it would only be a matter of time before Dad finds out about it.

The thought sends an ice-cold shiver through my body.

No, online shopping will have to do it for the time being.

"What do you think about that?" Ruby asks, turning the laptop towards me.

I just turn up my nose. "That looks like someone slipped with scissors," I say, tracing the hem of the dress with my index finger, which is quite a bit longer at the back than at the front. "My mum would have been really upset about that cut. And about the color. And the unmotivated lace trim on the décolleté."

"Okay, okay," Ruby says laughing and closes the page. "Then we'll look here again. We only got as far as page twelve of twenty-seven."

She begins to scroll down, and together we observe how dresses in a wide variety of colors and cuts appear on the display.

"Maybe I should just avoid the spring ball," I suggest after a while.

Ruby immediately shakes her head. "It's your last spring ball, Lydia. You must come."

"I'm only slowly believing that it's impossible to find a dress in which I can hide this belly here. What if someone's penny drops?" I ask, pointing to the small ball hidden under my oversized sweatshirt.

"We'll find another dress. Don't worry." Ruby sounds much more confident than I feel.

Although Dr. Hearst told me that my belly is growing rather slowly compared to other women who are expecting twins, I already feel huge. In the last few weeks I have gotten into the habit of holding my bag in front of me at school, and I also wear all blouses two sizes larger. James let her go unnoticed from the sewing room after one of his meetings at Beaufort. For the first time, I'm happy about the fact that our school uniforms were designed by Mum and are produced in our sewing room.

I wish I could do the same with the dress for the spring ball. I already regret that I let Ruby and James persuade me to go. The dress is not even my biggest problem. First and foremost, I want to avoid having to see Graham outside of class.

But I can't tell Ruby – and certainly not James. I wouldn't be able to stand it if he looked at me with pity just one more time. Not after last Wednesday, when I pinched a nerve in my back and lay helpless like a beetle in bed. The pain was so intense that I couldn't move and had to wait until James heard my cries for help. And then he had to help me get dressed.

It was humiliating, and I would like to erase the entire morning from my mind. Forever. If I also tell him now that I can't bear to meet Graham at a party, he certainly thinks I'm completely unstable. And I don't want that.

"What about this?" asks Ruby.

I don't like this dress either. It's too young, not glamorous enough and reminds me of a uniform. "I'd really like to have a dress that doesn't make me stand out completely."

»I never thought it would be so difficult to find a dress to match A Midsummer Night's Dream. I already regret suggesting the motto."

"It's a nice motto. And a dress by Elie Saab would go perfectly with it," I sigh.

Ruby types the name into the search bar of her browser and then lets out an enthusiastic exclamation. "That would really fit perfectly. The flower appliqués look totally beautiful and ... oh God, they cost a fortune."

"Oh, well. That's not the problem. But you always have to try on a dress like this on site, and that's just not possible right now."

Apart from the fact that it would be totally exaggerated to go to a school ball like that. I'm going to save Elie Saab's dream for my wedding. Or for any wedding – because most likely all my friends will get married

before me. My love life still consists of reading old messages from Graham and bursting into tears, if possible in such a way that no one notices.

It is one big tragedy.

"We could ask Ember for help," Ruby says hesitantly. "She always finds the best things online." She gives me a cautious look. "We don't need to tell her more than she needs to know."

"Don't you think she'll figure it out on its own?" I ask cautiously.

"That could be. "Ember has a flair for secrets," Ruby muses. But even if she finds out, I hope you know she would never say anything."

I take a deep breath. In the last weeks and months, Ruby has proven to me that she is a good friend. Maybe even the best I've ever had. I can't imagine that she would betray me. And if she trusts her sister, so can I.

"If you think Ember can solve my clothing problem, then I'd love for us to ask her."

Ruby beams. Then she gets up. "When did Percy and James come to pick you up? Have we any more time?"

"The training won't be over for half an hour," I say after a quick glance at the clock. "By the time he's here, it's sure to be a quarter past seven."

"Perfect." Ruby opens the door and waves me over. I follow her into the hallway. Ember's room is right next to Ruby's, and her door is open a crack. Ruby knocks twice.

"Ember, do you have a moment? We have a little clothing emergency."

"Sure, come in," she calls to us.

Together we enter Ember's room. It's the same size as Ruby's and pretty cluttered. A bed, a desk, another, narrower table on which a sewing machine stands, right next to it a tailor's dummy with a dress hanging from it. My eyes are widening.

"Is that your dress?" I ask Ruby, stunned.

I actually want to look at it up close right away, but I remember my manners in time. "Hi, Ember," I say, raising my hand.

Ruby's sister sits on the floor in front of her bed, in front of her a few rolls of fabric and swatches of fabric samples. She has a large, messy bun on her head, from which some dark strands have come off. A pen is stuck between her lips.

"Hi," she mumbles and puts the swatches aside to take the pen out of her mouth. "What's the emergency?"

"Lydia needs a dress for the spring ball. She would love to have one from Elie Saab, but unfortunately that won't happen this time. Do you have any idea where you could find something that fits the motto? We've already gone through the Internet shops you showed me."

"Elie Saab would be really perfect. The clothes are so beautiful." Ember sighs. "I have countless of them on my clothes board on Pinterest."

"Right?" I ask, stepping closer to the tailor's dummy. Over my shoulder, I give Ember a questioning look. "May I?"

She nods. "Sure."

I look at the dress closely. It is soft rose in color, has a tulle skirt and a top embroidered with flowers. On closer inspection, I notice that there are two pieces that Ember probably wants to sew together with a wide silk ribbon and that are still held together by small pins.

"Did you sew it yourself?"

Ember nods.

"It's beautiful," I say sincerely.

Ember's cheeks get a bit of color. "We were really lucky, I actually ordered the tulle just for fun. The quality is not particularly good, but a layman certainly won't see that once everything is ready."

Suddenly I hear Mum's voice in my ear.

Talent. Pure talent.

Lately it has been happening to me all the time that I have to think about her. In the strangest situations and in the strangest places, I see her face or hear her voice, and although it still hurts incredibly to think of her, I find these moments beautiful and calming at the same time. As if a part of Mum was still with me.

"You're really talented, Ember. I wish I could sew so well."

"Don't you learn that when you grow up in a family like yours?" she asks cautiously.

I shrug my shoulders.

I still remember how I begged my parents at thirteen to hire a seamstress to teach me. I wanted to implement the designs I had drawn, but I had no idea about the basics. Dad wanted to see my sketches and designs first to know if it was worth paying for my lessons. But when he realized that I had designed clothes for young women, he immediately rejected me with a disparaging snort.

After that, I more or less taught myself how to sew. But even the finished skirts and blouses couldn't convince my parents that a women's collection at Beaufort would be a good and important step. And at some point it was too depressing for me to sit at the sewing machine for hours and put sweat and heart and soul into a piece of clothing that no one would ever wear.

"I was able to sew. Now... not anymore," I answer after a while.

"How come?"

The fact that Ember just asks feels nice somehow. Most people tend to be self-conscious in conversations with me, as if they don't know what they can and can't ask me. This leads to the fact that they only talk to me about trivial things. Ember is one of the few exceptions: she makes me feel like she's really interested in what I have to say.

"I always wanted to release my own collection under Beaufort, but my parents categorically ruled out women's fashion in their range. So I gave up sewing at some point."

Ember looks at me thoughtfully. "So you don't design anything anymore?"

"Yes, but—" I shrug my shoulders. "Only for me, not for Beaufort."

"I'm sorry," Ruby says quietly next to me, and Ember nods in agreement. "I could say something like 'Never give up!' now, but I can imagine how depressing it must be to be rejected again and again. At some point, I wouldn't feel like it anymore."

"Yes." I feel these dark clouds gathering inside me, pulling me into a vortex of dark thoughts every time, from which I only find my way out after hours. As fast as I can, I try to distract myself and concentrate on something else. "Anyway, change of subject! Where do you think you could get a nice dress for the spring ball? Ruby said that as a blogger you know all the insider tips," I chirp cheerfully. I can hear for myself how contrived it sounds.

Ember looks at the doll before turning to me. "I still have plenty of material. If you like, I can also sew you a dress."

For a moment, I am speechless.

Then I realize that I can't possibly ask her for this favor. I slowly shake my head. "That's too much work. Besides, the party is already Saturday in a week."

Ember makes a dismissive hand gesture. "Nonsense. I wouldn't have made the offer if I didn't have enough time. You can give me a petticoat from one of your old dresses, can't you?" asks Ember. We'll make you something pretty, it's going to be great."

"Accept the offer, Lydia," Ruby urges me and puts an arm around my shoulder.

I am so overwhelmed by the openness of the two, by their warmth and helpfulness, that my throat tightens and my eyes start to burn. I blink frantically and breathe deeply in and out again. Maybe it's also because of the hormones, but at this moment it's incredibly difficult for me to keep my composure.

"Thank you," I finally manage to say.

"Oh, thank me, not yet. My work has a price. Although this one is very small ...", says Ember and looks back and forth between me and Ruby with an almost devilish smile.

Confused, I look at Ruby, who looks anything but happy.

"Ember ..." she says, her tone serious.

"Come on, Ruby." Turning to me, she adds: "I'd like to go to the party with you."

"That's a great idea! Isn't it?" I ask Ruby, but Ruby only looks at her sister with a grim expression.

"Lydia would like me to go with you."

"You haven't told me yet who the mysterious boy you met at the last party is," Ruby says.

"What does he have to do with the fact that I want to spend a nice girls' night out with you?" replies Ember.

Ruby only raises one eyebrow.

"I saw what you ordered from the decoration company. I really want to go to the fairy ball. When do you experience a party like that?", Ember continues.

Ruby takes a deep breath, holds her breath for a few seconds, and then slowly lets it escape. "We agreed on rules last time, and you didn't stick to them. I'm just worried."

"I didn't drink, nor did I dance naked on the tables. So I don't give you any reason to worry at all."

Ruby sighs. For quite a while she says nothing at all. She looks as if she is making a pro-and-con list in her mind.

"The same rules apply as last time," she says finally. "And this time you're sticking to it—agreed?"

Ember's smile widens.

"Agreed?" asks Ruby.

"I'd love to accompany you to the spring ball, Ruby. Thank you very much for the nice invitation!" says Ember triumphantly. When Ruby doesn't react, she exhales audibly. "Agreed, I'll stick to your rules."

"Okay," Ruby says and nods. "Then we'll probably have a threesome date for the spring ball."

Ember cheers and thrusts his elbow into my side. "It's going to be so great."

I hope that she will be right.

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Lydia

The dress that Ember has conjured up is a dream. The top is made of a flowing champagne fabric and has short sleeves. Directly below my chest she sewed on a tulle skirt – similar to Ruby's dress – on which lots of small fabric flowers are scattered. It falls gently down and is cut to hide my belly as much as possible. I'm pretty sure Ember knows, but strangely enough, I don't have a bad feeling about it.

"I think we have to go slowly," says Ruby, glancing at the clock on my desk. It is made of dark wood, and golden ornaments adorn the shimmering dial. My father gave it to me for my tenth birthday. I don't know why I still have it there. It's not even particularly beautiful, but I can't part with it.

"Lydia?" Ember's voice sounds close to me and tears me out of my thoughts.

"Yes?"

"Are you okay?" she asks cautiously. Ember has exactly the same eyes as Ruby: green and piercing. Sometimes I have the feeling that both sisters can see directly into you.

"Yes, everything is great." "I think James and Percy have been downstairs for twenty minutes. We really should go."

Ember nods, but her gaze remains thoughtful.

"Thanks again for the beauty program, Lydia," says Ruby. "That felt so good after the stress of preparation." She comes to me and hugs me briefly.

"You two have made sure that I am properly dressed. That was probably the least," I reply.

I hired stylists to take care of Rubys, Embers and my makeup, as well as hairstyling. Now we look like we could walk on a red carpet. One on which fairies are mainly present. Or Shakespeare himself.

Together we make our way downstairs to the foyer, where James and Percy are already waiting. The two are talking, and I hear Percy laughing. The sound touches me. It's the first time in a long time that I see the two of them exchange a word with each other without any inhibitions.

James turns around, and his gaze lands on Ruby as if by itself. His eyes light up, as they do almost every time he looks at her or talks to her.

"You look beautiful," he says, while Percy holds my coat for me to slip into.

"You say that every time," I say to James.

He just shrugs his shoulders, his gaze still fixed on Ruby. She turns in a circle and smiles broadly at him. "I feel like a princess."

"You look like one, too," James replies, cupping her cheek before bending down to give her a soft kiss.

"I always don't know whether I should find this beautiful or rather disgusting," Ember murmurs close to me.

"You think it's beautiful," I reply as if by itself. "That's so much better than seeing them both unhappy."

Ruby

Yesterday afternoon, when we watched the fifteen fake trees being erected in Boyd Hall, I thought we had made a huge mistake. In the daylight, the arrangement looked strange, much too massive and not at all atmospheric. But when I look around now, I breathe a sigh of relief.

The soft glow of the lanterns and candles, the blue and purple petals that we have distributed and the delicate classical music of the orchestra create a fairytale atmosphere in which the guests visibly feel comfortable in their elfin dresses and bright suits.

"Ruby, it all looks beautiful," sighs Lydia next to me.

"Really nice," Ember agrees.

She points to the wooden swing attached to one of the trees. Our photographer stands in front of it and waits for him to take a picture of the couple who are getting into position. The girl grasps the ropes entwined with flowers, and her boyfriend, who is standing behind her, puts his hands over hers. It looks highly romantic.

"We all have to take a photo together afterwards," says Lydia.

"I said it would be worth coming here," I reply. Then I automatically start looking around for Lin. I have to ask her if she has spoken to the caterer and taken a close look at the buffet. But before I can find her, James gently puts his hand on my back.

I look up at him questioningly.

"I know exactly what you want to do now. But your shift is only in..." he glances at his watch, "an hour."

"Did you remember that?" I ask amused.

He nods. "Now you're mine, and not the morsels, Ruby Bell."

The next moment he pulls me away from Lydia and Ember. I just manage to glance over their shoulders before I have to look ahead to avoid stepping on my dress. At first I think James wants to go to the bar with me, but then he makes a swerve and pulls me towards the swing. Another couple has just posed there, and we stop a few steps behind the photographer.

Grinning, I look at James. "Seriously? I remember times when you didn't feel like going to our parties at all," I remark, "and now you even want a picture of a couple as a souvenir?"

"You know why I didn't feel like it," I hear James say close to my ear. I get goosebumps.

"Actually, you wanted to," I say. "Admit it. It was all a façade, actually you really liked the DJ at the back-to-school party and were just jealous that you didn't hire him for your own house parties."

James snorts softly. "Exactly."

Suddenly he leans over to me and runs his mouth over my cheek and then over my jaw. I shudder as he presses a kiss on the spot behind my ear.

"You really look beautiful," he murmurs, and I feel his warm breath on my skin. Goosebumps spread across my body, and I'm about to open my mouth to return the compliment, when the photographer's voice makes me wince.

"The next ones," he calls bored. When he sees that it's my turn, he raises an eyebrow in surprise. "Oh, it's you, Ruby."

Mr. Foster and I have known each other since I organized events at Maxton Hall. He also shoots and edits the official event photos for our blog, the school's homepage, and Lexington's newsletter, which he sends out once a month. He is a professional, and the fact that he has agreed to take these rocking pictures tonight with a Polaroid camera only makes him rise even further in my respect.

"Good evening, Mr. Foster," I say.

"I don't think I've ever taken a picture of you," he thinks aloud and then points to the swing. "Take a seat."

"Thank you," I murmur and sit down, while James positions himself behind me and puts one hand around the rope of the swing, the other on my back. Even through the fabric of my dress, I can feel the warmth that emanates from it. A tingling sensation runs through my entire body, and I wonder if this exciting feeling will ever pass when I am close to it. Hopefully not.

"Smile!" says Mr. Foster, but he didn't have to ask me to—my smile comes naturally.

After the picture has been taken, we get a print from a Polaroid camera. James shakes it briefly before we look at it.

"It's so kitschy."

As I sit on this flower swing and James stands behind me – probably all couples would have their picture taken in the same pose that evening.

I already know that I will continue to grin every time I look at this picture in the future.

"I like it," says James.

He stows it away in the pocket of his jacket, smiling. Then he raises his hand and strokes my cheek with his knuckles. It gives the impression that this does not happen consciously at all, but as if by itself. When he pulls his hand away again, I would like to hold it there and nestle my cheek in the palm of his hand.

"Do we want to dance?" I finally ask. I have to do something to control the heat that his gentle, natural touch has ignited in my body.

James' eyebrows rise in surprise. "You want to go dancing voluntarily?"

I nod and take him by the hand. Before I can change my mind, I pull him behind me onto the dance floor and between the other couples, who are already slowly moving to the music.

I put a hand on James' shoulder and start moving with him. This time I watched videos together with Ember and practiced in advance, but I quickly realize that I don't have to worry about the step sequences we have learned. James and I just sway back and forth.

"At the beginning of the year, I never thought I'd be here. With you," James murmurs close to my ear. I'm so grateful."

His words send a warm tingle through my body. "I'm grateful to have you, too, James."

We move on to the slow song that the orchestra is playing. At some point I let my hand wander higher until I can stroke his neck. James pulls me so close to him that there wouldn't be a sheet of paper between us. I can feel his breaths on my body. They walk just as irregularly as my own. As I let my second hand slip out of his and wrap it around his neck, James sucks in a sharp breath. His hands wander over my waist and stroke my sides. I swallow hard and close my eyes.

Then I feel James' lips brush over my hairline.

"James—" I whisper, slowly opening my eyes again.

He looks at me through half-lowered eyelids. I hold my breath, take in the sight of him. The beautiful eyes, the slight curve of his lips.

"Ruby—" he says hoarsely.

And then I can't stand it for a second longer. I stand on tiptoe, and he comes towards me.

When our lips meet, it's as if pure electricity is shooting through my body. That's always the case with James. I can't describe it at all, but a simple kiss from him is enough to turn my world completely upside down and make me forget everything around me.

James runs his tongue lightly over my lower lip, and I allow him in. I bury my hands in his hair and can feel his moans on my lips.

"God, take a room," a cutting voice sounds next to us.

James pulls away from me, and I blink several times. Then I look over James' shoulder and recognize Camille, who is dancing with a guy from our class. She rolls her eyes.

"We're really bad," I murmur, burying my face on James's shoulder.

Suddenly I notice how he stiffens. "What—"

I raise my head. James fixes on a point over my shoulder, and I turn to follow his gaze.

Mr Sutton has just entered the dance floor with a woman.

"Isn't that our tutor from the Oxford study group?" I ask.

"Philippa Winfield," James murmurs. He always remembers all the names of people – even those he meets only once. I think that's something you train yourself automatically when you're born into a big company.

"The two look familiar," I say, after Mr. Sutton has wrapped his arm around Pippa. She smiles at him – because of her high heels they are about eye level – and then she leans forward and whispers something in his ear

that makes him laugh. It is a shy laugh that is clearly different from the one he says in class.

"Fuck," James says at the same moment that Mr. Sutton looks over Pippa's shoulder and his cheerful expression dies.

It doesn't take long for me to realize why.

Lydia.

She stands near the dance floor and has seen everything. Now she turns on her heel and leaves the hall through one of the rear exits.

I want to go to her right away, but James is holding me by the hand. Before I can ask why he does this, he nods in the direction in which Lydia has just disappeared.

Mr. Sutton runs after her.

"Do you think that's a good idea?" I ask hesitantly.

James' expression is impenetrable. "At some point, the two of them will have to talk to each other. Besides, I think she'd rather be left alone by us at the moment."

Since James knows Lydia better than anyone else, I trust him.

"I don't want her to feel bad," I murmur.

James looks at me warmly at my words. "She can do it. I'm quite sure of that."

The certainty with which he says this, and the way he suddenly looks at me, give the impression that he is not only thinking about Lydia.

For the first time since I've known him, he seems to believe in his own happiness. And that makes me incredibly happy.

Lydia

I regret coming here. I should have listened to my gut feeling and not let myself be persuaded to do so. I knew it wouldn't be easy for me to see Graham. However, I would never have expected something like this.

Just when he danced with Pippa, when he put his arm around her as a matter of course, when she smiled at him and he returned it, when the distance between their faces kept shrinking – I couldn't take it anymore. It was just too much.

And even now, in the empty hallway, without music and without people around me, my heart doesn't stop racing. I feel sick, and my hands feel sticky. I think my blood pressure is too high. Immediately I put a hand on my stomach, as if I could feel if everything is okay with the little ones.

"Lydia?"

I drop my hand and turn around.

Graham stands a few meters away from me, his jacket open, his brows knitted thoughtfully.

"What?" I ask aggressively. Oh, how tired I am of always pretending in front of everyone that everything is fine in my life. Nothing is in order. Especially not now that he is standing in front of me. Where he ran after me, even though I thought he didn't even notice my presence. Where he looks at me as if he knows what's going on inside me – just like he used to.

I can't look away. What has built up in me becomes more and more powerful until I can no longer hold it back.

"Did you have fun?"

His gaze darkens, and he furrows his brows even further. "We were only dancing, Lydia."

I snort contemptuously. "That in there was clearly more than just 'dancing.'"

We've never argued before, and now I know why. It feels terrible and not at all liberating to hiss at him like that.

"It would have been funny if I had refused her request to dance. People are already talking behind my back."

I laugh. "So you almost made out with my tutor on the dance floor to prevent people from worrying about your relationship status?"

The words come out of me louder than intended, and Graham casts a nervous glance over his shoulder.

"I hate that, Graham," I say. My voice is cold, at the same time it trembles. I've never heard myself talk like that. "I hate that you can't even exchange three words with me without immediately looking around in panic." I clench my hands into fists and push back the burning behind my eyes with all my might.

"Do you think I'll enjoy it?" he replies suddenly.

I can only let out a bitter snort.

He, too, is now clenching his hands into fists. "I'm trying to do the right thing for both of us!"

"The right thing?" I can't believe he just said that. "Do you think it's right to dance with other women—while I'm watching?"

"Do you think I'm enjoying it? To keep me away from you, to pretend that we never knew each other?" he asks, stunned. Then he tears his hair and shakes his head. "It hurts a lot, Lydia, and it's getting worse every day."

"That is certainly not my fault!" I almost scream the words and bite my lip afterwards. I take a deep breath and think of what Mum has drummed into me all my life about composure. "I'm not calling you," I continue quietly. "I'm not going to report to your class. Damn, I'm not even looking at you. What do you think I should do so that it doesn't hurt you anymore?"

Graham shakes his head again. Then he takes a long step towards me – and embraces my face with his hands.

For a moment I am petrified. Then I push his arms away. He can't touch me like that – when he does, it feels like it used to, and I can't stand that for a second.

"We can't go on like this, Lydia," he croaks.

"I already said that I would stick to the agreement."

"Me too. Nevertheless, we both break down from it."

I feel my anger gradually subsiding and only pain remains. Pain that tears me apart from the inside and makes me unable to breathe properly.

I wish I hadn't pushed his arms away. At the same time, I wish I had done it with more force.

"It was just a dance," Graham whispers.

I just nod. I would like to look away, but I can't. Graham and I – we haven't been so close in a long time. I feel like I have to soak up every second before the moment is over and I'm left alone.

"Nothing has changed for me, Lydia."

My breath catches. "What—what do you mean?"

Graham gets a little closer, but doesn't touch me. "By that I mean that you are the first thing I think of when I get up. I think of you all day long. When I see something funny, I want to tell you about it first. I have your voice in my ear when I go to sleep at night. Heavens, Lydia, I love you. I loved you the first time we spoke on the phone. I'll never stop loving you, even though I know there's no chance for us."

My heart beats as fast as if I had just run a marathon. I can't believe he just said that.

"I'm going to change schools."

That pulls me out of my state of shock. I shake my head. "No. No way. You said yourself that Maxton Hall is the best thing that could have happened to you. That you'll never find a better job again."

"I don't care. I finally want to be able to be there for you again. I want to be able to go to a café with you, hold your hand. And I wish my best friend back. If I have to take a worse job for it, I'll be happy to do it."

Again I shake my head, completely confused by this twist. "I... This won't do. Why all of a sudden?"

"This is not a spontaneous inspiration. I've been thinking about it since my very first day here. Every morning I wonder if Maxton Hall is really worth it that we lost each other."

"But we have—" I break off, unable to think clearly.

"That was our joint decision. That's why I didn't say anything. I was afraid to put you under pressure. But now—"

The tears come faster than I can hold them back. I squint my eyes and am shaken by a silent sobbing. When Graham touches me this time, I don't resist, but let my forehead sink tiredly forward against his chest and allow him to gently caress my cheek.

"I'm so sorry I couldn't be there for you, Lydia," he whispers.

The longing for him is almost unbearable at this moment. As well as the guilty conscience because I still haven't told him about the pregnancy, and the grief – not only for our relationship, but also for our friendship. I

claw my hands into his shirt and hold on to him. "I miss my mum. And I miss you. All the time," I sob.

"I know. I'm so sorry." Again he strokes me.

His gentle touch reminds me of our very first meeting. At that time, we were nothing more than friends who had met online, but he kept me the same when a young woman in the café asked me about the headlines about me in the newspaper. I had tried not to let it be known how much her words hit me, but Graham felt it immediately and hugged me. He whispered in my ear that everything would be fine. Just like now.

His soothing voice eases my pain, and as he runs his thumbs over my moist cheeks, assuring me that we'll fix everything, I sink into this dream for a moment and into the illusion that he might be right.

But then Graham stiffens.

"Lydia," he murmurs.

I detach myself from him a bit and follow his gaze.

At the end of the corridor, only five meters away from us, stands Cyril.

His face is paler than I've ever seen it before, and he looks from Graham to me and back again in disbelief. His mouth opens.

But then his facial expression changes. His brows contract tightly, his eyes become narrow slits, and he clenches his teeth so hard that the bone protrudes from his jaw.

The next moment, he turns on his heel and disappears back towards Boyd Hall.

"Damn it," I hiss, breaking away from Graham altogether.

"Lydia—"

I shake my head and wipe my wet cheeks with my fingers again. "I have to talk to him. Can we perhaps ... on the phone?"

Although Graham looks like his entire body is under tension right now, my words bring a warmth to his golden-brown eyes that I've been longing for for months. It is familiar, like a faded memory that slowly takes on color again and becomes reality.

"I'll call you," he says. "After the party."

"Okay," I whisper.

For a moment I am tempted to hug him again, but then Cyril's stunned face appears in my mind's eye, and I turn on my heel instead to look for him.

I run after Cyril as fast as I can. Shortly after the exit of Boyd Hall, I catch him.

"Cy ...", I say breathlessly and reach for his elbow.

He spins around and snatches his arm from me. "Don't touch me."

I raise my hands, shocked by his cold tone. Cyril has never spoken to me like this before. The way he looks at me is also completely foreign to me: derogatory and full of contempt. He shakes his head.

"I can't believe you did that, Lydia."

Frowning, I look up at him. "I don't think you can afford to judge me, Cy. Or shall I remind you of the kind of people you've been with?"

Cyril flinches. "You think I'm mad because you're sleeping with your teacher?"

Now I'm the one who flinches. Close behind Cyril stands a small group of people who have also just left the hall.

"Why else?" I ask quietly.

He lets out a desperate sound and then tilts his head back to look up, as if the sky could tell him what to say next. Then he looks at me again and swallows hard.

"I'm mad at you because you've been stalling me for an eternity."

My mouth opens. "What?"

"For me, there is only you, Lydia. I've been in love with you for years."

"But," I croak. "But the thing about us... that was nothing serious."

Cyril looks as if I slapped him in the face. He opens his mouth, but not a word comes out.

"I didn't know you felt that way," I whisper. Carefully, I reach out to him a second time and touch his arm. He's my friend, I've known him since I was a child. If I had known that he had serious feelings for me, I would never have started anything with him.

"Are you telling me you didn't notice anything?" he replies incredulously.

I shake my head silently.

"So you didn't realize that I hadn't been with anyone since the thing with us. You didn't realize that after your mother's death, I was there for you every day from morning to night and comforted you."

"That's what friends do for each other," I whisper through tears.

"I'm not doing this for anyone," he says, his tone bitter. "I'm doing this just for you."

I stare at him, unable to move. Nausea overcomes me, at the same time more tears run down my cheek. "I'm sorry. I... I didn't mean to hurt you."

Cyril hesitantly raises his hand and wipes a tear from my cheek. Then his expression hardens. "But you did."

With these words, he turns around and walks towards the parking lot.

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James

The evening clearly did not go as I had imagined.

Actually, the plan was to spend as much time as possible with Ruby – we both only had a one-hour shift each and the time afterwards at our disposal. I wanted to dance with her, celebrate and kiss her as often as she would have allowed in front of the others.

But then Lydia suddenly came back to Boyd Hall, distraught. At first, we thought that her conversation with Sutton had gone badly or that he had said something that hurt her. When we finally found out from her what really happened, I immediately went in search of Cyril.

Alistair and Keshav had no idea where he could be, and it took me an eternity to find Wren, but at least he was able to tell me that Cyril drove home in a hurry a while ago. So I took a taxi and asked Percy to drive Lydia, Ember and Ruby home.

Now I'm standing in front of Cyril's front door and pressing the bell again. I can hear the gong echoing from outside through the whole house. I'm sure Cyril is here – his car is parked across the driveway, and I saw a light burning on his floor as we drove down the driveway.

I ring the bell again. And once again. Just as I raise my finger again, the door is torn open.

Instantly, a heavy flag of alcohol blows towards me. Not more than an hour has passed since the meeting between him and Lydia, and yet Cyril is already wavering. His dark hair is all messed up, and the top buttons of his shirt are open.

"It was clear. Lydia is sending her guard dog," he slurs.

"Can I come in?" I ask.

Cyril pulls the door open with a swing, turns around and goes up the stairs to the upper floor without turning around to look at me. There is no light on in the whole house. Apparently, his parents are not there again.

I follow him, up to the first floor and directly into his room. The window is open, but the smell of smoke and alcohol is still heavy in the air.

Cyril sits down on the windowsill. In an ashtray I can see the butt of a cigarette glowing. He picks it up, pulls it deeply and leans back.

"Well," he begins, without looking at me. "You're here to silence me?"

"I'm here because I'm worried about you," I answer, and go to the window with him.

Cyril turns to me and looks at me with a raised eyebrow.

"And because Lydia is worried."

He lets out a snorting laugh and takes another puff. Next to the ashtray is a bottle of whiskey that is not even half full. I wonder if he really drank all this in the last hour.

I never expected to see Cyril like this.

"I'm sorry, man."

Cyril puts out the cigarette. Then he grabs the bottle, puts it on and puts his head back.

"I don't understand," he manages to say between clenched teeth. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and puts the bottle down again with a clink. "I just don't understand why."

I don't know what to answer to that. Cyril has been hoping to get together with Lydia for years. To learn now that his wait was in vain must absolutely destroy him.

"I would have done anything for her. Everything," he continues, shaking his head. Apparently, this makes him dizzy, because he slumps a bit to the side. I grab his arm and pull him off the windowsill.

"I know," I say.

Suddenly, Cyril grabs me with both hands. "You have no idea how that feels, James. To hope for something for years and to see everything break before your eyes."

His face is contorted with pain. He sways and cannot stand straight. Without further ado, I take him by both arms and maneuver him towards the bed. I give him a slight push, forcing him to sit down. When I'm sure it won't tip over to the side right away, I let go of it and go to the window to close it. Then I draw the heavy gray curtains.

I turn to Cyril. He leaned forward and buried his face in both hands. I just feel lousy at the sight of him. This whole situation is so weird, and I feel sorry for Cy, but I still have to keep Lydia's well-being in mind. She is the one who could lose everything if her relationship with Sutton comes to light.

I sit down next to Cyril on the bed. "You mustn't tell anyone about it, Cy," I say urgently.

Cyril just shakes his head. Then he drops his hands and turns his head to me. "Do you really think I'd ever do anything that harms Lydia?"

I return his gaze. "No, I don't think so."

He nods.

Then he stares silently at his hands for a while. "I always thought that the thing with us would have been just as important to her."

"It's not your fault either. That much is clear."

He just growls and lets himself fall backwards onto the bed with a groan.

"I'll get you a glass of water," I say after a moment.

Cyril doesn't reply, so I get up and go downstairs to the kitchen. When I come back, he sits upright in bed again. I've taken a bucket upstairs in case he gets sick overnight, and Cyril eyes it with a mocking look.

"Here," I say, holding out the glass to him. He takes it and forces himself to take a few sips. Then he puts it down on the bedside table.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" I ask.

"No, man. I think I must be alone now."

"Okay, then I'll go." I point over my shoulder with my thumb.

Cyril nods curtly. Then he does something he hasn't done in at least ten years – he stands up and wraps both arms around me. At first I'm taken by surprise, but then I pat him on the back. He rests half his weight on me, and I hold him upright as best I can.

"It'll be okay," I say quietly.

Cyril breaks away from me and avoids my gaze. It is obvious that he does not believe my words.

Ruby

It's already past half past two when James finally comes home. He knocks softly on Lydia's room door and opens it a crack. When he sees me sitting on the bed next to his sleeping sister, a smile comes to his lips that makes my stomach tingle. Carefully, I stand up and try not to make any noise. James' smile widens when he sees that I've swapped the dress for one of his shirts and one of Lydia's leggings.

Only when I have quietly closed the door behind me do I dare to say something. Lydia was so upset after we came here – I don't want to wake her up under any circumstances.

"You're here," he greets me quietly.

I nod. "I was going to get off with Ember, but Lydia looked so desperate. I didn't want to leave her alone, so I told Mum that I was staying with her. Have you found Cyril?"

James' smile fades. "It was quite dense. I don't know if he'll remember anything tomorrow."

That doesn't reassure me much.

"I trust Cy," James adds. "You can rely on him for such things."

I look at him skeptically, but finally nod. "Okay."

James looks down the hallway and then back at me. I grab his hand and pull it lightly, and together we go to his room.

There I take a seat on the oversized bed.

"Is Lydia feeling better now?" asks James as he takes off his jacket and loosens his tie. Then he drops down next to me.

"Yes," I answer thoughtfully. "I think so. Mr. Sutton called, and the two talked for a while."

James doesn't seem to know what to make of it. He only exhales audibly and rubs his forehead.

"What?"

He just grumbles. "I don't want Lydia to get into trouble. I just don't know how to prevent this house of cards of secrets from collapsing soon."

"It won't," I say softly, leaning forward to touch him. I feel the need to comfort him when he looks like this, and I wish I could do more than just caress his cheek.

James looks at me with dark eyes. "I would do anything for the people I love."

I run my fingers further down to his neck. Wrap your hand around the back of his neck, run your thumb over his hairline. "I know."

"You are one of them, Ruby."

I pause in the middle of the movement and swallow hard. All of a sudden, there's a lump in my throat that I can't swallow.

"I love you," he murmurs.

There is so much emotion and so much pain in his voice at the same time that for a brief moment I think I can't breathe.

But in the next moment, my body reacts to his confession as if by itself. I lean forward until I'm kneeling on the bed and level with James. Carefully I lower my mouth to his and kiss him, only very briefly.

"I love you too, James," I whisper, leaning my forehead against his.

James breathes in audibly. "Really?"

I nod and kiss him again.

It's supposed to be just a short kiss again – but then James closes a hand around the back of my head, and what started gently quickly becomes more. I lose my balance, so I fall to the side and into the soft down. James doesn't break the kiss for a second. All the words I still want to say disappear from my tongue as James shares my lips with his. I sigh softly.

When he breaks away from me this time, we are both breathless.

"Thank you for being there for us today," he murmurs.

We are both lying on our sides, our faces facing each other. James gently strokes my waist upwards, rests his hand on my rib bone. He draws small patterns on my skin.

I still remember exactly how it felt when he touched me for the first time: as if his touch burned through the fabric of my clothes right into my skin. It's the same now as his hand wanders back down and comes to rest on my thigh.

"Thank you for letting me be there for you," I whisper, brushing one of the reddish-blond strands out of his forehead. I could run my fingers through his hair forever, I love how it feels under my fingers.

We lie there quietly. The only thing that can be heard is our steady breathing. We can't let go of each other. I have to touch James all the time, as if to make it clear to myself that this is actually reality. That we have actually found each other again and that there is this new, steadily growing trust between us.

I make an effort, but at some point my eyelids become so heavy that I can hardly keep them open. James is there as I fall asleep, one hand in mine, the other gently buried in mine.

Ruby

"What do you mean?" asks Lin the following Monday, pushing her planner across the table for me.

I look at the appointments she has entered with a purple pen. Between Chinese characters, her neatly handwriting says Moving to Oxford, in the field for the following day she has written Moving in with Ruby. I grin broadly at Lin. And although the whole thing is still a few months away, I take my golden pen out of my pencil case, leaf through the monthly overview of the entire year in my planner and enter exactly the same thing.

"Tada," I whisper just as the bell rings for lunch. Lin and I start to put away our things, but before I can shoulder my backpack, the gong sounds a second time – shorter this time.

"Ruby Bell is immediately called to Principal Lexington's office," the voice of Principal Lexington's secretary rings through the loudspeakers. Instantly, every single student in the room turns to me and stares at me.

Frowning, I look at the clock above the classroom door. Actually, our conversation with Rector Lexington is only shortly before the end of the lunch break. If he wants to see me now, something must have happened.

Goosebumps spread across my body as I mentally chase after the question of what it could be.

"Shall I come with you?" asks Lin as we leave the classroom.

"No, go ahead and get something to eat." I grip the straps of my backpack tightly.

"Okay. Do you already know what you want? Then I can take it with you, and you don't have to queue up."

"That would be great. I'll just take what you take."

Lin squeezes my arm briefly before we continue down the corridor in different directions. The way to Principal Lexington's office seems much longer to me today than usual. The queasy feeling increases the closer I get. And when the secretary waves me through with a stern look, my heart threatens to jump out of my chest with excitement.

I take a deep breath before knocking on the heavy wooden door and entering.

The greeting gets stuck in my throat.

My mum sits in front of the headmaster's desk.

At the moment, I have nightmares about Dad, who is in the hospital because he had another accident.

"Is Dad okay?" I ask immediately, moving quickly toward her.

"Your father is fine, Ruby," Mum answers, but without lifting his eyes from the headmaster's massive desk.

Irritated, I look back and forth between my mother and the principal.

"Sit down, Ms. Bell," Principal Lexington tells me, pointing to the empty chair next to my mum. Hesitantly, I take a seat.

Principal Lexington rests his folded hands on the table in front of him and then looks at me over the rim of his glasses.

"There is nothing more important to me than the reputation of our school. We have stood for intelligence and excellence for centuries. If someone does something to harm this school, I take action against it. You should be aware of that by now, Ms. Bell."

I swallow hard. "Principal Lexington, I actually thought that the Spring Ball was a complete success. If something went wrong, I'm really sorry, but —" Before I can finish my sentence, Principal Lexington pulls open one of the small drawers at his desk and pulls out four printed pictures, which he pushes across the table to us.

"These photos were entrusted to me at the weekend by a concerned member of the parents' board," he continues, unmoved.

I can hear my mum breathing in sharply and lean closer to the desk. The pictures are dark, and at first I can't see anything at all – until I discover myself on them.

They are pictures of me.

I take one of the prints in my hand and hold it closer to my eyes.

I need a moment to classify the photo – but it must be from the back-to-school party. Only there I wore this green dress.

But I am not alone in the picture. A man is standing close in front of me.

Mr Sutton.

And it looks like we're kissing.

I remember that we talked to each other. But we were never so close to each other. I have no idea who took this photo, but it's clearly meant to harm me — or Sutton.

"That was a completely harmless situation. I—"

"Ms. Bell, I don't think you understand," Lexington interrupts me. "The pictures were sent to me by a member of the Parents' Council, and a student has also confirmed that he saw you and Mr. Sutton together."

"We were just talking!" I say indignantly.

"Ruby, watch your tone," Mum admonishes. When I glance sideways at her, a cold shiver runs down my spine.

My mum has never looked at me like this before – as if she was incredibly disappointed in me. But before I can say anything in my defense, Lexington continues to speak, and Mum avoids his gaze from me.

"In all my twenty years of working here, I've never seen anything like it, Ms. Bell. I will not allow the reputation of our school to be destroyed because of an affair."

"I'm not having an affair!" I shout.

I can't believe this is happening right now. This must be a nightmare.

"I have a boyfriend," I say quickly. "I... I don't have an affair with a teacher. I would never do such a thing, I swear."

I can't say that Lydia is the one who was with Mr. Sutton. That just doesn't work. Not after everything she has been through and what is still to come. I would never abuse their trust like that.

"I don't think you're aware of the seriousness of the situation, Ruby," Principal Lexington continues, lifting one of the pictures. "I think it's best if you leave school. You and Mr. Sutton are suspended from Maxton Hall College with immediate effect."

Silence.

It feels like someone has just pulled the plug. In my ears there is only a beeping to be heard. The seconds pass as if in slow motion, Principal Lexington's mouth is still moving, but I hear nothing more.

"You can't do that," I manage breathlessly. "I have a commitment from Oxford University."

Principal Lexington doesn't answer, he just pushes the pictures together and puts them back in an envelope. It's brown, and I can see a stamp in the back corner – presumably the sender. I squint my eyes and see a curved black B.

My heart skips a beat.

This can't be.

The two would never have done that.

They wouldn't have cheated me like that.

"Which student testified against me?" I ask breathlessly.

Now Principal Lexington looks at me almost pityingly. "That's confidential information, Ms. Bell. If you would please leave my office now? Regarding the suspension, we will send you a letter. Good day."

He flips through a stack of papers on his desk and then directs his gaze to his computer – an unmistakable signal that we are now dismissed.

Whole. Certain. Not.

"Do you know how much I worked my ass off for this school?" I blurt out.

Principal Lexington looks slowly at me again. "Don't force me to call security, Ms. Bell."

"Just because I have a scholarship and no rich parents to give you money when there's a rumor about me, you can't just kick me out of school!"

"I guess I have to beg a lot!" says Principal Lexington indignantly.

"You wretch—"

"Ruby!" says my mother sharply. She grabs me by the arm and pulls me up from the chair.

Without another word, she drags me through the office outside into the anteroom. I'm foaming with rage and staring at Lexington for the entire three meters until Mum slams the door behind us.

That has not really happened. It just can't be.

Shaking my head, I turn to my mother. "Can you believe that? How sick does someone have to be to come up with something like that?" I ask her.

Mum just shakes her head and doesn't look me in the eye. Instead, she has her gaze fixed on a point above my shoulder. "I knew very well that something like this would happen if we sent you to this terrible school."

I wince, and my eyes widen. "W-what?"

Mum shakes her head. "Ruby, how could you do that?"

"I'm saying I didn't do anything!" I shout.

If even my own mother doesn't believe me, I don't know what to do. Despair overcomes me, runs through my veins and makes it difficult for me

to breathe.

"Mum, you have to believe me—I would never kiss a teacher."

"I never thought you'd lie to us to sleep with your boyfriend, but it seems that things have changed in the last few months."

I look at her with my mouth open.

Mum takes a deep breath and finally sighs softly. "I have nothing more to say to you right now, Ruby. I'm so disappointed in you."

Tears welled up in my eyes. I look for words, but I can't find any. My body feels like it's under anesthesia. The only thing racing through my head is the question of who the hell took these pictures.

"Mum—"

"Please take the bus home," she interrupts me and swallows hard. "I have to talk to your father now."

"I didn't, Mum."

Without reacting to my words, she adjusts the handle of her handbag on her shoulder, turns around and disappears into the hallway.

I am left alone.

Rector Lexington's words repeat themselves in my head in a continuous loop.

You are suspended from Maxton Hall College with immediate effect.

Suspended. Shortly before the end of the second term. Before I got the chance to graduate. Although at home on my bulletin board there is the printed e-mail with the Oxford acceptance.

If I don't get a degree, I can forget about Oxford.

Everything I've been working towards for the last eleven years.

The realization of what has just happened hits me with full force. I sway on the spot, have to hold on to the secretary's counter because everything seems to be spinning around me. It is only with difficulty that I manage to leave the office without breaking down.

In the hallway, clusters of students come towards me, all looking forward to their lunch break, and my feet want to carry me towards the cafeteria as a matter of course. But I'm not allowed to go to the cafeteria anymore.

I am no longer allowed to go to the meeting with the event committee.

You are suspended from Maxton Hall College with immediate effect.

Actually, I'm not even allowed to stand here in the hallway anymore.

"Ruby?" a familiar voice sounds next to me.

I look up with eyes veiled with tears. James is standing in front of me. When he realizes how dismayed I look, he gently embraces my upper arms.

"I heard you were called out. What happened?" he asks urgently.

I can only shake my head. It's just too crazy to say it – and besides, this nightmare then becomes reality. The only thing I can do is fall against James and wrap my arms around him. I bury his face on his jacket and allow the tears to flow for a short moment. Only for a very short time, only until I have solid ground under my feet again.

"Principal Lexington... expelled me from school," I manage after a while. I break away from James and look up at him. He wipes under my eye with one hand, his gaze is confused. "Someone seems to have taken photos of me and Mr. Sutton that look like we're kissing."

James' hand freezes on my cheek. "What?"

I can only shake my head.

James pulls away from me and looks at me wide-eyed. "What did you just say?"

"Someone sent photos to Principal Lexington that look like I'm the one having the affair with Sutton," I whisper insistently. I wipe my eyes with a trembling hand. A few people stare at me as I pass by, and I recognize an ice-blue pair of eyes.

"That can't be," James says.

"Why not?" Cyril's voice sounds. "You're the one who took those photos, Beaufort."

Dazed, I look back and forth between James and him. "What?" I whisper.

James doesn't react. He just stares at Cyril. He stands in front of us with his head tilted and his hands buried in his pockets.

"Come on. Tell her," he tells James.

"What kind of are you talking about, Cyril?" I ask, clawing my fingers into James' arm.

Cyril raises an eyebrow defiantly. "Ask him, Ruby. Ask him who took these pictures."

Again I look at James, who stands there completely motionless.

"James?" I whisper.

When I say his name, he seems to wake up from his torpor. He turns to me and swallows hard.

I look into his eyes.

Panic rises in me.

This can't be.

"Who took these photos?"

James' breathing also suddenly goes faster. He slowly raises a hand as if he wants to touch me, but doesn't dare. "It's not—"

"Who, James?"

James opens his mouth again, but then closes it again. He squints his eyes, and I see him swallow. Once. Twice.

When he opens his eyes again, it feels as if someone has hit me in the chest.

"He's right, Ruby."

The ground under my feet breaks into thousands and thousands of pieces.

"I'm the one who took the photos."

And I fall.

Epilogue

Ember

I feel like a criminal.

My gaze twitches to the clock, to the counter and the waitress behind it, to my cappuccino and back to the front door of the café. The cycle starts again. And again.

Each new minute seems to pass more slowly than the previous one.

In the meantime, I have already missed a whole school lesson. I've never felt so criminal in my life, not even when Mum caught me stealing a scone from behind the counter at Smith's Bakery, even though she hadn't allowed me to.

The guilty conscience I have now cannot be compared to then. This time I'm really doing something forbidden.

The excitement ensures that I can hardly sit still. I slide back and forth in my chair, wondering if the cappuccino was a good choice. Actually, I'm not a coffee drinker, but since I slept so little last night, I thought the caffeine would do me good. I probably should have left it alone.

Ten minutes to go.

I ask myself how I am supposed to endure this. I briefly consider packing up my stuff, getting up and leaving, only to come back in thirteen minutes and pretend I've just arrived. But that seems a bit exaggerated to me.

What this excitement does to me is crazy.

Normally, nothing upsets me so quickly. But I don't usually skip school behind my parents' backs and make an appointment with a boy I don't really know.

Absently, I leaf through the pile of information brochures and applications for funding programs and scholarships. In many of them, there are still post-its with which Ruby has marked important places, in a color system that is guaranteed to have some deeper meaning.

The bell of the café rings. I look up – and suddenly everything around me seems to be happening in slow motion.

He really came.

His gaze wanders over the people in the café. For a moment, his brows contract a little bit – then he discovers me at the table on the wall. I raise my hand indecisively in greeting. The wrinkle on his forehead instantly smoothes out, and his lips curl into a smile.

Slowly he strolls towards me.

He wears a black leather jacket with a wide collar over a gray shirt that has a pocket on the chest, dark jeans and heavy boots. It's a great outfit, effortless but stylish at the same time. So far, I've only seen him in a suit – I was curious to see how he would dress in his free time.

The half-smile doesn't disappear from his face as he sits down in the chair opposite me.

My heart is racing. There is so much darkness in his gaze that I want to fathom. So much that I will explore in the future.

"Good morning, Ember," says Wren Fitzgerald.

A smile slowly spreads on my lips.

Thanksgiving

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Ruby and James' story continues

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