

SAVE

MONA KASTEN

ME

ROMAN

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Mona Kasten

# SAVE ME

Novel



LYX

## *About this book*

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

For Lucie

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

GERSEY, ENDLESSNESS

Ruby

My life is divided into colors:

Green – Important!

Turquoise – School

Pink – Maxton Hall Events Committee

Purple – Family

Orange – Nutrition and Exercise

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

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

Gold – Oxford

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

Pick up a letter of recommendation from Mr Sutton

I run my finger over the shimmering metallic letters.

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

more experience than Mr. Sutton."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

No answer.

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

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

It's half past two. To the minute.

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

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

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

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

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

My heart skips a beat.

I heard right.

Mr. Sutton is here.

But... He is not alone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In Mr Sutton's lessons.

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

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

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

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

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

But I just keep running. And further.

## 2

James

Someone maltreats my skull with a jackhammer.

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

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

Oh, fuck.

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

Double-fuck.

Alistair is going to kill me.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alistair grimaces in agony and lets out an incomprehensible hum.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"James?" a familiar voice sounds.

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

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

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

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

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

Ruby

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

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

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

"What do you mean?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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