

# SAVE

MONA KASTEN

# US

ROMAN

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MONA BOX

SAVE US

Novel

digital

LYX

## About this book

Ruby is in shock: she has been suspended from Maxton Hall College because she is said to be having an affair with her history teacher. From one second to the next, her dream of studying at Oxford vanished into thin air. But that's not all: James, of all people, seems to be responsible for the photos circulating of her and Mr. Sutton. Ruby can't believe it. She and James have been through so much together, overcome so many obstacles together—would he really do that to her? However, it quickly turns out that there is more to it than meets the eye. And while Ruby fights to be able to graduate despite everything, James is once again in danger of breaking under the obligations to his family. Are the worlds in which they live too different after all? Or can they save each other, even if all signs seem to be against them?

For Anna

# Playlist

A Day to be Certain – Gersey  
You – Keaton Henson  
Surrender – Natalie Taylor  
The Tide – Niall Horan  
Dream In A Dream – TEN  
In My Blood – Shawn Mendes  
Fallin' All In You – Shawn Mendes  
The Shortchange – Thomston  
Bill Murray – Phantogram  
Critical – Jonas Brothers

Doesn't today feel like a day to be certain?  
Certain, yet to decide.

GERSEY, A DAY TO BE CERTAIN



# 1

Graham

My grandfather used to ask me: When the day comes when you lose everything – what will you do? I never seriously thought about the answer to this question, but always said what came to my mind first at that moment.

When I was six years old and my brother deliberately broke my toy excavator, it was: Then I'll repair the excavator.

When we were ten, when we moved from Manchester to near London, I said defiantly: I'll just look for new friends.

And when my mum died and I tried to be strong for my dad and my brother as a seventeen-year-old: We will make it.

Even then, giving up was not an option for me.

But now, at almost twenty-four years old, in this office where I suddenly feel like a criminal, I have no answer. My situation seems hopeless at this moment, my future uncertain. I don't know how to go on now.

I pull open the squeaky drawer of the heavy cherry wood desk and dig out the pens and notepads that have found their place there last year. My movements are slow, my arms leaden. I have to hurry: I am supposed to leave the building before the lunch break is over.

They are suspended with immediate effect. I forbid you any contact with students of Maxton Hall. If you violate this prohibition, charges will be filed against you.

The pens fall out of my hand and land clattering on the floor.

Damn crap.

I bend down, collect them and throw them carelessly with the rest of the belongings that I have stowed in a cardboard box. It's a wild jumble of notes, textbooks, my grandfather's old globe and teaching materials that I copied for tomorrow and should actually throw away now, but can't bring myself to do it.

I look around the office. The shelves are emptied, only a few scraps of paper on the desk and the soiled underlay suggest that I was correcting work here until a few hours ago.

It's your own fault, a spiteful voice sounds in my head.

I rub my throbbing temple and then check all the drawers and compartments in the desk one last time. I shouldn't delay my farewell longer than necessary, but it takes me more strength to break away from this space than I would have thought. I made the decision weeks ago to look for a job at another school so that I could be with Lydia. But there is still a huge difference between leaving the employment relationship on your own terms and being escorted outside by the security service.

I swallow hard and take the coat from the wooden coat rack. Mechanically I put it on, then I grab the box and go to the door. Without looking around again, I leave the office.

Questions roll over in my head: Does Lydia already know? How is she? When will I see them next? What should I do now? Will a school ever hire me as a teacher again? What if not?

But there is no way I can fathom the answers to that now. Instead, I push back the panic rising in me and walk through the hallway towards the secretariat to hand in my bunch of keys. Students walk past me, some of them greet me friendly. A painful stinging fills my abdomen. It is only with difficulty that I manage to return her smile. I really enjoyed teaching here.

I turn into the hallway of the secretary's office, and all of a sudden it feels as if someone has poured a bucket of ice water over my head. I stop so abruptly that someone bumps into me from behind and mumbles and apologizes. But I hardly listen – my gaze is directed at the tall, reddish-blond young man to whom I owe this whole situation.

James Beaufort doesn't pull a face when he sees me. On the contrary, he looks completely uninvolved – as if he hadn't just destroyed my life.

I knew what he was capable of. And it was clear to me that it was not a good idea to turn him against me. "He and his friends are unpredictable," Lexington warned me on my first day at school. "Take care." I hardly paid attention to his words, because I already knew the other side of the story at that time. Lydia had told me how much this boy suffers from his family's inheritance, how closed he is to his twin sister.

In hindsight, I feel so stupid that I wasn't more careful. I should have known that James would do anything for Lydia. Probably my professional ruin in his daily routine is nothing more than a trifle.

Next to James is Cyril Vega, whom I fortunately never had to teach. I don't know if I would have been able to maintain a professional façade. Every

time I see him, a picture of him and Lydia appears before my eyes. How they leave school together and get into a Rolls-Royce. How they laugh together. How he takes her in his arms and comforts her, while I never could after her mother's death.

After a short moment, I clench my teeth tightly and continue on my way, the box tucked under my arm. I close my hand tighter around the key in my coat pocket the closer I get to the two of them. They have interrupted the conversation they were having and are watching me, their faces two hard, impenetrable masks.

I stop in front of the door to the secretariat and turn to James. "Are you satisfied now?"

He doesn't give any reaction, which makes the anger inside me boil up further.

"What were you thinking?" I ask, looking at him invitingly. Again, he doesn't answer. "Do you realize that you are destroying livelihoods with your childish pranks?"

James exchanges a look with Cyril, and his cheeks take on a light shade of red – just like his sister's when she gets angry. The two look so damn similar, but in my opinion they could hardly be more different.

"You're the one who should have thought about it before," Cyril spits out.

His eyes sparkle even angrier than James's, and it occurs to me that they probably came up with a plan together to have me kicked out of school.

Cyril's gaze leaves no doubt that he is the one who has the power of the two of us. He can do anything with me, no matter if I'm older than him. He won, and he knows it. The victory is written all over his face and is reflected in his proud attitude.

I let out a resigned laugh.

"I'm surprised you can still laugh," he continues. "It's over. You've been exposed—do you realize that?"

I close my hand around the keychain, so tightly that the small metal teeth cut into my skin. Does this rich rascal really think I don't know that? I don't know that no one will be interested in when and where Lydia and I met? That no one will believe us if we claim to have known and loved each other before my time at Maxton Hall? And we ended our relationship the moment we knew I was going to be her teacher? Of course I know that. From now on and for all time, I will be the disgusting guy who had an affair with a student

during his early days as a teacher.

The thought makes me sick.

Without giving them another look, I go to the secretary's office. I take the key out of my jacket pocket, slam it on the counter and turn around on my heel. As I walk past the boys again, I see out of the corner of my eye how Cyril hands James a cell phone. "Thank you for that, man," I hear him say, then I avert my gaze and walk as fast as I can towards the exit. Only in passing do I notice that James is getting loud behind me.

Every step hurts, every breath seems like an unsolvable task. A noise enters my ears that drowns out almost all sounds. The laughter of the students, their echoing footsteps, the creaking of the double-winged door through which I leave Maxton Hall and step into the unknown.

Ruby

I feel numb.

When the bus driver tells me that we have arrived at the terminus, I don't know what that means for a moment – until I realize that I have to get off if I don't want to drive all the way back to Pemwick. I have no memory of the last three-quarters of an hour, I was so lost in thought.

My limbs feel heavy and tingling at the same time as I walk down the steps and step outside. I cling to the straps of my backpack with both hands as if they could give me support. Unfortunately, that doesn't help me get rid of this feeling. As if I were caught in a whirlwind from which there is no escape, and no longer knew where up or down was.

None of this can really have happened. I can't have been kicked out of school. My mother can't really believe I'm having an affair with a teacher. My dream of Oxford can't have vanished into thin air right now.

I think I'm losing my mind. My breathing goes faster and faster, and my fingers cramp. I feel sweat running down my back, and at the same time I have goosebumps all over my body. I'm dizzy. I close my eyes and try to get my breathing back under control.

When I open it, I no longer have the feeling that I have to vomit at any moment. For the first time since I got off the bus, I perceive my surroundings. I drove three stops too far and am at the other end of Gormsey. Under normal circumstances, I would be terribly angry with myself. But instead I feel almost relieved, because there is no way I can go home now. Not after Mum looked at me like that.

There's only one person I want to talk to right now. A person I trust unconditionally and who knows exactly that I would never do something like that.

Ember.

I start walking towards the local high school. It can't be long until the end of school, because a few younger students are already coming towards me. A group of boys tries to push each other off the narrow sidewalk into the bushes. When they see me, they pause for a moment and then walk past me with their heads down, as if they were afraid that I might reprimand them for their behavior at any moment.

The closer I get to Gormsey High School, the stranger I feel. Two and a half years ago, I went to this school myself. I don't miss the time, but standing here again now feels like a trip into the past. Except that at that time no one turned in my direction and stared at me because I was wearing the school uniform of a private school.

I go up the last steps to the front door. The walls of the building, which were probably once plastered white, are yellowed, and the paint on the windows is peeling off. It cannot be overlooked that no money has flowed into this school in recent years.

I push past the students who stream towards me from inside and try to find a familiar one among the many faces. It doesn't take long for me to discover a girl with two braids braided close to her head who is leaving school with a boy.

"Maisie!" I call to her.

Maisie stops and looks around searchingly. When she recognizes me, she raises her eyebrows questioningly. She motions for her boyfriend to wait for a moment, and then winds her way through to me. "Ruby," she greets me. "Hey. What's the matter?"

"Do you know where Ember is?" I ask. My voice sounds perfectly normal, and I wonder how that can be when everything inside me is broken right now.

"I thought Ember was sick," Maisie replies, frowning. "She hasn't been to school today."

"What?"

This can't be. Ember and I left the house at the same time this morning. If she wasn't in school, where the hell did she go?

"She wrote to me that she's in bed with a sore throat." Maisie shrugs her

shoulders and glances over her shoulder at her boyfriend. "She's probably just at home, and you've missed each other. Listen, I have an appointment now. Would it be okay if I...?"

I nod quickly. "Sure. Thank you."

She waves to me again, then goes down the stairs and hooks herself under her companion. I watch the two of them while my thoughts are overturning. If Ember had had a sore throat this morning, I would have noticed. She didn't look sick and didn't behave strangely. At breakfast everything was as usual.

I dig my cell phone out of my pocket. Three missed calls from James are shown on the display. I delete the notification with hot cheeks.

I'm the one who took the photos, his voice sounds in my head, but I try to ignore the heavy feeling in my chest. I go into my favorites and click on Ember's name. It rings, so her cell phone is not switched off. However, she doesn't answer even after the tenth ring. I hang up and then open a new message.

Please get in touch. I need to talk to you urgently.

I send them off and stuff the phone back into the pocket of my blazer, then I go downstairs and turn to school one last time. I feel incredibly out of place. There is no doubt that I don't belong here anymore. But the same is now true of Maxton Hall.

I don't belong anywhere anymore, it shoots through my head.

With this thought, I leave the school grounds. Without thinking about it, I turn left and walk down the main street in the direction of our neighborhood, even though our home is the last place I want to be now. I wouldn't stand it if Mum looked at me again as disappointed as she did in Lexington's office.

What happened plays out in a continuous loop in my head. Again and again I hear the voice of the headmaster. How he took away my entire future in a few words, everything I've been working towards for years.

As I pass a series of cafes and small shops, snippets of conversation from the students who are on their way home before and after me reach my ear. They talk about homework, get upset about teachers or laugh about something that happened during the first break. How numb I realize that I no longer have anyone with whom I can have such conversations. I have no

choice but to walk along here, let the sun mock me with the deep certainty that there is nothing left in my life. No school, no family, no friend.

Tears welled up in my eyes, and I tried in vain to blink them away. I need my sister. I need someone to tell me that everything will be okay, even if I can't believe it myself.

Just as I'm about to take out my cell phone again, a car comes to a halt next to me on the street. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see that it is a dark green, rickety frame with rusty rims and dirty windows. I don't know anyone who drives such a car, so I keep walking without paying attention to him.

But the car follows me. I turn to the side to take a closer look at him when the window is rolled down on the driver's side.

I definitely didn't expect the face that appears behind it. Surprised, I pause.

"Ruby?" asks Wren. Apparently, I look just as horrible as I feel, because Wren squints his eyes and leans out of the window a bit to take a closer look at me. "Are you okay?"

I press my lips tightly together. Wren Fitzgerald is pretty much the last person I want to talk to now. Especially not when I think more carefully about why he looks at me like that. For sure, my expulsion from Maxton Hall has already made the rounds. A wave of unpleasant heat comes over me, and I walk on without answering him.

A car door is slammed shut behind me, and shortly afterwards I can hear quick footsteps. "Ruby, wait!"

I stop and close my eyes. Then I take one, two, three deep breaths. I try not to let it show how confused I am right now and what's going on inside me before I turn to Wren.

"You look like you're going to topple over at any moment," he says with a furrowed brow. "Do you need help?"

I snort softly. "Help?" I croak. "From you?"

Wren then presses his lips tightly together. He looks briefly at the ground, then up again. "Alistair told me what happened. That really sucks."

I stiffen and avert my gaze. So it's exactly as I thought. Word of the matter has already spread at school. Just great. I look at the façade of a fitness center across the street. Some people train on treadmills, others lift weights. Maybe I should hide in it. I'm sure no one will find me there.

"Great," I murmur.

I want to turn away from him again and move on, but something makes

me hesitate. Maybe it's the fact that Wren didn't drive along here in a limousine, but in a car that looks like it's going to fall apart at any moment. Maybe it's the look in his eyes that seems serious and sincere and not like he's having fun with me. Or maybe it's the fact that we're facing each other here in Gormsey – the last place I would have expected someone like Wren Fitzgerald.

"What are you doing here?"

Wren shrugs his shoulders. "I happened to be in the neighbourhood."

I raise an eyebrow. "In Gormsey. By chance."

"Listen," Wren changes the subject. "I refuse to believe that James has anything to do with it."

"Did he send you to talk me into that?" I ask in a trembling voice.

Wren shakes his head. "No. But I know James. He's my best friend. He wouldn't do such a thing."

"They're pictures that look like I'm making out with a teacher, Wren. And James admitted to having made them."

"Perhaps he made them. But that doesn't mean he sent it to Lexington."

I press my lips together.

"James wouldn't do that," Wren says insistently.

"Why are you so sure about that?" I ask.

"Because I know how James feels about you. He would never do anything that harms you."

He says this with such certainty that my thoughts and feelings are stirred up anew. Would it change things if James didn't submit the photos? But why did he make them in the first place?

"I want to know for myself what the whole thing is all about," says Wren. "I'm going to see him now. Come with me, Ruby. Then you can see for yourself."

I stare at Wren. It is on the tip of my tongue to ask him if he has lost his mind. But I hesitate.

This day has already reached its absolute lowest point. It can't get any worse, because I have nothing left to lose.

I ignore the alarm bells that start ringing in my head at this moment. Without thinking any further, I walk over to Wren's rusty car and get in.



Lydia

The news that Graham has been suspended has spread like wildfire throughout Maxton Hall. It was unbearable to stand in front of the school and wait for Percy to finally pick me up, especially since I didn't reach James or Ruby – not to mention Graham. The thought of how he must be feeling right now makes me sick, and it drives me crazy not knowing how he feels.

When I finally get home, I go straight to my room and try to reach him again. This time he answers, and I gasp for breath in relief.

"Graham?"

"Yes." His voice is toneless.

"I'm so sorry," I blurt out as I paced up and down my room. My whole body is charged with adrenaline, and my heart is pounding fast and violently against my chest. "I'm so sorry. I didn't want that."

I can hear Graham breathing in sharply. "It's not your fault, Lydia."

Yes, it is. It's my fault that Graham and Ruby were kicked out of school. "I'm going to Principal Lexington's this afternoon and clear it up. Everything will be fine again, believe me. I'll take the blame and—"

"Lydia," he interrupts me gently.

"Ruby has also been suspended. She absolutely does not deserve this. I can't let her be punished for something she didn't do."

"Lydia, I—" Before he can finish the sentence, the cell phone is snatched out of my hand. In shock, I let out a little scream and drive around.

Dad stands across from me and looks at me with cold eyes. He lowers his gaze to the glowing display of my cell phone. Then he raises a finger and ends the call.

"Hey! What...?", I begin.

"You'll never speak to that teacher again," my father interrupts me in an icy voice. "Do you understand that?"

I open my mouth, but the coldness in Dad's voice and the angry look in his eyes keep me from saying a word.

He knows.

Dad knows about Graham and me.

Oh God.

"Dad," I whisper desperately.

At the word, he grimaces into an almost painful grimace. "If your mother were still alive, she would be ashamed of you."

He says this so calmly that it takes a second for the words to get through to me in their full meaning. They hit me like a blow, and I retreat a bit from him and his anger. "Let me explain, please, Dad, it's really not what you think. Graham and I knew each other before, we—"

Suddenly, my father pulls up his arm and slams the cell phone against the wall with full force. It splinters into its individual parts and ends up scattered on the floor in black shards and plastic pieces. Stunned, I stare at him.

"I'll tell you one last time: you'll never speak to this man again. Did you understand that?" Meanwhile, his voice trembles with anger.

"I'm trying to explain to you that it's—"

"I don't want to hear your explanations, Lydia," he interrupts.

I hate it when he is like that. That he doesn't want to listen to me, even though he knows full well that I have something to say.

"I have not maintained your good reputation by all means, just so that you will make the next reckless decision right away. That will stop immediately, understood?"

It feels like someone poured ice water in my face. It takes me a moment to find my voice again. "What do you mean by that—my good reputation preserved?"

Dad's expression hardens. "I have made sure that the name of this family is not damaged even more. You should be glad of it instead of looking at me like that."

My throat is as if constricted. "That was you?" I croak hoarsely. "You gave the pictures to Principal Lexington?"

Dad's cold eyes are fixed on my face. "Yes."

I feel like I don't have the air to breathe. Nausea rises in me, and the room begins to spin. With one hand, I reach for the chair in front of me to support myself.

My own father is to blame for Graham losing his job and James' girlfriend being suspended.

"Why did you do that?" I whisper.

The need to explain my situation to him has crumbled to dust. There is only room in me for incredulity – and for unspeakable anger, which spreads faster in my veins from second to second.

"Because you could destroy this family – do you not care what you have put at risk with your reckless behavior? Does this family mean nothing to you?" my father asks.

"Family? You don't give a shit about this family!" I hiss, clenching my hands into fists. My arms are shaking, and I feel like I'm going to explode at any moment. "The only thing you care about is money. You don't give a how James and I have been doing since Mum's death. And now you're standing in front of me and asking me to be glad that you had my friend kicked out of school?"

Dad's nostrils puff up briefly at the word "friend," but otherwise there is no emotion to be seen on his face. I would do more to save the name of this family."

His calm voice drives me crazy. My breath comes faster and faster, and I claw the nails so hard into the palms of my hands that I'm sure I'll be bleeding soon.

"You should be grateful to me, Lydia," he adds.

My anger is at its peak. I can no longer hold back the words, they bubble out of me uncontrollably. "You may have kicked him out of school, but you can't cut him out of my life!" I scream with all my might.

"And if I can." Dad turns around and wants to leave the room.

But I'm not done yet.

"No, you can't. I am pregnant."

He stops on his heel. As if in slow motion, he turns back to me. "What?"

I stretch my chin forward defiantly. "I'm pregnant. From Graham."

It's strange to watch his reaction. For a moment, he just looks at me and blinks several times in a row – like the strange-looking man in this GIF that has been circulating for months. Then his shoulders begin to twitch, as if he is having a hard time maintaining steady breathing, and red spots form on his cheeks, forehead, and neck.

I actually thought I had already experienced all forms of Dad's anger. James and I learned early on to correctly interpret the smallest movements in his facial expressions and posture and to get out of the way in time.

But I've never seen him like this moment.

His gaze is on me, a second, another one, and I slowly take a step back,

because I can't assess what will happen. But to my surprise, Dad turns around and leaves my room without another word.

He slams the door so hard that I involuntarily flinch. I press a hand on my chest and take a deep breath. My pulse is racing, I can feel my heart pounding under my hand.

Less than ten seconds later, the door suddenly opens again – so sweeping that the knob slams against the wall and is sure to leave a dent there. My father comes back into the room and builds up in front of me.

"Does he know?" he asks so quietly that I hardly understand him.

The question catches me completely off guard, and it takes me several seconds to shake my head. "No, I—"

"Good," Dad interrupts. Without giving me another look, he strides through my room with great strides. He tears open the door to my walk-in closet and enters the small room. I hear a loud rumble.

I dive to the door and stare at my father, who has obviously just pulled one of my large suitcases down from the top shelf of the cupboard. He is just reaching for a travel bag, which he fires noisily at the floor next to it. He kicks the lid of the suitcase open with his foot and then begins to randomly tear clothes from the shelves and from the hangers and throw them in.

"What are you doing?"

Dad doesn't react. As if in a frenzy, he reaches for T-shirts, blouses, pants, underwear, bags and shoes. His hair stands out in all directions due to the jerky movements, the spots on his face and neck are getting darker and darker. Even when the suitcase is full, it doesn't stop, and the things end up in a messy pile on the bag and the floor next to it.

"Dad, what are you doing?" I yell, taking a step forward to get him to stop. I grab his arm, but he breaks free. The force of his movement makes me stagger back, and only in this way do I barely manage to hold on to the door frame with one hand.

At that moment, James bursts into the room.

"What's going on here?" he asks. His gaze is worried as he looks me up and down to see if everything is okay. Then he spots Dad in my closet, and his eyes widen.

"What are you doing, Dad?" he asks.

Dad moves around on his heel and points to James. "You knew about it?" he asks.

James frowns. "Of what?"