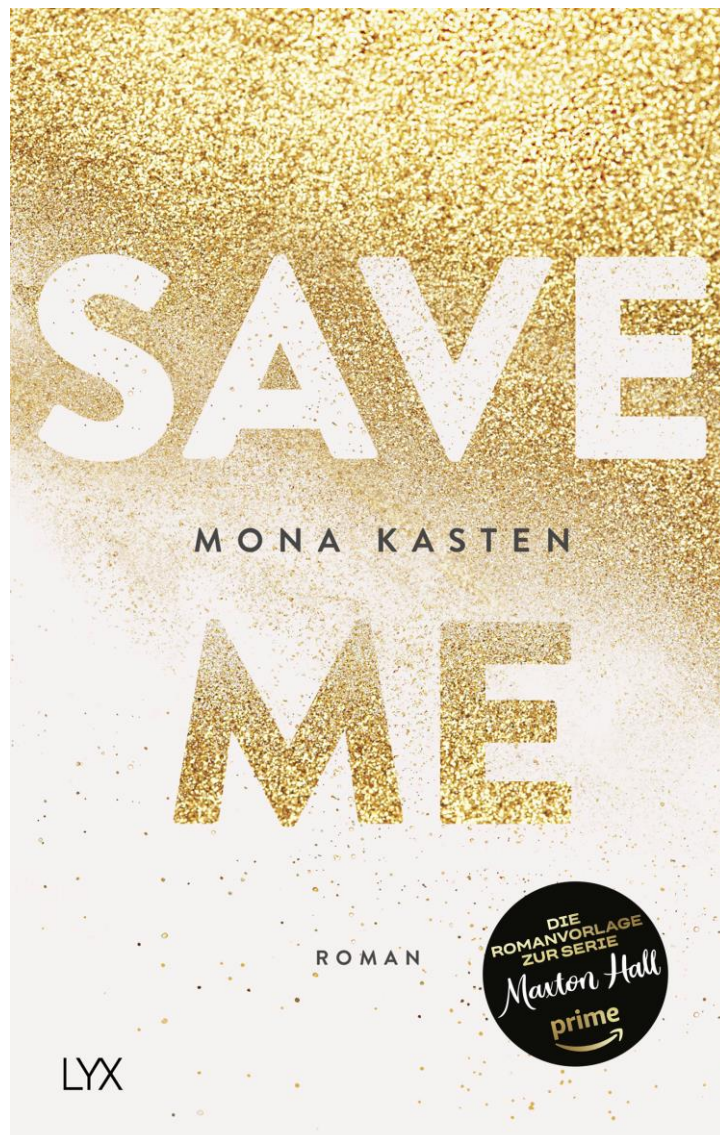


**Mona Kasten**  
**SAVE ME**

Sample Translation by Alexandra Roesch



**New Adult**

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## Ruby

My life is divided into colours:

Green – *Important!*

Turquoise – *School*

Pink - *Maxton Hall Organisation Committee*

Purple – *Family*

Orange – *Diet and sport*

I've already dealt with purple (*make Amber's outfit*), green (*buy new text markers*) and turquoise (*ask Mrs Wakefield about maths homework*). Crossing an item off my to-do-list is by far the best feeling in the world. I sometimes write down items I've already finished, just to be able to cross them out again immediately afterwards – although I do it in a nondescript light grey, so I don't feel like a complete cheat.

If you open my personal planner, you can immediately see that the majority of my day consists of green, turquoise and pink. But just under a week ago, at the beginning of the school year, I introduced a new colour.

Gold – *Oxford*

The first task that I wrote down with the new pen was:

*Pick up my letter of recommendation from Mr Sutton*

I run my finger over the metallic shimmering letters.

Just one more year. One final year at Maxton Hall College.

It seems almost unreal that it's finally starting. In three hundred and fifty-six days I might be sitting in a politics seminar being taught by the most intelligent people in the world.

Everything inside me tingles with excitement when I think about the fact that soon I will know whether my biggest dream has come true. Whether I made it and can go to university. *To Oxford.*

No one in my family has ever been to university, and I know that it's not self-evident that my parents didn't just smile wearily when I first told them that I wanted to study PPE in Oxford. I was seven at the time.

But even now – ten years later – nothing has changed apart from the fact that my goal is within reach. It still feels like a dream that I even got this far. I still catch myself fearing that I'll suddenly wake up and realise that I have to go back to my old school instead of Maxton Hall – one of the most prestigious private schools in England.

I cast a glance at the clock hanging above the massive wooden classroom door. Three more minutes. Last night I already completed the tasks we're meant to be working on, and now I have nothing else to do except wait for class to finally end. I jiggle my leg impatiently, and I'm immediately punished by a jab in my side.

'Ouch,' I hiss and go to hit her back, but Lin is quicker and swerves. Her reflexes are incredible. I'm guessing that it's down to the fact that she has been taking fencing lessons since primary school. After all, in fencing you do have to be able to strike as fast as a cobra.

'Stop being so fidgety,' she retorts without raising her eyes from her notes. 'You're making me nervous.'

That got me worried. Lin is never nervous. At least not that she'll admit to or show. But at this moment I can actually see the worry in her eyes.

'I'm sorry, I can't help myself.' I follow the letters with my fingers once again. I've done everything possible to keep up with my fellow students over the last two years. To prove that I deserve my place at Maxton Hall. And now that we are starting to apply to university, the excitement is almost killing me. I wouldn't be able to do anything about it even if I wanted to. However, the fact that Lin seems to be in a similar situation is making me worried.

'Have the posters arrived yet?' Lin asks. She peers over towards me, and a strand of her long black hair falls over her face. She pushes it aside impatiently.

I shake my head. 'Not yet. This afternoon for sure.'

'OK. We'll put them up tomorrow after biology, alright?'

I point towards the corresponding pink-coloured line in my planner and Lin gives a satisfied nod. I force myself not to start jiggling my leg again. Instead I start unobtrusively packing away my pens. Their tips all have to point in the same direction, which is why I need longer.

But I don't pack away the gold pen; instead I ceremoniously slide it behind the narrow elastic of my planer. I turn the nib so that it points forwards. That's the only way that feels right.

When the bell finally sounds, Lin is out of her chair faster than I would have thought humanly possible.

I look at her questioningly.

'Don't give me that look,' she says, while she slings her bag over her shoulder. 'You started it!'

I don't reply, just pack away my remaining things, smiling to myself.

Lin and I are the first to leave the room. We quickly walk across the west wing of Maxton Hall and turn left at the next corner.

In the first few weeks, I kept getting lost on the large campus and arrived late to class more than once. I was really embarrassed, even if the teachers were always reassuring me that this happens to most newcomers in Maxton. The school is like a castle. It has five floors, a south, west and east wing and three side buildings, where subjects like music and IT are taught. There are countless twists and turns to get lost in, and the fact that not every staircase leads to all floors can drive you mad.

But while I felt completely lost in the beginning, I now know the place like the back of my hand. I'm even pretty sure that I could find my way to Mr Sutton's office blindfolded.

'I should have got Mr Sutton to write my letter of recommendation, too,' Lin grumbles while we walk along the corridor. Venetian masks decorate the high walls on our right – an art project by last year's leavers. I've stopped in front of them several times to admire the playful details.

'Why?' I ask, making a mental note to tell the caretaker to take the masks down and put them in a safe place before the Back-to-School party at the weekend.

'Because he liked us ever since we arranged the leaver's party with him last year, and he knows how committed we are and how hard we work. And he's young, ambitious and a recent graduate from Oxford himself. God, I could kick myself for not having thought of it myself.'

I stroke Lin's arm reassuringly. 'Mr Marr went to Oxford, too. And I can imagine that it actually makes a better impression if you're recommended by someone with a bit more mileage than Mr Sutton.'

She looks at me sceptically. 'Do you regret asking him?'

I just shrug my shoulders. At the end of last year, Mr Sutton just happened to hear how much I wanted to go Oxford and told me I could ask him anything I wanted to know about it. Even if he did study a different subject from the one I'm intending to study, he was able to give me a whole lot of inside information that I hoovered up greedily and later wrote down carefully in my planner.

'No,' I finally reply. 'I'm sure he knows what's important for a letter of recommendation.'

Lin has to take a left at the end of the corridor. We arrange to call each other later, and then quickly say our goodbyes. I cast a glance at my watch – 1.25pm – and walk a bit faster. My appointment with Mr Sutton is at 1.30pm, and I definitely don't want to be late. I rush past the high Renaissance windows, through which golden September light is falling into the hallway and push my way through a group of students who wear the same royal blue school uniform as me.

No one takes any notice of me. That's how things are in Maxton. Although we all wear the same uniform – blue-green checked skirts for the girls, beige trousers for the boys and customized royal blue blazers for everyone – it's pretty obvious that I don't belong here. While my fellow students come to school with expensive designer bags, the fabric of my khaki green backpack is so worn out in some places that I'm expecting it to

fall apart any day now. I try not to let myself be intimidated by this or by the fact that some people behave as if the school belongs to them just because they come from wealthy families. I am invisible to them, and I do everything to keep it that way. *Don't attract attention.* It's worked well so far.

Gazing down at the floor, I push my way past the remaining students and take a last right. The third door on the left is Mr Sutton's. There is a large wooden bench between his office and the next one, and I look from the bench to my watch. Two more minutes to go.

I can't wait another second. I smooth my skirt down purposefully, straighten my blazer and check if my tie is still in the right place. Then I approach the door and knock.

No answer.

I sigh and take a seat on the bench and look down the corridor in both directions. Maybe he's just popped out to get something to eat. Or a cup of tea. Or coffee. Which reminds me that I shouldn't have drunk a coffee today either. I'd been jittery enough as it was, but Mum had made too much, and I didn't want to waste it. Now when I cast another glance at my watch, my hands shake slightly.

It's 1.30 on the dot.

I look down the corridor once more. No one to be seen.

Maybe I didn't knock loud enough. Or – and this thought sets my pulse racing – maybe I made a mistake. Frantically I tug at the zip of my backpack and pull out my planner. But when I check it, everything is ok. The right date, the right time.

Shaking my head, I close my backpack again. Normally I'm not this flustered, but the thought that something might go wrong with my application, stopping me from being accepted at Oxford, is almost driving me crazy.

I tell myself to calm down. Purposefully, I get up, go to the door and knock once more.

I hear a noise this time. It sounds as if something has fallen down. I carefully open the door and peek inside.

My heart stops.

I was right.

Mr Sutton is there.

But ... he's not alone.

A woman is sitting on his desk kissing him passionately. He is standing between her legs, both hands on her thighs. The next moment, he grabs her tighter and pulls her forward to the edge of the desk. She moans quietly in his mouth as their lips join once more and buries her hands into his dark hair. I can't make out where one of them begins and the other ends.

I wish I could tear my gaze away from them, but I can't. Not when his hands disappear further beneath her skirt. Not when I hear his heavy breathing and she quietly sighs 'Oh God, Graham'.

When I finally free snap out of my state of shock, I can't even remember how my legs function. I stumble across the doorway, and the door opens with such force that it bangs into the wall behind. Mr Sutton and the woman jump apart. He jerks his head round and sees me in the doorway. I open my mouth to apologise, but all I can utter is a hoarse gasp.

'Ruby,' Mr Sutton says breathlessly. His hair is completely dishevelled, the top button of his shirt is undone, and his face is red. He looks like a stranger, no longer like my teacher.

My cheeks feel like they're on fire. 'I ... I'm sorry. I thought we had a ...'

At that moment, the young woman turns around, and the rest of the sentence sticks in my throat. My jaw drops, and an icy coldness spreads through my body. I stare at the girl. Her turquoise eyes are at least as wide as mine. She immediately averts her gaze, lowers it to her expensive high heels, looks across the floor and then helplessly at Mr Sutton – *Graham*, as she has just sighed.

I recognise her. I especially recognise her red-blonde, perfect wavy ponytail that always dangles in front of me in history.

In *Mr Sutton's* class.

The girl who has just been snogging my teacher is Lydia Beaufort.

I feel dizzy. I am also pretty sure I'm going to throw up any second now.

I stare at the two of them and try to delete everything I saw in the last few seconds – but it's impossible. I know it, and Mr Sutton and Lydia know it too, I recognise that from their shocked expressions. I take a step backwards, Mr Sutton steps forward, his hand outstretched.

I stumble across the doorway once again and just manage to stop myself falling.

'Ruby ...' he says, but the roaring in my ears is getting louder.

I turn around and start running. I can hear Mr Sutton calling my name behind me, much louder this time.

But I just carry on running. On and on.

## 2

### James

Someone is mauling my head with a jack hammer.

This is the first thing I notice as I slowly wake up. The second thing is the naked warm body lying half on top of me.

I look to the side, but all I can see is a honey-blonde mane of hair. I can't remember leaving Wren's party with anyone. If I'm honest, I can't even remember leaving the party. I close my eyes and try to recall images of last night, but all I remember are a few disjointed flashes: me, drunk on a table. Wren's loud laughter as I fall off, landing by his feet. Alistair's warning look when I dance too closely with his older sister, pressing myself up close to her from behind.

Oh, fuck.



I carefully raise my hand and brush the girl's hair out of her face.

Double fuck.

Alistair's going to kill me.

I sit up with a jerk. A stabbing pain shoots through my head, and everything goes black for a moment. Elaine mumbles something incomprehensible next to me and turns to the other side. I realise that the jack hammer is actually my mobile phone, which is lying on the bedside table vibrating. I ignore it and look around for my clothes on the floor. I find a shoe near the bed, and the other one by the door under my black trousers and belt that goes with them. My shirt is lying on the brown armchair. When I put it on and try to fasten it, I realise that some of the buttons are missing. I groan and pray that Alistair isn't here anymore. He mustn't see the torn shirt, nor the red scratches that Elaine left on my chest with her pink varnished fingernails.

My phone starts to vibrate again. I glance at the display and see my father's name. Fantastic. It's just before two on a school day, and my head feels as if it's about to burst, and I almost certainly had sex with Elaine Ellington. The last thing I need now is my father's voice in my ear. I resolutely reject the call.

However, what I do need is a shower. And clean clothes. I sneak out of Wren's guestroom and close the door behind me as quietly as possible. On the way down, I encounter the traces of last night – a bra and several other items of clothing are dangling across the bannister, there are cups, glasses and plates of left-over food all over the hallway. The smell of alcohol and smoke is in the air. There's no way anyone could miss the fact that a party took place here a few hours ago.

I find Cyril and Keshav in the living room. Cyril is sleeping on Wren's parents' expensive white sofa, and Kesh is sitting in the armchair by the fireplace. A girl has settled on his lap, her hands buried in his long black hair, kissing him passionately. The two of them look as if the party is just getting started again. When Kesh briefly releases his embrace and sees me, he throws his head back and laughs out loud. I give him the finger as I walk by.

The opulent terrace doors that lead into the Fitzgeralds' garden are wide open. I step outside and am forced to squint. The sunlight is not particularly bright, but it still feels like I'm being stabbed in the head. I look around carefully. Things don't look any better out here than in the house. Quite the opposite, in fact.

I find Wren and Alistair on the loungers by the pool. They've got their arms folded beneath their heads, eyes hidden behind sunglasses. I hesitate for just a moment, and then walk over to them.

'Beaufort,' Wren says happily and pushes his glasses up so that they sit on his curly black hair. Although he's grinning broadly, I can still see how pale his dark-brown skin appears. He must have a pretty bad hangover, just like me. 'Good night?'

'Can't really remember,' I reply and risk a glance towards Alistair.

'Go fuck yourself,' he says without looking at me. His hair gleams golden in the midday sun. 'I told you to leave my sister alone.'

I was counting on this reaction. I raise one eyebrow, unimpressed. 'I didn't force her to come to bed with me. Don't act as if she can't decide for herself who she wants to sleep with.'

Alistair grimaces and grunts something I can't make out.

I hope he'll calm down and not hold it against me forever; after all, it can't be undone. And I don't really feel like justifying myself to my friends. I have to do plenty of that at home.

'Don't you dare break her heart,' Alistair says after a while and looks at me through the reflective lenses of his pilot glasses. 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 what we were letting ourselves in for last night. And even if I hardly remember anything, I can still recall her breathless voice in my ear: *It's just happening once, James. Just once.*

Alistair doesn't want to accept that like me, his sister is no angel either.

'When your parents find out, they'll immediately announce your engagement,' Wren added a moment later, clearly amused.

I grimace. My parents have been pushing for me to get engaged to Elaine Ellington for years – or some other daughter of a wealthy family with a large inheritance. But I have better things to do at eighteen, than think about what or who might be coming my way after I finish school.

Alistair also snorts disdainfully. He seems similarly unimpressed at the thought of welcoming me as a new member of his family. I put my hand on my heart, feigning hurt. 'That almost sounds as if you don't want me to become your brother-in-law.'

Now he pushes the sunglasses up into his curly hair and flashes his dark eyes at me. He gets up from the lounge very slowly, like a predator. Although he is slim, I know how strong and fast he can be. I've experienced it often enough in training.

The way he's looking at me gives me a clue what he's planning.

'I'm warning you, Alistair,' I say with a snarl and take a step backwards.

It happens faster than I can blink. Suddenly he's right in front of me. 'I warned you, too,' he replied. 'Unfortunately, you took no notice.'

The next moment he shoves me forcefully. I stumble backwards, straight into the pool. The impact drives the air from my lungs, and for a moment, I can't tell which way is up and which is down. The water roars in my ears, the thumping headache feels much worse under water.

But I don't rise to the surface right away. I let my body go weak and freeze in this position with my face in the water. I stare at the pool tiles that I can only just blurrily make out and count the seconds in my head. I close my eyes for a moment. It's almost peacefully quiet. After half a minute, I begin to run out of air, and the pressure on my chest increases. I let one last dramatic air bubble rise to the surface, continue to wait, and then ...

Alistair jumps in the pool and grabs me. He drags me up to the surface, and when I open my eyes and see his shocked expression, I burst out laughing and gasp for air at the same time.

'Beaufort,' he yells in shock and jumps on me. His fist lands in my side – damn, he punches hard – and he tries to headlock me. But as he is smaller than me, it doesn't work out the way he wants it to. We wrestle for a moment, then I get a grip on him. I lift him up easily and throw him as far as I can. Wren's laughter sounds in my ear as Alistair sinks beneath the surface with a loud splash. When he resurfaces, he stares at me so angrily for a moment that I burst out laughing again. Alistair, like all the Ellingtons, has the face of an angel. Even when he wants to look threatening, his brown eyes coupled with the blonde curls and his bloody perfect features simply make it impossible.

'You're a damn wanker,' he says and sloshes a handful of water at me.

I wipe my hand across my face. 'Sorry, man.'

'It's alright,' he replies, but continues to splash me with water. I spread my arms out and let it happen. At some point he finally stops, and when I look at him, he just shakes his head with laughter.

Then I know that everything is alright between the two of us.

'James?' a familiar voice says.

I spin around. My twin sister is standing at the side of the pool, blocking out the sun. She wasn't at the party yesterday, and for a moment I think she wants to give me a hard time for bunking off with the boys. But then I look at her properly, and I turn cold: her shoulders are drooping, her arms hang weakly at her sides. Avoiding our eyes, she stares down at her feet.

I swim over to her as fast as I can and get out of the pool. I don't care how wet I am, I take her arm and force her to raise her head and look at me. My stomach sinks. Lydia's face is red and swollen. She must have been crying.

'What is it?' I ask and grip her arms a bit tighter. She tries to turn her head away, but I don't let her. I grip her chin so that she can't avoid my gaze.

Her eyes are brimming with tears. My throat feels dry.

'James,' she whispers hoarsely. 'I've messed up.'

## Ruby

Seeing these friendships break up really hurt me at the time, especially as no one in Maxton Hall wanted anything to do with me either – or even took any notice of me. I'm not from a rich family. I have a six-year-old backpack rather than a designer bag, a used laptop my parents bought me before school started instead of a gleaming MacBook. At weekends I don't go to the cool parties that everyone talks about for the rest of the following week – I simply don't exist for most of my fellow students. I like this now, but I felt incredibly lonely and isolated in the first few weeks in Maxton Hall. Until I met Lin. It was not just that she and I both experienced something similar with our friends that connected us. Lin also shares two of my biggest hobbies: she loves to organise, and she loves manga.

I can't say whether we would have met if it hadn't been for the issue with her parents. But even if I sometimes get the feeling that she misses the time when she was 'someone' here and hung around with people like the Ellingtons, I'm thankful to have her.

'Then go to the director and put up the posters in the library and the learning centre. I'll do the rest, okay?' I suggest.

I put my hand up for a high five. For a moment it looks as if she is going to say something, but then she just smiles thankfully and slaps my hand. 'You're the best.'

Someone pulls out the chair next to me and sits down. From one second to the next, Lin turns pale. I frown when she stares at me wide-eyed, then at the person who's sat down next to me, and then back at me.

I slowly turn to the side – and look directly into turquoise-blue eyes.

Like everyone in school, I recognise these eyes, but I have never seen them close up. They are part of a striking face with dark brows, prominent cheekbones and an arrogantly beautiful mouth.

James Beaufort has sat down next to me.

And he's looking at me.

He looks even more dangerous than from a distance. He's one of those students who behave as if they own the school. And this is exactly what he looks like: he stands tall and confident; his tie sits perfectly. The uniform, which is pretty bog standard, looks fantastic on him, as if it were made for his body. That's probably because his mother designed it. The only thing that doesn't look meticulous is his red-blond hair, which in contrast to his sister's, is not perfectly styled but artfully ruffled.

'Hi,' he says.

Have I ever heard him speak before? Shouting on the lacrosse field or drunk at Maxton Hall parties, yes, but not like this. His 'hi' sounds familiar, as if it were completely normal for him to sit next to me at lunch and speak to me. But we've never exchanged a single word before. And that's the way it's meant to stay.

I carefully look around, struggling to swallow. Not everyone, but certainly some heads have turned in our direction. It feels like the invisibility cloak that I've been wearing for two years has slipped a bit.

*Not good, not good, not good.*

'Hey, Lin. Would you mind if I borrowed your friend for a moment?' he asks, his eyes never leaving my face. His gaze is so intense that it sends shivers down my back. It takes a while for me to register what he's said. The next moment I turn to face to Lin and try to send her signals that I would mind, but she doesn't look at me, only at James.

'Sure,' she croaks. 'Feel free.'

I just manage to pick my backpack up from the floor, before James Beaufort's hand is resting on my lower back and he is steering me out of the cafeteria. I walk a bit faster, just to get away from his hand, but I can still feel his touch afterwards, as if it has burned itself into my skin through the fabric of my blazer. He leads me around the large staircase in the hall and only stops when we reach a place where our fellow students going in and out of the cafeteria can't see us anymore.

I can imagine what he wants. As he hasn't so much as looked at me for the last two years, it must have something to do with his sister and Mr Sutton.

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

His lips form a slight smile.

'Do you indeed?'

'Listen, Beaufort ...'

'I fear I have to stop you at this point, Robyn.' He takes a step towards me. I don't draw back, but simply look at him with raised brows.

'You will immediately forget what you saw yesterday, do you understand? If I find out that you've breathed a word of it, I'll make sure you're kicked out of school.'

He presses something into my hand. Stunned, I look down and stiffen when I realise what it is.

A fat wad of fifty-pound notes is lying in my hand. I swallow dryly.

I've never held so much money in my hands before.

I look up. James's arrogant grin speaks volumes. He's telling me clearly that he knows full well that I could do with the money. And that this is not the first time he's bought someone's silence.

His gaze and his entire bearing are so smug that I'm suddenly gripped by incredible anger.

'Are you serious?' I utter between clenched teeth and hold the wad up in the air. I am so angry that my hands are shaking.

Now he looks puzzled. He puts his hand inside his blazer and pulls out a second wad and holds it out to me. 'Ten thousand is the limit.'

Aghast, I stare at the money, and then back at his face.

'If you keep your mouth shut until the end of term, we can double it. Till the end of the school year, we'll quadruple it.'

His words repeat over and over again in my head, and my blood begins to boil. The way he stands in front of me, throws ten-thousand pounds at me and wants to shut me up.

As if it were nothing. As if that were the done thing when you've been born with a silver spoon in your mouth. Something suddenly becomes very clear:

It's not that I can't stand James Beaufort.

I *detest* him. And everything that he stands for.

The way he lives – without regard or fear for the consequences. If you have a name like Beaufort, then you're untouchable. It doesn't matter what you do – Daddy's money will fix it. While I've been busting a gut for two years to get just the slightest chance of being accepted at Oxford, sixth form is just a walk in the park for him.

It's unfair. And the longer I stare at him, the angrier I become.

My fingers tighten round the notes in my hand. I clench my teeth and rip apart the thin strip of paper around the wad.

James frowns. 'What ...?'

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

James unwaveringly returns my stony gaze; his only reaction is the pulsating muscle at his jaw.

As the notes slowly float to the ground, I turn and walk away.

[END OF SAMPLE]