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Ellen woke up with a start and sat upright just before her radio clock turned on and played a popular top-40 song. She buried her face in her hands and with a moan she fell back into her pillow. That dream again! Always that same dream! Ever since the accident, nearly nine months ago, she had been having this dream so many times. After they moved house, not one night had passed without these images. The stress of moving was probably to blame. Saying goodbye to her house of birth, her dear friends, all the familiar furniture and other stuff that couldn't possibly fit into their new house. Getting used to their new home and her new room. And to top all that, today would be her first day at a new school. She had to pick up her books and would meet her classmates and her tutor. Her stomach quivered with nerves. She didn't know anybody here and had to start all over again.

With a sigh she pushed aside her rumpled comforter and placed her feet on the bare wooden planks. She looked around the dull bleak room. Most of her things were still in boxes piled up against the wall. Together with her mother she had tried to assemble an IKEA wardrobe but they got lost in the instructions. So now she had to wait for her uncle Chris who would come to see them next weekend.

Ellen stood up, walked over to the sink and splashed her face with cold water. She tried to tame her red curls with a comb but failed and finally pulled her hair through an elastic rubber band into a high ponytail. Her hair was simply unmanageable! She squeezed some concealer on her fingertip and put it on the scar on her left temple. It was still red and slightly raised, but the doctors had assured her that in time it would become smoother, softer and paler, leaving nothing but a thin white line.

She threw on a white T-shirt and a pair of jeans that were still lying on the chair beside her bed and quickly stepped into her scuffed white sneakers. Reluctantly she put on her glasses. Just last week she had lost a contact lens and after her mother had told her that for the time being there would be no money to buy a new one, she had tried to go through life with only one lens. But in no time she had double vision and a splitting headache. That left her with no other option than to find her old specs and deal with the fact that she had to wear them for a few weeks, maybe even months.

Downstairs the table was laid for one. Next to her plate her mother had left her a note. She had already left for the hospital, working an early shift.

*Good morning Muffin Mouse,*

*Have a great day today. I'm sure it will turn out better than expected.*

*At the end of the day you'll have a lot of new friends.*

*I'll be home around 3:30 pm, so we can go shopping for wrapping paper and other school stuff and maybe even find you a new desk.*

*Huggies and kisses ☺*

*Mum*

Ellen read the note while she buttered some toast.

Her mother had been utterly shattered by her husband's death. The first few months she had muddled on, taking care of Ellen, going back to work. She had tried so very hard to overcome the loss, but to no avail. She just couldn't go on living in their renovated farmhouse located in a idyllic village in the south of Holland. Everything reminded her of the happy life she had together with her husband and her daughter. A life that came to such an abrupt end. She had to make a new start. Try to get her life back on track. So she decided to turn back to where she originally came from. In no time she found work as a first aid nurse in the Emergency Department at the local hospital. Then she went house-

hunting. She sold the renovated farmhouse with a good profit so she could afford this house. A three bedroom terrace house set around a small garden square on the outskirts of Blaricum, a small town in the Gooi area, centrally located to Amsterdam and Utrecht. Nowadays also known for the rich and famous that lived there. Her mother had chosen it because the house was end-terrace and its backyard ended in a public park where the leaves of high white birches whispered in the wind. There was one drawback: with her 15 years of age, Ellen was by far the youngest tenant in the neighbourhood.

She cleared the table and put her plate and cup on the kitchen sink in the small open kitchen and then sauntered to the hallway. She stopped at the big photo of her father. 'O Daddy, I miss you so much!' she whispered while her fingers caressed the glass of the photo frame.

'Come on, Tigger, don't be miserable. Keep your chin up!' his voice resonated in her head. A smile lit up her face. Dear Dad, whenever she thought of him, she could always hear his voice as if he was there with her. And although she knew that was just imagination, it always gave her such a warm feeling. She took a deep breath, pushed her shoulders back and walked into the hallway where she grabbed her Herschel backpack from under the stairs. She chuckled looking at the silly buttons her friends had pinned on it as a farewell. She took the keys from the key-rack, opened the front door and stepped onto the gravel path.

The shed was crammed with boxes and all sorts of junk. She pulled out her old Granny Bike, locked the door and mounted it for her first ride alone to her new school. The closer she got, the bigger the houses, the longer the driveways, the higher the hedges and fences. She had cycled this road twice with her mother to memorise the route but without really paying any attention to her surroundings. She couldn't believe her eyes. Some of the houses looked like small castles. Would those be homes for just one family? Half her old village would fit into them.

After a 20-minute ride she turned into the avenue on which her school was situated. A long line up of SUV's, 4-wheel-drives and cabrio's were parked at the Kiss and Ride to drop off students. She passed them and steered to the right entering the schoolyard of the Rembrandt College, her new school, and got off her bike. She looked around, ill at ease. All around the schoolyard cheerful groups stood chatting and making fun. New arrivals were welcomed loud and enthusiastic.

'Yo Roderick, my man! Is it true? Your old man belongs to the Bentley club now? And you even went jet skiing in Saint Tropez. What the hell, man, you're a lucky bastard!'

'Whazzup Christian! Good to see you and yes I blew everyone out of the water...'

Ellen walked over to the bike sheds and tried to find an empty spot for her old Granny Bike amongst the shiny scooters and latest bicycles. She locked up her bike and with a heavy heart started to walk across the schoolyard towards the school entrance. With her head held down and her eyes on the pavement she didn't notice she was walking straight towards a group of girls until it was too late and she bumped into one of them.

'Jesuuusss, you stepped on my Manolo's, biatch!'

Ellen looked up startled and stared into a picture perfect face of a girl with flawless makeup on and perfectly straight, shiny blond hair that was kept out of her face by a pair of expensive sunglasses on top of her head. She was wearing a suede mini skirt with a matching top that showed her bellybutton. Around her right wrist lots of bracelets tinkled when she adjusted the strap of a big pink bag dangling from her shoulder. It had flashy golden letters saying: CITYVOGUE.COM and, in a small triangle, the brand name PRADA. Her feet were in golden slippers that had three straps in leopard print and a small heel.

'I'm so sorry,' Ellen stammered completely baffled by the hostile attitude of the girl, but

even more by the sudden sense of emptiness, joylessness and coldness that settled around her heart and made her flesh creep. Every sound suddenly became distorted and was pushed into the background as Ellen's head filled with a buzzing sound. Everyone and everything around her seemed to move in slow motion. She looked around, bewildered. The following moment her hands flew to her ears as the blond girl's voice came back in full force.

'I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry!' she mimicked Ellen. 'Do you have any idea what these shoes cost?! And you just stepped on them with your nasty elephant feet! Where the hell are you coming from anyway? Been living under a rock, no doubt.' She looked at Ellen with undisguised contempt. 'Did a carnival come to town?'

The other girls in the group chuckled.

Before Ellen could reply, the haughty blond turned her back on her and stalked off to the school entrance, wiggling her hips and tossing her long blond hair over her shoulder. Her fans followed in her footsteps.

Ellen watched her, completely flabbergasted. What a bitch! She took a couple of deep breaths and felt the empty, joyless feeling fade away. She gathered all her courage to continue her way but then her eyes were drawn to some strange spots on the pavement. Where the blond had been standing only minutes before there was a large wet spot from which smaller ones seemed to go in the direction of the entrance. Ellen followed the trail with her eyes. Further ahead the blond was walking with her fans across the schoolyard. Next to her, small dark spots appeared on the pavement. They looked like wet footsteps. Ellen pushed her glasses up her nose, stunned. The blond had reached the entrance and went in through the glass doors. Within a split second the wet spots disappeared, vaporised into thin air as if they were never there.

Ellen blinked her eyes and shrugged her shoulders. With her head held high she walked on thus preventing another clash. In the hallway she checked the monitor for her class number and found her way through the school building. Outside classroom M12 she halted and took another deep breath before she entered. 'Oh God, no,' she groaned.

The haughty blond was sitting on top of one of the desks surrounded by even more girls. She clearly had everyone's attention and spoke with a loud voice. Ellen's first impulse was to turn on her heels. But what good would that do? This was her class, she couldn't change that. At least not at this moment.

The blond fell silent in the middle of her sentence and her eyes widened when she became aware of Ellen. 'Jesuuusss, tell me my eyes are deceiving me! Is that Irish traveller going to be in our class? OMG, the neighbourhood clearly is not what it used to be!

Ellen felt a blush creep up her neck that turned her face a bright shade of red when all the girls looked her up and down. She tried hard to ignore the curious looks and moved to an empty desk near the window.

'Anyways...' the blond continued in her loud voice when Ellen was seated, dragging the attention back to her '... then I told my daddy, my Louis Vuitton is so last season, I can't be seen with that at school. And tadaaa... look what I got!' She showed her pink bag. 'The latest Prada.'

'Wow, I'd love to have a father like that,' sighed one of the girls, looking green with envy.

'Oh, and there is more, girls! I saved the best for last,' the blond cooed in a high pitched voice. 'We've got new neighbours!'

'Where? The house next to yours or the one opposite? There were two houses for sale weren't there?' one of the girls asked.

'Yeah right. It's the one next to us, but that's totally beside the point,' the blond hissed, irritated. 'It's about the boy next door! I didn't believe my eyes, OMG, he's, like, so fucking

hot, I started to drool!'

Meanwhile, the classroom had filled with students but the seat next to Ellen stayed empty. Everybody seemed to know each other from last year and friends sat together and shared their holiday stories and joked around. Nobody paid her any attention. She stared out of the window onto the schoolyard where the last students hurried inside. Tears were burning behind her eyes. She had never felt so alone. Why on earth did she select this school?

The classroom's door closed with a bang. Ellen looked up, startled, and watched a woman walk briskly to the blackboard. She was young, somewhere in her late twenties, Ellen guessed. She was tanned and her sun bleached hair fell wild around her face. She wore a pair of slim fit khaki pants with a lot of pockets and loosely rolled up legs, a tight black T-shirt with the text: I HATE SHOPPING and on her feet a pair of outdoor sandals. Her jewellery consisted of a chunky silver ring around her left middle finger and a diving watch around her wrist. Around her neck a leather strap with a sparkling piece of rock crystal. She slammed the folder she carried down on her desk. It was only then the blond girl noticed her.

'Jesuuusss, what's she doing here?!' She hissed, aghast of the unexpected presence of the woman in front of the blackboard. 'Where's Miller?'

'Claire Lefèbre, how about using the chairs to sit on and putting our feet on the floor? It's been mopped, so you don't have to worry about getting your latest foot jewellery, or whatever you call those things you're wearing, dirty.' The young woman in front of the class looked at the blond with raised eyebrows, standing straddle-legged with her hands on her hips.

Ellen couldn't help smiling. She peeped at the girls in the back of the classroom. The blond stepped off the desk and sat down on a chair, clearly offended.

'*Bitch!*' she whispered, but still too loud.

The woman in front of the class replied. 'I'm so glad your vocabulary picked up this summer. Really gives me hope.'

Ellen couldn't help but gloat.

'Right,' the woman went on, 'class 3Hd, obviously you were expecting to see mister Miller. Unfortunately he seriously injured his back during the holidays and won't be back before Christmas. So I'll be taking over a few of his tasks, therefore I'll not only be your English and Maths teacher but also your tutor.'

'*Fuck!*' Ellen heard behind her. The blond was not amused.

'But first things first, let me introduce myself to our new students,' the woman continued undisturbed by the outburst of the blond, 'I see we have two, and that would be Ellen Woods and Nadir ...' She was interrupted by a loud knock on the door before it swung open and a self-confident boy entered the classroom.

'OMG, that's him!' the blond giggled nervously.

The boy was completely unaware of the excitement he had caused with the girls in the back of the classroom and walked up to the teacher to shake her hand. 'I'm so sorry I'm late, I couldn't find the classroom and got lost in the building. I'm Nadir, Nadir Garzetti.'

The teacher shook his hand. 'Welcome Nadir. I just told the class we have two newbies this year to whom I've to introduce myself. Let me do that right away. My name is Freddie Metz, your tutor and your English and Maths teacher. Find yourself a seat so we can get started.'

Nadir looked around the classroom. There were two empty desks in the back just in front of Claire Lefèbre who sat upright, parted her lips and fluttered her eyelashes adoringly to attract his attention. Nadir didn't seem to notice her as he walked in the aisle between the desks and sank into the empty seat next to Ellen, who was startled immensely

and felt another blush creep up her cheeks. She made herself as small as possible. Nadir didn't notice her reaction and turned towards her. 'Hello, I'm Nadir and you are?' Ellen looked shyly down on his outstretched hand. After a moment she put hers out. His grip was warm and firm while hers was cool, slightly damp and insecure.

'Hi,' her voice sounded hoarse, 'I'm Ellen Woods.' Finally she looked up and gazed into an insanely attractive face with the kindest, sweetest, most beautiful eyes she had ever seen, deep brown with gold flecks. Those eyes looked at her friendly, showing interest and narrowing slightly when he gave her a warm smile and said: 'Hi Ellen, nice to meet you. Is it okay if I sit next to you?' While he spoke his black hair fell on his forehead. He carelessly ran his hand through it brushing it aside again.

Ellen nodded, speechless. Although the moment lasted no more than thirty seconds, she completely forgot where she was. When the teacher continued speaking, reality kicked in again.

'Ah wonderful, Nadir, you just met our other new student, Ellen Woods. Welcome, the both of you.' She opened the folder on her desk and took out a small pile of papers which she held above her head. 'This is your class schedule for the coming year. You all know how it works. Write it down in your school diary, however do check the school's website on a regular basis to see if there are any changes in the schedule and of course for any other relevant information.' She handed the papers over to a boy who sat in front of her and instructed him to hand them out. The following hour the class was informed on what was expected of them this year and especially the first semester. It was going to be an important year because at the end they would have to make some crucial choices involving their future level of education. Ellen listened carefully and made some notes.

'Well then,' the tutor ended her speech, 'that's all folks. Thanks for your attention. If there aren't any questions, you may leave and we'll all see each other coming Thursday when the lessons start.' She glanced at the paper she was holding and smiled. 'Fantastic! English and two hours of Maths.'

The classroom immediately became noisy with chairs scraping on the floor and feet shuffling as students stood up, eager to leave and continue their conversations and fool around.

'Hold on! Not so fast!' the tutor cried out as she gestured for them to sit down again. 'You lot make absolutely sure you bring the right Maths book with you on Thursday. That will be Modern Mathematics 3A! You can leave 3B at home. Oh, and Ellen, could you stick around for a moment, please? I've got something for you. Right then, class dismissed!'

Ellen stayed seated at her desk while everybody around her got up and left the classroom, talking in loud voices. Nadir also rose from his chair and put his hand on her shoulder. 'I'm gonna go now. See you on Thursday, okay?' Ellen just nodded and waved timidly. She was a bit confused. Her tutor didn't mention anything about where to collect this year's school books.

When the classroom finally emptied Freddie Metz walked over to her, pulled out a chair from under the desk in front of Ellen and sat down on it astride, arms leaning on the back of the chair.

'Finally, some peace and quiet around here,' she sighed. 'Tell me, how are you doing? You think you can get used to this school? You already met Nadir. That's nice. I mean, him being a newbie as well. Maybe you two can support each other the first few weeks. The majority of the students here go back quite a few years. Some even went to kindergarten together. So it might be difficult at first to fit in, feeling like an outsider.'

Ellen nodded. She had already experienced that.

'Anyway, I think you'll be doing just fine, but in case you should encounter some

problems, don't hesitate to come to me. No matter what it might be, I'm here for you and there isn't a problem we can't solve. I know you've been going through a tough time last year and probably are still in the middle of it. So if anything is bothering you, no matter what, don't hold it in and come to me! Alright?'

'Okay, I will. Thank you. Ellen whispered. 'I do have a question.'

'Well, spit it out.'

'When will we be getting our books... I mean...'

'Ah yes, that's the reason I asked you to stay. You see, our school's policy is to have the book parcels delivered at the students home address. However, until recently your address was unknown to us. So we had your books delivered here at school.' She got up and walked over to her desk and pulled out a box from underneath. 'And here they are!'

'Oh, okay,' Ellen sighed relieved.

'You think you can manage. It's rather heavy.'

'Sure, no problem. At my old school we always had to pick them up ourselves. No home delivery there,' Ellen grinned. 'I will carry the box on my bike rack.'

'Right! Well now, if you don't have any more questions, I'll leave you to it. I'm already late for a meeting. It can get a bit hectic at the start of a new school year. You're going to be alright then?' Without waiting for an answer, she grabbed the folder from her desk, waved her hand in the air and rushed out of the classroom. 'See you on Thursday,' she called over her shoulder.

Ellen got up, threw her backpack over one shoulder and lifted up the box. Jeez, it was heavy indeed! She arrived in the hallway, puffing and panting, and pushed the glass entrance doors open with her back. In the schoolyard students were hanging out together. Ellen dragged herself to the bike sheds. Her arms were hurting by now and her glasses slipped down her sweaty nose. The sweat also made her scar itch badly.

A couple of girls were hanging out close to the bike sheds, cooing and giggling and doing their utmost to impress the guy in their midst. It was Nadir, completely surrounded by Claire Lefèbre's clan. Ellen could hear her loud voice which drowned all others.

'Oh, come on, Nadir. Don't be a spoilsport! Promise you'll come to my pool party on Saturday. After all you're the boy next door now. It's going to be incredible. You'll have a blast, for sure...'

Disappointment flared through Ellen. The only person who had noticed her and had shown some interest was already accepted and obviously very well liked. Coming Thursday she would be sitting alone again. What was she thinking? That a guy like that would actually see her? She had nearly reached her bike, swallowing her disappointment, when she heard Claire sneer in a sharp voice.

'Look at her! Is she moonlighting as a porter now?! She's becoming weirder by the hour.'

Ellen pretended not to hear anything and strapped the heavy box onto the bike rack. But the words that were followed by laughter, cut through her like a knife. She didn't care about those stupid girls, but the fact that Nadir was now one of them, while only moments before he had been so kind, hurt her deeply. She pulled her bike out of the shed and rode off, blinded by the tears that filled her eyes.