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How strange to see myself lying like that. I was white, even more pale than usual, my hair in a long plait beside my neck, laid out on the pink cardigan. A single candle was burning; it was large, long and white. It stood in a candlestick from which the gold plating was beginning to flake. I saw no mourners. In fact, there wasn't a single person. The room in which I was laid out was empty, there was no one sat in the chairs. Even my mother was absent. Likewise in the adjoining room, in the space where people should have fallen tearfully into each other's arms when everything was over, looking for comfort, shaking their heads and mumbling 'She was still so young, only sixteen...' it remained quiet, the coffee and cake untouched. There was music at least, but I didn't recognise it, something instrumental, it sounded classical. Who chose that?

I was back in my body. The purple lining of the casket felt cold against my neck. Suddenly a frail, old man in a black suit with grey, wispy hair was also there. He walked towards my casket. I wanted to open my mouth, ask him why I was lying here, who he was, where my mother had got to while I was about to be cremated, and who on earth had put me in this terrible pink cardigan. But I could not move. My voice wasn't working, my face was frozen and I could not even blink.

The man smiled at me, a calm, wise smile, as if to say it was better this way. And maybe he was right.

He closed the casket, it was dark. And stuffy. It smelled of the sawdust in Sattnin's cage.

Sattnin!

Who was looking after him now? What if my mother actually *had* taken him to the petting zoo to feed to the snakes as she had threatened during one of our many arguments? I had to get out! Away from here!

With the palms of my hands, I pushed against the top of the casket, but it would not move. The lid was shut tight.

Suddenly my voice was back. 'No!' I shouted. 'Let me out of here!' I banged with my fists above my head.

No one heard me.

The music had stopped.

I heard footsteps retreating, sounding ever more distant, no one reacted to my screaming and thumping. Somewhere a door closed. Then all was silent.

At home, in my room, a different girl was laying in my bed. A new daughter for my mother.

Blond.

I woke up with a headache.



Another nightmare, from which I unfortunately did *not* wake up, was the Mercatus High School. Throughout the summer holidays I had hoped that the fourth year would be different, that perhaps things would finally be better, that for once I would not end up in their class. That I would only see them in the corridors every so often, where at least I could try to avoid them and, other than that, would have nothing to do with them. That my first three years at this school would have been disappointing and that now it might, finally, be alright.

But when, a week before the start of the new year, I received the list of my classmates by email, I thumped the screen. And again. With my fist. The monitor had rocked but then found its balance and the screen had remained the same. Undisturbed. I had not been mistaken. Yet again I wondered who made these lists and how they did it, whether a bunch of names were mixed up by the computer and then divided by three so that they had three classes, or whether someone really thought: yes, let's put Elizabeth Versluys in class 4b, with Sabina de Ruiter, Sebastiaan Volkers and Jeremy Hasselbank. Lovely. Just like the last three years.

The only positive thing about 4b was the presence of Alec Leeuwenburgh, who was finally in my class this year. Before then I had seen him around the school and noticed him because he seemed much older and wiser than other boys our age. He had a grown-up appearance, like a man in a boy's body. Something like that drew attention, especially at the acne-strewn Mercatus High.

Alec was always in the company of Riley Konings, and extraordinarily pretty blond girl. She too was in my class for the first time this year and she and Alec made a strikingly beautiful couple. I caught myself staring at them during the lessons, but I couldn't help myself. You *had* to look at them. They were, in all their perfection, endlessly fascinating.

I stood no chance at all with Alec, I knew that. It was nonsense to be in love with him. He came from a different world, a closed world behind a door to which I had no key. His life was *members only*. The V.I.P. party to which I would never be invited. He was Riley's.



When break was over we would have another hour's lesson, maths, before I could finally go home. After the Christmas holidays I had started to spend breaks in the toilets because even the school hall wasn't safe any more. Despite the constant presence of two teachers, who sat at a table on the stage and supervised the room from there, Sabina always found a way to inconspicuously throw chocolate milk over my trousers or smear mayonnaise in my hair. At least in the toilets she could not get to me.

When the bell told me that break was over I opened the toilet door and stepped out, heading up the stairs. Slowly I walked along the second floor hall to classroom 2.3.

Damn.

Both Sabina and Jeremy and Sebastiaan were still stood outside the classroom, alone, with their backs to me, while the rest of the class – as far as I could tell – was already inside.

I stopped halfway down the corridor.

From the other end of the hall, Mr Schop approached. He strode briskly towards the classroom. He beckoned me. 'Come on, Elizabeth! What are you waiting for? The bell has gone, we're starting!'

Sabina, Jeremy and Sebastiaan turned and looked back simultaneously. Sebastiaan grinned. While Sabina and Jeremy walked into the class after Mr. Schop, he remained standing. I walked quickly past him. I had one foot in the classroom when he suddenly shoved me aside and pushed in front of me. 'Watch it, pig!'

When class was finished and we were dismissed, I was the first to leave the school. Quickly, before Sabina would be there too, I went to the bike shed and unlocked my bike. But before I could even pull the bike from the rack, I saw it.

Flat tyres. Again.

I cursed.

As I walked back into the school to find Sundar, Sabina was standing with Denise in the schoolyard, smoking. Denise often loitered after the last lesson to wait for her friends from 4c. She was extremely arrogant because she had once been in *Fancy* magazine and as a result thought she was Holland's Next Top Model. But at least she didn't join in the bullying.

'Don't you need to get home, Elizabeth?' asked Sabina with an expressionless face as I walked past them.

I pretended not to hear her.

When I walked back into the bike shed with Sundar, she had gone. Sundar was the janitor and the hero of the school. If a group of boys had a punch-up, it was he who got in between them, when a girl in the fifth year was hassled by her pushy ex-boyfriend, it was he who kicked the aggressive boy out of the school. And he was a star at fixing punctures. But despite the jokes that he made as usual, and that tripped effortlessly off his tongue, I could tell from his eyes that that he felt sorry for me. It was already the third time that month.

That night in bed, I listened to Sattnin's breathing. As usual he was lying beside me on the pillow, to the left of my face. The familiar sweet smell of his sleeping body was comforting, the nicest smell in the world. For many people rats are vermin, but that is because they don't know better. Sattnin was my friend. He was clever, funny and the only one in the world who loved me as I was.

'How many times do I have to tell you not to let that filthy animal into your bed?' my mother often demanded, 'He poos and pees on your pillow and then you lay in it with your face. How very hygienic!'

And I could explain to her a hundred times that Sattnin was house trained and never did his business outside the cage, but she would not have any of it. My mother did not understand me and she never would. She had no idea what I went through at school. If she knew then it wouldn't cross her mind to be so negative about something that made me happy, the *one* thing that made me happy.

When she would finally come home from work later that evening and open my door quietly to see if I was asleep, she would see Sattnin curled up and nestled against my cheek and, with a sigh, would close the door again. She did not know that there were also hairs on my pillow, long strands that I pulled out of my head each night. That my scalp was still burning from what I had done when she came into the room, she did not know either. Long after she herself had gone to bed I would still be awake, wishing that the new day would stay away, at a safe distance on the other side of the night. But in the end I fell asleep. The mornings came regardless.



Since my father left us, we'd never really sat down to dinner. Actually, we didn't even have a real dinner table anymore because my mother used it for the work she brought home. It was covered with folders and files. Every evening my mother served our food in the kitchen and we ate it in the living room, sitting on the sofa in front of the television.

Our emptied plates were in front of us on the dark brown coffee table, grey placemats underneath them. The placemats were a fitting reflection of our existence, colourless and smudged. The stains on them, the spilled fat, were the bullying that soiled my life. Or maybe *I* was the dirt - the world a placemat, and I the greasy stain that had ended up there unwittingly.

Riley did not eat sitting on the sofa, of that I was sure. Surely she would sit with her parents at a beautifully set table with a clean white cloth and a golden candelabra in the middle. The candlelight was spreading a warm glow over her face and the television was switched off, because the Konings' family did not need it in order to enjoy their evening meal. Instead they had conversations, Riley talked about her experiences at school and her parents smiled happily at each other because they were so proud of their perfect daughter. Riley ate caviar and steamed exotic vegetables. She drank freshly squeezed fruit juice from crystal glasses. The cutlery was real silver and was polished every day, and she never spilled anything. Her parents drank champagne or expensive red wine that her father kept in their personal wine cellar under the house. And every –

My mother's voice pulled me back to my own evening meal. 'I'll have to work late again tomorrow night, Lizzie. But I've had a look in the freezer and there are three meals in it. You can choose which one you have, if you like.'

I looked up. An ad on the television showed a blond girl who drove a pink cabriolet with her girlfriends and laughed hysterically because she was so happy with her clean-shaven legs. A pink razor was shown triumphantly, next to the broad smile of the model, who wore skimpy white shorts and proudly swung her legs into the air.

'Lizzie? I'm talking to you.'

'I heard you,' I said. 'Freezer food tomorrow.'

My mother sighed. 'I know I'm working late a lot at the moment, but that's just how it is. You said you understood last time.'

'I do.'

'Well, why are you pulling a face as if it's so awful to just quickly warm up your food? There's even a pizza there, if I'm right.'

I said nothing and looked back at the TV.

From the corner of my eye I saw my mother's quizzical face, the bags under her eyes, the crease between her eyebrows. Wrinkles that had not been there a few years ago became deeper every day. I felt her watching me, waiting for a reaction.

I stood up. 'I'm going to do my homework.'

'Lizzie,' my mum said, but I had already left the room.



For more than half an hour I was sat on the closed lid of the toilet. Every day was the same. Trying to avoid Sabina, Jeremy and Sebastiaan, cycling home when all the others were long gone. The new, tougher rules made it impossible to skip school this year. The previous years I had often managed to stay away, to call and pretend to be my mother, but this was no longer an option since every name on the sick list was checked with the parents. In bed in the evening I felt the bruises on my legs where Sabina's boots had hit me, I heard the echo of their voices. Only when I shifted the pain by pulling my hair out, either one hair at the time or in tufts, would I find calm.

I looked at my watch. The last voices, girls from another class, had disappeared from the toilets more than ten minutes ago. The only people left at school were those who had been allowed to catch up on their computing assignment in the IT-room on the second floor. Alec was one of them. That assignment took an hour and a half, surely they weren't done yet. It was past four o'clock everyone else must have left by now. Sabina and the others would be gone too without a doubt. Surely they would not wait for me, I wasn't worth that much of their spare time.

I opened the door and made my way out through the quiet corridor of the ground floor.

'No!'

I tried to pull myself free, but Sebastiaan and Jeremy held my arms tight. My glasses slid from my left ear and hung across my nose at an angle. 'Let me go!'

They pressed their feet on mine so my legs had nowhere to go. Apart from the four of us there was no one in the schoolyard.

Sabina picked the glasses from my face and put them on. She puffed out her heavily made up cheeks with a chuckle. 'I'm Elizabeth,' she said in a deep voice. 'I'm a fat troll and I stink like a pig.'

'Yo, take them off before you catch scabies,' Jeremy said.

Sabina shrieked and pulled my glasses from her face. Scowling, she threw them on the ground. 'Yuck!'

I was still struggling to free my arms. 'Why don't you just leave me alone for once?'

She smiled and left my question unanswered.

Suddenly Sabina's eyes started to glint. 'Hey, guys, wanna see something?'

As if they already knew what Sabina would do, Jeremy and Sebastiaan started grinning and Sabina came closer. My immediate reaction was to shrink back, but I was held tight.

Sabina's breath stank of cigarette smoke and with a false grin on her face she pulled my cardigan up in one movement. At once I felt the cold air seep through the fibres of my white cotton bra. As usual I was wearing a big and shapeless one from Marks & Spencer. My mother had often tried to get me to wear nicer bras, but I did not find them comfortable and did not see the point. They were wasted on my figure anyway.

Sabina was roaring with laughter. 'Very sexy!'

'Let fucking go of me!' Jeremy and Sebastiaan had me so firmly in a hold that the muscles in my arms seemed to cut through my skin. A sharp pain went from my shoulder blade to my lower back.

Jeremy made growling noises in my ear.

Sabina was laughing louder all the time and wildly pulled my bra up. My breasts bulged painfully from underneath it and Sebastiaan started howling. A loud, insane

sound. His cry was taken by the wind, flew over the school grounds and seemed as though it might penetrate the walls of Mercatus High, so that everyone would hear the awful noise and rush to see where it came from. They would all point and laugh at me, gathering around me in a circle.

I closed my eyes, pressed them firmly shut. The laughter and howling echoed around me, but I could escape this world. If I only concentrated hard enough, it would be a nightmare and I would wake up. I am lying in bed. *Now.*

I opened my eyes.

I was not lying in bed. I was still stood here, in the schoolyard, where the cold air was feeling up my body and Sabina's shrill laughter was piercing my ears. *If I had a knife now I would stab her.* Until she was dead. No matter how awful that might sound, I would do it. And I would leave her there, rancid food for wood lice. Wipe my shoes on her. She deserved no better. I would not even be sorry.

'Here, why don't you hold her for a minute,' Jeremy said to Sabina. 'I want to have a closer look at this.'

While Jeremy and Sabina swapped places I tried to wriggle free, use my arm, but Jeremy did not let go until Sabina had firmly taken over his grip.

Jeremy was standing in front of me, his head tilted, his thumb underneath his chin. If Alec passed by now and saw me like this, I would die, I was sure of it. With a rough hand Jeremy took my left breast and gave it a hard squeeze. My body tensed underneath his touch, his hand on a place where no one had touched me before. Jeremy kept squeezing, harder, until I could no longer suppress a cry of pain. Tears filled my eyes. I tried to step back, but Sebastiaan still had his foot pressed on my ankle. Sabina was standing on my right foot with her boot.

'What deformed tits you have,' Jeremy said and patted my breast from underneath.

'Yuck!' Sabina shrieked. 'What a fat jelly pudding.'

Jeremy laughed. 'And look at those nipples, they look like teats.' He took the left one between his thumb and his index finger and gave it a firm twist.

Pain flamed up in my stomach. My eyes were burning. My bottom lip started to tremble and I bit it, hard. I did not have to let this happen. With all the force I had in me I lifted my right knee so Sabina staggered and as hard as I could I hit Jeremy between his legs.

Strike.

With a scream he let go of my breast and doubled up.

'Filthy whore!' Sabina yelled. She let go of me and put her arm around her hunched and groaning boyfriend. 'You OK?'

With my free hand I quickly pulled my bra and my cardigan down. The bra was twisted and the straps were piercing my flesh, but that did not matter now. I pushed Sebastiaan away, but he did not seem to notice and went to stand on the other side of Jeremy. He wore a shocked expression.

Before I could run away, Sabina leapt in front of me and with a flat hand slapped me hard in the face. The blow on my cheek resonated in my head, echoing between my ears. 'Dirty cuntpig,' she hissed.

Fighting the urge to put a hand to my burning face, I leaned down and quickly grabbed my bag and glasses from the ground. Get out of here, and quick.

'You should be grateful for what Jeremy just did,' Sabina spat at me, 'cause there is not a boy in the world who would ever want to touch you.'

'That's right,' Jeremy added.

When I straightened up I saw his fist hurtling towards me. There was no time to duck; he hit me right on my nose. For the second time my glasses ended up on the ground.

Something in my face cracked. Everything turned dark. Lightning bolts flashed to and fro. I was so dizzy I started to stagger. I pressed my hands firmly to my nose. They were trembling. Out of pain? Out of anger? I did not know. My face was wet. Tears, or blood, perhaps both. A wave of nausea came up.

Somewhere in the tumbling images I saw Jeremy climb on his scooter. 'Fucking troll. I'll get you.'

He beckoned Sabina and she jumped up behind him, her arms around his waist. Then he spat at me.

The phlegm landed next to my glasses on the ground and Jeremy sped away. Sebastiaan tore behind him noisily on his own scooter, his eyes squinting. 'You'll regret this!' He yelled over his shoulder.

The fear I should have felt at this threat did not materialise, nothing existed except the pain in my face. I still had my hands cupped around my nose and my mouth had filled with the iron taste of blood. I bowed my head and let my eyes close. Finally, I was alone, it was over. For now. A combination of relief and pain exploded in my skull, my throat, my stomach. It made my tears flow, my body shake. A hoarse sound came from my mouth.

When, after what must have been a couple of minutes, I had pulled myself together, I walked back into the school. My eyes were dry but my head was down and I was still dizzy. I headed towards the toilets. I'd put my glasses into my coat pocket, it was too painful to wear them on my nose. If I'd have waited just a little longer in the toilets before going outside earlier today, perhaps I could have avoided all this. I had been impatient. From now on I ought to –

I bumped into someone coming out of the male toilets and shrieked. Quickly I hid my nose behind my hand and without looking who it was I walked on, opened the door of the toilet.

'Elizabeth?'

Alec.

'Are you alright?'

Carefully I glanced up at him, my hand still on my nose. As a result of our collision some of my blood had got on his shoulder and it clearly showed on the white t-shirt he was wearing.

Alec followed my gaze and saw the stain. A surprised expression came over his face, with his index finger he brushed over the blood. Then he took my hand away from my face. 'Jesus!'

I pulled my hand free and fled into the toilet. Softly cursing I tore some paper of the toilet roll, folded it a few times, pressed it against my bleeding nose and walked towards the sink. Why did it have to be Alec of all people who saw me like this? One handed I opened the tap and rinsed first one, then the other hand. The toilet paper continued to turn more and more red, the stain spreading over the white surface.

Alec's worried face appeared behind me in the mirror.

'You aren't allowed in here,' I said without thinking, my voice muffled from underneath the paper. 'This is the ladies.'

He ignored my remark and came and stood closer to me. Inquisitively he looked at my red eyes. 'Is this a spontaneous nose bleed, or is it something else?'

His face in the mirror was concerned.

I was silent. The paper against my nose was soaked now, and bright red.

Alec walked into one of the cubicles and came out with an entire roll. 'Here, press this firmly against it. I'll get someone for you.'

'No!'

He looked at me with surprise.

'I'm OK,' I said. 'When the bleeding stops, I'll go home. Please, don't tell anyone.'

'So someone has done this to you,' he said. 'Who, Elizabeth? Is it someone from our class? Is it who I think it is?'

'It doesn't matter, really it doesn't. I'm going home in a bit and then it'll all be fine.' Despite the tremble in my voice I managed to sound determined.

'But shouldn't you have this looked at?' Your nose might be broken. Don't you want to –'

'No, no. It isn't broken. It will be alright, really.'

For a moment he did not know what to do, then he said: 'OK.'

I wanted to smile at him, but did not manage to.

'But,' he went on, with a firm voice indicating he would not be dissuaded, 'I'll take you home, because I want to be sure you arrive there safely.'

Why? *Why* for goodness sake? What was it to him, why was he being so nice to me? It was me, the troll, did he not realize? And he lived in 's-Gravendeel of all places, taking me home would mean an enormous detour and he was already late because of his test.

I caught my reflection in the mirror. I look even more hideous than usual. My eyes were thick and swollen, Sabina's pulling had made my hair stand in all directions, my face was patchy from crying and my nose was bleeding. I looked like a fucking monster. No, it was impossible that he should take me home, I could not allow it. He was not to see me like this for another second. It was bad enough that he already *had*. And how would he take me home? I was on my bicycle, he came by bus. Was he going to ride my bike and give me a backie? He would find out just how heavy I was that way. No, it was a terrible idea. He meant well, he was even nicer than I'd expected and it was horrible that this had to be the first conversation I ever had with him, but I could not have him look at me like that any longer. There was a mixture of worry and pity in his eyes, as if I were a hurt animal that he had found along the road and that no one would take care of. That everyone would skirt around because it was a deformed creature, which flies had gathered on top of, ready to strike. And for which he now felt responsible. How ugly he must find me, compared to the beauty of Riley he was accustomed to. I had to disappear from his sight as quickly as possible. Perhaps this week I could talk to him again, when I didn't have a red face and a bloody nose. The chance was small, I knew that too. Because then Riley would be there and he would only have eyes for her. I could not even blame him. The only reason he –

'So? Is that OK with you?'

I cleared my throat, shook my head. 'No need to,' I said as casually as possible. 'They're coming to pick me up in a minute.' I avoided his eyes in the mirror.

'Oh, well that's good. I'll stay with you till they're here, just in case you faint. You look like you might collapse.'

I shook my head again.

'I can't just leave you like this, Elizabeth? Who's coming? Your father?'

Of course he didn't even know my parents were divorced, probably knew nothing at all.

'Yes,' I said. 'He's already on his way, he'll be here any moment now. So you don't have to stay, really not.'

Alec briefly put his hand on my shoulder and smiled to my reflection in the mirror. For a few seconds the pain in my nose disappeared. I stood there motionless, unable to speak or smile back at him.

Alec walked out of the room.

I had not even thanked him.

It made a huge difference that I had started travelling home by bus instead of cycling. At least Sabina and her little friends could no longer deduct from the presence of my bike that I was hiding somewhere, but I still stayed behind at school for another hour just in case, safe and almost invisible in the corner of the multimedia centre. When the multimedia centre was too busy I would walk to the toilets behind the gym, a recently discovered hiding place. These toilets were hardly ever used, clearly very few people even knew they existed. At least Sabina had never tried to find me there. Probably the weather played a part in this as well; with the end of the year in sight temperatures were rising and the after school freedom was basking in sunlight. It had become a waste of their time to try and find me or wait for me. Only in the breaks and between classes did they keep pestering me.

Sabina had an off day. During English Mrs Ingelse had asked her to put away her mobile phone, but five minutes later Sabina was playing with it again, texting someone underneath the table. Because I was, as usual, sat at the front of the class, I had not seen anything, but we all heard Mrs Ingelse's angry outburst and Sabina had had to hand in her red Samsung. Although it wasn't the first time this had happened to her, she had kept whining about it all day long to anyone who would and wouldn't listen, and she had tried unsuccessfully to get it back from Sundar downstairs. Sundar, who had a plastic box where he kept the confiscated mobiles of that day, had let Sabina read her texts, but she didn't get her phone back until the end of the day. Because no matter how kind Sundar was, he took his job seriously.

For me it wouldn't make any difference to be without my phone for a day. The only person to ever text me was my mother, saying she would be working late again. There was no one who called me and I only used my mobile as an alarm clock and for taking pictures of Sattnin.

Everyone in our class had each other's mobile phone number and email address, as they were listed and handed out to us at the start of each year. A large part of our class had added each other on msn and Facebook, and they would chat and email one another in the evenings, but I was kept out of all that.

It was quiet at the bus stop, there was only one person on the bench in the shelter. It was a blond girl. She looked a bit like Riley, I noticed as I came closer. This girl too was wearing a denim jacket and had long blond curls.

It *was* Riley.

How odd. Didn't she always travel with Alec? But she was sitting alone, stared at the ground. When I arrived at the bus stop she looked up. Her eyes were moist.

'Hi,' she said softly, barely audible.

'Hi,' I said, unable to leave the surprise out of my voice. Riley was the last person I was expecting to see here.

As casually as I could, as if we ran into each other after school every day, I walked over to the timetable and checked my watch.

'It's just gone,' Riley's voice croaked from the shelter. 'There won't be another one for fifteen minutes.'

I turned back. Riley took her bag from the bench and put it on the ground. She looked at me.

My heart was thumping when I sat down. She smelled sweet and fresh, like baby soap.

‘Are you alright?’ I asked, after we’d sat next to each other in silence for a while. Now and again a passing car driver would cast her an admiring look and people beeped twice. And all that while she was just sitting here, without looking about her, most of her face not even visible.

Riley sniffed.

I had never seen her so close up and even now that she was crying, I could not believe how beautiful she was. Here, in broad daylight I was undoubtedly uglier than ever, but there was a glow on Riley’s smooth healthy face and her heart shaped lips seemed soft like rose petals. Her long lashes shone, she did not use mascara. What a difference to the sunken and heavily made-up eyes of Sabina. Riley noticed me watching and tried to smile, but her chin was trembling.

I scraped my teeth over my lips to try and peel of the loose bits of skin.

‘Is there something I can do to help?’ Despite the fact that we never spoke to each other this seemed the right question to ask.

She looked at me in silence.

‘Could I come to your house?’ she asked.

The question came so unexpectedly that I wasn’t sure if I had heard it right. But her look was questioning, begging almost.

My god. The idea of Riley Konings in my house, in *my* world, was so unreal that the mere thought made me spin with excitement.

‘My parents are on holiday and I’d rather not be alone right now,’ she said softly.

This was not happening. That someone like Riley could be alone was too absurd to fathom. She was someone with dozens of girlfriends, maids, a circle of humble servants around her perpetually prepared to fulfil any wish she might have, immediately and with full dedication. And then there was always Alec. Strange that he wasn’t with her. Or would he be the cause of her sadness? It was obvious that this was not the right moment to ask her about that. I had to be patient. If she really did come to my house, maybe she would tell me of her own accord.

‘That’s fine,’ I heard myself say. My voice sounded strange, with a high note in it. And it wasn’t just my voice which was unsteady, my legs were shaking too. I lifted my bag of the ground and placed it firmly on my lap. But no matter how tight I held my bag and how hard I pushed my feet on the ground, I could not hold my legs still.

I looked over my shoulder as we stepped aboard the bus. A wave of excitement shot through my stomach when I saw that she really was following me. Everyone who saw me with her would be jealous. They would envy me for being in the company of such a pretty girl, they would think Riley and I were friends and that I was clearly someone special because someone like her chose to hang out with me.

But the bus was, apart from an elderly couple at the front, completely empty and the driver did not see more of Riley than a mass of blond curls hanging over her bowed face. I walked to the back seat, where I slung my bag into the corner and dumped myself down. Riley came and sat next to me without a sound.

She was quiet when we walked to my street. She hadn’t said much in the bus either. We had sat next to each other in silence as we drove over the Slinge. I felt my hands get clammy and Riley sniffed every so often. Once we had looked at each other and she had smiled. I did not know if I had smiled back at her, my jaws were locked and I probably had not managed much more than a frozen look in her direction.

We walked into my street. She would probably find it all very boring. The big concrete block in which I lived, the bourgeois terraced houses across the road. The whole neighbourhood probably looked different from ‘s-Gravendeel. I had never been

there, but I was sure that Riley, and Alec too, did not live in a flat. Without a doubt Riley lived in a beautiful detached house with a spacious front and back gardens and I bet the whole attic was converted into a sunny loft that she had all to herself. And a large pond in the garden, where white swans were swimming and lilies flowered. Where there was no rain and where the moon shone through Riley's window at night and hugged her to sleep in a silver embrace.

'My mother's not here,' I said as I put the key in the lock of the main door. 'She always works late on Wednesdays.'

'And your father?'

A short pain shot through my stomach. Alec had not known either, perhaps no one in the class knew.

'My parents are divorced,' I said, without looking at her. I stepped into the lift ahead of her. 'My father lives in America these days.'

Riley said nothing. She followed me as we stepped out of the lift, her footsteps on my landing. The white flaky concrete floor, the cobwebs around the window of the empty flat next to ours, with every step Riley took, she trod further into my world. However unreal this seemed.

'Alec's parents are separated too,' she remarked when we got to my door.

I gasped.

Alec and I were even more suited to each other than I'd thought.

As if in a bizarre dream I watched her put her denim jacket on the hat stand, how she had to stand on her toes to reach it. She was here, at mine. Fantasy and reality had decided to flow into each other, to become one, just like that, without informing me first. And I could do nothing but let it happen, take part in this weird and wonderful game that had taken over my life in the past hour. This was a new beginning, I could feel it. It had to be.

Thankfully my mother wasn't there. She would not have been able to hide her excitement over the fact that I had finally brought someone home. As soon as we'd have come in she would have introduced herself to Riley, and she'd have tried to act young and modern like she did with my cousins Jenny and Trisha. And if Riley and I would have sat in my room she would have come barging in all the time with obvious questions like would Riley care for another cup of tea. Or lemonade. A bowl of crisps then? And she would have said things like: 'See that school isn't so bad, Lizzie, just look what a nice friend you have!'

Fortunately she would be at work for a while yet.

Never before had someone from school been at my place. Not in all those years. Not on a weekend, not on a free afternoon, never ever. And of all people Riley was the first. She had no idea that I'd stood in front of the mirror in my blond wig imagining I was her. That I tried to smile like she does, batted my eyelashes like I'd seen her do, that I mimicked her high girly giggling when I was alone and no one could hear me. She would never know how often in bed, with my eyes shut but wide-awake, I fantasized about *her* boyfriend.

I glanced sideways. A quiet triumph radiated from me, slowly filling the room. Finally I was no longer at the bottom of the ladder, as right next to me I had someone who had come crashing down so many steps that I had automatically moved up.

Of course I knew she would make up with Alec this very night. They would forgive each other and tomorrow at school pretend as if it had never happened. No one would know anything about it except Riley, Alec and me, and all would be the same again. Back to square one.

But... it couldn't, surely? Not after everything had changed so dramatically! I couldn't let that happen.

'Maybe you'd like something to drink?' I asked.

Riley looked up. 'Yes, please,' she nodded. 'Orange juice would be nice, if you have some.'

The glowing red numbers on the microwave indicated that it was only five past seven. And yet the sun was already almost gone. I switched on the kitchen light. The thunderstorm that had been forecast had to be on its way, usually it wasn't nearly as dark at this time.

The reflection of my face in the small kitchen window was transparent. Through it the grey clouds outside were visible. They stuck together and turned the sky ashen-grey. If Riley looked outside now, she would see the dark sky too. She would probably want to get back home before the storm broke. I had to act quickly.

I opened the fridge and took the carton of orange juice out of the door. The ready-meals my mother had bought for me were neatly piled up on the lowest shelf next to the cheese. Today's pizza money was hanging on the door untouched.

I shook the carton and poured two glasses.

I stared at them.

If I did nothing Riley would drink up her juice and leave. I would stay behind and everything would be the same as before. I would fall back into a reality I could never accept again and this whole experience would have been nothing but a *tease*, a chance I should have grasped but that I had let slip away. Nothing would have changed.

No. It wasn't too late yet. The chance was still there and I had to do something with it. All this had happened for a reason. If I didn't take action now, I would sit behind them in class again tomorrow while they whispered in each other's ears, Alex would put his hand on her back, caress her curls, mere centimetres away from me and unaware that his real true love was sat behind him.

No! Riley was here and she would stay here. It was *my* turn to be happy now. Riley's life had been one big luck out, no harm in her stepping aside to let another person have some of that. It was my goddamn right.

Quickly, before I could change my mind, I walked into my mother's bedroom. I shot a rapid glance in my room as I passed it. Riley was still sat on the bed and stared, just as I had expected, outside with a worried look on her face. She wanted to go. She regretted coming with me. What was she doing here at that fat, quiet girl's home? She had to leave, back to 's-Gravendeel, to Alec, so she could quickly get on with her perfect little life. Perhaps she would grant Elizabeth a smile tomorrow at school, but that would be it and it would not be long before she had forgotten this day. Elizabeth, after all, was not important. True, it had been nice of that fatty to take care of her for a while, but it wasn't more than she was used to really. Wasn't everyone always at her service? Elizabeth was the same.

Well, Elizabeth would show her that it wasn't all that obvious.

In the oval mirror on my mother's wall I caught a glimpse of my face. Was that me? I looked very different, the beaten look had disappeared from my eyes and there was a determined twist to my mouth.

Without a sound, so that Riley would not hear me, I took the orange box with sachets of sleeping powder from the drawer of my mother's bedside table.

"Here, your orange juice," I smiled.

Riley turned her head back from the window and took the glass. She instantly took a gulp. "Thank you, I'm really thirsty."

I sat down next to her again.

"I think I ought to go," Riley said with a glance at the thin golden watch on her wrist. "It'll be past eight by the time I'm home and I still have to do my French for tomorrow."

Why didn't she just honestly say that she wanted to go home and find Alex and make up with him in a passionate way? Did she think I was stupid?

She looked at me. "But I'll see you tomorrow at school, right?"

"You will."

"Maybe you'd like to sit with us in lunch hour?" she suggested. "I usually go to the Spinozaweg with Alec and Pascal, you know, get a sandwich and stuff. You could come tomorrow if you like, I think that'd be nice."

The invitation buzzed round my head. Of course I wanted that. Who wouldn't? Even if it only happened once, it would still be a lunch hour to remember. It would get a special place in my memory, safely stored beneath the repeat button.

But she said this for no reason, I had to bear that in mind. It did not mean anything, she wasn't sincere, she only said it now to be kind. Because of course she could see how surprised Alec and Pascal would be if I really did come along with them tomorrow. Riley knew just as well as I did that it would not happen. Besides, she clearly already assumed that all would be good between her and Alec tomorrow while she had been so angry with him just before. It had all gone exactly as I had expected.

"Yes, that sounds great," I answered.

"What do you usually do in lunch hour? I never see you actually."

Did she not know that I was always hiding? Did she know at all that I was bullied?

"I usually stay in," I replied curtly.

Riley nodded and finished her orange juice. She put the empty glass on the ground. "Well, from now on you'll come with us. It'll be fun!"

If that truly happened, the bullying would stop immediately. I would be promoted from troll to Riley and Alec's friend in one go. My new status would win respect from everyone. School might even become... *fun*.

But the glass on the floor was empty.

Riley got up. "Well, I'm off then."

She shouldn't go, not before the stuff would take effect! If she'd leave now she would feel unwell on her way, all sorts of things might happen!

Delay, play for time!

I too got up, my hands all sweaty. "If you wait a second, I'll walk you to the bus stop. Otherwise you'll only be trying to find where it is."

She smiled. "That's very kind of you, thank you."

"I'll just go to the loo and then we can go," I said and I walked out of the room.

After lingering in the toilet for an extra few minutes, I walked back into my room. Riley sat on her knees with Sattnin, who looked up to her curiously. She cooed to him and Sattnin's beady eyes shone with pleasure by this sudden unknown attention.

I squatted next to her.

'What's his name?' she asked.

'Sattnin. You can take him out if you want.'

When she hesitated I opened the door of the cage. Sattnin immediately sat up on his back paws and I tickled his belly.

I lifted him from his cage. 'Here, hold him for a moment.'

Riley took him from me and giggled when he curiously sniffed her hands. 'He's so soft! You wouldn't expect a rat to be.'

Sattnin let himself be stroked willingly and made squeaking noises with pleasure. Except by me he had never been held or petted by anyone, and he clearly found this friendly girl with her small hands and soft voice extremely interesting.

I watched how Riley let him walk over her arm and I tried to smile, but couldn't. If I hadn't put that powder in her juice, if I hadn't been so bloody stupid, this would have been a moment to enjoy. Of which I could have cherished the memory later. But the only thing I could think of now was what I had done and how come Riley did not notice anything yet.

Perhaps it wasn't too late yet.

While Riley, completely unaware of what was waiting for her, smiling and with her eyes closed, pressed the chubby body of Sattnin against her cheek, feverish thoughts flashed through my mind quicker and quicker. I could go to the kitchen, supposedly to pour myself another glass of orange juice and come back all shocked saying I only just noticed the carton was over a year past its sell by date. That's why it was so thick and maybe tasted a bit odd. And that we'd better pop our fingers in our throats and throw up to be on the safe side, before it could do any damage. Would she? But would it be in time anyway? How long did those sachets take to kick in? I had put five in her juice. What on earth had I been thinking?

Carefully Riley put Sattnin back in his cage. 'I really have to go.'

I nodded and closed the door to the cage. Sattnin kept looking at us, poked his pink snout through the bars.

Riley got up and smoothed out her skirt. Suddenly she let out a little shriek. She staggered and grabbed my shoulder.

It had started.

'Are you OK?' I asked.

She took her hand from my shoulder and raised it to her head. 'I just feel so dizzy all of a sudden.'

I got up too. 'Why don't you come and sit on the bed, you'll feel better soon.'

