



TELL ME YOU'RE MINE

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STELLA

I'm lying on the floor.

Legs pulled up, arms around my knees.

Inhale. Exhale.

My heart's still pounding in my ears, the pain in my stomach has turned to nausea, but at least I've stopped shaking.

My name is Stella Widstrand now, not Johansson. I'm thirty-nine, not nineteen. And I don't get panic attacks any more.

A grey autumn light streams in. I still hear rain pouring down outside. My office at the clinic looks the same as always. Tall windows, moss green walls. A large landscape painting and a wooden floor with a handwoven rug on it. My old, battered desk, the armchairs in the corners, just inside the door. I remember decorating this room, how carefully I chose every detail. I no longer recall why that felt so important.

I always imagined that I would find her. Not that she would track me down. Maybe she was driven by curiosity, wanting to see who I am. Maybe she's come to accuse me, so I won't ever forget.

Maybe she's here for revenge.

It's taken me so many years to rebuild my life, to get to where I am today. But even though I've left what happened in the past, still I've never forgotten. There are things you can't forget.

I'm lying on the floor.

Legs pulled up, arms around my knees.

Inhale. Exhale.

Henrik kissed me on the cheek before he left for work this morning. I ate breakfast with Milo and dropped him off at school, then headed to Kungsholmen. Just a normal day. Fog on the windows, traffic over the Traneberg Bridge, mist hanging above the grey waters of Lake Mälaren, and no place to park when you get to the city.

Her appointment was an hour before lunch. She knocked, I opened the door, and I knew immediately. We shook hands, introduced ourselves. She called herself Isabelle Karlsson.

Does she know her real name?

I took her wet jacket. Said something about the weather and asked her to come inside. Isabelle smiled and sat down in one of the armchairs. She has dimples.

As I usually do when I meet a patient for the first time, I asked her why she sought help. Isabelle was prepared. She played her role very well and claimed she's been suffering from a sleep disorder since her father's death. She needs help dealing with grief. She said she felt lost and insecure, that she found social situations difficult.

It all felt extremely practised.

Why?

Why didn't she just say what she wants? There's no need to hide her real reason for coming.

She's twenty-two now. Medium height, an hourglass figure with a narrow waist. Short, unpainted nails. She has no visible tattoos or piercings, not even in her ears. Her straight black hair hangs down her back. Still wet from the rain, it glistened against her pale skin, and it struck me how beautiful she is. More beautiful than I ever could have imagined.

The rest of the conversation is a haze. It's difficult now to remember what I said. Something about the dynamics of group therapy, or something about communication, or how our self-image determines how we see others.

Isabelle Karlsson seemed to listen attentively. She tossed her hair and smiled again. But she was tense. She was on guard.

At first I felt sick to my stomach, then came the dizziness and the pressure on my chest, making it difficult to breathe. I recognised the symptoms. I apologised and left the room, went into the bathroom in the hallway. My heart raced, a cold sweat ran down my back, and the throbbing behind my eyes sent flashes of light through my head. My stomach knotted up, and I dropped down on my knees in front of the toilet and tried to vomit. I couldn't. I sat on the floor, leaning against the tile, and closed my eyes.

Stop thinking about what you did.

Stop thinking about her.

Stop thinking.

Stop.

After a few minutes I went back in, told her she was welcome at group therapy next Wednesday at one o'clock.

Isabelle Karlsson pulled on her jacket, lifted her hair from her neck, and tossed it. I wanted to stretch out my hand and touch it, but I stopped myself.

She noticed.

She saw my doubt, my desire to make contact.

Maybe that was exactly what she'd hoped to accomplish?
To make me feel unsure?

She slung her bag over her shoulder, I opened the door for her, and she left.

I've dreamt of this day. Fantasised about how it would happen. How it would feel, what I would say. It wasn't supposed to be like this. And it hurts more than I ever could have believed.

I'm lying on the floor.

Legs pulled up, arms around my knees.

Inhale. Exhale.

She's come back.

She's alive.

ISABELLE

‘Isabelle!’

I hear Johanna’s voice and turn around. I’m back in the M-building at the far end of campus. The lunch hour is almost over, the room is full of students, and every table and chair is occupied. It’s always packed here at lunchtime. I spin around, but don’t see Johanna until she stands up and waves.

‘Come over here,’ she calls out.

I have no desire to do so. I’ve spent the last hour on pins and needles. It felt like I might explode from holding all those feelings inside.

Grief. Rage. Hate. And the struggle to hide all of it. To smile and act nice. Be someone I’m not.

I’d much rather eat my sandwich alone before the next lecture starts. Think through what happened at the therapist’s office. *But I always have a hard time saying no.* I pull my bag up on my shoulder, then start winding my way through all those people, all those backpacks on the floor, all those green tables and red chairs, until I arrive.

Johanna’s the closest thing I have, have ever had, to a

friend. And she has been ever since that first horrific period at KTH, the Royal Institute of Technology, when she took me under her wing and let me move in with her. Why, I don't know. We're not at all alike. She's done so much, travelled all over the world. She has purple hair, pierced ears and nose, also a tattoo on her lower back and another on her forearm. It's of a unicorn spraying fire. She's cool, confident, knows what she wants.

Susie and Maryam, who are sitting next to her, are also very nice. But I can relax with Johanna, actually be myself.

'Where'd you go?' Maryam says. 'I didn't see you at the mathematics lecture.'

'I wasn't there,' I say.

'Did something happen?' Susie puts a hand over her heart. 'You never miss anything.'

'I had to take care of something.' I pull out the chair next to her, hang my jacket over the backrest, and sit down. It still surprises me when people even see that I'm here. When somebody notices me. Maybe even misses me. I'm so used to being invisible.

I open my bag and take out a sandwich I bought at 7-Eleven. It's seen better days, so I throw it back in again.

'Is it still raining?' Johanna says.

'Same as this morning,' I answer.

'Ugh, Mondays.' Susie sighs while flipping through a textbook on mechanics. 'Do you understand any of this?'

'I wrote down a bunch of stuff about momentum last time,' Johanna says, 'but I can't make sense of it.'

They laugh. I laugh, too. But part of me feels like I'm in a glass cage looking out. I feel like two different people. One is the person people see. But the other one, only I see.

She's the real me, and the difference between the two is profound. Inside me is a ravine of darkness.

And a tendency to be melodramatic.

'Isabelle, you understand it, right?' Maryam asks, turning towards me. 'The panic is setting in, we need to start prepping for our exams soon.'

'I promise, if you read the book you'll get it,' I say.

'Just say it. If we spent our time studying instead of partying, we'd understand it, too.' Susie nudges me and grins.

'Admit she's right.' Johanna's napkin hits me in the head. 'Admit it, Isabelle.'

'Do you think I'm boring?' I say. 'You think I'm a stick-in-the-mud, a nerd who doesn't know how to have a good time? You'd all be lost without me, you slackers.'

I throw the napkin back at Johanna and burst out laughing when two more hit my head straightaway. I throw them at Susie and Maryam, too, and soon there's a full-on napkin war at our table. We laugh and scream and everyone in the lunchroom stands up and starts shouting and—

My phone rings.

I do this way too often. Disappear into a fictional dream world. Play ridiculous little movies in my head. Scenes in which I'm as spontaneous and natural as everyone else.

I fish the phone out, look at the screen.

'Who is it?' Maryam asks. 'Aren't you going to answer?'

I send the call to voicemail and put the phone back.

'Nothing important.'

After the lecture I head home by myself. Johanna is going to her boyfriend's place. I wish I could have gone straight home after my appointment with Stella, considering how

exhausting it was to meet her, but I didn't want to miss anything important at school.

Now I'm on the metro. Alone, one of many strangers. When I moved here I hated that, but now I don't mind. And after a year in Stockholm I can find my way around pretty well. In the beginning, I was terrified of getting lost. I mixed up Hässelby and Hagsätra, triple-checked how to get wherever I needed to go. In spite of that, I travelled around quite a bit, visited most of the shopping centres that were within reach of Stockholm public transportation.

I've taken the commuter trains to their final stations, tried out all the metro lines, and taken most of the buses in the city centre. I've walked around on the islands of Södermalm and Kungsholmen, through the neighbourhoods of Vasastan and Norrmalm, and spent a lot of time in the city centre.

I look at my fellow commuters and pretend I know everything about them. That old lady with orange hair and ruby red glasses, she works out at Friskis&Svettis twice a week, wears colourful leggings from the eighties, and stares saucily at men in the gym.

The couple holding hands and kissing each other: he's a medical student and she's a middle school teacher. They're on their way home to their studio flat near Brommaplan. They'll cook something together and watch a movie and fall asleep next to each other on the sofa. Then she'll go to bed, and he'll take out his computer and watch Internet porn.

The tall, skinny guy in the suit, coughing until he's bent over double. He's dying of lung cancer. No one knows how long he has left. How long do any of us have left? Life could end at any moment. *It could be over today.*

I miss Dad. Four months have gone by since that day in May. Four long, empty months. Afterwards, I found out that he'd been feeling sick for several weeks. Of course, he didn't go to the doctor. I didn't know a thing. Dad was hardly ever sick. Why would he bother me unnecessarily?

To say I feel guilty doesn't begin to cover it. I went home too rarely. The last time I saw him was at Easter. I didn't even stay the whole weekend.

Was it selfish of me to move? Dad wanted me to take this chance. He encouraged me to stay in the city, hang out with my new friends on the weekends, and to break free.

Only after he was gone did I learn the truth. And I will never forgive her for what she did. With all my heart I wish she was dead. I hate her.

Hate her.

Hate her.

Hate her.