

Girl on the run

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The girl from the polder¹

Jessie lives in a polder somewhere in the Netherlands. One day, her regular, uneventful life changes abruptly. Her mother has suddenly vanished, which causes stress and chaos in her young life. This event causes Jessie to change. Slowly, a metamorphosis takes place. Her friends notice too. They call her a dark soul, much to Jessie's liking.

But then, unexpectedly, someone kidnaps Jessie. She wakes up in a desolate area, not knowing who took her and why. Although she is hurt and afraid, she manages to escape from a violent gangster who wants to protect his business at all costs. Her adventure starts then. It is a roller-coaster filled with danger and difficult situations. Being a true survivor, Jessie compares her situation to that of a game, a puzzle she needs to solve, but from time to time, she doubts if she'll ever get home. In the meantime, the man who kidnapped her, is chasing her. Jessie is on the run, crossing parts of France, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands². Will she be able to find help in time?

¹ Polder: a piece of low-lying land reclaimed from the sea or a river and protected by dykes, especially in the Netherlands.

² The author knows these locations well. She lives in Flevoland in the Netherlands and she has travelled often to the locations that are mentioned in the book. The author was born in the vicinity of theme park The Efteling, which is also mentioned in the story.

When you are trapped, you want to escape

One day, Jessie finds out that not everyone can be trusted. At a certain point, after losing her mom to a lover boy, after having been kidnapped, she realizes she has lost faith in most people.

Somehow she manages to keep moving. She runs for her life through parts of France, Belgium, Germany and finally the Netherlands.

The man she is running from is a hardened criminal who is very clever but unforgiving.

Will Jessie be able to escape?

'It is pitch dark in the room. She cannot see the walls or a door, for that matter.

The bed she is lying on is very lumpy. It is as if she was thrown on some bags with potatoes or something. She touches the material with her cold fingers. The round things in the bags could be potatoes.

She continuously listens for noises that may tell her where she is, but disappointingly, it is very quiet in this cold and damp room. Despite many uncertainties, Jessie is still determined to find out more about this place. Someone has kidnapped her, and she is not going to take it!

Frantically, she tries to undo her ties, but the tie rips on her wrists are too strong and too tight for her. Yet, somehow this doesn't discourage her from searching for a solution.

Somehow, a solid determination to escape is causing her to forget her pain. It even sharpens her mind. She desperately wants to get out of here!

Not knowing what else she can do, she starts moving around the cramped space on her knees.'

Now, before you read on ..

You may think that this is just another story about a kidnap and some criminals.

It isn't.

The main character, a girl called Jessie, discovers while escaping something very valuable. Because even though she is 'just' a girl, she proves to be an independent, intelligent, fearless soul.

Blue Monday

It is a windy Monday morning in March. Jessie Artem is lying in her bed. It is a rather messy bed. The covers are all scattered on the floor. The only thing left is the sheet she is lying on and the beat-up pillow underneath her head. Her blond hair is a mess. The black mascara she put on yesterday morning makes her eyes look like those of a raccoon. This is the result of the sadness she felt last night. She cried until she fell asleep. And just a few minutes ago, she awoke from a disturbing dream.

In that dream, she had boarded a small helicopter. For some reason, she sat behind the pilot. And from where she was, she could see cottages and a very green pasture, lots of grass and lots of trees. But then, when she glanced sideways, she noticed something odd. The pilot, a young man, was crying! He wept silently. Jessie didn't remember ever hearing a sound in her numerous dreams. So, he wept silently. And when she asked him why he was crying, he told her that it was because of the policeman who had died.

She had tried to look around to see where the officer was, but for some reason, she couldn't.

The pilot was clearly very distressed, but she didn't know how to help him.

She had then told him to take the helicopter down. And he had done so.

He had landed the thing in a street.

She noticed a long line of cars behind them, and they stood near the traffic lights. For some reason, she was very aware of all of these details.

The lights had just turned yellow. Jessie remembered feeling a sense of surprise when she noticed that the pilot had suddenly opened the door, then he had jumped onto the asphalt, and all of a sudden, he had disappeared.

Jessie had told the other passengers, because she wasn't alone, that they had to get out and walk back to the airport. She remembered that her voice was very harsh, rigorous and determined. This was very different from how she usually was. It was as if she had become a completely different person in that dream.

After a minute or so, she had gotten out too.

Then she had just stood there, as she watched how the other passengers walked back to the airport. She remembered cars lining up behind the helicopter. And she remembered how she wondered why no one had phoned 911.

So, instead, she phoned, and while she waited for the operator to answer her call, she stood beside the helicopter to make sure that no one would enter it.

When the alarm clock on her bedside table starts ringing its disturbing tunes, she wakes up feeling exhausted and very anxious. Where did this dream come from? Was it supposed to warn her of some imminent danger or disaster? And why did she dial 911 in her dream? Here in the Netherlands, one should dial 112 in an emergency.

Slowly, reluctantly, she opens her sticky eyes. The memory of the strange dream continues to distract her. After a few minutes of staring at the ceiling, trying to find a reason to get up, she slowly turns her head to search for her alarm clock on her bedside table. As usual, the thing is surrounded by books and makeup. The clutter is making it hard to see what time it is. She actually has to sit up to see the numbers on the clock. Seven-thirty! Somehow she's surprised. It is a lot later than she expected.

This realization startles her because she is supposed to leave the house at seven forty-five!

It is truly amazing what a person can accomplish when she is in a hurry. Jessie decides to skip her morning shower, and she brushes her teeth in record time.

Then she brushes her hair, and then she tries to remove the traces of old mascara from her eyes.

Due to a lack of time, she decides to forgo a fresh layer. After all, it is Monday.

For her, it is already a Blue Monday. So, who cares about mascara? Her day is ruined already.

At seven-forty, she stumbles into the kitchen. Her dad Mike has left for work already. Deciding to eat later, she grabs some buns and a package of cheese slices. She packed her books last night already, so now she only needs to put the bread, the cheese and a couple of water bottles in her old backpack.

At seven forty-five, she is ready to go. While she takes her bike out of the garage, she puts the heavy backpack into one of her bike bags. When you bike about twenty kilometers a day, you need to be prepared. These big old bags protect her backpack and books from rain, hail, and snow.

Of course, she isn't thinking about all of those advantages. Why should she? All of her friends own a bike and bags like these. It is considered pretty standard when you bike through the polder in the Netherlands every day.

After she has locked the garage door and the house's front door, she is ready to go. She takes her bike then swings one of her long, strong legs over the saddle. She is using a men's bike today.

It is her dad's. She prefers his bike to her own because it is sturdier, and she finds it easy to handle.

While checking the street for traffic, she finds the pedals with her feet. With the top of her feet, she moves them into the proper position. Then she puts her feet down on the horizontal pedals, pushing her bike forward across the driveway, down the street.

It now is seven-fifty. Jessie is currently running five minutes behind schedule.

It is a very tight schedule. The thirty-minute bike ride will have to be completed in twenty-five minutes, but that won't be easy because it is very windy today.

The east wind pushes hard against her. It is March, but it is still freezing cold for this time of year. Her long, knitted scarf only covers part of her face. Especially her mouth needs protection. She doesn't like to get cold teeth. Now she looks a little like a burglar; her eyes are barely visible. Her hat covers her ears. She doesn't care if she doesn't look very fashionable right now. It is cold. It is windy. And she hasn't had breakfast yet! She is craving a nice, hot cup of coffee.

She is pretty grouchy now. The cold wind in her face certainly doesn't help.

A few minutes later, she turns her bike onto the bicycle path next to the highway; the wind is now gaining power. Out in the open, between the long fields, Jessie cannot take cover from the freezing cold east wind. But it doesn't matter. She is used to this.

Her strong legs are moving fast. She needs to hurry up. Like a cyclist competing in a contest, she lowers her head while she tightens her grip on the steering wheel of her bike. Her breath is heavy. She is getting warm now.

Knowing that it won't make any difference, she stubbornly keeps checking her watch. She has to be at school at eight-fifteen.

But, the wind is too strong today, and after fighting it for eight long kilometers, she knows that she will lose this battle. It is already ten minutes past eight, and she still has two kilometers to go!

By now, she is sweating profusely, and to her horror, she realizes that she has forgotten to use a deodorant. She curses softly underneath her scarf. 'Shit!' She is hungry, her legs hurt, she hasn't had her coffee yet, and on top of that, she will have to stay after school because this will be the third time in a row that she will be late.

When she finally arrives at school, she is only four minutes late, but the schoolyard is already completely deserted. No one but a few hundred bikes witnesses Jessie's arrival. She sighs because none of her friends has waited for her, but she can't blame them either.

She's going to have to face the music alone. Again. Hurriedly, she shoves her dad's bike in between the bikes of her classmates. She'll lock it later. Hurriedly, she swings her bag over one shoulder, desperately trying to ignore the obvious, hoping things won't be as bad as she fears.

Maybe she is in luck. Maybe her watch is running fast. Maybe the big clock in the school corridor has broken down. Maybe.

She is running now. The front door is still open, and she quickly enters, hoping that no one will notice. But then she slows down because she can see the school secretary sitting at her window.

The tiny woman is frowning at her when Jessie closes the big door behind her.

It is a heavy door, and with a loud bang, it slams shut. The sound echoes through the empty hallway of the silent school like the announcement of a loud instrument, like a trumpet, telling everyone that Jessie Artem has finally arrived.

It almost sounds reproachful because all of its students are where they should be, except Jessie.

"You're late again!"

Like the other two times, Mrs Van Dalen eyeballs her with her beady little eyes. Her opinion of Jessie is clear. Her eyebrows raised, she expresses her obvious disgust with this seventeen-year-old, who has once again confirmed that she won't adhere to the school rules.

Hence her tardiness.

Because of her twenty-year experience, the woman can't think of any other reason. She has grown to dislike students who don't show up on time. That there might be another reason, that thought has never crossed her mind.

And with this opinion set in her mind, the woman has no sympathy with the blond girl standing there waiting in front of her window. The child has a very red face, and sweat is pouring from her brow. Her bright, blue eyes seem even brighter now. Jessie senses the disgust in the woman's voice when she states that Jessie has to report to the principal's office before she is allowed to go to her math class.

Jessie's belief that this is indeed a doomsday is hereby confirmed. The principal's office! Not even she had reckoned that this would be the consequence for her tardiness!

A minute later, she is waiting in one of the small, red plastic chairs in front of the office of the principal she hardly knows. Instead, she has heard different stories about him from students who are very up to date with the inside of his office. Now, Jessie isn't a regular troublemaker. She likes to do what needs to be done, and she has never had a problem with her teachers. Only since her mother had decided to leave her and her dad for a more exciting venue she has trouble getting to school on time. Since her mother left, she has been responsible for most of the household chores, such as cooking and doing laundry. Her mom only left a few weeks ago, and Jessie and her dad Mike are still having trouble getting used to the new daily rhythm.

Jessie is feeling very sad about her mom's sudden departure. It is as if she is the one who is getting punished the most for her mom's 'midlife crisis.

This is what her father called it. But Jessie isn't so sure. There had to be more to it. Why else would her mom, the sweetest woman in the world, all of a sudden leave her and her dad? Without any prior warning, she had packed her bags and was gone!

It happened on a Friday. When Jessie got home that Friday afternoon, she noticed right away that the house seemed different. It was quiet. Their home was never quiet! Her mom had a habit of tuning the radio to a very modern music station. All day long! She would only turn it off when she had to go somewhere. And, although she was already fifty-three, she loved modern rock music. She would often dance to it. Jessie loved that, and she would watch her mom while she made all kinds of groovy moves in the middle of their wooden living room floor.

But that afternoon, the house was quiet. Too quiet. Jessie's mind tried to tell her that something was terribly wrong.

She remembered walking through the house, searching in every room for her mom.

But when she got to her parent's bedroom, she was in for a nasty surprise. The room was tidy. Too tidy. Her mom was, like Jessie, a gigantic slob.

Creative people often are. And her mom, a writer and an artist, was a major slob! But this time, the bedroom was tidy. The bed looked like a bed in a hotel room, clean, sterile, cool and empty. The bed was made. This was probably the first time it was made. For as long as Jessie could remember, that bed had never been tidy.

Her parents' bed had been so welcoming, so accessible. Even at her age, she would sometimes lie in between her parents to cuddle or just to chat about things. But now, the bed was made.

It was as if, by fixing the sheets and blankets, invisible doors had been closed, doors that would never again be opened. That afternoon, something had told her to open the wardrobe.

It is a walk-in wardrobe. Usually, her mom's clothes lay scattered on the shelves and the floor. But now, most of the shelves were empty. The clothes hangers were also empty. Her shoes and boots were missing, as well as most of her jewelry.

When Mike got home that day, he found his daughter in that wardrobe. She was lying on the floor cradling an old and forgotten sweater. Her mobile phone lay in pieces next to the wall.

Mike knew instantly what had happened. Then he tried to call his wife too. But he too, was in for a surprise.

Her phone number had been 'taken out of service'! What had she done? And why? Why had they not noticed anything?

When had his wife started planning all of this?

And most importantly, where had she gone?

It took two whole days of waiting before they knew that she had found a new friend. An internet friend. A man who liked to travel the world.

And she thought that she deserved the attention he was able to give her.

'But what about us?' Jessie had thought. She had not been able to ask her mom that. Her mom had sent a cold and very distant email. That was all.

This is how Jessie lost her mom. It felt like she had died. Maybe even worse. Her mom had dumped her and her dad. Because of all this, Jessie often felt worthless. Lately, she considered herself to be a reject.

At school, they had started to notice this too. Her marks had gone down dramatically. On top of that, she was tardy, and she neglected her friends. No one understood what was wrong with her.

The truth was, no one knew about her mom's departure. But that was all about to change.

Grief

It is already a quarter to nine that morning when the principal finally unlocks the door to his office. He is standing in the doorway, looking down at Jessie.

The tall man in his blue jeans and navy sweater impatiently checks his watch.

'As if I don't know what time it is!' But, Jessie is keeping this thought to herself. It is probably wise not to anger the man who holds such an important position at her school.

Instead, she gets up to shake hands. This is a Dutch custom. You shake hands to introduce yourself.

His name is Rob. This is making her feel more at ease. A stricter man would never mention his first name to a mere student.

They enter the office, and he tells her to take a seat.

Hesitantly, she decides to sit down in a metal chair facing his desk. He is seated in the big black chair behind it. His big hairy hands are lying folded on the black metal desk.

Not knowing what to expect, Jessie takes in the room.

It is very basic, very tidy, very metal. There is a computer, a printer and a radio.

The presence of the radio is instantly making her feel more confident.

Ordinary people listen to the radio. Hence her principal must be an ordinary person, a normal person, for a principal at least!

Without realizing that this is happening, she suddenly lets out a big sigh. Right now, she is feeling a bit weak. She is hungry and thirsty.

The sweat on her body has already dried up. She is hoping that she is not emitting a bad odor since she forgot to use a deodorant.

While she worries about her physical appearance, her eyes wander to his steaming cup of coffee.

And, as if he can read her mind, he places his fresh cup of coffee in front of her.

“Koffie?” With a smile on his friendly face, he is now offering his mug of steaming hot coffee to her.

“Do you have milk?” is her response to his gesture. Maybe this guy is not as bad as she feared.

“Is it okay if I eat in your office?” she continues. She is really ‘pushing her luck’ now. But she is willing to take the risk. Her stomach is complaining loudly now. He must have heard the rumbling sound too!

In response, he is making an approving gesture with his right hand.

“Thanks!” She is genuinely grateful, and she can’t believe her luck. Hot coffee and a bun with old Gouda cheese!

So, while he tells her that she has been late too often and that there needs to be a consequence for her tardiness, she really couldn’t care less!

The warm drink and the food make her feel drowsy. The bike ride from that morning, the disturbed sleep, the stress and the grief due to her mother’s departure have all taken their toll.

“Jessie, can you tell me why your marks have dropped?”

Now she frowns, and then she starts chewing faster, thinking about how she could best answer this question.

It is a question she had been expecting. Yet, she had not expected that she needed to come up with an answer so soon. She hadn’t mentally prepared herself.

So, instead of answering, she just sits there, staring at a big poster on the wall behind her principal. She doesn’t see it, however. Her mind is still rehashing the events of the past weeks. The mug with the hot brown liquid sits forgotten in her hands. It is already starting to tip dangerously to one side. The liquid is moving slowly towards the rim. In a few seconds, it will spill on her blue jeans.

“Jessie?”

“Um, I, eh”, she is starting to stammer.

At this moment, she isn't entirely in control of her emotions, but then she abruptly sits up straight.

In a quick motion, she places the coffee mug a little too quick and a little too hard on the metal desk.

The sound echoes in the room. It sounds angry. And then the coffee spills.

But Rob doesn't seem to notice.

She does, however. It is making her feel even more insecure. It is making her voice falter.

Feeling truly miserable, she suddenly feels like crying.

He is looking at her, but he doesn't say anything. His eyes seem surprised but calm.

Then she looks up too. She notices his calm face, his calm eyes.

They are grey. Funny how one notices trivial things when one is in trouble. He has long nose hairs too, like her dad. Now, she shouldn't have made that connection. Suddenly she remembers how her dad was crying that Friday afternoon when he found out that the love of his life had taken off.

Without a word. There wasn't even a note. Mom had left without so much as a goodbye!

Again she sighs. As if that sigh is giving her the 'okay' to spill all of her bottled-up sadness.

These intense emotions that now take hold of her are making her cry. She can't stop it, and then she cries for ten long minutes.

Still, Rob, her principal, says nothing. He only places a box of tissues in front of her.

Then he sits and listens.

After ten minutes, a big pile of used tissues lies in Jessie's lap. She has told her story, apologizing about two dozen times.

Now he knows. And because of that, the other teachers will also know. Probably before the end of the day.

From tomorrow on, her calm, regular life will be over.

Now they know, and they will feel sorry for her and because of that, they will treat her differently than before. And all she wanted was to be normal, regular, the same as all the rest of them.