

Edited Excerpt from “Invisible Ellen”

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The crowd was a mass of gray and brown as twilight stole the color from all lesser pigment, but the intriguing, blind stranger’s fluorescent hat bobbed above the muted waves of commuters like a beacon. As Ellen hurried to catch up with it, something else snagged the corner of her eye. Two men had peeled themselves from a doorway and started after the girl with the steady focus of predators. With a nasty jolt, Ellen realized that she wasn’t the only one interested in the blind girl and this struck her as grossly unfair. She’d been following her first and she didn’t want to share. She hitched up her fanny pack and went on.

After three blocks, the girl turned off onto a narrow alley, the two men followed, and bringing up the rear was an increasingly determined Ellen, who by now was thinking of the girl as her story and the two men as interlopers. This dead-end access to the surrounding buildings had no other foot traffic and ended in a brick wall with a large dumpster pushed against it. The girl pulled a set of keys from her pocket as she tapped along. The men glanced back, surveying the busy avenue they had just left. Neither of them registered Ellen, hugging the brick, a few feet from the corner.

The men returned their predatory attention back to the girl, and Ellen started cautiously down the alley after them.

All at once, the men stepped up their pace and the girl paused, tilting her head to listen and then she hurried forward. As the men overtook her, she spun, clutching the strap of her bag. Ellen saw the flash of a knife and felt a physical pain in her chest as she gulped in a sharp, silent, terrified breath. In the next second the knife swiped neatly and the girl cried out and cowered, then straightened. She was left intact, but holding nothing but the strap of her bag, now dangling useless. As the men raced back toward the avenue with her satchel, she recovered and screamed after them. “Pathetic bastards!!” she railed furiously. “Police! Police!” she shouted, the words echoing even as they were repeated.

Ellen shrunk against the alley wall, stained the same soot color as the faded black of her clothes, her heart racing. The men sprinted toward her, their eyes fixed on the avenue and escape, only a few paces away. As they came level with Ellen, some limp emotion in her suddenly stiffened. Without planning it, she thrust a foot out into the path of the thief nearest to her. He went down hard, letting go of the stolen bag to catch himself, his hands slapping smartly on the rough cement of the sidewalk and

scraping off layers of skin as he slid. Obviously unfamiliar with the buddy system, his accomplice did not pause, but rounded the corner and disappeared like a rat from an attic light.

The satchel was lying on the cement. Ellen darted out and grabbed it up while the thwarted purse snatcher was shaking his head and desperately gasping for the air that had been punched from his lungs. Gulping like a goldfish whose misguided leap for freedom had ended in a rude whack on the kitchen linoleum, he stared around, clearly stunned by both the fall and its cause. Moving behind him, Ellen stomped down hard on the instep of the man's sneaker and he wheezed a yelp, a choking, airless expression of pain.

"Beat it, asshole," Ellen screamed, her voice so rusty with disuse at that volume that the words came out in a low, throaty rasp. The asshole struggled to his feet, holding his scraped and bleeding palms out in front of him, and ran off without looking back.

Clenching the satchel to her hammering chest, Ellen collapsed against the rough bricks. Her whole body was shaking so violently from the unexpected confrontation that she worried she might disintegrate.

It took a full minute before she could hear anything except the panicked thumping of her heart, and when she could, she realized that outside her head it was oddly quiet. The girl had stopped shouting for the police and was standing still, listening.

"Hello?" the girl called out tentatively. "Who's there?"

"It's okay," Ellen gasped. "It's me, the lady . . . from the bus. I . . ." She sucked a huge lungful of air and tried to direct the oxygen to the sharp pain in her thudding chest. " . . . have your bag."

There was a moment of silence—then the girl said, "Really?" She sounded dubious.

Ellen couldn't imagine anything more "really" than what had just happened, but she couldn't be annoyed. She was having trouble believing it herself. "Yeah . . . really," she said.

"Sweet." The click of the cane brought the girl the few yards back up the sidewalk. She stopped just in front of Ellen, who was, no doubt, easy to locate due to the fact that she was panting like a Saint Bernard on an August afternoon. "Are you all right?" the girl asked.

"I . . . think . . . so."

"What happened? I heard him go down."

"Um . . ." Ellen shuffled her feet uncomfortably and said, "I tripped him."

"Nice. I hope he scraped his face off. Thanks. I'm Temerity." She held out one hand, only

slightly off course. Confused by the gesture, Ellen realized she was still hugging the satchel and thrust it at the hand.

Temerity took it, tucked it under her left arm and then extended her right hand again. “And you are?” she asked pointedly.

“Uh, Ellen,” Ellen said. She took the hand between her thumb and fingertips and gave it an awkward shake. From the point of uncommon contact, she felt a creeping sensation spread across the skin of her wrist and up her forearm, as though a swarm of ants were following a parade route over her shoulder and across her back.

“Well, Ellen, can I buy you a cup of coffee or a beer or something to thank you?”

“No,” Ellen blurted in horror, and then fumbled, “I mean, I have to go to work. I work nights.”

“Where?”

“Costco.”

“I didn’t know they were open nights, not that it makes any difference to me.”

“They’re not, I clean.”

“You clean,” she repeated. “Do you eat?”

Ellen glanced down at her lumpy, overstuffed body, the prolonged conversation was making her increasingly anxious, and hollow. She needed food to stabilize herself. “Sure, sometimes.”

“So that’s good.” Temerity felt along the side of the strapless satchel until she located a small zippered pocket. Taking out a card, she ran her fingers over the raised lettering then held it out. “Here’s my number. I want you to call me tomorrow and I really want to take you to dinner, or breakfast, or whatever works for you. Like I said, it’s all midnight to me.”

In spite of the million-ant march advancing across her skin, Ellen gawked at Temerity in awe. “You eat at restaurants?” she asked.

Temerity’s pretty face scrunched up into a sarcastic scowl. “No, I eat at libraries and furniture outlets. Of course I eat at restaurants, don’t you?”

Ellen wasn’t sure what to say. She wanted to know more about this woman, but the thought of making an actual social engagement spurred the anxiety ants into a fit of competitive flamenco dancing in miniature golf cleats. Uncertain of how to respond, she just said, “No, but, I mean, aren’t you afraid that you’ll, uh . . .” Her nerve failed her.

The head cocked to one side. “Make a spectacle of myself? Miss my mouth? Stab myself with a

fork? Eat the toothpick? You don't have to be a blind to make a complete fool of yourself, and anyway, who cares?" Temerity threw her arms out and spoke the last words so loudly that they echoed against the walls.

"I don't go to restaurants." Ellen felt ashamed to say it out loud.

Temerity let out an exaggerated sigh. "In that case, I can truthfully tell you the only thing you're really missing out on is the onion blossom at Judy's. So yummy, and impossible to make at home without a grease fire. Fine. Call me, I live here"—she pointed up—"we can talk about your dietary peculiarities, then. If you'd rather, you can come over and I'll cook at home. How about that?"

"Maybe," Ellen said, anxious to get away now. "I gotta go." Turning, Ellen fled from the first human who had offered her anything in almost six years. And who, ironically perhaps, saw her because she couldn't.