

PARKER

Sven isn't at school today.

I can relax a bit, because no one comes up with any new jokes about Parker the Barker all day. But at the same time I keep thinking: *What's going to happen tonight?* He could have had one of those seizures where his face goes blue and they had to take him to hospital. Then he won't have left the door open a bit, and I'll be stuck outside in the dark. With my nose pressed up against the glass. And Alaska going crazy inside.

When I get out of bed at 2:00A.M., I have instant goosebumps. Yesterday's storm put an end to the summer. Of course it's ridiculous to go sneaking back into Sven's house in the middle of the night. But it's my only option.

My mom and dad say I can't see Alaska again. They say it would be unkind to visit her at her new place. She wouldn't understand. We couldn't explain to her why she had to leave. And if we suddenly appear again, she'll be completely confused.

I know that, but here I am anyway, cycling along the gleaming streets. Everything is different from five weeks

ago. My body feels like it's slowly crumbling away. Without Alaska, there soon won't be anything left of me. Look at my dad. He used to be a human being. And now he's just empty packaging.

Other people can be sensible if they like, but I've had enough of that. I'm finally doing what all those websites keep telling me to do: I'm being myself. And I, Parker the Barker, need to see Alaska.

I put on the balaclava before climbing over the fence. The wet wood is slippery under my hands. My heart is thumping even harder than before, because this time I know what's going to happen: I'm not just on my way to Alaska, but also to Sven. If everything's OK, if he's not in hospital, if the door is slightly open, then I'm going to have to talk to him again.

The door is open.

As I feel for the handle in the dark, Alaska is already quietly starting to sing. And as soon as I step into the room, the bedside lamp goes on. I blink. Sven is sitting up in bed—as if he was waiting for me. This time he isn't almost naked. He's wearing a dark T-shirt and his blond hair is falling over his forehead. There's a bandage on his left hand.

"You're here!" I whisper.

He raises his eyebrows. "Shouldn't I be saying that to you?"

Feeling a bit dizzy, I crouch down to pet Alaska. I need to be really careful now. To whisper as quietly as possible, so that he doesn't recognize my voice. And to remember that I don't know a thing about him. I don't know he wasn't at school

today, I don't know that he makes up nasty nicknames, and I don't even know what color his eyes are. You can't see that by the light of his bedside lamp.

I sit on the floor. Last time it was covered in junk, but now his room has been tidied. Alaska is jumping around me, licking my neck and swishing her tail into my face. I whisper nonsense, just because it's so good to talk to her again.

"Are you a happy puppy, Alassie? Are you good at singing?"

"You call that singing?" whispers Sven from his bed. "You should come to my school. There's a girl in my new class who can bark 'Jingle Bells'."

I freeze.

"She's called Parker," says Sven. "Parker, the amazing barking girl! So now I call her Barker."

Inside my throat, there are two of those drawstrings that you use to close a gym bag. Sven is holding them firmly in his hands. And he's pulling them.

"Get it?" he asks. "Barker. Woof!"

I clench my fists.

"Of course I get it," I whisper. "I'm not stupid."

"But you're not laughing."

"I don't happen to find bullying very funny."

"But didn't you hear what I said?" he asks. "That girl started *barking*. So it's OK to call her Barker, isn't it?"

I just want to get away. But I can't, because I still have to pet Alaska. It's like in the tales of *One Thousand and One Nights*. As long as I keep talking calmly to Sven, he won't give me away to his mom and dad. As long as I listen to his horrid stories, I can keep on stroking Alaska.

So I pretend that I'm someone else. A girl who comes from the other side of the planet. I have never, ever barked for a single second in my entire life. I don't know anyone called Parker the Barker.

"What happened to your hand?" I ask, pointing at the bandage.

"Bruised it." He sighs. "I had another seizure this morning."

"Did Alaska press the alarm button?"

"Yes, she saved my life again. I was standing here in my room and suddenly I went crashing to the floor. Right on top of my hand. And then I almost choked, so they had to call an ambulance."

He brushes the hair off his forehead and stares at the bandage.

"I am *so* tired of this. It's been going on for a year now. And if we don't find the right medication, then it's never going to stop."

The big old bulldozer has vanished from his voice. The funny little hedgehog too.

"The only people I've seen today have been parents and doctors," he says gloomily. "The past few weeks had been all right. The move was out of the way, and the dog classes were going OK. But then there was my new school and my new class, and my dumb epilepsy gets worse when I'm stressed."

"Stressed?" I ask in surprise.

"Yes, stressed!" He frowns. "What year are you in?"

"Second," I whisper. All I can think is: *I'm not Parker the Barker. I'm not in the first year. I'm someone completely different.*

"So you must remember what it was like to go to a new school. I get lost half of the time, I don't understand any French, and my whole class has a panic attack when I have a seizure. And I have to give talks about epilepsy all the time." He sighs. "Imagine walking around on Mars for the rest of your life. And having to explain how you work to every Martian you meet: how you breathe, how your nose runs, how you pee, how you puke—and every time they go 'ooh' and 'ah' and look at you as if *you're* the alien." He shrugs. "That's my life. But I don't have to go to Mars for it."

As I look at him, I can hardly believe that the idiot in my class is really the boy who's sitting there in that bed.

"I had..." He stops and irritably brushes the hair off his forehead again.

"What?" I ask. "What did you have?"

"Never mind."

There are dark circles under his eyes. The cut on his chin has only just healed and now he's got a bruised hand too.

Just imagine, I think. Just imagine suddenly hearing that you've got to live on Mars for the rest of your life.

"Tell me," I say. Quietly, as if I'm talking to Alaska.

He sighs. "I had this plan all worked out. On that very first morning, I was going to pull off a brilliant stunt. So that the whole school would hear about me. And not about Sven the alien who lies there drooling and shaking, but about Sven who—well, you know..." He shrugs. "I couldn't actually come up with anything. And I was too much of a coward. I was walking through the halls all on my own, and suddenly I felt really terrified that I'd have a seizure."

Alaska is lying next to me now, on her side. Her legs stretched out, her back against my thigh. My hand is stroking the warm, dry pads on her paws. Sleepily, she nudges my leg with her head. Sometimes I can hardly believe that dogs and people can love each other so much.

"What you wanted on Monday..." I don't look at Sven. "That's what *everyone* wants. To do something amazing, so that the whole school immediately knows who you are. Or, even better—the whole world. But does it ever happen? No, of course not! And that's nothing to do with your epilepsy."

He doesn't say anything. At any moment, he could make another joke about the girl who barked, but right now he's silent.

"It's only the first week," I whisper. "What were you expecting? That you were Harry Potter? That you'd get to school and everyone would say they'd been waiting for you for years? And that you're going to save the world?"

He snorts. "Well, it would be pretty cool."

"Yeah? Well, I'm not interested in all that," I say.

"Really?"

"No! I don't want to save the world. The world can't be saved."

"Is that right?" he asks. "The bad guys are going to win, are they?"

I swallow. "They already have."

Silently, I lie down beside Alaska. My arms around her body, my face in her fur.

There are no prisons for animals, because animals are never bad. If they eat each other, it's only because they have no

other choice. Because there are no bowls of biscuits out there on the savannah. Animals aren't especially good either—they just *are*. They are *themselves*, just like all those websites want you to be.

But suddenly I realize that Alaska is different now. She has a job as an assistance dog. She doesn't get paid for it, she won't become famous, she won't get extra tasty snacks or a golden collar. But, even so, she's helping a human being.

"Now you," says Sven.

"Now me what?" I ask.

"Now you have to tell me something. I don't know anything about you."

I don't reply.

"Or you could take off that balaclava," he says. "That would count."

I bury my hands deep in Alaska's fur, so that I can touch her warm skin. Her fur is a bit too big for her body. It's like she's wearing a furry onesie. It feels baggy under her chin.

"You have three options," says Sven. "One: tell me something. Two: take off that balaclava. Three: I'll press the alarm button. If my mom and dad hear that Alaska used to belong to you, then you'll never be allowed to come back here. They take the rules for assistance dogs pretty seriously. No one's allowed to distract her—and certainly not her old owner."

Now I hate him again.

So it really is *One Thousand and One Nights*. I have to talk, or it stops here and now. And that can't be allowed to happen.

Never seeing Alaska again—that is not an option. I’ve been trying for four months now, but I don’t miss her any less. Only more.

I clench my fists.

There is actually only one story I can tell. No one at school knows what happened this summer—and that includes Sven. I’ve never told anyone about it—at least not normal people anyway. Just the police.

“Well?” he says. “Have you fallen asleep?”

I sit up straight.

SVEN

"It all happened five weeks ago," the girl in the balaclava says quietly.

It sounds as if she's about to start telling me a fairy tale.

I rest my bruised paw on the quilt and wait for her to continue. I still haven't seen her face, but I feel as if I know her.

Or more like she knows me.

It's really stupid. I say things to her that I don't say to anyone else.

My psychologist is always whining that I don't tell him anything. So next time I'll tell him to put a balaclava over his head. And that it might be a good idea to turn off the light.

"My mom and dad have a store..."

Balaclava Girl was lying next to Alaska, but now she's sitting up again. Six feet from my bed. Her arms around her knees, her fists clenched tight.

"The store was there before I was born. One night, years ago, there was a break-in. But there'd never been an armed robbery. Not until this summer."

She looks at the beast. "It's so weird...Alaska doesn't know anything about it. It happened after she'd gone. She only knows us the way we were before the robbery."

I want to say something funny. To ask if we should put our hands over her doggy ears to prevent the hairy monster from having nightmares.

But I keep my mouth shut.

"I was there," says the girl. "I saw it all. The security camera filmed it, but I was there too. I was in the office at the back of the store, and I saw it happen."

"You saw your mom and dad being robbed?"

She nods. "I hid behind the coats on the rack. But I could still see the store through the coat sleeves."

The beast awakes and sits up. She's listening. Her front legs stretched out, her face serious, as if she understands every word.

"It was late-night shopping, so we were going to shut at nine. They came in at seven minutes to. Two men in black, with balaclavas on their heads."

I look at the thing on the girl's head, and really don't get it. So why's she wearing a balaclava? Why does she insist on keeping it on?

"The smaller man had a knife in his hand. The tall one had a gun." She looks at me through those staring holes in her balaclava. "Have you ever seen a gun in real life?"

I shake my head, and she shrugs.

"It looks exactly like you think. Exactly like in the movies."

I don't say anything. I'd quite like to see a Glock 9mm for real.

"They yelled at them to open the till. My dad just turned to stone. He didn't do a thing. Which I could understand, because I didn't do anything either. My mom shouted back at them and said there wasn't any money. That they'd just taken it to the bank. And then the tall man hit the side of her head with his gun."

She clasps her hands together.

"My mom opened the till. I saw some blood running down her cheek, just a thin little trickle. And I saw the shoes of the man with the gun. Black, with red flames on the sides of the soles."

She clears her throat.

"Suddenly my dad could move again. And then he came up with the bright idea of pressing the alarm button. That red button you have beside your bed? Well, they've got them in the store too. But when you press the button, it's not parents who come. It's the police."

"Good for your dad!" I say.

She shakes her head furiously. "No! It was incredibly dumb! You're not supposed to press the button until after they've gone. Not while the robbery is still going on. Before he'd even

reached the button, they shot him. And then they ran. I don't think they could stand the sight of blood."

She leans over Alaska and starts stroking her again. As if the story's over.

I don't want to ask, but I can't stop myself.

"So...is he still alive? Your dad?"

She shrugs. "Sort of."

Seriously. What kind of answer is that when someone's asked if your dad's still alive? Shrugging your shoulders, like it doesn't matter? Who does that?

"No one is *sort of* alive," I say, more angrily than I mean to.

She sighs. "He was hit in the shoulder. When the ambulance took him away, there was this big puddle of blood on the floor. Three days later, he was allowed to leave hospital. And now he's at home."

"So it all turned out OK."

She sighs again. "Sort of. The blood soaked into the floor, so there's still a stain. And now he sits at home all day, just staring at the computer, watching the live feed from the security cameras, because he's too scared to go to the store now."

"And what about your mom?"

"Yeah, she still goes in. The store was only closed for a weekend. She says we can't let the bad guys win. She doesn't want to be afraid."

"That's brave," I say—and the girl shakes her head again.

"No! She's incredibly dumb too! Those robbers are still walking around free. And there are all those other criminals out there as well. Any day there could be another robbery. Any day someone on the street could beat you up. Any day someone on your bus could blow themselves up. It could happen at any time. Any minute. Any second."

She curls up small. Her shoulders shake, and she puts her hand over her mouth.

Alaska is busily licking away at her other hand, like she does with me after a fit.

The beast must be thinking: *Seizures? Robberies? What can I do? I'll lie here. I'll give them a bit of a lick.*

I pause for what must be a hundred seconds, and then I get out of bed.

I mean, she won't stop crying, so what else am I supposed to do?

I carefully sit down on the floor beside her. I've never comforted a girl in my life.

Never mind "a girl." I've never comforted *anyone* before.

"I don't get it," she says in a hoarse voice.

Her tears are rolling straight into the balaclava. I can't see them.

"How do people do it? How do they just go on with their lives when they know everything could go wrong at any moment?"

I look up at the helmet that I put on top of my closet this morning. The doctors wanted me to wear it all the time. Yeah, right.

My unbruised hand slowly moves to her shoulder.

The moment I touch her, she shivers. But she stays sitting there. With my hand on her shoulder.

And now? What happens next?

Imagine if I wanted to comfort Alaska—yeah, just imagine that—then obviously I'd stroke her. Simple. My hand doesn't need to come up with anything complicated: brush half a foot to the left, then half a foot to the right. And repeat that about thirty times.

A dog I can handle. But what do you do with a girl's shoulder?

"Can I come back on Friday night?" she asks quietly.

"Fine by me," I say.

She stands up, and my hand falls off her shoulder.

She gives Alaska a bit more of a stroke, because everyone can pet dogs. Half a foot to the left, half a foot to the right—piece of cake.

PARKER

The next morning, everyone in 1B obviously wants to know why Sven wasn't at school yesterday. It's at least a quarter of an hour before our math class can start. Everyone sits listening breathlessly to his story about his major seizure, the wailing ambulance, the bruised hand and the blond nurse who took his blood.

I watch in silence. Not through the holes in my balaclava, but just normally, with my eyes. Last night I looked at his face for at least an hour. And now I can see everything at once. I can see the big old bulldozer, and also the funny little hedgehog. And even when he's grinning away and telling the story about the nurse, I can see the ordinary human boy who's stuck on Mars for the rest of his life. The boy who has to explain every day how he breathes.

At lunchtime, I get a text message from my mom. Something is up with Finn. There's nothing to worry about, but when my brothers get picked up from school, his teacher would like to have a quick word with Dad.

I call Mom right away.

"I'll go with Dad," I say.

"Really? Would you do that?" She sounds worried. "I tried to see if Erik could stand in for me, but he's already coming in tonight. I really can't leave the store."

"I'll make sure I'm at their school at half past two."

"Can you do that? Don't you have class?"

"No, it's a short day."

She doesn't know my timetable yet, of course. She doesn't know that 1B have class until half three today.

"Thanks, Parker. That's a load off my mind."

In biology, the others are learning the difference between living, non-living and dead, but all I can think is: *What's up with Finn?*

When the bell finally goes, I don't walk off with the rest of them. I have to go and report myself sick. It's none of the school's business how my family works so, from this moment on, I have a bad case of flu.

I see Sven walking through the empty hall, ahead of me. He's on his way to the elevator, all on his own. His feet are dragging along the floor, and I look at his black T-shirt. Was he wearing the same one last night? Is he really wearing his bed T-shirt to school?

I want to think it's grubby, but I can't quite manage it. And I can't seem to forget his hand on my shoulder either. I don't understand how it can feel so different—being touched by Alaska, or by Sven.

Is it because of Alaska's fur? When she nudges me with her head, it's like being cuddled by a teddy bear. But when Sven

put his hand on my shoulder, it felt like—well, it felt like being touched by a *person*.

This is the first time I've walked across the primary-school playground without belonging there. My dad's waiting on the bench under the chestnut tree. His face is gray, and his head looks like a crumpled-up ball of paper. The shoulder they shot is lower than the other one.

I bite my lip. So now I have to talk to him. To walk along beside him, where everyone can see. For a moment, I wish I had a different dad. A bulldozer, not a ball of paper. But I already regret thinking that.

"We've been back at school four days now," says Finn's teacher with a serious look on her face, "and in that time Finn has kicked five of his classmates, tied up two of the infants, and today he hit seven children on the head with a stick."

"It wasn't a stick," says Finn. "It was my gun."

Dex and Joey play outside while Dad, Finn and I talk to the teacher. She's new, so I don't know her. The chairs we're sitting on are low, and the tables are sticky. Welcome to primary school.

"So, of course, I spoke to Finn about his conduct," she says.

I wonder if that's something you learn at teaching school. To say you spoke to someone about their conduct.

"And then he told me that he's a soldier. Not just at school, but at home. In fact, he said that it's all part of his upbringing. That he has to march every day and go out on missions, or he doesn't get any dinner."

"Hmm," says Dad. His face is even grayer than before.

"How strange," I say. "I'll talk to him. That's clearly not acceptable."

"Indeed." The teacher looks stern. "Luckily there haven't been any serious accidents yet. But we've had a split lip and a couple of bruises. And obviously I know that you've all had a tough summer. But Finn's behavior really does need to improve."

Dad and I nod enthusiastically. I give Finn a kick under the table, and then he nods enthusiastically too.

"We'll give him a good talking-to," I say. That sounds like the sort of thing you might learn at parenting school.

When we're all around the corner and the school is no longer in sight, I yell: "Soldiers! Atten-TION!" I look at Joey and whisper: "That means you have to listen."

They immediately stand in line.

"Private Finn!" I say sternly. "Why did you hit other children on the head with a stick?"

"That was not a stick, General!" Finn says, standing perfectly straight, his chin in the air. "That was my gun, General!"

I nod. "A good point, Private. Why did you hit the other children on the head with your gun?"

"They were the bad guys, General! They had knives and pistols! So I gave them a clobbering!"

As I look at them standing there in a line, I want to hug them. My own private army, with their messy hair and their hands that look like they've just dug a tunnel to Australia.

"Listen carefully," I shout. "All the kids at your school are soldiers too! You are all in the same army. There are no bad guys at school, only fellow soldiers. Private Finn, do you understand that you must not hit other soldiers on the head? Do you understand that your mission is to protect them?"

"Yes, General! I will protect them, General!" He wrinkles his nose. "What about the teacher?"

"Seriously?" I say. "Did you hit your teacher on the head too?"

"Couldn't reach, General! She was too tall, General!"

I see my dad's face relax, just for a moment. And then he starts looking around again, as if he's searching for the alarm button.

"Your teacher," I say seriously to Finn, "is your—um—colonel, so you must listen to her. And Private Joey and Private Dex, your teachers are your colonels too. Is that understood, soldiers?"

"Yes, General!"

"Good. Diiiiis-missed! March!"

They salute, turn ninety degrees and start marching away.

Dad and I follow them in silence. And suddenly I think: *If only it were tomorrow night. I want to tell Sven what just happened.*

SVEN

Yvonne's coming round for a training session. The beast's already in her harness. She's so happy that she's dancing.

I thought I'd be in a foul mood: first a whole week at school and then another full hour of dog classes on Friday afternoon. But I'm not in a foul mood at all, because this morning I suddenly realized: Yvonne knows who Alaska's previous owner was.

She knows Balaclava Girl.

Dogs don't pay any attention to appearances—Yvonne is the living proof of that. She's absolutely huge and she wears at least five different colors at the same time. But yeah, the beast adores her.

As soon as Yvonne comes in, Alaska starts acting like the best assistance dog in the universe. And the really dumb thing is: I can see why she wants to please her. Yvonne is the boss—you can feel it.

You get all those guys in their smart suits, trying to look all tough. But Yvonne just stands there. Feet firmly on the

ground as if they have roots. Completely relaxed. And you do whatever she tells you to do.

First we go outside to practice "Alaska, sit!" and "Alaska, let's go!" And walking nicely without pulling on the leash. Yvonne says it's mainly me who needs to learn how to do that.

I still can't stand being put on display next to that assistance-dog vest. Everyone always asks questions. And even though the vest says, *DO NOT PET* in big letters, people still start cooing away at the beast: "Oh, I know I'm not supposed to pet you, but you're so sweet. How can I resist? Ha ha."

It is very simple: you have to ignore assistance dogs.

And no, that's not sad.

If you saw a policeman directing traffic, would you go and pinch his cheeks? Have you ever given the pilot of your plane a little tickle under the armpits?

Well, the beast's no different.

When she's wearing her vest, she is at work. And she could do without being prodded and poked by every idiot who comes along.

"So..." I say when we come to a long and straight section of sidewalk. "Um... Where was it that Alaska used to live?"

Yvonne raises her penciled-in eyebrows.

"Oh? So now you're suddenly curious?"

She's not just a dog whisperer, you see. She's secretly a human whisperer too. She can see right through you.

I shrug. "Just wondering. Did she, like, live with some old man or maybe with...um...*children*?"

Yvonne laughs. "Yep. Four of them, to be precise. I met the family out in the woods one day. There was a girl of about your age and three little brothers who were yelling their heads off. They said they were looking for a new home for Alaska, so I told them that I train assistance dogs to work with children. They thought it sounded like a great idea."

"The girl you mentioned..." I say. "Did she have a name?"

Yvonne stops and gives me a hard stare.

Go on, I think. Say it!

I've dreamed about her three times, I tell her just about everything, and she's coming again tonight.

And I still have no idea who she is.

But Yvonne shakes her head.

"Alaska's *your* dog now," she says calmly. "Her old owners hated having to say goodbye to her, but that's all in the past. Come on, we've got work to do."

"I only asked what her name was! Just her first name. You can tell me that, can't you?"

“We’ll continue indoors. Have the two of you been practicing with your medicine bag?”

For the rest of the dog class, I am very grumpy.

I can’t get it out of my mind: Alaska running through the woods with three boys yelling away. Without her stupid harness. Without any nasty medicine bags to carry, without tasks and commands and a job to do.

And then, of course, getting all those hugs from Balaclava Girl. Every day, nonstop, right the way through all the tsunamis.

I kick the wall, because now I’m sure of it. The beast liked living with her more than with me.

PARKER

I haven't been on a bad-guy hunt all week.

Every afternoon, I came up with some excuse or other, but now I've run out. I know "bad guy" sounds childish, but that's a good thing. When I say "bad guys," I think of clumsy cartoon characters in black-and-white striped pajamas. Not those two men in the store. The little one with the knife. The tall one who shot Dad.

I'm sitting on the wall at the end of the shopping street. With a book in my hands, but I'm not reading. I'm looking at the shoes of every man who walks by.

The police say they're doing their best. They've studied the pictures from the security camera, and what they know is this: the robbers were wearing black Adidas sweatpants, black hoodies (brand unknown) and black balaclavas. That's all they could get from the pictures. My mom didn't see anything more than that either. And no one knows what my dad saw. Not even him. There's a gap in his memory.

Over the past few weeks, I've studied hundreds of shoes walking by. Yes, of course I told the police about the black shoes with the red flames on the sides of the soles. They now know exactly which Air Jordans the tall one with the gun was wearing. But I'm the only one who knows what the shoes

really looked like. Not fresh out of the box, but on that guy's feet.

The robbers made one big mistake. When they ran away, they pulled off their balaclavas as soon as they got outside. You see, people notice when you run down the street in disguise. They shoved their balaclavas into the pockets of their sweatpants, but one of them messed up. He dropped his balaclava.

The police found it later on the street outside the store. They compared it to the pictures and identified it as the balaclava that the man with the gun had been wearing. There were a few of his hairs inside, so now they have his DNA.

But what good is that? You can't go around the entire country taking a little bit of DNA from every man. *Sorry, sir, we just want to find out if you're a criminal.* As long as there's no suspect, a grubby balaclava with a few hairs in it is no use at all. And that's why I'm here. On the wall. Looking at shoes.

Every thirty seconds, I'm sure I'm about to faint. That my heart's going to thump itself to pieces, and my brain will run out of blood. Every thirty seconds, I think: *I want to leave.* But I stay. I press my hands as hard as I can against the rough bricks of the wall.

Tonight I'll be able to stroke Alaska again, I tell myself. If I can keep this up for an hour, that's my reward. I don't think about Sven. Not about his blue husky eyes, not about the way he brushes his hair off his forehead, not about the way his voice sounds when he talks about his seizures.

Sometimes I glance at faces instead of shoes, but then I quickly look back down again. I just don't get it. How can all those people walk along so calmly? Their expressions not haunted, no alarm buttons anywhere nearby, the emergency number not already keyed in on their cell phones. Don't they ever watch the news?

Maybe they don't care if they're alive or dead. Or maybe they're with the bad guys too, and they're thinking: *In this world, you'd better make sure you have a gun in your hand.*

SVEN

In the middle of the night, I wake up with a start. My dozy head is suddenly perfectly clear.

I am such an idiot!

All I know about Balaclava Girl is that she's in the second year, and that she comes to my house at night on her bike. That's not enough information to find her online.

But a robbery five weeks ago, here in our town, when the store owner got shot in the shoulder, and the robbers are still on the run? Now that's something I can google.

I look at my telephone and see that it's five past two in the morning. If it's the same as last time, she'll be here in less than half an hour.

I go to Google.

It's pretty lame, I know, but I'm out of breath. And my fingers mistype three times.

I click on the magnifying glass. There it is!

*ARMED ROBBERY! MONTIJN PHOTO SUPPLIES—
OWNER WOUNDED*

I want to go on reading, but my eyes stick on that one word: Montijn. A name I'd never heard before—until this week.

Every teacher begins every class by marking who's absent. They learn our names by repeating them thousands of times. Sven Beekman. Sol Louakili. Ziva de Vries.

Parker Montijn.

The girl who started barking in the very first class.

I look at Alaska and, in my mind, two completely different worlds slowly start to come together.

That quiet, skinny girl in my class—and the dark shadow in the balaclava. The barking girl by day—and the stroking girl by night.

It makes no sense.

I'm going round the bend. There are lots of people who have the same name.

But check this: we'd been living here all summer without Balaclava Girl ever coming round. And then Monday night, after the very first day at school, she suddenly turned up.

Is it coincidence?

I need to know. Now.

I sit up straight and look at the beast again.

Seriously, I'm actually nervous.

And then I start barking.

"Wuff wuff woof, wuff wuff woof..."

I'm barely halfway through the first line when Alaska jumps up. She runs over to me, wagging her tail, puts her front paws on my quilt and sticks her nose in the air. "Wuff, wuf, wuff, wuf, woooff!"

She can do it. She can bark "Jingle Bells."

Before I have time to think about it, my mom comes rushing in. Hair in a mess, crumpled nightie.

"Sven?" When she sees me sitting up in bed, she stops dead in her tracks. "I heard Alaska barking! I thought you..."

In my head I see the holes in the balaclava staring at me.

So there is no mysterious girl smiling at me as we drive on a winding road along a steep coast.

The eyes of Parker from 1B have been behind those black holes all along.

"What's going on?" asks my mom. "Why was Alaska barking?"

I brush the hair out of my eyes, silently swearing to myself. There's a girl in my class who knows everything about me...

“Sven? What’s wrong?”

I hold up my phone. “I was playing a game on my phone because I couldn’t sleep. But the sound was on, and the beast suddenly starting barking along.”

It’s one of those wonderful moments when you can really shine as a mother. When you’re certain that you’re right and that hundreds of scientists and academics would back you up. Because after staring at an illuminated screen, I obviously won’t be able to get to sleep. And if I don’t get enough sleep, I’ll have extra seizures, and then...

Oh. My. God, is all I can think. *Just go away! Any moment now, we’ll be here having our Educational Moment when Balaclava Girl –*

No, not Balaclava Girl.

Parker.

When Parker the Barker gets here.

I clench my fists.

She’s known who I am the entire time. She looked at me through the holes in her balaclava and saw me lying there half naked in my boxers. She listened to my stories about the failed stunt, she let me comfort her, she stroked Alaska.

Woah, it feels like she’s seen my *brain* half naked. My sparking brain full of short circuits, in nothing but its underwear.

* * *

Before long she'll be standing here again beside my bed in her black disguise. And suddenly I know what I'm going to do: I won't tell her that I've found out. She thinks she has a secret—well, she doesn't. I might be the alien with the bruised hand who's going to stay in 1B for the rest of his life, but tonight, I'm the winner.

I know everything. And Parker Montijn does not.

PARKER

For the first time, the dark streets aren't empty.

It's Friday night, and it's not just thieves who are out and about, but people who want to have fun. Groups of drunken cyclists sway and swerve along the road, and my hands immediately start shaking again.

The TV news tonight went on about a bomb for ten minutes. A car bomb in a town square full of people. Thirteen dead, a hundred wounded, pools of blood that they just covered up with sand.

My dad leaves the room as soon as the news begins, but my mom watches without batting an eyelid. Even when they say, *Some of these images might be disturbing*. Or maybe especially then. She knows someone still has to be there. Someone who watches. Someone who goes to the store. Someone who takes care of us.

I sat beside Mom on the sofa and stared at the screaming people on TV. I tried to keep track of what was going on, because if you stop paying attention for just a second, you can't tell whether you're looking at the good guys or the bad guys.

* * *

Behind me, in the dark, I hear someone shout.

"Hey, sweetheart! Where are you off to at this time of night?"

I glance over my shoulder. Two men, laughing.

"Aren't you a bit young to be going to the pub?" shouts the other one.

I start cycling faster.

They probably don't have guns. They probably won't do anything to me. But how can you tell who's going to shoot and who's on his way to visit his grandma?

I'm panting when I enter Sven's room. I slide the doors shut behind me as quickly as possible and pull down the handle with a jerk. Out of breath, I stroke Alaska.

"What's up? Someone chasing you?" Sven asks coolly.

He's not sitting in his bed, but on his chair, with his feet up on the desk. He's wearing a hoodie and looking at me in a way I don't understand. As Alaska dances around me, I quickly reach up to touch the balaclava—no, he can't see my face.

"Some drunk men started yelling at me."

Alaska's warm tongue licks my hands. Her black eyes are glowing in the white. What makes dogs so great is the way they never get tired of you. They never think: *I've already seen that Parker girl twice this week, so we've run out of things to say.*

"Oh, really?" Sven still sounds just as chilly as he looks. "What were they yelling?"

"They asked where I was off to at this time of night. And if I wasn't a bit young for the pub."

He raises his eyebrows. "Oh? So they were sensible drunk men, were they?"

I don't say anything.

I lay Alaska's ear flat on my hand and stroke it with my fingertips. A thin piece of dog, as soft as can be.

"Of all the people in prison," I whisper, "ninety-two percent are men. And only eight percent are women. And it's even worse with armed robbery. Just about every single armed robber is male." I look up. The light on his desk is on, and his blond hair is glowing. "Did you know that?"

"No," he says. And then he shrugs. "So what?"

The way he's sitting there—it reminds me of a movie. Or of lots of movies: the villain at the center of his web, completely in control, giving orders for people to be murdered, while he sits there casually, with his feet up on his desk.

"So what?" I hiss. "I just don't get why we seem to think it's normal for men to kill and steal and to blow people up."

"Think about it," says Sven. "One hundred percent of Dutch prime ministers have been men. It was men who invented computers and airplanes. They discovered gravity and figured out how evolution works. We've been running the world for thousands of years—so yes, sometimes we get things wrong."

"We?"

"Yes. We! Men! At least we do something. If you don't ever do anything, you'll never end up in prison. Makes sense, doesn't it?"

He's sitting there, looking like he's running the whole world right now. The red alarm button is gleaming. It looks like the buzzer in a TV quiz show. The one that contestants have to bash when they think they know the answer.

Sven would bash it harder than anyone else. Even if he had no idea of the answer.

"Come on," he suddenly says. "We're going outside."

I stare at him. "Outside?"

"Yes, my mom was just in here. She'd heard Alaska barking. I keep thinking that we shouldn't be talking this loud—and it's annoying me."

He stands up. As soon as Alaska sees that he's putting his shoes on, she goes crazy.

"Yes, beast," he says to her. "You can come too."

I sit on the floor, frozen. We're going outside? Now, right this moment? No way. I have to whisper, or he'll recognize my voice. And I certainly don't want to go out for a walk with Sven the bulldozer in the middle of the night.

But I can hardly stay behind in his bedroom by myself.

Sven slides the door open. "We'll go out into the field at the back."

"But Alaska can't get over the fence, can she?" I whisper.

"I've got a key for the gate."

It feels like he's asking me to jump into a black hole. A black hole full of bad guys and bombs and gravity. But in the end I can't resist. The thought of it: going out with Alaska in the middle of the night. Running around together across that enormous field. Playing with a stick—and pretending she's still my dog.

SVEN

My head is about to explode. We need to get as far away as possible from the houses, so that I can scream.

I've never felt like such a fool.

Yes, slowly surfacing after a seizure—that sucks big time. Shocked faces all around, while I'm confused, trying to puzzle out what just happened, if I've hurt myself, where I am, who's with me—that's a nightmare.

But this time I didn't have a seizure. I was there, I was fully aware, I was talking to her—I can remember everything.

And she completely conned me. While I was lying there in my bed. Half naked. I told her I was too much of a coward to pull off a stunt at school. I told her that I feel like a boy on Mars who has to keep explaining how he pees.

And the next day she just sat there in class, as if nothing had happened.

We sneak through the dark yard as if there's a war on. Alaska knows exactly what's going on. The three of us are playing a game together—and in this game no one's allowed to bark.

I open the gate and let the beast and the liar out. She wants to hold Alaska's leash and that's fine by me. It's the last time she'll ever see that dog.

High above us, there's a perfectly round moon in a deep blue sky. The wind is blowing. Autumn is on its way.

"You know something?" I whisper, because the houses are still much too close. "Seems like it must be pretty hard, hating half of the world's population. Do you hate the boys in your class that much too?"

"Absolutely," she says in a flash.

"Oh really?" I ask, as if we're talking about the weather. "Why's that?"

She sighs. "They keep shoving and thumping each other all the time. They're always talking about other boys who play games on YouTube and acting like they're all funny and tough. But they're just childish bullies."

"All of them?"

"One of them in particular."

I can't see her face, of course, but I can feel her holding back.

She's walking across the bare field beside me, and her whole body is hesitant. She mustn't give herself away—but at the same time she wants nothing more than to tell me all about this one bully.

"My whole class thinks I'm stupid," she whispers. "They're laughing at me and it's all because of one boy." She kicks the sand. "Honestly, I don't feel any need to be special. I don't expect people to start cheering when I enter the room. But I don't want to be the class clown either. I accidentally

did something weird just once, and now they all think I'm an idiot."

"Alaska's allowed off the leash here," I say in a cold voice.

We're away from the houses now. Grass is beginning to grow, even a few bushes. If they don't start building soon, there's going to be a whole wood here before long.

I put my hands in the pockets of my sweatpants, and I look up. Without streetlights, you can see the universe.

And here we go—she's off again. Parker the Barker, who thinks the entire world is rotten, all except for her.

Now that I know, I can recognize her voice. Even when she's whispering.

"I just don't get it," she whines. "Why so many people are bad. Why they bully and steal and murder and lie..."

"You're asking me? That's nice!" I give the ground a good kick. Really hard, so that sand sprays up all around. "I'm not the one who's been lying for a week. That's you. You've known who I was right from the beginning."

She stops, perfectly still. In the moonlight, even the holes in the balaclava are black.

"Come on, Barker!" I yell. "Bark 'Jingle Bells' again. That's your favorite hobby, isn't it?"

I think she's actually stopped breathing.

I wonder what I'll do if she passes out. I don't have my cell phone, and the alarm button's a long way away.

And I don't know what I'll do if I have a seizure now either.

Well, yeah, I do—not a thing. I won't know what's going on anyway.

It's a bit like being dead. But the advantage of being dead is that you don't wake up again after a while, covered in drool and with a concussion.

"You know?" she whispers.

"I do now, yes."

Before she guesses what I'm planning to do, I've pulled the balaclava off her head. Her face is a patch of light in the darkness. Huge eyes, hair plastered to her scalp.

She quickly tugs the elastic band out of her hair and makes a new ponytail. As if that matters.

"Did you think it was funny?" I ask in a loud voice. "That I had no idea who you were and I just kept on babbling away? Did you tell Ziva and Elin and the others all about me?"

She shakes her head. "It wasn't like that."

"Yes, that's exactly what it was like! You sat there in my bedroom with that balaclava on your head, acting as if you didn't know a thing about me. As if I could tell you anything."

"I told you all kinds of things too, didn't I?"

"Just about that stupid robbery."

Alaska's standing between us. I watch her white head going to and fro: from Parker to me, from me to Parker—as if she's watching a tennis match.

But for once Parker is completely ignoring the beast.

"That robbery," she yells, "just happens to be the most important thing in my entire life!"

"Yes," I yell back. "I kind of realized that! And all men are evil and you know exactly how many of them are in prison. Seriously, how long are you going to go on whining about it?"

I brush the hair out of my eyes, but it blows straight back.

"Sometimes bad things happen. Deal with it! Your dad's shoulder is OK now, so get a high-tech alarm and if you're all still terrified in two months' time, then your mom and dad can sell the store and go and do something else instead. How hard can it be?"

"How hard can it be?" Her voice rings out across the field, high and shrill. "Those robbers are still walking around. And they've got a gun! You should be scared too. *Everyone* should be scared!"

I sigh. "Look around you, Barker. Everyone *is* scared. Or maybe they're not scared, just for a moment—but that's basically the same thing. Everyone knows the world is a scary place. So why are you allowed to be more scared than everyone else? Why are you allowed to whine about it constantly while the rest of us have to get on with living?"

She stands there, not saying a word.

Alaska whines. She nudges her nose against my leg, then Parker's hand. Then my hand, then Parker's leg.

"Just be glad," I say, "that you can be scared of a man with a gun. I have to be scared of myself. I could just keel over at any moment."

She takes a step back.

"I know," she says. "Poor, poor you, with your seizures and your key for the elevator and your brilliant stunt that you didn't pull off. But do you know something? Your epilepsy doesn't change anything. You're nothing special. You're still a mean little boy who picks on other kids on his very first day at school."

"Are you serious?! You're the one who started *barking* in the very first class."

She nods. "Yes, and thanks to you no one's ever going to forget that. You wanted to pull off a stunt, and that was exactly what you did. You came up with the dumbest nickname ever, and now everyone thinks you're cool. But you couldn't care less what they think about me."

The night is biting into my face. The wind's blowing harder and harder.

"Why should I care what they think of you?" I scream. "I've already got enough to worry about. Don't you get it? It's every man for himself!"

She stands there, very straight. Skinny, in her polo neck and her black pants.

"And that," she says quietly, "is exactly what those armed robbers thought too. *It's every man for himself.*"

I could thump her. I've never met anyone who's so good at exaggerating. And the entire time Alaska keeps pacing between the two of us. Whimpering quietly, her dark doggy eyes shining in the moonlight.

"Stop that whining," I shout. "Get a grip, beast." I grab her collar. "We're going home."

Parker's still holding the leash. No way am I going to ask that liar if I could please have the leash back. So I pull Alaska along by the collar.

"Let go of her," shrieks Parker. "You're hurting her!"

If you tried chopping a baby into bits and pieces, I imagine its mother would sound something like that.

"Alaska isn't a beast," she shouts. "She's the sweetest dog ever. And if you yank her collar like that, then she *feels* it. What do you think? That she exists to help you? That she's some kind of living alarm button?"

"Yes," I say. "That's exactly what I think. But she's dumber than an alarm button. You don't have to teach an alarm button anything. And it doesn't need treats."

Suddenly there are razors slicing through my leg. I slump forward and grab my shin with both hands.

Parker just kicked me. Really hard.

"Come on," she shouts at Alaska. "We're going!"

I've let the collar slip from my hand. Wagging her tail, Alaska runs to her old owner.

Parker doesn't even take the time to attach the leash. She just starts running.

"You don't deserve her," she yells at me. Her voice echoes across the dark field. "At least I love her!"

PARKER

Together with Alaska, I run through the night. We must have raced through the world together like this a thousand times before. She can run much faster than me, but she stays there beside me, galloping along, doing a couple of extra skips, tapping my hand with her nose, smiling with her black mouth.

I'm so angry that I can't think. *I hate him*—that's all. My entire head is packed full of *I hate hims*. I desperately hope that I don't twist my ankle, that I don't fall, that I get to my bike before him.

The balaclava is somewhere far away in the field, the wind is blowing through my hair, and I don't look back even once. And then I hear him calling.

"Alaaaska!"

She does a half spin in the air.

"Alaska, heeere!"

She glances at me, shakes her head so that her ears flap and then happily starts running back to her new owner. And he runs to her—as if they're two lovers who have forgotten all of their quarrels and are racing toward each other with open arms.

I stand there, panting. I'm cold as ice and hot as a volcano,

all at the same time. Alaska was with me for eight months. Then she stayed with Yvonne for a month to learn all of her assistance-dog tricks. And now she's been with Sven for three months.

Just three months.

"Alaaaaaska!" I call, as loud as I can. The cold night fills my lungs. "Come on, girl!"

I see the white patch in the distance stop. For a moment, nothing happens. And then she heads back in my direction. Fur swinging, tail swishing.

"Alaska, here," Sven calls.

"No," I yell. "Here!"

"Seriously?" He's so close now that I can see his face. His hair is ruffled, and he's out of breath too. "You're trying to make her choose?"

I still have the leash in my hand, but it's no good to me without Alaska. She stops somewhere between us. She doesn't understand.

Of course I don't want to make her choose. That would be unbearably cruel. But at the same time, it's exactly what I want. I want to make her choose, because I love her more—and she knows that. I've been her owner for longer. I trained her so well that Yvonne saw immediately that Alaska could become an assistance dog. I don't call her a "beast," I give her as many hugs as she wants—and I never fall down on the ground, drooling and twitching.

"OK," I shout. "We'll let her choose. And whoever she chooses gets to keep her."

"Deal," says Sven.

I'm dizzy. It feels like this is the end. Alaska is going to choose, and then after that there's nothing. Just a black hole.

"How are we going to do this?" he shouts from a distance.

I once saw a duel in a film. Two men with guns stood back to back, and then they both walked twenty paces, turned around and shot. One hit the target. The other died.

"We'll walk away from each other," I say. "No calling out to her. We'll just walk. And then we'll see who she goes with."

"Fine by me."

"But you can't just walk back to your house. That wouldn't be fair."

"OK," he says. "I'll walk toward those flats over there in the distance. You can walk toward those trees."

Alaska has heard that we've stopped yelling at each other, so she's stopped worrying for now. She's sniffing the ground, halfway between us.

"We'll start walking on three," says Sven.

I clasp the leash. "So we won't call out to her. We'll just walk without saying anything. Right?"

"And we'll see who she chooses."

"One..." calls Sven.

"Two," I say.

"Three!" we shout together.

We start walking at the same time. Our backs facing each other. So this really is a duel. I don't know what's better—walking slowly, so that I can stay near Alaska for longer, or running, and hoping that she'll gallop off with me.

My heart pounding, I walk across the deserted field. I keep looking back and almost stumble over a piece of wood. My hands are cold. I want to shout, but I don't do it. She's going to choose me anyway. She was over the moon when I came through the dark sliding doors. She hears the way Sven talks to her every day—she knows that he hates her.

And then I see that white patch moving in the distance.

In the darkness, I can't quite make out which way she's running at first. For a moment I think: *Maybe she's running to and fro, maybe she's not sure, maybe she's saying goodbye to him.*

But the white dot is getting smaller and smaller. She's not coming back.

Alaska has chosen Sven.

SVEN

On Saturday morning, everything is the same, but everything is different too.

I have another seizure, but I don't need to go to hospital. When it started, I was sitting on the floor with the beast. She was whining so frantically that I looked to see if something was wrong. A sprained doggy ankle or a thorn in one of those gray paw pads or a twisted tail—how should I know?

When I come round again, she's lying beside me, panting. What is it with dogs? Even when they're not out of breath, they pant.

Whenever I go crashing to the ground, the beast has to do two things: press the alarm button and come and lie beside me. As soon as I'm back to normal, she goes crazy with excitement. She knows her reward is coming: dog biscuits from the most securely sealed jar ever. The things reek—it's like someone disemboweled a cow and left it to ripen for three weeks.

* * *

But Yvonne says it's not about the biscuits.

It's about me being back. About the short circuit being over.

According to her, Alaska and I have a special radio connection. During a seizure, that connection is broken and *that* is what an assistance dog hates more than anything: an owner who doesn't react. Losing the signal.

Slowly I see the white head coming into focus.

Panting, pink tongue. Wet, black nose.

She looks at my face, and waits. For the signal to come back.

Waking up in an ambulance is a nightmare. I have no idea where I am, and I get into a panic. Sometimes I scream. Sometimes I lash out and try to pull the drip out of my arm.

But when the beast is lying next to me, I know everything's OK.

I go on looking at her and think about last night.

I still can't believe it.

She knows I have seizures. She knows she has to wear a dumb vest with me, that I'm in a foul mood a lot of the time, and that everything could go wrong at any moment.

And still she wants me to be her owner.

She chose me.

PARKER

All weekend I feel sick. Out there in the dark field I thought: *Alaska is going to choose, and then after that there's nothing. Just a black hole.* And I was right. The black hole is inside my stomach now.

For three nights, I almost had her back again. My hands had just remembered what it felt like to stroke her. And now I've messed it all up. She watched us both walking away: her old owner and her new one. And then she chose him.

While I'm on the computer looking at photos of all the golden retrievers on Earth, I think about something that happened two years ago. At my old school, there was this boy in my class whose mom and dad were always arguing. When we were about nine, they finally got divorced. But the arguments went on. About the house. About how they were going to divide up all their stuff. And about how to divide up the children. One day at school, he told us that his mom had yelled that *he* had to make the decision: did he want to live with his dad? Or with her?

I can still see his face. His head wasn't covered with white fur, the classroom wasn't dark, and he wasn't standing fifty feet away from me. I could see his expression perfectly.

So I know. What Alaska must have looked like in the field. When her head was looking one way and then the other, at Sven and then me. When she realized she had to choose.

On Sunday night I don't set the alarm clock for two in the morning. That's all over now. I've never felt this bad about spending an entire night in bed before. And I can't even sleep. *Lying awake in bed is restful too*—that's what my mom always used to say.

That was before she started taking sleeping pills.

On Monday morning, I'm sitting next to the poster of the Eiffel Tower in the rain again. As I sort everything in my pencil case by size order, from big to small, I'm not waiting for anyone. But when Sven walks into the classroom, I suddenly can't remember how to sit in a chair like a normal person. He walks past me and I can't help myself: I quickly check to see if he has any new Band-Aids or bandages.

Nothing. Even the bandage on his bruised hand has gone.

Before he sits down, he looks at me for two seconds. And then he completely ignores me. I do exactly the same. He says "*Bonjour, je m'appelle Sven*" to Benjamin; I say "*Ça va bien, merci*" to Claire. He doesn't call me Barker; I don't tell anyone that he feels like a boy on Mars; he doesn't say anything about the robbery. So this is how it's going to be from now on.

But at lunchtime, it all goes wrong for Sven.

He's sitting with Benjamin on a bench on one side of the hall. Elin and I are sitting in the window seat on the other side. My eyes are supposed to be looking at my sandwich—that's the idea. But every thirty seconds, they keep darting over to Sven.

So I see him fall.

His body stiffens and, with one shout, he falls like a plank on to the floor. That shout has immediately alerted the entire hall: *Something's wrong!* He lies there perfectly still, stretched out on the floor. And then he starts shaking.

Elin and I run toward him—and so does everyone else. Within a few seconds, there's a huge circle around him. Last week Sven had three small seizures, so his spooky laughter doesn't send us into a panic anymore.

But this is different.

He's breathing in gasps. His eyes have rolled back, and his arms and legs are shaking like mad. Once I accidentally zapped past a film of a man being tortured: they kept giving him electric shocks. And that's what Sven looks like now.

"There's blood coming out of his mouth!" shouts Benjamin. I feel dizzy.

Sven's head bangs on the black-and-white tiles with every movement. *Just be glad*, he said on Friday night, *that you can be scared of a man with a gun. I have to be scared of myself.* As I look at the bloody froth on his lips, I understand what he meant. I desperately try to remember what the hand-out said, the one about epilepsy that he gave out on the first day.

"We need to put something under his head," I shout.

But no one's listening.

Teachers come running. Elin is crying, one boy's filming it with his cell phone, people are screaming, and at least three students are calling the emergency number, even though it said in the handout that you should only call them if the seizure lasts longer than five minutes. But if they weren't calling, I'd be doing it myself.

My hands shaking, I take off my sweater. I kneel down beside Sven. I act like I'm not scared and carefully slide the sweater under his banging head. Otherwise I don't touch him—you're not allowed to hold on to him during a seizure. You can't stop the shaking anyway—all you'd do is hurt him.

I know that, inside my head, this is going to become another movie for viewers over the age of forty. His rolled-back eyes aren't looking at anyone, and his face is twisted. This isn't Sven, I tell myself—this is just his convulsing body. His blood is dripping on to my sweater, but he can't feel any of this.

Can he?

The teachers make a wider circle, to give him space. Their voices sound nervous. *Look around you*, Sven yelled in the field. *Everyone is scared*. I sit in silence on the floor beside him. What I really want to do is to run away as quickly as possible, but this is what Alaska does: she stays with him. She sees him shaking, she hears him groaning, but she stays.

Finally the seizure is over.

Did it last three minutes? Seven? Fifteen? I have no idea. Sven is lying beside me, not moving. He's wheezing, and his body is limp and pale.

Blockmans kneels down next to us and looks at me. "We can move him on to his side now," he says quietly. "So that he doesn't choke."

Together, we carefully roll him over. Sven has touched my shoulder once—and now I'm touching his. Very briefly, I let my hand rest there. He groans, and his eyes are unfocused. But suddenly he wants to sit up.

"Keep calm," says Blockmans. "You had a seizure. It's OK. Just lie there for a moment."

But Sven really wants to sit up. I can see that he's confused. He has no idea where he is.

And then the circle of students opens up. Two ambulance men come through. Yellow-and-turquoise uniforms, medical equipment. They're towering above us. And they take over.

They check Sven's pulse, talk to Blockmans and then the two of them discuss the patient. I stand up and move to the back without saying anything. I see Sven's face. The confusion. His complete helplessness. He can't explain what's happening to him right now, so they get to decide everything. They don't think he's broken anything, and they can see that the blood is because he bit his tongue, but to be on the safe side they decide to take him in anyway.

And, also to be on the safe side, he has to go on a stretcher. He doesn't want to—he doesn't understand. I wish I felt brave enough to take his hand and tell him it's OK, and that he has

to go to hospital now, but Alaska will be waiting when he gets home.

But he's furious with me. I fooled him with my balaclava, so now he thinks I'm just a massive fraud. When he was having his seizure, I made sure he didn't bash his head to pieces. But now he doesn't want anything to do with me.

I watch him being wheeled off on the stretcher. As soon as the school doors close, everyone around me starts chattering away. I don't say anything.

Slowly, I walk back to the window seat, where there's still half a cheese sandwich on top of my bag. I'm about to throw it away, but then I hear Sven's voice inside my head again. *Why are you allowed to be more scared than everyone else? Why are you allowed to whine about it constantly while the rest of us have to get on with living?*

So I finish my sandwich.

SVEN

I'm just back from the hospital when the video arrives.

I'm lying in bed, exhausted. My head aches and my muscles ache and my tongue is all fat and sore because I bit it again. At the beginning of a seizure, every muscle in your body goes stiff. If your tongue happens to be between your teeth, then it's bad luck. Seriously, the doctors gave my mom and dad a warning: never try to free his tongue with your fingers. You'll lose them.

It's Sol who sends the video.

He says he doesn't know if I'll want to see it, but it's going all around the school right now. Classes are sending it on their group chat. And it's jumping from class to class, via friends, brothers and sisters.

OK. If the whole school's seen something, then I want to see it too.

I open the video.

Instantly, I'm sorrier than I've ever been. About anything.

It's my seizure—a whole two minutes and thirty-five seconds long.

They filmed me while I was out of it.

Last spring, I stayed at an epilepsy center. They tested medication on me, examined me every day, and the psychologist was pretty OK. But they also filmed a major seizure. And they asked me: do you want to see it?

I didn't even need to think about it: nope.

I saw other kids having seizures at the center. So I know exactly what happens. What order it all happens in, how the blood and drool drips down your chin, how your eyes roll back, what kind of zombie noises you make.

Seriously, let me be on another planet, while I fall apart.

But there I am, lying on the black-and-white tiles.

Shaking, frothing, grunting.

I can see it. And the rest of the school has seen it too.

For the first time in ages, I start crying.

Just seeing myself lying there, with that crowd around me. Like a circus act.

Knowing that it's me. That I'm like *that*.

And also knowing that someone thought it was funny to film it and send it to the entire universe.

* * *

I have absolutely no doubts about it, not even for a second.
I'm never going back to that school again.