

## 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.

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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.

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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.

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

## PARKER

I can see the video on Benjamin's phone. From a distance—he sits in the row in front of me. But I can tell what it is right away. The scene from a torture movie, about a boy on Mars getting electric shocks.

No.

Sven, having a seizure. And me sitting next to him. I'm in the video too—but I'm not moving, I'm not bleeding, I'm not making any noise.

Blockmans has just been called away from the classroom, so I take out my own phone. The girl who lives across the road from me sent me the same video three minutes ago. We used to do art classes together, and now she's in the second year.

*Parker!!! Whaaat? Scary stuff! Is he in your class? The two of you are going viral! It's all over the school!!!*

I stare at the film. It's in color, not in black and white like the pictures from the security camera. But otherwise it feels exactly the same: seeing something again, something you've already seen for real when you were petrified. And even though you're not petrified now, there's still nothing you can do.

You can't ever change a thing about it. You saw that someone was filming it on their phone, but it didn't get through

to you. Now it's too late—you can't stand up and smash that phone on to the floor.

"He's not coming back," I hear Sol say.

"Seriously?" says Benjamin.

"He's leaving school. Just sent me a message."

I clutch my phone.

It doesn't matter, I tell myself. I'm not allowed to see Alaska again anyway. It'll be easier if Sven leaves school. If Alaska is never waiting in the playground again.

Blockmans comes back into the classroom. He has a very serious look on his face.

"Listen up, guys," he says.

We all fall silent.

"So Sven Beekman had a major seizure this morning. We knew it would happen one day, and we also knew that everyone would be scared the first time. But I just spoke to Sven's mom, and it appears that one of our students filmed the seizure."

I can see cell phones under a lot of the desks. Some of the screens are still silently playing the clip.

"We are, of course, going to find out who made the video," says Blockmans. "But first we want to make sure that it doesn't end up on the internet. I'd like all of you, right this instant, to delete the video." He motions at us to take out our phones. "Come on. Get your phones out. For once, it's allowed."

All of the phones come out on to the desks. Some of the class are seeing the seizure for the first time. They whisper to me that I'm in the video too. Excitedly, they ask if I was



scared. And they look at my black sweater, which I've put on again because I was cold without it. You can't see the blood-stains anyway.

As I delete the video, I know for certain that it won't disappear. Even if every teacher makes every class delete every video, it will still exist. Some people have already sent it to their friends at other schools. That's just how it works—that's the world. A bomb could explode somewhere at any moment. And videos that you send to more than two people will always continue to exist.

I try to tell myself all of this without thinking about Sven, but it doesn't work. I put my hand up.

"Sir, can I go to the toilet? I've already deleted the video."

Blockmans can't tell anything from a black screen, but I hold my cell phone up anyway. He nods and, with my phone in my hand, I stand up. Quickly, I leave the classroom. Down the long hall, all the way to the empty stairwell. Making a group chat for the class was Ziva's first job as the class representative, so I have Sven's number.

I can hardly breathe as I listen to the phone ringing.

And then he answers.

"I don't want to talk," he says right away.

On the phone he sounds younger than thirteen.

"Are you out of hospital yet?" I ask.

He clears his throat. "Which part of 'I don't want to talk' don't you understand?"

"I'm in the video too," I say.

"Seriously? As if that..." He stops.

On the other end of the line, I can hear him breathing.

I wonder if he's in his bedroom—the room I know. I wonder if Alaska is with him.

“Sol says you're not coming back to school. Is it true?”

It's a while before he answers.

“Yes,” he says.

“Because of the video?”

“Because I've had enough of Mars. I've had enough of being the outsider.”

“But you can't just... What are you going to do?”

He sighs. “There are schools where everyone's like me. So I won't stand out. Ambulances and pills and seizures are just normal there.”

I press the phone to my ear. I try to remember that he's just a mean little boy. That I'm Parker the Barker because of him, that he calls Alaska “beast” and that he pulls really hard on her collar.

“You think you're the only one,” I say quietly, “but that's not true. Everyone is walking around on Mars. You said yourself that everyone is scared. Well, it's the same with being different. We're all different. I have to spend all day explaining how I breathe too. And still no one gets it.”

I look up at the gray concrete steps. Empty stairs for people without a special key for the elevator.

“Within three days they'll be used to your seizures. That's the advantage of a planet full of wildly different people. There's always something new. Tomorrow some Fifth Year will put her boobs online and then no one will think your torture movie is that fascinating anymore.”

“What?” he says. “My *torture* movie?”

It feels as if gravity ceases to exist for a moment.

"Well, um..."

"Is that what you're all calling it?"

I shake my head. "No, just me. I mean, I saw this horror film once and..."

I can't go on.

For three seconds, I can still hear him breathing on the other end of the line. And then he hangs up.

## SVEN

I put a chair next to my closet, stand on the seat and grab the helmet.

Alaska comes running over. She looks up curiously. Her head at an angle, tail slowly wagging.

I brush my hair from my forehead, put on the helmet and fasten the strap under my chin.

Today two things have been rammed into my head and they're never going to leave it.

Two minutes and thirty-five seconds of video.

And three words. *Your torture movie.*

I see the images on a phone screen.

And when I think of those words, I'll always hear the voice of Balaclava Girl.

So that's how she sees me. As an actor in a horror film.

Not as Sven the champion swimmer. Not as the Sven who always won at ditch-jumping, not as the Sven who could easily skate ten miles.

\* \* \*

And, as I'm finally beginning to realize, she's right. I'm not that boy anymore.

Everything that I was is gone.

A year ago, I had a pile of paper shoved into my hands: here, you're getting the role of the boy with epilepsy. These are your lines. You don't have that many to learn. After all, most of the time you'll be lying on the ground, grunting.

It's time to get used to it.

This is my life.

I have an assistance dog, a bedroom on the ground floor, an SOS bracelet on my wrist, a bottle of pills and a helmet.

I'm Sven and I'm in the epilepsy club.

## PARKER

Sven's desk stays empty. On Tuesday, and on Wednesday too.

He needs to recover from his seizure, of course. He's waiting for us to forget the video and then he'll be back next week. That's got to be it. What kind of parents would be OK with their son changing schools after just a week? If we all started doing that, then I should have moved schools right after "Jingle Bells." Moms and dads always say that you need to stop and think about things. That you need to discuss them, and that it's important to sleep on stuff.

But it seems that Sven's parents are different.

On Thursday morning, Blockmans comes into our math class. He says Sven isn't coming back. Never again.

"He's looking for a school that's more suitable for him."

He doesn't say what kind of school that might be. And I don't say that I'd like to go looking for a life that's more suitable for me. A life without robbers, without allergic little brothers and without cell phones making videos.

The whole class signs a card for him. There's a gorilla on the front, with a bunch of colorful balloons. *Dear Sven*, it says inside. *Good luck at your new school!*

When the card gets to me, I hesitate. Ziva has put a heart

on the *i* in her name instead of a dot. When I write my name, I make the *a* into a paw print.

Then, after that, as we're sitting there in deathly silence, doing our sums, I can't seem to keep my pencil completely still. The same thing happened the first week after the robbery. The entire time, my whole body was trembling a bit.

I think back to that night when I raced through the gleaming streets to Sven and Alaska. For weeks, it had felt like my body was slowly crumbling. If it continued, I was going to be like my dad. Just empty packaging.

Now I can feel it again. The crumbling.

With everything I do, another piece falls into the black hole. Class without Sven. A school playground without Alaska. Another afternoon with my little brothers marching around, while my dad sits silently looking at the pictures from the security cameras.

It's Thursday, so it's late-night shopping. Since eight o'clock, I've been sitting at the computer, next to my dad. We're watching Mom and Erik tidying up the store. We see a customer come in and we both hold our breath. Then we see the customer leave—and we breathe out.

"You're thirty-nine," I say to my dad. "Are you going to stay sitting here forever?"

"Of course not." He goes on staring at the screen.

"How much longer then?"

He shakes his head. "I don't know, Parker."

"Do you regret having four kids?" I ask.

He quickly turns his head to look at me. "Why would you think that?"

"Well..." I shrug. "If the world is so dangerous that all you can do is sit at home, looking at the pictures from the security cameras... Then it actually seems pretty odd to have four kids. Because all those kids have to go outside every day. To school and to the supermarket and to judo and to recorder classes."

I see his face twitch, and I'm not even shocked. These past few weeks, I've seen him cry at least ten times. The first time was awful, and I wished I was somewhere in New Zealand, all huddled up deep under the bedcovers. By the tenth time, I just wished he'd stop.

"You can be the one with the knife," I hear Dex shouting in the kitchen. "And I'll be the one with the gun."

"I want to be the one with the gun!" screams Joey.

"No, Joey." Finn sounds like that teacher of his. Calm, reasonable. "You're the one who gets shot. That's fun too, isn't it?"

Dad and I are still looking at each other. Nothing is ever going to smooth out the creases in his face.

"I'll go," I say.

I get up and walk toward the kitchen. But then my dad clears his throat.

"Hey, Parker. During Easter vacation, there was that card game that you guys kept wanting to play," he says.

I stop.

"How about we play it now?" he asks.



"You know it's twenty-five to nine, don't you?"

We both look at the screen again. In black and white, my mom is cleaning the counter.

"Yes," says my dad. "I know." He stands up. "I want to play the game now. With my four kids."

## SVEN

I'm never getting out of bed again.

Why would I? The next seizure is going to happen at some point, so I'm better off already lying down.

The alarm button is waiting beside me; Alaska is waiting at my feet. And I'm waiting too.

I've had enough of crashing to the ground and getting injured and throwing hot tea over myself and tumbling through a window and breaking my wrist. I've had enough of ambulances and hospitals.

I'm just going to lie here.

## PARKER

On Friday, after school, I'm feeling brave. I'm going on another bad-guy hunt. It's too cold to sit on a wall doing nothing, so I start walking. Street after street after street. I come to a neighborhood I don't know very well, but that doesn't matter. Thieves can be anywhere.

As I walk along a gray sidewalk past gray houses, I wonder what Sven and Alaska are doing now. How long will this go on? How long will they be walking invisibly beside me with everything that I do?

*It's four o'clock. Now he's feeding her.*

*Now they're going for a walk.*

*Now he's giving her a brush.*

*Now they're going to sleep.*

The past few days, whenever missing her got too bad, I went online and read websites about assistance dogs. So I could still kind of feel close to Alaska. So I could imagine what her days are like now.

*Now she's practicing with the alarm button.*

*Now she's got some time off and she's running through the wood without her vest on.*

*Now she's the only dog allowed in the supermarket.*

And then, suddenly, I see two black sneakers with red flames on the sides of the soles.

I stop breathing.

The sneakers are walking along the other side of the narrow street—and everything about them is right. The messy way they're laced up. The way the soles are a bit worn out. And both of the tongues are just a little too far to the right.

I take my phone out of my bag and stand there. As I turn off the sound with a shaking finger, the man with the flaming shoes walks on, as calm as anything. If I don't go after him right now, I'm going to lose him.

I'm dizzy.

So dizzy that I think I'm going to black out for a moment—but I start walking again anyway. Back to where I came from. Following him. He's wearing gray sweatpants and a black jacket. His hair is short and there are spots on the back of his neck. I can't see his face.

All that time I've never imagined what I'd do if I actually found him. I went out on my bad-guy hunts. Looking for some cartoon character in black-and-white striped pajamas. But now here we are, the bad guy and me, all alone in a silent street. If I call the police, he'll hear me speaking. If I stop to use the phone, I'll lose him.

I feel just like I did during the robbery: I can't think properly. But I have absolutely no doubt about the shoes. Not for a second. Hidden behind the coats at the back of the store, I just stared at his feet. The picture is burnt into my brain. And

the picture is right. There, on the other side of the street—it's him.

He goes around the corner.

I cross the road, close my eyes for a moment and then follow him.

Six weeks ago, that man had a shiny gun in his hand. Not a toy gun, a real one. I have no idea if it's under his jacket now. Do robbers always take their guns with them, just in case? The way other people are glued to their phones and fall apart if they lose their signal for a second?

Maybe that's how it feels with a gun: like you've always got a signal wherever you go. Without having to pay for it.

My stomach hurts; my heart's thumping loud enough to deafen me. Whatever I do, I'm not going to send my mom and dad a message. If they know I'm here on my own, following the man with the gun, they'll be so angry.

I clasp my fingers around my telephone. The screen comes to life, and I stare at the photo of Alaska. And suddenly I know what I need to do. My brain's working again. It's like finally keying in the right password after you've tried a bunch of wrong ones.

I start typing.

*Can see robber!!! And his shoes!*

*What shd i do???*

I press *Send*. And quickly add my location.

There's no stopping the videos inside my head now. I see my mom standing behind the counter, her face as white as chalk. I see my dad diving for the alarm button, and I hear the gun go off. The man walking ahead of me, past the

window boxes full of geraniums, was the one who pulled the trigger.

I see the puddle of blood on the floor, after they took my dad to hospital with screaming sirens.

And then I feel the phone vibrating in my hand. It's Sven's reply.

*Call the police!*

*Make sure he doesn't see you!!!*

*Can't call polite he'll hear*

*Police*

*Want me to call them?*

*Yes!!!*

*OK*

*BRB*

*Be careful!!!*

## SVEN

I'm sitting up in bed. I've never called the emergency number before.

All those times that people called the number for me, I was out of it. I was shaking away on the floor while they keyed in the numbers, while they waited for someone to answer.

"Emergency services. Operator speaking," says a man's voice. "Which service do you require? Police, fire brigade or ambulance?"

*Ambulance*, I almost say. But I'm not having a seizure this time.

"Police," I say.

As they're putting me through, I look at Alaska. I'm still lying in bed—this is day four. All that time, absolutely nothing has gone wrong. It's like falling stars. If you keep looking, nothing ever falls.

"Police," says a woman's voice. "What's your emergency?"

"Hi, my name's Sven," I say quickly. "You have to arrest someone. This summer there was a robbery at Montijn Photographic Supplies. And now Parker, that's their daughter—the owners of the store, I mean..."

I take a deep breath.

"Parker has just tracked down one of the robbers. She recognized his shoes. He was wearing a balaclava—during the robbery, I mean—so she didn't see his face. But he had sneakers with red flashes of lightning on the sides of the soles. Or flames—I can't remember. But anyway, she was just following him, like, two minutes ago, on Roerstraat. You have to send the police right away!"

"Is Parker injured?" asks the woman on the other end of the line.

"No. Not yet..."

"And she's following a man she suspects of having committed a robbery?"

"Yes."

"But she's not being threatened?"

"No."

"And she's never seen the robber's face, but the man she's following is wearing the same sort of shoes as the man who committed the robbery?"

"Yes, I already told you that! Black sneakers with red on the soles."

"This emergency number," says the woman calmly, "is for emergencies. If you have any tips for the police, you can call the national police hotline."

"But Parker is going after the man right now. On her own!"

"Then she should stop right away. She must not put herself in danger. And she can call the hotline. This emergency number is not for children who are playing detective."



"Oh, really?" I yell. "It's you lot who are making such a mess of the world. And when Parker recognizes a robber, it's suddenly supposed to be her fault that she's in danger?"

"I can assure you," the woman says so calmly that I could thump her, "that the police take every tip seriously. But this number is intended only for emergencies. And right now you're blocking the line for a real emergency."

She hangs up.

Every stupid, lame seizure I have, they come racing up with their sirens wailing, but when Parker sees the man who shot her dad, it's not an emergency.

Another message comes in.

*Sven!!!*

*Where are they?*

I clench my fists.

I was planning never to get out of bed again. And *if* I ever went outside, it would only be with someone else. Exactly the way you're supposed to do things when you're in the epilepsy club.

I was also planning never to say another word to Parker. But that was last week—a millennium ago. An incredibly dull millennium ago.

The emergency services don't get it, but I do. As soon

as that man realizes he's being followed, it *will* become an emergency.

Parker sends me her new location and I stare at the map. If I walk, it'll take me at least half an hour to get there. Way too long.

God, this is crazy.

I'm not allowed to use my bike. Absolutely, definitely not. My bike moved house with us, but I haven't been on it for months.

It's obvious what I should do. I need to phone my mom. She's gone to the supermarket, but if I call she'll come straight home. Then we can both get in the car and go to Parker.

I can see it in HD: my mom's worried face, her shrill voice, the two of us together in the car—and I suddenly find myself throwing back the quilt. I get out of bed and start pulling on my clothes, because now I can see *everything*. The rest of my entire rotten life if I stay lying here now.

Imagine if all you did all day was wait for seizures.

I'm afraid of dying—of course I am. But lying in bed, year after year after year—that's worse than being dead. That's worse than concussions and injuries.

\* \* \*

I put Alaska's yellow vest on her, and she immediately starts wagging her tail in delight. Every assistance dog's nightmare is that your owner is a coward who stays in bed for the rest of his life.

I hesitate for a moment before putting on the helmet. If I do go crashing off my bike, I'll be better off with a head made of plastic.

My bike's right at the back of the shed. I hate it that my hands are shaking. That I'm scared of *cycling*.

And all that time, Parker's been following the robber. I hope he hasn't spotted her. How many streets can you trail someone for before they notice something's up?

She sends her location again and I answer that help will be there in ten minutes. She doesn't need to know that she'll be waiting for an epileptic kid and his assistance dog.

So now I'm going out on my bike, with Alaska beside me. That's one thing the beast hasn't learned how to do. When you're the assistance dog of a loser who's not allowed to use his bike, you don't need to learn much about traffic. She can cross the road, from one sidewalk to the other. But racing along beside a bike? Nope, she's never done that before.

And yet, somehow, she can do it anyway.

Balaclava Girl was right: Alaska is a circus dog. Half of the time she's almost pulling me over—she's going too fast or too

slow and she keeps nearly wagging her tail in between the spokes—but we're getting there.

Seriously, I'd forgotten what it felt like. The wind in your face. Legs pedaling, lungs panting. Like you're *living*.

People are staring at me, with my helmet and my assistance dog, but right now I couldn't care less.

Parker sends her location again. I'm almost there. I clench my jaw.

*Please, I think. Not a seizure. Not now.*

I'm going too fast, the tarmac's flying by, cars are racing past us—if I have a short circuit now, it's not going to end well.

For me. For Alaska. Or for Parker. Is crazy Balaclava Girl still following that criminal? Where on earth is he going?

And then I see her coming around the corner. Alaska spots her at exactly the same moment. She does her high-pitched baby bark and at the same time I feel a huge tug on the leash. I try to keep hold of it, but then I remember the girl I used to live next door to. She once went for a walk with a massive dog. The dog saw a cat, went after it and, for twenty yards, the girl didn't let go of the leash. I saw her knees and hands and arms afterward. All covered in blood.

Alaska races over to Parker, ears flapping as if she's acting in an advert about happy dogs, dragging the leash behind her.

I thought Parker would be mad when she saw us. She wanted the police. But her face lights up when she looks at us. I get off my bike and push it on to the sidewalk.

"You two have come as well!" she whispers, as Alaska jumps up at her and licks her right in the face.

"When are the police going to get here?" Parker grabs the leash and starts walking again.

In the distance, I can see just one man.

"Is that him?" I ask quietly.

She nods. "When are the police getting here? Should I tell them where we are again?"

I shake my head. "They're not coming."

"What?"

"I called the emergency number, but they won't come. They say this isn't an emergency situation."

She doesn't reply. Looking very pale, she walks beside Alaska. Every inch of her body is screaming *emergency situation*.

We come to a busier part of town. I park my bike against a lamp post and take the leash back from Parker, to complete the picture: boy with helmet and assistance dog. Pale, silent girl without dog.

We need to get closer to the robber now, or we'll lose him. We don't dare to speak, scared that he'll hear us.

God, this is useless.

How long are we going to keep it up? Soon the guy's going to get on a scooter and he'll be gone. And then we won't have

anything. No proof at all. Don't think that's going to impress them much at the national police hotline.

But suddenly I have an idea.

"Take a photo of Alaska and me," I whisper. "With the rest of the street in it too. Nice, eh, with all these people around..."

She looks at me, and I can see she understands.

## PARKER

I thought I was never going to see Sven and Alaska again. And now they're walking beside me, as if we belong together. The robber is on the phone. I can see his hand waving about, his head nodding. With every step, he's getting closer to the town center. To the shops. To Montijn Photographic Supplies.

I try not to look at the blue helmet on Sven's head. I saw it on his bedroom floor that very first night. I thought it was an ice-hockey helmet. Or for mountain climbing or something. But Sven could fall at any moment, of course.

"Go on. Take the photo," he whispers.

My cell phone is shaking in my hand. If I'm not careful, I'm going to drop it, and it'll smash into pieces. The idea is simple: take a photo with the robber in it too. So that I can go to the police station and say: "Look, this is him. You didn't believe me, but this is the man who shot my dad."

"But if I take a photo now," I whisper, "all you'll see is the back of his head. How can..."

The robber stops using his phone, and I instantly lose the power of speech. Alaska is walking between us, with a serious expression on her face. She looks different now that she's wearing her assistance-dog vest. She's at work, and she knows it.

I wonder if she remembers that night out in the field. Can her doggy mind think back to things that happened a week ago? Does she remember that I made her choose?

And then I feel Sven's arm around my shoulder. His mouth is suddenly very close to my ear.

"I've got a plan."

I don't say anything. As I wait for him to tell me, I think again about how different it feels: being touched by a dog, and by a boy.

"Make sure you're ready with your phone," he says quietly. "I'm going to start screaming, and that guy will obviously turn around to have a look. And then you can take a photo."

I can feel his breath on my cheek. The edge of his helmet against my head.

"But we're not supposed to be drawing attention to ourselves," I whisper.

"I'm me, remember? I can't help attracting attention. It's what I do."

If I turned my face right now, we'd bump noses. He lets go of me, and I quickly put my phone in camera mode. Sven stands in front of me, but so that I can still see the robber. And then he starts barking.

"Jingle Bells"—at the top of his voice.

The man looks around. Alaska goes crazy and I take as many photos as I can, but I have no idea how they're going to come out. And then Sven shuts up.

The whole world is staring at us. Everyone—except for the robber. He's already hurrying on.

I swipe through the photos. "They're blurred."



"Then we'll just do it again," says Sven.

Quickly, we start walking. I'm out of breath. Sven is wearing a helmet, Alaska is in her harness, but otherwise they're the boy and dog I already know. Alaska is walking nicely on her leash, and Sven is humming a Christmas tune.

I know that all kinds of things could happen at any moment. Bombs could explode, the robber could start shooting, the world could come to an end. But with Sven and Alaska there, it feels different. I've seen the two of them forever and ever in that dark bedroom and somehow it feels as if the room is still here. As if we have walls around us.

But then Alaska stops walking nicely on the leash. She looks at Sven and begins to whine. She nudges his leg with her nose.

"Stop it, beast," he says, but Alaska doesn't listen. She tugs on the leash and walks in front of his feet, so that he nearly trips over her. She stares at him and gives a short bark. And then another one.

"What does she want?" I ask. "She never used to do that with me."

"She's just weird." He shrugs. "That morning after the storm she did the same thing. And on Saturday morning too. It's normal. She just does that sometimes."

I look at Alaska and I am certain that this is not "normal." In the eight months she lived with us, she never looked that worried. She never nudged away at anyone's leg like that, as if something terrible was about to happen.

Then I remember something I read online. Some assistance dogs can predict seizures. They see the epileptic fit coming, before you have any idea as a human that you're about to start

shaking. Predicting seizures isn't something you can teach a dog, because people don't understand how it works. And most assistance dogs never get the hang of it. But yeah, some of them do.

"Saturday morning?" I say quickly. "When she did that... Did you have a major seizure afterward?"

He nods. "But I was already sitting next to her on the floor, so I didn't fall. I didn't get hurt."

"Lie down," I say.

"What?" He stares at me in surprise.

"You're going to have a seizure. That's what Alaska's trying to tell us. Lie down, or you'll hurt yourself when you fall."

"That's crazy," he says. "We have to follow that guy, remember? We need to take more photos."

We're still walking. Alaska keeps whining and nudging. And Sven could fall to the ground at any moment. I clench my fists. Finally I've found the robber. If I let him go now without getting any good pictures, then I'll be just as scared tomorrow. Or even more scared, because now I know that he's still here. In my town.

But I can't leave Sven behind. I need to be with him when the shaking starts. It's that simple.

"Lie down," I say. "Now!"

"That's crazy," he says again. "Not even doctors can predict when I'm going to crash. What are you trying to say? That the beast can do magic? That she's psychic or something?"

I look at Alaska. I know her better than anyone in the world. She's trying to tell us something—there's absolutely no doubt about it.

"If I've got it wrong," I say, "then you can laugh at me later. But first—lie down. There, on the grass."

If I hadn't seen that seizure on Monday, I wouldn't dare to do this. But if he's about to turn into a plank, then he needs to lie down. I drag him by his sleeve to a patch of grass around a statue. Then I sit and pull him down with me. Alaska lies beside him and starts licking his hand.

He frowns. "She does that whenever I have a seizure too."

Everything inside my body is trembling now. I could almost imagine that I can feel it coming too. But humans can't predict when someone's about to have an epileptic seizure. Not even machines in hospitals can do it. Only dogs.

"This grass is wet," says Sven. "Seriously, nothing's going to happen."

"Do you want me to call an ambulance when it starts?" I ask. My hand is stroking Alaska's soft back. She's still anxious.

"No. Please don't." He refuses to lie down. But sitting on the grass will work too, I think. I hope.

"You should only call an ambulance if the shaking's been going on for five minutes. Seriously. I've had enough of hospitals. And ambulances. You can call my mom though—you know, if I do crash."

He gives me his phone and I look around. The robber is long gone. My photographs of him are blurred and the emergency number won't listen to us, so following him all that way was completely pointless. And now I'm sitting here next to a furious Sven, and nothing's happening.

He looks at me, but I don't look back.

## SVEN

She's staring at the street that the robber disappeared into, as she sits there beside me on the soaking wet grass.

Her face is still pale, but both her cheeks are flushed bright red.

Balaclava Girl, beside me on the grass.

I came to help her. And now we're sitting here waiting for a seizure that's not going to happen.

I'm an idiot in a helmet, I tell myself. A boy sitting next to an assistance dog on a damp patch of grass, waiting for a star to fall.

Yet somehow, I don't feel like an alien right now.

When my mom and dad look at me—yes, then I'm sick. In an ambulance, with doctors, at the epilepsy center, with my key for the elevator, completely out of it in a new class at school—yup, then too.

But Parker and Alaska, Balaclava Girl and the beast...

There's something weird going on with those two.  
I don't have to explain anything to them.  
They know my planet. They're u s e d t o m...

## PARKER

The moment he stiffens, I feel my own body go stiff too. He lies there on the grass for a second, perfectly still, and then he starts shaking. For the past few minutes, I've been rehearsing inside my head what I need to do now. That's why I can do it. I don't need to think. I just do it.

First I turn on the timer on my phone.

Sven's wearing a helmet, so I don't need to put anything under his head this time.

I don't look at his eyes rolling back. I don't want to listen to his gasping breath. Alaska is whimpering. Her dark eyes are huge, and there's a frown on her doggy face.

"He can't feel anything," I whisper to her. "It's OK."

He's frothing at the mouth again, but this time it's not red.

I had it all planned, all except for the people. All those grown-ups who are coming up to interfere.

"He's having an epileptic fit," I keep saying. "It'll be over soon. It happens to him all the time. Really, there's no need for anyone to call an ambulance."

I see a man taking out his phone anyway.

"No!" I shout. "Don't call them! He doesn't need a doctor. I'll call his mom—that's enough."

So this is what it's like. Walking around on Mars. New people all the time, people who don't understand. Who stick their noses in without any idea what's going on.

I want to cry, but there's no time for that.

In Sven's telephone, there's a shortcut to *Mom cell*. She answers right away.

"Sven! Is everything OK?"

"It's not Sven," I say quickly. "This is Parker. Um, I'm a friend of Sven's. We were taking Alaska for a walk and he had a fit. A big one. Can you come and fetch us?"

"Oh, God..." She takes a deep breath. "OK, where are you? Is he injured? Does he need an ambulance?"

I can hear from her voice that she's like Alaska: she's done this plenty of times before. She wants to whimper, but she does exactly what needs to be done. As I'm talking to her, I see that Sven has stopped shaking. All the busybodies who were still standing around, who didn't like it one bit that we didn't need them, start to drift away.

Alaska keeps licking Sven's hand. I look at his pale face and feel like I've just survived an earthquake. Last time, I rolled him on to his side with Blockmans, but I can do it on my own too. The handouts call it the "recovery position." So that he won't choke on his own spit.

"You haven't hurt yourself," I whisper to him. I don't know if he can hear me yet. "You were out for less than three minutes, and the seizure's over now. Your mom's on her way."

Alaska keeps on licking away, and I keep on talking. There are no screaming sirens, and no one straps him into a

stretcher. And as I'm talking, I look at Alaska as if I'm seeing her for the very first time. I thought I knew her inside out. Every fold in her fur, every spark in her brain, every trick she can do. But there's more.

She knew Sven was going to have a fit. She warned him. If only I understood how she can see it coming. Does she listen extra hard? Does she feel something? Can she smell a seizure? But no one knows the answer.

Sven starts coughing. I rest a hand on his shoulder, but then take it away.

"What?" he croaks. Then he frowns. "My back's wet."

I almost laugh, but I stop myself. He's still not quite awake.

"You're lying on the grass," I say. "Don't worry. Your back will dry out."

A red car drives up on to the sidewalk and the driver's door flies open. The blond woman who was waiting in the playground with Alaska, that first day, jumps out of the car.

"Sven!" She runs over to him. "Are you OK?"

"My back's wet," he says angrily.

I can see that he still hasn't realized what's going on.

His mom looks at me. "I'm so glad you called me. What was your name again?"

"Parker," I say. And then I have to say it. "Alaska saw the fit coming! She warned us, and that's why Sven didn't fall."

"Really?" his mom says. "Are you sure?"

Before I can reply, Sven butts in. "I don't get why we're still sitting here. This grass is soaking wet!"

His mom nods. "Come on. Let's go home. Parker, can I give you a lift?"



I hesitate. There's nothing I'd like more than to go straight home in a car. But I shake my head.

"I can't go home yet. There's something I need to do."

## SVEN

The mist has gone. I'm back again.

I'm not sitting in the front of the car next to my mom, but in the back seat. Alaska is lying beside me.

When I look at her, I don't see a beast but a person. A person with a furry face and triangular eyes. Like holes cut into a snow-white balaclava.

Alaska looks back at me, and I know that she doesn't see a vague blob. She doesn't see an alien, or my illness. She sees *me*.

Whoa, so I guess Yvonne was right.

Alaska and I have a radio connection. A connection that's better than anything a human could come up with. Studying for ten years to be a doctor, MRI scanners, ultrasound machines, EEGs—nothing beats a hairy monster.

When you make an online call, they sometimes ask how many stars you'd give the connection.

Well, Alaska?

Seriously?

More stars than there are in the universe.

I look at the long whiskers sticking out of her snout like antennae. At her soft floppy ears and her shiny nose.

And then I put my arms around her.

Hey, I'm just as bonkers as Balaclava Girl. What's the point of loving someone you can't play computer games with, or go ice skating with?

But yeah, I never thought she'd learn how to do it.

I knew some assistance dogs could see a fit coming. And I knew that it changed everything for their owners. No more surprises, no more suddenly crashing to the ground, no concussions or arterial bleeding.

I've read about those super-teams of dogs and their owners in the magazine about assistance dogs. Iris and Bieke. Corrie and Cisco. Melanie and Snow. They made me furious, because I knew I'd never belong to a super-team like that. As if someone could ever see the rotten short circuit in my head coming, when I didn't have a clue myself.

But now here we are. Right here in the back seat.

Sven and Alaska. The new super-team.

## PARKER

I try to act like Sven is still having a seizure. Then I knew exactly what I needed to do. There was an earthquake going on right next to me, but Alaska and I didn't panic. We did what we had to do.

Without a dog and without a helmet, I walk along the shopping street. My hands in my pockets, as if I've got a gun and I'm the only one who knows about it. My hair in the cold wind, my jaw clenched. In one straight line, I head for Montijn Photographic Supplies.

I open the door and step through. For the very first time, I go back into the store. And then I stop. It's not just my mom behind the counter—my dad's there too. They're sitting there, next to each other. Above their heads is the brightly colored poster: *Armed robbery! Always take CARE!* Unseen, beneath the counter, the red alarm button waits.

I start crying.

They both come running.

"Sweetheart, what is it?" My mom puts her arms around me without waiting for an answer. The way that Alaska starts licking when Sven's still confused.

"I saw him!" I cry into the darkness of her hug. "The robber! The man with the gun!"

I had no idea my dad would be here too. I thought he was still at home watching security images. I was going to tell my mom the whole story first, and then we could decide together if Dad needed to know. But now they're getting to hear the whole story together. About me recognizing the sneakers with the red flames. About Sven calling the police for me, and the police refusing to come. And about Sven coming instead—Sven with Alaska.

Yes, with Alaska. I tell them that I've seen her again. That she's the best assistance dog in the world. We had no idea what an amazing super-dog we had living with us for eight months.

"I tried to take some photos..." My hands shaking, I swipe through the blurry pictures. "But then Sven had an epileptic seizure and we let the robber get away." I look at my mom. "So he's still walking around here somewhere. About half an hour ago, he was heading in this direction. He might even have walked past the store."

I don't dare look at my dad. He's taken the telephone from my hands and keeps swiping through the blurred photos.

"Why didn't you call me?" my mom asks. Her face is very serious. "Or send a message, if you couldn't phone?"

I don't reply.

I wanted to be brave. My mom and dad have seen enough films for viewers over the age of forty. I wanted to solve the problem myself, but it backfired. So now we know that the man with the unknown face and the black sneakers is still out there, somewhere nearby. You can rob a store and shoot someone and then calmly go out for a bit of a walk around town.

"That guy..." My dad is thinking. "You said he had a cell phone, didn't you? And the phone was on? You saw him using it?"

I nod and wipe my nose on the back of my hand.

"And your phone was on the entire time too?"

I nod again.

"And how long were you near him? Any idea?"

"At least twenty minutes. Sometimes he stopped and stood there for a bit. And then he started walking again."

I look at my dad's face. Since the robbery, his eyes have been dull. But there's a little something twinkling away in them now.

"We're going straight to the police station. Right now," he says. He still has my phone in his hand. "Your phone was on the entire time, so your location will have been tracked. If they compare those details with the details of all the other cell phones in the area, then maybe they can work out which phone you were following all that time."

Mom and I stare at him. It's him: my dad from before. He always had ideas, he built his own cameras, and when we all watched a movie together, he knew who the bad guy was within ten minutes.

Inside the police station, everything is blue and white. There are officers walking around here who know what it feels like to have a gun on your hip at all times, and it smells of coffee, and they have prison cells on the other side of the building. While we're waiting for the detective, I listen to see if I can

hear any criminals banging on the walls of their cells.

In my head, I'm rehearsing what I'm about to tell them. About the shoes. About following him. And about the phones. The police obviously don't need to hear all about Sven and Alaska, but it's impossible to erase the images from my mind. I can still feel Sven's arm around my shoulders. I can hear his words in my ear.

*I'm me, remember? I can't help attracting attention. It's what I do.*

He thinks he's the weirdest weirdo of all. And I guess it's not surprising. That very first day at school, there was no brilliant stunt, just spooky laughter. And a week later, half the town saw his torture movie. I told him that we're all weird. That everyone would forget about his fit before long. But I was wrong, because no one's sending any new clips around. Sven is still the only alien in the entire school.

Suddenly I have a plan.

I have no idea if it's going to work, and I don't know if it'll make any difference to Sven. But I can't forget it: he came to help me. Him and Alaska. He knew I was going after a criminal, the emergency people wouldn't listen, he wasn't actually supposed to use his bike at all, and we'd fallen out. But still he came.

I glance to the side. My dad is sitting next to me, with a very straight back. If you didn't know, you wouldn't be able to tell which shoulder had a bullet in it.

Without saying anything, I pick up my phone and look for Benjamin's number. I wish I'd come up with a one-person

plan, something I could do all alone. But that's impossible. Everyone in 1B, all the kids who have been laughing at me for two weeks now—all of them have to help.

I've never spoken a word to Benjamin and until three minutes ago I wasn't planning to either. But everyone thinks he's funny, and he's friends with Sven. If I want to get my class to do something, I'd better start with Benjamin.

*Hi*, I type. My fingers hesitate. He's obviously going to be quite surprised that I'm suddenly talking to him. *Can I ask you something?*

I sit there, staring at the screen. Benjamin comes online almost immediately.

*Hey, Barker!*

The silver bullet. My whole class is full of annoying little brats. What I'd really like to do is smash my phone on to the floor, but I don't do that. If I go ahead with my plan, they're going to call me Barker even more. That's exactly my point: that we're all barking mad. Each and every one of us.

Benjamin starts typing again.

*Lolz sorry ☺ But is it true tho??*

*That you were born in a park?*

I bite my lip.

*No*

*At home*

*But my mom and dad thought*

*Bed was a boring name*

He's quiet for a moment. And then:

*Ha ha ha*

*Ha ha*



*Mine thought Hospital sucked too*

*So...what's up?*

*Wanted to ask you something*

*It's about Sven*

*Yeah?*

*Got a plan*

*But I can't do it on my own...*

## SVEN

We're eating quinoa salad with roasted pumpkin. Alaska's having steak.

My mom went specially to the butcher's to get the steak for her. While she was out, I gave the beast a brush.

Cell phones are strictly forbidden at the table, but suddenly my dad's phone makes an extra-important sound. While he's checking his message, I take a quick look at my screen too.

There's a new message in the 1B group chat.

It's not my class anymore, but Ziva hasn't removed me from the group yet. And I haven't left it. I've already paused five times with my thumb hovering over *Leave group*. But pressing those words would feel even worse than leaving school.

I open the message. A video—and under it in massive letters: *1B IS THE COOLEST CLASS IN THE SCHOOL! On Monday you met Sven. Now meet Parker! Check it out and send it on!!!*

I click on the video and almost choke on a bit of pumpkin.

It's Parker. At the computer, with a fluffy, snow-white puppy on her lap. There's a Christmas tree behind her, and "Jingle Bells" is ringing through the room.

Parker and the puppy are barking along to the song. They're going too fast half the time, making up extra notes as they go, but if anyone ever wondered what the happiest puppy in the world looks like—well, that's it, right there.

Last week I'd have just got mad and clicked it shut. No way I'd have wanted to see that second-hand beast having a fun singalong with her old owner.

But now Alaska is *my* dog. The only one who sees my seizures coming. And yes, it's lame—but I'm melting at the sight of that little mutt on the screen.

Seriously, so that's what Alaska looked like as a baby? The other half of my super-team, with a tiny little snout and snow-white fluff instead of fur.

I turn up the sound on my phone as loud as it will go.

"We're eating!" says my mom indignantly.

But then she sees Alaska. The real one, not the ball of cotton wool on my screen. The grown-up beast comes dancing up, still licking her lips after the steak. She nudges my phone with her nose and starts barking along.

I play the video again and look at the baby on the screen and then at the big assistance dog beside me.

And yes, I look at Parker a bit too.

I only know her as BalACLava Girl. With rings under her eyes and nervous hands. But in the video she's wearing a red sweater with reindeer on it. And her face is glowing. Just like this afternoon, when she saw Alaska and me.

"That's Parker!" my mom exclaims. She leans over my shoulder. "And is that...Alaska?"

Silently, I go on staring at the video. Over and over again.

The second video comes in when I'm sitting in front of the television.

*1B IS STILL THE COOLEST CLASS IN THE SCHOOL. Benjamin is at least as nuts as Sven and Parker. Check it out and send it on!!!*

A sunny lawn full of daisies. Benjamin is half the size that he is now and he's wearing a colander on his head. He's dancing around a big circle of cuddly toys. Each of the toys has a cup of tea and a prettily decorated slice of cake.

"Look, Mommy," Benjamin shouts into the camera. "Teresa's already finished her tea! Now we're going to have presents. And then we're all going to sing for Crockie!"

My head still feels heavy from the seizure, and my muscles are stiff. But I can't help it: I burst out laughing.

The third video comes in a quarter of an hour later. Claire's playing a game and she's swearing so much that I turn off the sound on my phone super quick.

Three minutes later, it's Ziva in front of a mirror. She's got a mega-zit on her forehead and she's shrieking hysterically that there's no way she's going to school like that.

The fifth one is Sol, dressed from head to toe in orange, like the Dutch national soccer team. He's sobbing in front of the TV, while someone in the background is laughing his head off.

"Dude," a voice yells, "you've just got to accept it. They suck!"

Sol starts crying even louder.

They mention my name with every clip that's posted, like I'm still in 1B. Like I still belong.

I read all of the comments, but I don't write anything myself.

While I'm waiting for more videos to arrive, I go back and watch Parker's. I play it without any sound. I look at her face without the balaclava. Her eyes, her nose, her mouth.

This afternoon we nearly caught that robber. But when Alaska started whining, Parker didn't hesitate for a second. She let the man with flames on his shoes walk away. And she stayed with me.

If Balaclava Girl were a dog, I'd give her ten steaks.

## PARKER

The videos are coming in faster and faster. I had no idea my class was so crazy. I'm sitting on the floor in the living room, with my phone plugged into the socket. After every video, we all leave comments, of course. But this time the idea is not to be cool and normal and just right. Today, all of 1B is dancing around on Mars.

Sven is the only one in the class who hasn't reacted yet. Does he think this is the lamest idea ever, a really bad stunt? Or does he just not care what we do anymore?

"Everything OK down there on the floor?" asks my mom.

"Yes..." I look at my mom and dad, and for the first time in a lot of weeks, a bit of me doesn't crumble away.

"Everything OK up there on the sofa?" I ask.

They nod at the same time. The television is off, but they're still sitting there together. They're drinking wine and they've said we can go to bed as late as we want to. As long as we stop marching around and giving orders. From today, marching is no longer part of our upbringing. I abandon my phone for a bit and go and fetch more chips. My brothers have been hiding under the kitchen table for at least an hour. They're having a meeting—in whispers.

"...buried in the yard," I hear Finn say.

"The bathroom is our new base," whispers Dex.

"And all of the toilet rolls are bombs," Joey shouts excitedly.

I know what's going on down there—it's the beginning of a secret resistance army. I push the rest of the bag of chips under the table with my foot, pretend I didn't hear anything, and head back to the living room.

This evening at the police station, my dad wasn't a crumpled-up ball of paper. He sat there with a serious expression on his face and explained to the detective that I'd followed the suspect for at least twenty minutes. Which meant our phones had also been close to each other for at least twenty minutes. And therefore he suspected that the police should be able to track down the man.

I held my breath when the detective didn't answer for ages.

"We can't just request information about cell-phone locations," he said finally. "We have to get permission from the public prosecutor. But given the serious nature of the crime... Armed robbery, grievous bodily harm..." He nodded. "Yes, we'll get permission. And you're right. We'll be able to use the details from the transmission towers to work out which telephone was near your daughter's all that time."

"And when you know which telephone it was," I asked, "will you be able to find the robber? And arrest him? And compare his DNA with the DNA from the balaclava? And then throw him into prison?"

"Calm down," said the detective. "It'll have to go to court first. The suspect will get a lawyer and, if he's found guilty, then the judge will decide the sentence."

"And then they'll throw the scumbag into prison!"

The detective chuckled for a second. And then he nodded firmly. "Yes, that is most definitely the plan."



## SVEN

It's Saturday morning, and I've been trying to make my mind up for at least a quarter of an hour. Or more like all night.

*Should I? Shouldn't I?*

The way Alaska looked as a puppy—that's how I feel now. New. Strange. Like I don't know my own paws.

Like I want to bark a Christmas song.

Finally, I just do it. I call Parker.

"Hey," says Balaclava Girl's voice on the other end of the line.

"It's me," I say.

She doesn't reply.

"Sven, I mean."

"Duh, I know that! Is your back still wet?"

"What? My back?"

This conversation is not going at all as planned. All I really want to do is hang up.

"Yesterday when..." She stops. "Never mind. It doesn't matter."

I can tell from her voice that she thinks this is as weird as I

do. Why didn't I just send her a text message? Calling someone—that's what you do with your grandma.

But if I suddenly hang up now, she really will be baffled.

"Those videos..." I clear my throat. "I know it was your idea to start sending them around. That one with Benjamin is hilarious."

She laughs. "That colander on his head! And the pretty little pieces of cake."

"Yeah," I say.

Alaska's lying on the sofa beside me. Her head against my thigh, her legs stretched out.

"And?" asks Parker. "Are you coming back to school?"

I can hear it in her voice. She hopes I'm coming back.

There's a rushing sound inside my head, but Alaska is just lying there, perfectly calm. So I'm not having a seizure.

This is normal. This is just an ordinary kind of short circuit.

"Yeah, the videos are hilarious," I say. "But don't forget that Benjamin can take off his colander. You can stop barking. I *live* on Mars—remember?"

"But now Alaska lives there too! She can predict your seizures. She can warn you before you're in trouble, can't she?"

"Yeah, when I'm doing homework. Or crossing the road. But I'm talking about school. The beast doesn't go to school."

Parker's quiet for a moment.

"Why not? Why don't you just take her with you?" she asks. "To school, I mean."

The rushing inside my head is deafening now.

I look at Alaska again. With her eyes closed, she puts her front paws up beside her nose. As if she's happy about something.

"Sven!" yells Parker. Her voice doesn't sound like Balaclava Girl's now. Balaclava Girl's voice never sounded as if it had bubbles in it. "That's it—Alaska has to come to school! All day, I mean. Then she can always warn you."

"Like they'd ever agree to that," I say. "Can you imagine that happening? A dog in class? A dog walking from classroom to classroom between classes?"

"But she's an *assistance dog*. She's allowed into stores and restaurants and planes, isn't she? At school she'd obviously wear her vest. She'd be at work, just like the teachers. Teachers are allowed to go into all of the classrooms, right? And teachers are allowed to walk down the halls, aren't they?"

I don't say anything.

No way am I going to think about this. I've had enough disappointments. Yet another lot of pills that doesn't work. An operation that gets canceled. An EEG that doesn't tell them anything at all.

\* \* \*

"Or have you already asked?" Parker suddenly sounds worried. "Did the principal say that Alaska can't come to school with you?"

"No, he didn't, but..."

When the beast didn't know how to predict my seizures, I didn't need her at school. At home she pressed the alarm button, and at school there were plenty of idiots who could call the emergency number if I went crashing to the floor again.

But Parker's right. Everything's different now.

Alaska isn't there just for the alarm button. She can warn me now, before I fall. And she could do that at school too.

"I promise I won't distract her," says Parker breathlessly. "Yesterday she saw a seizure coming when I was there—so she can do it! And that night in the field she chose you. She knows that she's *your* dog. But just imagine..."

She pauses.

"Just imagine," she says quietly, "if Alaska could always come to school with you from now on. If she lay under your desk every day. In our classroom. Just *being* there."

Suddenly I can't help myself. I can picture it perfectly.

The beast walking through the halls with me, with her yellow vest on her white back. Napping under my desk while I'm doing tests and buying French baguettes and learning about the Romans.

And occasionally feeling her nose nudge my leg and hearing her whine anxiously. So that I know what's up, and I can go and lie down somewhere. Somewhere in the school, in a place without any cell phones filming away. Without any losers staring open-mouthed at Circus Sven. Without any idiots instantly calling an ambulance.

Somewhere in that enormous building, in a place with just the hairy monster and me. And maybe, if she doesn't have stuff to do, with Parker too.

## PARKER

It's Monday morning, and the sun's shining. Some traffic lights are green; others are red. When I cycle past the man and his dog in the last long street, we both wave. We've never spoken to each other, but that doesn't matter. He's part of my way to school now. And I'm part of his morning walk.

I put my bike in the rack, but I don't go into school yet. I push my hands into the pockets of my sky-blue jacket and I wait.

Everything could go wrong at any moment, I know that. There are criminals everywhere and even if you put one in jail, there'll be plenty of them left. I still don't get how people can live peacefully without an alarm button within reach.

But last night I suddenly thought: *OK*. So all kinds of things could go wrong at any moment. You never know what's going to happen to you. You could get shot, you could freeze and fall to the floor, you could make a fool of yourself by barking in the very first class.

But you could also find Alaska again.

You could meet Sven.

And you could discover that there are more people living on Mars than you ever imagined.

\* \* \*

Finally they walk in through the gate. Sven and Alaska.

She's wearing her bright-yellow vest; his blond hair is gleaming in the sunshine. He could have a fit at any minute and in any place, but it won't take him by surprise. Alaska can warn him in time, so he won't go crashing to the floor. He doesn't bruise his hands now; the concussions are over.

Yesterday they went to visit the principal at home. Sven, his mom and dad and Alaska. To explain that she isn't an ordinary dog. Before they went, we came up with a thousand things to say to the principal. That, yes, Alaska can breathe and wag her tail and grin away with her black mouth, but that the principal should just look at her in the same way as a wheelchair. A student who can't walk is allowed to go around school in a wheelchair. Well, then Sven should be able to have his assistance dog, shouldn't he?

But the thousand things weren't needed. The principal said yes right away.

So yeah, all kinds of things could happen at any moment. You can go to a new school where you don't know anyone. And end up in a classroom with twenty-eight kids and the sweetest dog in the world.

Outside in the playground, Alaska can say hello to me by wagging her tail, but after that we ignore each other. This

afternoon we're going to the woods. Then her vest can come off and she'll be off duty. But for now she's wearing her uniform, and she's at work.

Sven and I look at each other. He brushes a strand of hair off his forehead, and I put my hands back in my pockets. All over the planet, traffic lights turn red. And then green again.

"Um..." he says. "Have we ever actually spoken to each other at school? In the light? Without a helmet and a balaclava?"

I think about it. And then I nod.

"That very first day, in the entrance hall. When you walked past me and hummed 'Jingle Bells'."

"Oh yes." He looks at the ground, and then back at me. "Do you miss your balaclava?"

"No. Do you miss your helmet?"

We start laughing at the same time. And then we head inside. The three of us. Alaska walks between us. I feel brave enough for anything, and I know Sven feels the same. As we enter the black-and-white entrance hall, the giants stop yelling.

"Look at that," I whisper. "They know us. The whole school knows who we are."

Sven grins. "So what next? Are we going to save the world?"

"We've got French first," I say. "But who knows? Maybe after that."



