

Alaska

Anna Woltz

Translated from the Dutch by Laura Watkinson

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For Fabeltje

Sven

This is the plan for today: to do something so brilliant within the first five hours that the whole school immediately finds out who I am. They have to know me before they hear about me.

I have no idea how I'm going to do it. I don't want to get thrown out of school on day one, of course. But it's got to be big.

If I don't do anything by then, within a week, I'll be *that loser from 1B*. The kid who gets brought to school every day by his dad and picked up by his mum. Who's never allowed to be alone. The guy with the watch that beeps every couple of hours because it's time for him to chuck down some more medicine.

I'm not going to let that happen.

Parker

My bike whizzes along the streets, because all the traffic lights are green today. As if the world wants to say to me: *Hey, look, I'm not really that bad.*

I'm in 1B with twenty-seven other kids, and I've already met almost everyone. One boy was sick on the getting-to-know-you afternoon in June. Just imagine, he doesn't know a single other person in the class yet. I'm glad I can't remember what it was like being born. Lying there, completely naked, in a world full of strangers. Faces you don't know, hands you don't know, nostril hairs you don't know. Maybe that's why babies scream so loud.

Down one more long road, and then I'll be there. My breath's racing too; my black dress is flapping in the wind. As I cycle past a man with a dog, I close my eyes for a moment. Less than a second, but that's long enough to see Alaska in front of me.

I've been missing her for four months now, so during the daytime it feels almost normal for her not to be there. I'm used to the dog-shaped hole in our house. I know I don't have to be careful with the door any more, and every blanket covered in white hairs went into the washing ages ago.

But at night I dream about her. Sometimes she's been injured and I run along dark streets to a brightly lit animal hospital that's eighty-seven storeys high. And sometimes – this is way worse – she's just there. She's lying beside me on the sofa and I'm stroking the soft bristles on her nose. Calmly, because I know we'll sit there together a thousand more times.

And then I wake up and feel empty.

There's no way I'm paying any attention to the Tips for First-Years on the Internet. I'm planning to skip puberty. Why would I want to "pimp" my rucksack with glittery flowers? And who gets to decide that lunchboxes are dumb, and sandwich bags are cool? Those websites give you these long lists full of tips, and then right at the end they suddenly say: *But whatever you do, always be yourself.*

Well, I wasn't going to pretend to be a leopard, or a hot-air balloon, was I? Of course not. But, *be yourself?* Is that what they tell the bullies and the liars and the people who are cruel to animals? All the people who are in prison and everyone who's not been caught yet?

Hey, bad guys, don't forget the most important thing of all: just be yourself!

If I ever have to give tips, I'll say: maybe you just happen to be a really nasty piece of work. Or a coward. In that case, you're better off being someone else.

Sven

My dad dropped me off at the gates. I wanted him to stop one street earlier, but he refused.

It's hot for September. I'm not wearing a coat, so everyone can see the blue strap around my wrist. The thing's supposed to look like some kind of cool wristband, but I still feel like an animal. A lost pet that's wandering around with its owner's telephone number.

As I walk towards the school, I deliberately don't think about my friends who are still on holiday. On the other side of the country, they don't go back to school until next week. They'll be in the second year. But I'm starting all over again, in the first year.

I head inside, pretending to be normal. The floors are black and white. The lockers are green and yellow. Nine hundred students all together – that's a herd. A screaming mob with bags that bang into everything, fists that shove, spots about to pop, mobiles that vibrate as soon as they recognise the school Wi-Fi.

I'm not scared.

I'm never scared.

But when I see the stairs, three storeys of rock-hard concrete steps, I stand still for a moment.

When my mum started going on about the stairs to the headmaster, I could have killed her. And last week, when I got that email with all the rules for my special lift key, I spent the rest of the day slamming doors.

But here's the worst thing about it. Now that I'm standing here – with that bare concrete and all those floors – I'm glad.

I'm thirteen, not eighty. But I'm glad that I've got a special lift key.

A deafening bell rings throughout the building. It sounds as if the universe is on fire.

Now you can really tell who's new. The first-years jump and start trotting. The rest don't speed up one bit.

The lift key's in my hand. But where's the lift?

Parker

We're sitting in silence, looking at the French teacher, but I know everyone else is fizzing and popping inside too, just like me. Maybe that girl at the front, the one with the black curls, will be my best friend. Maybe I'll like that boy with the freckles.

Everyone in my old class went to other schools. No one here knows me, no one knows what happened this summer. *This is a new beginning*, I tell myself. Maybe it's not just the traffic lights this morning that are turning green for me. Maybe the world really isn't that bad after all.

"*Bienvenue!*" shouts Mr Gomes. He's wearing a checked shirt with short sleeves. A dragon tattoo coils around his forearm. "*J'espère que vous avez tous passé de bonnes vacances.*"

I don't dare to move. Am I the only one who can't understand a word he's saying? Did we already have homework for today? And then the classroom door swings open.

Standing in the doorway, there's a boy with scruffy blond hair and faded jeans. I know who it is right away: it's him. The twenty-eighth member of 1B – the boy who was ill on the getting-to-know-you day. As quickly as possible, I try to take everything in: blue eyes, medium build, grey T-shirt, plaster on his chin, a bit taller than me, dirty trainers.

"*Alors!*" shouts Mr Gomes. "*Vous êtes en retard. Que s'est-il passé?*"

"Um," says the boy in the doorway. He gives the teacher a puzzled look. "*Une baguette, s'il vous-plaît?*"

It feels like we're Coke bottles that have been shaken for hours. And now the blond boy has unscrewed all twenty-seven of our tops at once. We all burst out laughing at the very same moment. In my ancient holiday scrapbook, I wrote in a seven-year-old's scrawl: *you have to say OON BAGET SEEVOOPLAY*. They were the very first French words I ever learned. I was amazed when the fat French baker actually went and fetched a stick of bread.

We go on laughing and laughing – and suddenly we aren't a bunch of assorted kids any more. We're a class.

“Sorry...” The boy in the doorway shrugs. “I got a D for French last year. I’m Sven.”

Mr Gomes picks up a piece of paper from his desk. His eyes fly over the words. “Sven Beekman?”

The boy nods.

“Aha,” says Gomes. “Right...” There’s a cautious sound to his voice. “Okay, Sven, sit down.”

And then he looks at us and his talking-to-eggshells voice has gone. “Listen up, 1B! How can you learn French when you’ve just been dropped into a class full of new people? That’s right. You can’t. So we’re going to get to know one another first.”

We all have to write down three funny things about ourselves. Two things that are true. And one lie.

“*Par exemple...*” says Gomes. “That means ‘for example’. I’ll tell you some things about me. One: I love eating fried grasshoppers. Two: I live in a treehouse. And three: I played football for FC Twente juniors.”

The boys in the back row start yelling out which one the lie must be, but he shakes his head.

“I’m the only one who doesn’t have to say today what’s made up. You’ve got a whole school year to find out. And now – get to work. Make your own lists.”

As, all around me, pens click and books open for the very first time, I stare at the gigantic black-and-white photograph on the wall: the Eiffel Tower in the rain. I search my brain for funny things to say, but instead I just see films I really don’t want to watch. They’re most definitely 16+, but they’ve been playing inside my head for weeks.

That’s how it works. They put scary warning labels on made-up things, like films and games: *Careful! Violence! Swear words! Sexy stuff!*

But when something actually happens, in real life, there’s no sign of any warning labels. Criminals don’t respect parental guidelines.

Five minutes later, there are big black lines scribbled all over the first page of my book, but there are also three sentences. When it’s your turn, you have to say your name first. Some

of the others have come up with stuff that makes me think: wow. If that's the weirdest thing you can imagine, you must have a very nice life indeed.

My favourite colour is blue.

I play hockey.

I went to Spain this summer.

And then it's my go. I take a deep breath. "I'm Parker."

It's the first thing I've said today since at breakfast with my brothers.

"I'm called Parker because I was born in a park. Two years ago, we secretly scattered my grandma's ashes at Efteling. And I can bark 'Jingle Bells'."

It's a few seconds before anyone makes a sound. And then the Coke bottles explode again. Everyone starts yelling, all at once. Saying you're not allowed to scatter ashes at a theme park. That Parker isn't a girl's name. And asking if we emptied the urn in Fairy-Tale Forest or on one of the rides.

"You can bark 'Jingle Bells'?" Sven yells above everything else. He looks at me. His eyes are as blue as a Siberian husky's.

I nod.

"Go on, then!" he shouts. He hasn't had his turn yet, so I don't know anything about him. No things that are true. No things that are lies.

I look at my book and think about Alaska.

Last Christmas, when she was still a puppy, the two of us must have watched the YouTube video of the dogs singing "Jingle Bells" a hundred times. The first time, she just sat on my lap, perfectly still. Her claws in my thigh, her puppy nose cocked at an angle, her eyes as round as marbles. Amazed to discover that such a thing existed: fellow dogs who could sing. By the sixteenth time, we were barking along with the dog choir. And after fifty times, Alaska was standing up on her pudgy little puppy legs and yapping at the silent computer, because she thought it was time for another concert.

"You're too chicken!" shouts Sven.

I look back at him, without blinking. There are a thousand things I'm too chicken to do. But this isn't one of them. I lift my chin, because that's what Alaska and I always did. And then I begin.

Sven

Seriously. The people in this town are even crazier than I thought. In the very first class, this girl starts barking. Talk about *barking* mad!

Her name is Parker Montijn. She's thin and pale, like she's just back from a trip to the North Pole. She's the only girl in the class who wears black clothes and the only girl who doesn't smile.

She puts her pointed nose in the air and barks so realistically that you want to make an emergency call to the animal-protection people. It's like she's just swallowed a dog. A live one.

But halfway through the song she stops.

She looks around and I see her cheeks go bright red. Whoa, I thought she was doing it on purpose. That this was *her* big stunt. But she's only just realised how dumb she looks. That the rest of the class can't stop laughing – at her.

"Do 'O Tannenbaum'!" shouts Ben.

"Or 'Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer'," yells Sol. "That one's perfect for dogs."

That's it. She's had it.

From today until the day she dies, Parker Montijn will be the girl who stirred a dog into her cornflakes for breakfast and started barking in the first lesson.

At lunchtime, Sol and Ben ask me to play football with them, but I shake my head.

I tell them I'm a competitive swimmer. That I don't go running around in a herd chasing after a ball. But secretly I'm exhausted, even though it's only midday.

Stupid medicine.

Slowly I walk down the hallway, chewing a spelt-bread sandwich with avocado.

Since we moved here, my mum hasn't had a job. Now she just does two things: worries about me and bakes bread. Sourdough with linseed. Date bread with goji berries and chia seeds.

But no matter what superfoods she uses, I'm still a freak.

Parker the dog girl is standing in the middle of the main entrance hall. All alone.

Black dress, white legs. She matches the checked tiles. With a serious look on her face, she's studying every window and every door and counting something on her fingers.

As I walk past her, I quietly hum "Jingle Bells". But I stop when I see her face.

"Think that's funny, do you?" she asks angrily.

She's looking right at me. Her eyes are pale grey with a dark line around. "It was your fault I started singing!"

"Is that what you call it here?" I ask. "Frogs croak, sheep bleat and dogs sing?"

"You challenged me!"

I put my hands in my pockets.

"When I was nine," I say, "I jumped into the canal in the middle of winter. My mum asked me later why I'd done it, and I told her someone had challenged me. She thought it was a really lame reason for nearly drowning."

"She was right," says Parker.

She looks all around the black-and-white-checked entrance hall.

"I've got things to do," she says.

Without looking back at me, she walks away.

A little later, in a corridor with no one else around, I stand clenching my fists. This is my chance.

Everyone else is sitting outside in the sunshine, and I'm in here. It's time for my brilliant stunt, so that the whole school at once will find out who I really am.

What shall I do? Set off the fire alarm? Call the police about a suspicious package? Climb onto the roof?

But then I pause.

I thought each and every one of my brain cells was working to come up with a stunt. But suddenly I notice how quiet it is here. How empty the corridors are. That I'm all alone.

Can I remember the last time I was without one single other person? Without a camera, without an alarm button, without a dog?

No.

I should be delighted – free at last! I've finally managed to escape from all that insanely irritating worry. From all the rules that make it impossible to *live*.

But I'm not happy.

I feel cold sparks at the back of my neck and God knows what's happening inside my head right now. Suddenly I couldn't care less about pulling off cool stunts – I just want one thing.

To get back to the mob. To stop being alone.

Parker

The sixth lesson of the day is with our class tutor.

All the windows in the classroom are open. A wasp is flying high above our heads and out in the school playground we can hear yelling voices that are already free.

Sven Beekman is the last to arrive again. I have no idea why that boy has to come late to every lesson. Ben's kept a seat for him, and Ziva, the girl with the black curls, smiles at him.

I act like he doesn't exist.

While everyone else is still fiddling around with notebooks and pens, I quickly check my mobile. I've already sent my mum four messages and she answered within five minutes every time, just as we agreed. I secretly give the start screen a little stroke with my finger. It still has a photo of Alaska on it.

Our class tutor is called Mr Hoppenbrouwers and even if you count the skeleton in the biology room, he's probably the oldest person in the whole school. A hundred years ago, he was a student here himself, and one of the first things he tells us is that the cellar beneath the multimedia centre is haunted. Some of the other kids giggle and shiver dramatically, but I just stare at the map on the wall.

"And now," says Hoppenbrouwers, "I need to run through the school rules with you. About the use of so-called smartphones in particular... there's some..."

He stops.

In the otherwise silent classroom, someone is laughing.

Not in a normal way, but all weird and deep. It sounds threatening. Like a ghost that's got stuck.

"HA-HA-HA-HA-HA..."

I feel goose bumps on my arms as I turn to look. Along with the rest of the class.

The noise is coming from Sven's mouth. From his body – but he doesn't look like himself anymore. His eyes have rolled back into his head and he's making smacking noises with his lips now.

“What’s wrong with him?” says Ziva.

“Hey, Sven...” Ben shakes Sven’s arm, but there’s no reaction.

Sven’s mouth opens and closes. His eyes are staring. And that spooky noise is coming from his throat.

Sol takes out his phone. “I’m calling an ambulance!”

“There’s no need,” says Hoppenbrouwers calmly. “Sol, put your phone away. Sven will be able to hear us again in a few seconds.”

The girls have all clasped their hands over their mouths, and Sol is still clutching his phone. The screen’s lit up; he’s already keyed in the emergency number.

I don’t do anything. Films I don’t want to see keep flashing through my head. They always appear when things get scary.

And then the weird laughter suddenly stops. Sven blinks, picks up his pen and looks down at his book, as if there’s nothing wrong. As if he has no idea he was just possessed by a ghost. Holding our breath, we all stare at him. His pen hovers over the paper, ready to get to work. But Hoppenbrouwers hasn’t given us anything to do yet.

After a couple of seconds, he looks up. And then he sees us staring.

Sven

It feels like I'm surfacing out of water.

It's happened. It must have done.

I put down my pen and wipe a drop of drool from my chin. They're staring at me.

So this is it. From now on I'll be that loser from 1B.

"You were gone for just a little while," says Hoppenbrouwers in his deep voice. "Half a minute maybe, no longer than that. You were smacking your lips and laughing."

I look at the chair in front of me. Inside my head I'm yelling all the swear words I know.

Hoppenbrouwers came to see me at home twice this summer. The second time, when we were sitting under the big yellow umbrella in the garden, I was out of it for a little while too. And he must have remembered what my mum did next: she told me how long it had lasted and exactly what I'd done.

"Are you okay?" asks Hoppenbrouwers. "Would you like something to drink or..."

I shake my head.

After an attack, the world is a little fluid. It takes some time for the lines to become solid again. For my brain to remember how to store everything: sounds go with sounds, colours go with colours. Words go with words.

I clear my throat.

"I feel fine," I say too loudly. "But I think Ziva and Elin could do with some water."

I was out of it, but they saw it happen.

They lived through it. And now, on day one, they already know more about me than I do about myself.

As the girls take gulps of water and rub each other's backs, I grit my teeth. Right now I really want to beat up the entire school.

Or not. I'm exhausted. I just want to go to bed.

Hoppenbrouwers looks at me. "Would you like to explain it yourself?"

I nod. If I start acting sorry for myself now, I'll be the handicapped kid for the rest of the year. I watch a wasp that doesn't understand how the open window works. It keeps smashing into the glass.

And then I tell them. That I have epilepsy.

I really, really hate that word. If there was a sport called epilepsy, there's no way in a million years I'd ever choose to join the club.

But this isn't something you choose.

It started a year ago. Just like that, out of nowhere. I had a short circuit in my head. My brain cells were firing off too many signals. Like if you bash away at all the keys on a computer at once, the whole thing stops working. Well, every time my brain fires off too many sparks, I stop working too.

"While I'm having an attack," I say, without looking at anyone, "I'm completely out of it. I could break my arm or fall into a fireplace without realising. And I don't feel what's broken until it's all over. Like now, when I saw you all staring at me... Yeah, well, that's when I know it's happened."

They're still staring, but I don't want to see. I know those expressions. When their mum or dad asks later: "How was your first day?" they won't tell them about French and maths, but about me. But not really about me, though – just about my messed-up brain.

"That one just now was a small attack. But sometimes I have a big one and then everything goes completely screwy. I don't feel them coming. I just fall down. And my whole body starts shaking. Usually it stops by itself, but if I'm still going after five minutes and my face turns blue, then it's a good idea to call an ambulance."

While I'm talking, all I can think is: *I DON'T WANT THIS.*

I didn't want to join the epilepsy club. But I've still been in an ambulance seventeen times in the past year. I had to give up swimming and I'm not allowed to ride my bike any more. In our new house, I sleep downstairs and I have my own bathroom, so that I never have to go upstairs.

I hate our new house.

“All the teachers,” says Hoppenbrouwers, “know about Sven’s condition and when they need to call an ambulance. And Sven and his parents have written a letter for you. With extra information.”

He picks up a pile of paper from his desk and starts handing out copies. It’s the lamest class presentation ever.

If I have as many attacks this year as I did last year, I’ll have to retake the year again. Soon I’ll be the only sixty-year-old in middle school and I’ll still be getting Ds for French.

“It’s not contagious,” I say loudly. “And when I’m not having an attack, there’s nothing wrong with me. Nothing at all.”

I can tell from their faces that they don’t believe me.

Hey, I don’t even believe it myself.

In two seconds’ time, I could be lying twitching on the floor. Wherever I go, whatever I do, there’s always that voice inside my head: *it could happen at any moment*. If it’s not this second, it’ll be the next one. Or the one after that.

Parker

Someone from the police once told me: *you can learn to be observant*. And he also said: *if you don't start paying attention until something's already happened, then it's too late*.

So, by the end of the first day, I've noted everything about everyone in 1B. Their first names, their surnames. I could give twenty-seven accurate descriptions. And I know where the firehoses and the emergency exits are.

In the corridors on the way out, I try to make myself as small as possible. The girls around me can't stop talking about Sven Beekman. They already thought he was funny and kind of cool, but now they can feel sorry for him too. Like one of those action heroes in a film, who suddenly reveals that he grew up in an orphanage. And that he silently cried himself to sleep every night – and that makes you like him even more. Even if he kills loads of people.

Well, that's not how it works with me.

I hold on tightly to my phone as I walk through the entrance hall. Giants are yelling all around me, but if my mobile starts vibrating, I'll feel it right away. I look out through the window – and then I stop so suddenly that I cause a multiple collision.

But I don't feel it at all.

Inside my head, I hear a frantic yelp of exploding happiness. The way dogs howl when they haven't seen you for a whole week. I can hardly believe it and yet I'm absolutely certain: out there in the sunshine, sitting on the grey slabs beside the bike shed... It's Alaska!

I haven't seen her for four months, but I still remember every little hair. Every fold in her white-blond fur. She's sitting beside a woman I don't know, waiting in the school playground. She's not wearing an ordinary collar like the one she had when she was with us, but a harness and a bright-yellow jacket. She's watching everyone really closely, and all I want to do is rush outside and hug her for ever and ever.

But then the woman waves at someone who's coming out of the school. Alaska starts wagging her tail in excitement. The fringe of hair on her tail swishes, her dark eyes twinkle, her black mouth smiles.

I peer around. And then I see who she's wagging her tail for.

He doesn't even look at her. He hands his rucksack to his mum and takes Alaska's lead, ignoring her sweeping tail. She pushes her nose into his hand, but he just starts walking without saying anything to her.

I stand there at the window and think: *so this is what it feels like*. A short circuit inside your head.

For four months now, I've been trying to find out where she is. Who her new owners are. In my mind, I saw her running in the woods through patches of sunlight and jumping into a stinky ditch. But I never knew who put her in the bath afterwards. Or whose leg she rested her head on when she wanted to play. So now I know.

Alaska belongs to Sven.

Sven

I can't believe that Mum's brought the beast. Right on the very first day.

Everyone's staring at that jacket on her back, of course. Written in huge letters on the side, it says ASSISTANCE DOG. DO NOT PET – but as always, everyone wants to do just one thing: to stroke the hairy monster. Without speaking to the mob around me and without looking at my mum, I tug at the lead.

I've already messed things up myself with 1B by having that attack. And now the rest of the school has seen me with an assistance dog.

With people in wheelchairs or people who are blind, you can think: *Aww, that's sad.* But with me, everyone just thinks: *Huh? An assistance dog? But why? He looks perfectly healthy! What's going on?*

I never used to want to give strangers on the street a black eye. But now I want to do it almost every day.

The pavement, the cars, the houses – the sun's made everything boiling hot. I can feel sweat on my forehead and I pretend not to hear my mum's hundred thousand questions.

I don't get it. Every dog has to do a course, but parents don't have to learn anything.

The dog harness has a blue square on it, with a big white letter L. That's because the beast is still in training. Well, they should stick an L on my mum too. And as far as I'm concerned, they should never take it off.

I storm past houses and parked bikes and a snack bar full of people with ice creams. But when I want to cross the road, I suddenly have to stop.

The animal has sat down.

I swear at her.

She's sitting on her bum and refusing to move. The lead's tight. I pull, but she doesn't budge even a centimetre. Her dark eyes look guiltily at me. As if she'd really love to come with me – but sorry, it's impossible.

"Oh, come on!" I yell. "Stop being so awkward!"

And then I feel my mum's hand around my wrist. She pulls me back so that the lead's not so tight, and she takes a doggy treat out of her pocket.

"Good dog," she says quietly to the animal. "Well done!"

I can tell from her hand on my wrist how angry she is. I can't hear it in her voice, though.

"I'm well aware," she says to me, just as quietly, "that you'd pictured your first day at a new school differently. But whatever the problem is, it's not Alaska's fault. She's here to help you. And chances are that she'll save your life a few more times."

She lets go of my wrist.

"You can yell at me as much as you like. But not at Alaska. And if you don't take her training seriously, then I'll call Yvonne and tell her it's not working out. And that she should find another child, someone who will do their best for Alaska."

I know all of that. And honestly, yelling at the dog feels much worse than yelling at my mum.

But Mum's always been around. And that creature only came along when I got sick. I look at the dog and it seems as if not only her jacket but every centimetre of her white fur is covered in the words:

YOU HAVE EPILEPSY. YOU'RE NOT NORMAL. WITHOUT ME YOU'LL DIE.

I go and stand on her right. Sigh deeply. And look at her.

"Alaska, let's go!" I say, in the fierce kind of tone that kindergarten teachers use.

And yes, that dog bum finally comes up off the pavement. Relieved, the animal trots across the street with me.

So that's how to do it. That's what Yvonne taught us and that's what we have to practise every day. At every kerb, I say *Alaska, kerb* – and she sits. And then I say *Alaska, let's go* – and we cross the street together.

Without a command, she refuses to move. Because in her dog universe there are no angry owners who are in a stinking mood. In her universe there are only owners who have attacks. And that makes it all very simple.

Cross the street with a command: life.

Cross the street without a command: death.

And she's right, too. That's the worst thing about it. Before I had her, I once walked out into the street during an attack and got hit by a car. Didn't quite die. But almost.

Parker

Now I know exactly what I need to do. I'm going to kidnap Alaska.

My feet pedal as fast as they can; the sun beats down on my head. I should be scared, because my mum's in the shop, and closing time is getting closer and closer. My shadow dad has picked up my little brothers from school for the first time and there are people everywhere in the streets who want to be *themselves*.

But I'm not scared today; I'm angry. For the past four months, whenever I was missing Alaska, I could at least think: she's an assistance dog now. She's making life easier for a handicapped child. It felt a bit like giving your favourite cuddly toy to a homeless kid. Or donating your pocket money to people who have just survived a hurricane.

But now I know the truth. Never in a million years would I give a single cent or even my lamest cuddly toy to Sven Beekman. But he's got Alaska. He didn't even stroke her when she stood there waiting for him and wagging her tail. He doesn't deserve her.

I pedal so hard that the world becomes a blur. People fly past and I can't remember any details. If something bad happens now, I'll be a rubbish witness, that's for sure.

Tonight I'm going to Sven's house, because Alaska can't stay there even a day longer. Just imagine living with someone who suddenly rolls his eyes back and starts laughing really scarily. Or lies on the ground twitching until he's so blue that you have to call an ambulance.

And what if you're not a human, but a dog? Then you'd have no idea why you had to start wearing a weird yellow jacket. And stacks of leaflets about epilepsy would be no help at all.

The front door's closed, but I can already hear my little brothers yelling. I chuck my bag down in the hall and run into the front room.

Dad's sitting silently at the computer. There's a puddle of lemonade on the table with a handful of swollen cornflakes in it, and the floor looks like a plague of locusts has passed through. My little brothers have only been home for half an hour.

"Parker!" yells Dex.

"Where were you?" screams Finn.

"Soldiers, MARCH!" shouts Joey.

Dex is nine, Finn is seven, Joey is six. My parents say it was deliberate. That they had four children on purpose – and I believe them too. But of course, they weren't planning on three lots of ADHD. But hey. There were other things they weren't planning on, too.

I walk over to my dad and put my arms around his neck.

He clears his throat. "How was school?" His eyes stay looking at the screen, but his hand gives my arm a quick squeeze.

"You know," I say. "Okay."

I don't tell him about "Jingle Bells". Or about Sven's creepy attack. Or about Alaska either.

"Have you guys got homework to do?" I ask, as I wipe up the drowned cornflakes.

"No!" shout my little brothers. "Of course not. It was the first day back!"

They grab their Super Soakers and start marching around the table, accompanied by soldier shouts. I see Dad wince, and I'd really love to take their rotten water pistols into the back garden and burn them. But all the other boys in the street have got them too. And my brothers are nine and seven and six. They can't help it that the parental guidelines are all wrong.

My dad is thirty-nine. According to those stupid symbols, he's old enough to handle any film in the world. But that's not true.

"Soldiers," I yell above the noise. "We are going on an expedition to locate provisions!"

Dex, Finn and Joey beam at me. When I suddenly found myself without a dog, I briefly tried to teach my brothers to fetch and to walk nicely on the lead. It was a disaster, but then I realised they didn't want to be dogs, but soldiers.

Our street smells of freshly sprayed grass and hot tarmac. Dex takes the lead, with Finn in the middle, and Joey bringing up the rear. Their brown hair is always in a mess, they have cornflakes stuck to their chins, and their clothes are never clean for more than ten minutes at a time.

“Left – RIGHT – left – RIGHT!” I shout so loud that the lime trees rustle. The more fiercely I yell and the sterner I sound, the more my brothers like it.

I hate marching and uniforms and shooting with water pistols. It gives me the shivers, and I think it should all be banned. But I also hate going into shops on my own. So now I have my private army. I send them out on exploratory expeditions for chocolate sprinkles and pickled gherkins. They lug the heavy shopping bags around, because that’s all part of a military campaign.

And they’re here. They’re here to protect me. That’s what they say.

Sven

When I wake up, the sun's already low in the sky. I'm thirteen, but after a day at school I need a two-hour nap.

I stay lying there, because I don't want to go into the living room. Sometimes I don't know what's worse: being sick, or the way my mum and dad look at me now.

There's an iron wall inside my head.

I simply don't think about it. How things will turn out, I mean. If we can't find any medicine that works.

With driving a car. And girls. And a normal job.

And if I can't ever swim in a competition again, if all I can do is look at the sea.

No. I don't want to think about that.

My hand pats the duvet beside me. As if it's not my hand, but someone else's.

The animal jumps up on the bed next to me. She lies so close that not even a flea would fit between us. I can hear her tail on the duvet: thud – thud – thud.

It's much too warm for a doggy hot-water bottle, but I let her stay there. I stroke her head and her floppy triangular ears. Most golden retrievers are yellow or brown, but this is a dog made of snow. Her eyes, mouth and nose stand out pitch-black against the white.

At home she doesn't have to wear that dumb jacket. At home I can sometimes forget for a while that she's an assistance dog. Then she just seems like the dog I've been wanting for thirteen years.

Parker

At two o'clock in the morning, I awake with a start. For a moment I think someone's broken in and that I can hear our alarm and that men with knives are wandering around downstairs. But then I remember what's going on.

I'm going to kidnap Alaska.

I take out my mobile from under the pillow and quickly swipe off the alarm clock. My eyes are still half shut, and it feels like I've only been asleep for ten minutes. But if I don't go now, I'll have to wait another two days. My mum and dad are on rations: they're allowed a sleeping pill one night, but not the next. And then they are. And then they're not. And so on.

On the nights without sleeping pills, they're constantly flitting around the house. On the nights *with* sleeping pills, they're dead to the world for six hours.

Just putting on a pair of black trousers and a dark-green polo neck, I get out of breath. I've stolen my dad's woolly hat from the box of winter clothes. If I pull it all the way down over my head, it comes past my chin. Before I went to sleep, I used the kitchen scissors to cut holes for my eyes and mouth.

So now it's a balaclava. It's lying beside the frog nightlight on my desk and looking at me with its holes. I look back at it, feeling a bit sick. In my mind, I can see the pictures from the security camera again. A film for people over forty. Without sound. But with violence.

With trembling fingers, I stuff the hat into my rucksack. My bike keys are already in there, with a torch, a rope that I'm planning to use as a lead for Alaska, and the half a packet of dog biscuits that I've had in my sock drawer for the past four months.

Downstairs, the new alarm is on. I can't get to the control panel without setting off the siren first, so I climb out of my window. I've already done it a thousand times when I didn't need to – just because it's fun jumping first onto the shed roof and then shinning down the pergola to the ground.

It's one of those nights that only happen a couple of times a year. The dark air is made of velvet. There's a faint smell of grilled meat and barbecues in the air; the last people have only just gone inside. Now the entire town is asleep.

Only the thieves are still awake.

Five weeks ago I would have thought this was great. Silently unchaining my bike from the fence and riding off down the empty street. Without light for the first two hundred metres, and then with. Knowing that I've perfectly memorised the route to Sven's house. Acting like it's normal to be cycling across town at quarter past two in the morning with my hair fluttering in the warm breeze.

But it's not five weeks ago – it's now.

My heart's thumping away, the palms of my hands are clammy. I try to focus on Alaska: the little pads on her feet, the way she always lay dreaming with her four legs in the air. If everything goes well, I'll be able to bury my face in her fur in half an hour.

But men in balaclavas keep flashing through my mind. I wish my marching brothers were here. My shadow father. My mother, who never cries.

Just when I'm so scared that I want to scream, I realise that I'm there.

A street full of new houses. There's still fresh sand between the paving stones – I can feel it under my wheels. I've studied the street on Google Maps. The gardens back onto an enormous empty field. Maybe they're going to build houses on it too, but there's nothing there yet.

I pedal to the end of the row of houses and then get off. Pushing my bike, I sneak around to the back of the houses. I'm panting as if I've just run a marathon. I still haven't put the balaclava on. Sven mustn't recognise me, but to anyone else I'm way more suspicious with the balaclava on than without.

My eyes are already so used to the darkness that I don't need the torch. As I drag my bike across the sandy field, I count the back gardens. Alaska lives at the seventh garden.

I've brought my bike to use as a step across the fence, but Sven's garden turns out to be made specially for burglars. The gate's locked, of course, but the planks are arranged

horizontally with gaps between them – it's like climbing up a ladder. And then back down again.

I stand there in his back garden, panting. A gleaming pond, white garden chairs, flowers that smell sweet in the night. All of the windows are dark. I pull the balaclava over my head and hate myself. But this isn't about money. This is about Alaska.

My entire plan is based on one thing: the heat. The day was sweltering; the night is muggy. Most people have no air-conditioning – they just leave the windows open. And that's what I'm hoping for. That Sven's parents aren't like mine. That they don't have an alarm. And that they sleep with the windows open.

I sneak to the back door. I try the handle – but the door is closed. I don't know anyone who sleeps right behind the back door, so I shine my torch inside for three seconds. A deserted kitchen. No sleeping people. And no sleeping dog either.

I tiptoe to the sliding glass doors to the left of the kitchen. This must be the living room. I feel the doors in the dark and then hold my breath. They're slightly open.

I crouch down. Grab my torch. Hold onto the door with one hand. And then I feel something wet go across my fingers.

Just as I'm about to scream, a white nose pokes through the gap. I hear frantic whining. A warm tongue greedily licks my hand. As if nothing in the world is as tasty as my fingers.

"Alaska!" I whisper to the nose. It sounds like a sigh, but it feels like a yell that goes all the way to the stars.

The whining's getting louder. I hear her tail swishing, her claws tapping on the floor. She's walking back and forth behind the door – any minute now she's going to start barking because she can't handle all that happiness.

I pull as hard as I can at the sliding doors, but the gap isn't even a millimetre larger.

Any minute now *I'm* going to start barking because I can't handle all that happiness either. In a flash I think back to this morning: looking like such a complete idiot in front of everyone in my new class and then that horrible Sven humming to tease me at break time. But if I manage to kidnap Alaska, none of that will matter any more.

I cautiously feel around the inside of the glass door. There's a handle halfway down. I give it a tug, it swings upwards, and suddenly the door moves. I slip inside and close it behind me. If I let Alaska into the garden now, she'll start barking away and galloping around in circles.

I'm here.

It's pitch-dark in the room, but that doesn't matter. You don't need light to hug.

I drop down onto my knees, wishing I had a thousand arms. Now I realise just how badly I've missed her. How completely. Not only with my head, but with my whole body – with my hands and ears and eyes and lips.

"Yes, good girl!" I keep whispering. "Shush, Alaska, I'm happy too. Yes, I missed you too. Ssh, Alaska – quiet, girl!"

I unzip my rucksack to take out the rope. And then a light goes on.

Alaska's tail swishes air into my face, but I can't breathe. I just blink.

I thought I was in the living room, but this is a bedroom. Against the wall, two metres away, is a single bed with a lamp beside it. And in that bed is Sven.

Sven

The ocean is rushing inside my head. My heart is thumping. I can't move.

There's a dark shadow next to my bed. It has thin arms and a black head with three holes. The hole for the left eye is higher than the right eye. The mouth is a triangle.

Alaska's acting like she's waited all her life for this moment. She's dancing around and whining like an idiot. Her tail's spinning like a propeller.

If I hadn't heard that whispering voice first, I'd be screaming the house down now.

But it all crept up on me. Like a hill getting steeper without you realising.

First I dreamed someone slipped inside. And as I woke up, I heard that whispering voice. *Good girl, Alaska, I'm happy too. Yes, I missed you too, Alaska...*

And now I'm completely awake and my brain has finally grasped that – really, truly –
SOMEONE IS IN MY BEDROOM.

The shadow stands up and takes a step towards the sliding doors.

"Wait!" I call. No idea why – my voice belongs to someone else.

The shadow stops.

It's a girl, I can see that now. Her jumper is tight. She doesn't have the kind of breasts yet that would go up and down when she runs along the beach. But there's something there. Then I remember that I'm only wearing boxers. And it's way too hot for a duvet.

Whoa, I must still be dreaming.

Being stared at in the middle of the night by a strange girl while you're lying half-naked in bed – that totally sounds like a dream, right?

"Are you real?" I whisper. Dumbest question ever, but hey.

Her hands are the only parts of her that aren't covered.

"Yes," she whispers back, as her fingers become fists. "I'm real."

I can't tell anything from her voice. Not her age, no strange accent. Not a turned-up nose, no beautiful eyes, no weird chin.

The only one who can remember how to move is Alaska. She bounds over, puts her front paws on the bed, gives my bare stomach a lick and runs back to the shadow.

If that animal weren't so ridiculously happy, I'd call the police.

"You know her name's Alaska," I whisper. "How?"

I act as if everything is under control. As if I have a girl in a balaclava standing by my bed every night.

"Well?"

Her fists disappear whenever the creature comes anywhere near. She strokes that white head as if her hands are hungry.

"It was me who named her," she says, so quietly that I can barely hear it. "Alaska belonged to me first."

I sit up. "That animal lived with you?"

She nods.

Of course I already knew that Alaska had other owners before. She was nearly a year old when she came to us. But I didn't need to hear anything about it. I mean, if you get a second-hand wheelchair, or a pair of used crutches, then you don't need to hear anything about the previous owner, do you?

"Take that balaclava off!" I want to find out what she looks like, but she shakes her head.

"I've got an alarm button here," I say. "If I press it, my parents will be in the room within three seconds."

"Why do you have an alarm button?" she whispers. "In case of burglars?"

"In case I have an attack." I run my fingers through my hair and feel that it's sticking straight up. "I have epilepsy. That's..."

"I know what it is," she snaps.

I was all ready to trot out my little lecture.

"Really? Okay... Well, sometimes I have an attack at night, and then the dog presses the alarm with her nose. And my parents come racing downstairs."

Her body changes. I see it happen. When she's talking to me, every muscle is tensed up. As if she's doing her best not to flinch. But when that dog's involved, she turns into a soggy dishcloth.

"Really?" she whispers. "You taught Alaska how to do that? To press the alarm with her nose when you have an attack?"

"Yep. At first I had a camera in my bedroom. It was always on. There was a motion sensor in it, so if I suddenly started shaking when I was doing my homework or lying asleep, then my parents heard a beeping sound."

She waits.

"Can you imagine that?" I ask. "Never being allowed to be alone? Your parents always watching you with a camera?"

The holes in the balaclava stare at me.

"Yes," she says quietly. "I can imagine." She kneels back down by the animal. "And now Alaska's the camera..."

I want to laugh at her. She's acting like that dog is the cleverest circus animal ever. And at the same time I want to kick something, because I can see how badly she's missed the hairy monster. Her hands can't stop stroking.

I'm certain: if the world was ending now, she'd go on stroking. All the way through the tsunamis.

"Are you allergic to dogs?" I ask. "That was all Yvonne told us. That's why Alaska had to leave her old owners."

The girl shakes her head. "Not me – my six-year-old brother. We thought he had a cold all winter. But he didn't. He was allergic."

"And so the beast had to go."

"Or Joey had to go," she says. "But my parents wanted to keep him. And so it was Alaska who had to leave."

I snort, but she's silent. I can't see her face, of course. But I'd bet quite a bit of money that she's not laughing at her own joke.

“And now I have to go,” she says. Her hand’s still stroking away. “Or my mum and dad will notice I’m missing.”

“I don’t even know your name!” I want to talk louder, but I keep whispering.

It’s a wonder my parents still haven’t heard anything. But ever since the dog arrived, they’ve slept like logs. What do you expect? They’ve had a whole year of sleepless nights.

We’ve read plenty about it online. Some epileptic people have an attack at night and suffocate on their pillow. Others fall out of bed, open up an artery and bleed to death.

“Can I come back to visit?” the girl asks tentatively. “Not tomorrow night, but the night after? Will you be here?”

So it really is a dream.

Asking someone if by any chance he might be in his bed later that week in the middle of the night? Weird.

“Is that a date?” I ask.

But she doesn’t reply. All her attention is on the hairy monster. Seems it has another five hundred spots that need stroking.

“I’ll come back,” she whispers. Not to me, but to the animal. “Promise. I’ll come back.”

Wow.

Just imagine a girl talking to you like that. Saying *I’ll come back* – and sounding like she’ll die if she never sees you again.

You couldn’t take it seriously, of course. Girls always overdo everything, their voices are too high, they simply adore horses and glitter, and they get all secretive about bras.

But in a way it must be nice. If someone’s not talking to an animal like that, but to you.

And then she’s gone. The doors slide shut. The windows shine. I don’t even see her walk away.

Parker

I don't dare wear my blue trainers to school. What if Sven remembers he saw exactly the same trainers last night? Then he'll know who I am. So I put on my sandals. And a skirt, because the heatwave isn't over yet.

I've slept two hours less than usual, but I feel more awake than ever. My hair dances in the wind, my legs pedal as if they could keep going forever. When I see that man with his dog again on the last long road before school, I start smiling. I wave at them, even though I don't know them.

Last night I didn't dream about Alaska for the first time in four months. Last night I hugged her for real. I know it wasn't a dream because this morning the balaclava and my polo neck were covered in white hairs. I buried them deep under my mattress. Tomorrow night I can go again. And until then I have to pretend there's nothing going on.

It feels weird to be back in the classroom with Sven.

Everything's different now: it's broad daylight, not three in the morning. We're at school, not in his bedroom. I'm not wearing a balaclava, he's not almost naked, his voice sounds like a big bulldozer and not like a funny little hedgehog.

And here, in the classroom, he knows my name.

"Hey, Parker," he yells, "what are you going to bark for us today? Can you rap like a dog too?"

At first, when he shouts my name across the room, I think he's overdoing the English pronunciation. People do that sometimes. Paaarkuhr – as if they've got a hot meatball in their mouths. But then I suddenly hear it, along with the rest of the class.

He didn't call me Parker, but *Barker*.

I've had loads of nicknames in my life, but never one that went straight through my heart. You can only kill a vampire with a silver bullet. Well, today Sven Beekman came up with a bullet just for me. Barker.

Silently, I stare at him, while the class goes crazy. *Parker the Barker! Ms Barker Montijn!*

Sven glances back with his ice-blue eyes. In my head I hear the funny little hedgehog asking, *Is that a date?* But in the real world I hate him.

I wish I'd managed to kidnap Alaska. I wish we were on our way together to Paris or Antarctica, because that boy doesn't deserve a dog to keep him alive. Sven Beekman deserves to choke on his own tongue.

When school's finally over, I'm still so angry that I accidentally end up looking like my brothers. I'm not just walking, I'm marching. And suddenly I think: today I feel brave enough to go to the shop. If I bump into someone with a balaclava or a knife or a gun, then I'll just think of Sven. And the silver bullet he invented for me. And then I'll beat the bad guy to a pulp.

I leave my bike at the end of the shopping street. I clench my fists so my fingers don't shake and I try to remember details of the people I see, but among all those shoppers I just keep seeing Sven's ice-blue eyes.

A bald man walks past. The black letters on his T-shirt say *THINK. FEEL. DO.* An angry thought flashes through me: *seriously, which of the three would you forget if it wasn't written on your belly?* He scratches his shiny, sweaty dome, and I wonder to myself if men are actually dumber than women. They're certainly more criminal. Look at the prisons. I Googled it: eight per cent of prisoners are women. Ninety-two per cent are men.

I don't get why it's not reported on the news more often. Why they don't give boys extra lessons at school. Why they don't just ban men from going out after sunset.

The window of Montijn Photography Supplies looks like it has all my life. Shiny cameras and lenses displayed on rows of shelves. The door is open. I walk up to the doorway and have to stop. My body refuses to go any further.

Things that look exactly the same can suddenly feel completely different.

From the doorway I look at my mum. She's behind the counter, bent over a camera. There are no customers in the shop. New security cameras everywhere. I give the one facing

the door a quick wave for my dad. I know he's at home, looking at the black-and-white pictures on the computer. That's what he's been doing for five weeks now.

Then my mum notices me.

"Parker!" She smiles, but still a shiver runs through me. I know she remembers her daughter's name, but I still heard her say *Barker*.

"Will you come outside?" I ask. "It's boiling in there!"

I can tell she understands. She carefully puts down the camera. There's a brightly coloured poster by the till. *Armed robbery!* it says. *Always take CARE! Don't forget the CARE principle!*

I can dream the letters now:

*C: Stay **C**alm.*

*A: **A**ccept what's happening. Don't resist.*

*R: **R**emember what they look like.*

*E: Give them **E**verything they ask for.*

I used to think the poster meant it would all be fine. As long as you stuck to the letters, you'd be okay. But that's not how it works. There's no such thing as okay. *Not dying*, that's what it's all about. When *death* is the alternative, *not dying* sounds pretty good.

My mum and I lean against the doorposts. As if we're guards. We have the same straight, light-brown hair, the same freckled nose, the same grey eyes. On the outside I'm my mum, but inside I'm my dad. Dad and I are the cowards. Mum and my brothers are the brave ones.

It's muggy out on the street. The sun's disappeared and there's a storm in the air. I look at the shoes of every man who goes by. Shoes are the most important thing of all.

"How was school?" asks my mum.

"Okay," I say.

"Want some Fanta?"

I nod. She goes inside to fetch two cans from the fridge at the back of the shop. While I'm waiting outside, I automatically take out my phone to check if there's another message from my mum.

There's nothing, of course. It's only as I'm staring at the screen that I realise how dumb I am. I'm here. And Mum's already coming back out. Right now, I'm sure she's alive. Safe and sound, she leans on the warm shopfront beside me.