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### The Stolen Bride

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storybook fiction

Age: 10+

#mystery #detective story #dogs

#friendship #adventure

Grandma has decided to enter her French bulldog Mati into a dog show. To keep the animal and herself from getting too nervous, she invites along her granddaughter Mari, who brings her friends Reilika and Sadu in turn. When Mati finishes with a silver medal, they decide to go say goodbye to the female bulldogs waiting their turn. Alas, their owner Kertu discovers that one is missing: Anna. Kertu hopes to find the dog quickly, as there's a tracking device on her collar. But when it's found around the neck of a cat outside the exhibition center, the owner has no choice but to call the police. The girls are certain that the police won't get to the bottom of it, so they tell Olav and Anton about what happened. Together, the Souptown Secret Society sets out to solve its twelfth case.

"The book shows children that there is power in cooperation. The most different type of people can work together, even if it takes a bit of arguing. The main characters are curious, strong and brave, easy to relate to and hopefully inspire young readers as well."

- Read me! Bookblog



## Reading sample

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### 3.

There was a huge throng of people walking in and out of the main doors of the exhibition center, but everyone was polite to one another. Mamma picked Mati up just in case and the first person they passed held the door open. The dog remained quiet even though they were met with a cacophony of curious barks, gruff woofs, and piercing yipping inside.

"Huh, getting in was a piece of cake!" Sadu said cheerfully when they got to the ticket booth.

"Maybe Mamma bared her teeth at everybody going past us," Mari giggled.

Mamma overheard. She turned to Mari and bared her own teeth.

"Like this—grr!"

The girls burst out laughing.

Mamma paid for everyone's five-euro ticket and wristbands that would let them enter and exit as many times as they pleased. She knew exactly where to go. "D Pavilion," Mamma said, and wound her way ahead through the crowd.

The center was filled with every breed of dog and dog owner imaginable. Whereas it was strictly forbidden to dye show dogs' fur, the rule didn't appear to apply to their handlers.

"Check them out..." Reilika whispered as she pointed to three blond women wearing fancy snow-white suits. The trio even had identical, black-rimmed glasses.

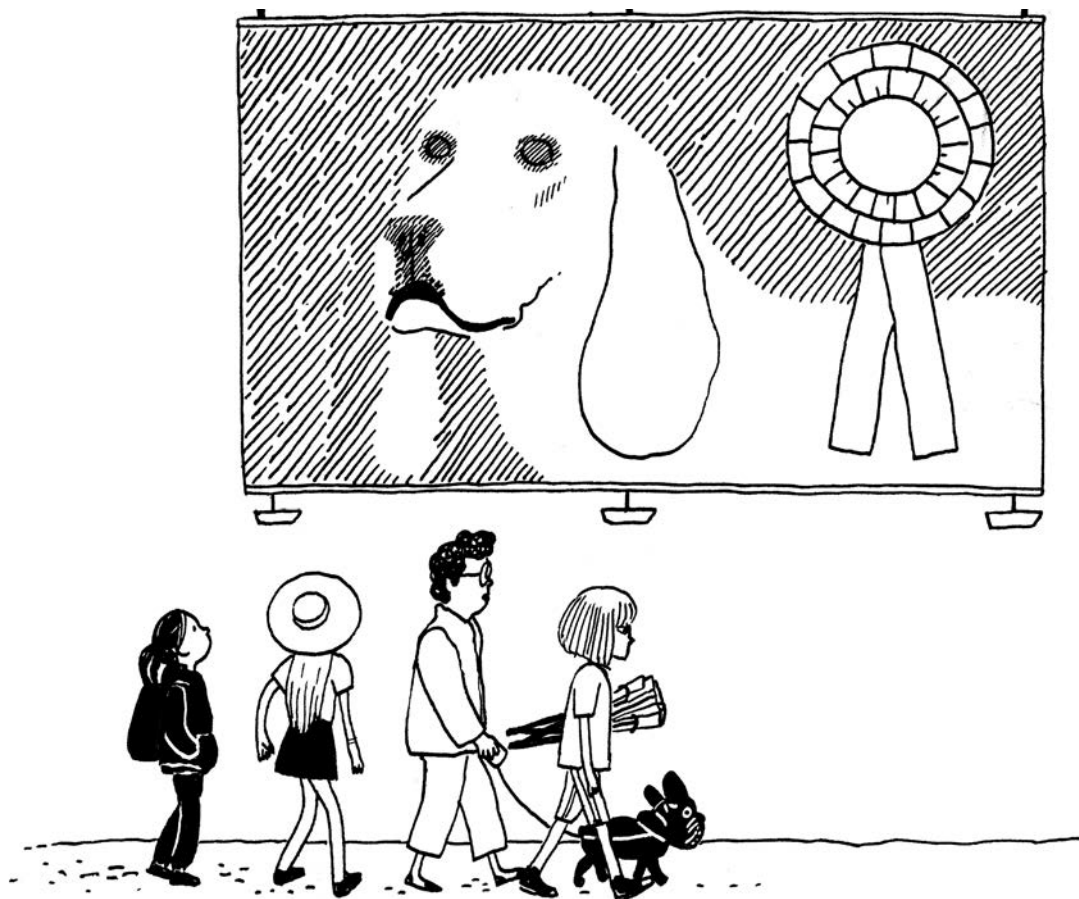
"That's a rally team if I've ever seen one!" Reilika said to Mari, impressed.

The dog show seemed like something only women attended; just a handful of men could be picked out. A couple of hunters were walking their dogs and here and there, you could see men pulling wagons and carrying crates.

Mamma spotted a redhead striding swiftly towards them.

"Elsa! I was wondering if you'd be here."

Mamma and Elsa both waved to each other energetically and apologized for being in a rush. As they parted, Mamma promised Elsa that they'd see each other at the spa soon—that's what Mamma called Elsa's Supilinn Dog Kennel on Allika Street. It was where Mati got all kinds of beauty treatments, from claw trims to fur washes.



Mati's team kept walking until they reached the D Pavilion, which was packed tight with competitors. Dog crates, wagons, and camp chairs lined every wall. Some handlers had even brought their own makeup tables on which competitors were being gussied up.

"Oh, there are so many people!" Mamma gasped. "I suppose it's no surprise. I didn't bring a crate because it would've meant showing up a couple hours early to stake down a big enough spot. But maybe that was a mistake. Mati could've taken a break in there from all this commotion."

Another woman waved to Mamma. "Oh, Pilvi's here, too!" Grandma squeaked.

Reilika suddenly scowled and muttered, "What is she doing here?"

"Who's that?" Sadu asked.

Mari gave a deep sigh.

"The Boulder."

The familiar girl called the Boulder was standing next to the woman named Pilvi, but neither Mari, Reilika, nor Sadu had any desire to chat with her, and the feeling was mutual.

Pilvi and the Boulder were standing next to a big crate covered with a sky-blue blanket embroidered with the words: "French Bulldogs – Reitel Kennel". The family's dogs were hidden away inside, calmly waiting for their turn to walk around the arena.

The mother and daughter were dressed identically: white sneakers with blue tulips drawn on them, light blue pants, and a similarly bluish jacket over a salmon pink shirt. Both had slightly broad, doll-like faces; rounded cheeks; and light blue eyes that matched their outfits. Their long hair was bound into a bun at the base of their neck, which was the most popular women's hairstyle at the show.

"Do my grandma and I look that alike, too?" Mari whispered to the other girls.

"You sure do," Reilika answered honestly. "But we and our relatives don't go around wearing the same clothes."

Mamma was having a lively conversation with Pilvi. She suddenly turned to the girls and introduced them. "You've met Mari before. And here are her friends Sadu and Reilika."

Mari smiled awkwardly at the Boulder as Mamma continued talking.

"The Reitel Kennel is breeding a new type of French Bulldog. They're trying to breed ones that don't have such a hard time breathing."

Pilvi Reitel picked up right where Mamma left off.

"Their noses. We're breeding bulldogs with longer snouts. That's why we don't win very many prizes at the shows. But our dogs are healthy."

"We sure have shared lots of laughs about it," Mamma continued. Noticing that Mari's eyes were fixed on the ground, a look of concern crossed her face and she asked, "Mari, honey, is everything okay?"

"It's kind of hard to breathe," Mari softly replied.

"The ventilation in here is terrible!" Pilvi said sympathetically, realizing that her own daughter was hiding behind her. The Boulder resisted a little when her mom gently pushed her forward.

"This is my daughter Elo. She's a little shy, but already a very talented handler. Elo has won several international championships with Sandra and Shakira."

Pilvi lifted the edge of the blanket hanging over the crate door. Two French Bulldogs stared out curiously at Mati. The woman introduced them with a note of pride in her voice: "The black and white one is Shakira. The yellowish-brown one is Sandra."

"Do you kids know each other?" Pilvi asked her daughter.

"We go to the same school," the Boulder murmured softly.

"Yeah, we see each other there pretty often," Reilika added slowly.

"And Sofia, too..." Mari remarked. It was meant as a jab at the Boulder, showing they remembered all too well whom she rolled after.

"Oh!" Pilvi exclaimed, just finding out that the girls were already acquainted. "And you know Sofia as well! She's here with her Doberman. Sofia is such a nice, good-natured young lady."

Mari and Reilika exchanged glances, not letting a single muscle move in their expressions. If a bridge could've been built between their looks, then there'd be big graffiti on the side, reading "AWFUL!" Sofia and her lackey the Boulder were anything but nice and good-natured, in their opinions.



"Are there any free spots around here, by the way?" Mamma asked Pilvi.

"If you don't have a crate, then you can slide right in next to us."

"There's a lot more room over that way. Let's go there," Mari said, and hurried away.

Reilika and Sadu followed. Mamma shrugged at Pilvi apologetically.

Judging was already underway on the D Pavilion's four arenas. Mari walked towards the opposite end, as far away from the Boulder as possible. It was incredibly hard to find any unoccupied space; there were crates and chairs everywhere. The only available room appeared to be between a couple of big green dumpsters in the furthest corner.

"Excuse me, is this spot still free?" Mari politely asked a nicely dressed woman standing nearby.

"Of course," she replied.

Mari was content to have gotten away from the Boulder. Right then, the girl had no idea that the corner they'd set themselves up in would soon become a crime scene.

4.



A woman with chestnut-brown hair was standing next to a big crate covered with a bright pink blanket. Two flags were crossed over it: one Estonian, the other Norwegian. When Mamma and Mati caught up with the children, it turned out that she knew that woman, too.

"Hi, Kertu!" Mamma squeaked like a little girl, raising both arms to wave.

"Oh, hi, Lydia!" the woman named Kertu replied with a warm smile.

"Did you come straight from Norway?" Mamma asked.

"Yes, we flew. I rented a car from the airport in Tallinn and drove down to Tartu yesterday. We're staying at my parents' place on Elva Street. It's wonderful that a show this big is being held in my old hometown. I visit Estonia so rarely these days."

"This is great! How many dogs did you bring?"

"All three!" Kertu proudly declared and lifted the corner of the blanket. Three French Bulldogs with dark brown eyes stared out of the double doors. They were very cute and as black as night, just like Mati. Gesturing with her free hand, Kertu introduced them.

"May I present Anne, Emily, and Charlotte, a.k.a. Lotte. Sisters."

Mati was fascinated by the trio and pressed his snout against the bars of the crate. Mari gripped his leash tightly. "Now, you behave!" she scolded. "You need to be nice around the girls."

"Ohh, they're soooo precioooooos!!" Sadu squeaked.

"How old are they?" Mari asked.

"They turned one year old on the summer solstice."

"Which one's which?" Reilika asked curiously.

Kertu pointed to each one by one and spoke in a soft, friendly tone.

"Lotte has the big white spot on her chest. Anne is the littlest but has the biggest ears. Emily's very calm. They each have unique personalities. Anne's eyes are a little lighter. Some judges mention that, too."

"You mean they should be darker?" Mari asked.

"Yes," Kertu replied. "Dogs are judged by their breed characteristics."

Mari squatted next to the crate and gazed at the pups. Mati appeared to like Anne best.

"So, you're Lydia's granddaughter?" Kertu asked Mari, holding out her hand.

Mari nodded and shook it. Halfway through the shake, she remembered that it was polite to look into a person's eyes.

"In Norway, we always shake hands when we say hello. I've forgotten that people don't do it often here in Estonia."

"It's polite to shake hands, anyway," Reilika said, holding out her own like she

was the prime minister.

After a full round of handshakes, Kertu and Mamma started discussing dog show details.

Puppies were shown first, followed by adult dogs. Females and males were shown separately. Mamma didn't need help from a handler because she only had one dog and what's more, she liked to work with Mati herself. Kertu said she had a professional assistant.

"I've always got someone with me to help out with the dogs," she said, looking around. "Ingrid is studying to be a veterinarian at the University of Life Sciences. Where has she run off to for so long? She left to grab some pastries."

"Mari, are you feeling better now?" Mamma asked.

"Yeah, I think there's more fresh air back here," fibbed the girl, though she hadn't actually felt it was stuffy before. She'd just wanted to get away from the Boulder.

Kertu lowered the blanket so the dogs could relax in peace. Then, her dark eyebrows rose. "Here comes Ingrid now."

Just like the other handlers, Ingrid was dressed very stylishly. She wore silver sneakers with a raspberry-red suit, and her brown eyes were highlighted with cat-eye makeup.

The kids exchanged pleasantries with Ingrid before deciding to go visit the pastry counter, too. Mamma asked them to hurry because Mati's turn in the ring was just a half-hour away. Mari promised that they wouldn't miss it.

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There was a long line at the café and only one person working behind the counter. The kids decided not to hang around and wait. Instead, they just wandered around the exhibition center, which turned out to be a twisted maze because of roped-off passageways connecting all the pavilions.

The Boulder's presence at the dog show gave the girls a lot to discuss. Mari had met Pilvi multiple times and even knew where the Reitel Kennel was, but had never known that the Boulder was her daughter.

"I shudder from head to toe whenever I think about her," Sadu confessed.

"We don't have to become friends with her here," Reilika said, shrugging.

"Or with Sofia," Mari added.

"Not with her in a thousand years!" growled Reilika, who knew the scourge named Sofia better than any of them. Sofia showed her true face at a dance camp they both attended. One time when the group of girls was hiking through the woods, the path was littered with frogs and Sofia started squishing them with her shoe. The frog killing only stopped after Reilika herself put an end to it. Ever since, Reilika and her friends had only been a thorn in the side of Sofia and her own lackeys.

"Whenever I see Sofia, I just stare right through her as if she's nothing but air," Reilika said.

"I don't even look in her direction," Sadu added.

Mari agreed with her friends, but she didn't want the Boulder and Sofia to ruin the mood any more than they already had. To change the subject, she suddenly yelled, "Just look at how many amazing dogs there are here!"

Reilika scanned the hall and only grunted in reply. The longer they stayed at the dog show, the more certain she became that she was a cat person. She kept it to herself, of course, because it certainly wouldn't be smart to start praising cats at a dog show.

"How has Mati done in competitions so far?" Sadu asked.

"Alright, I guess," Mari replied. "I think it is maybe his fifth or sixth. He's gotten all kinds of ribbons and trophies, but I haven't really looked at them closely. They're important, though, if anybody wants to have puppies with Mati."

"Ooooooh!" Sadu gushed. "Mati's puppies would be so cute."

Mari checked her phone and realized that Mati would be going into the arena at any second. They hurried back to D Pavilion, though getting there was far from easy. They walked past all kinds of dogs of all kinds of sizes going in the opposite direction, and every four-legged animal had the right of way.

It was a tight squeeze to get through. The sides of the passageways were packed

with folding tables offering everything a beloved furry friend might need: shampoos, collars, walking leashes, show leashes, harnesses, treat bags, and, of course, a kaleidoscope of treats themselves ranging from crunchy nibbles to oxtails. You could even buy wagons and big crates.

When the kids finally got back to Mati's blanket, Mamma was ready to enter the arena.

"How do I look?" she asked, turning this way and that.

Mari, Sadu, and Reilika gushed encouraging compliments in chorus.

"Very stylish!"

"Very youthful!"

"Very chic!"

It was true. Mamma's brown, low-heeled summer shoes, light-blue pants, and white shirt were a sure choice. Her tight curls glittered in the spotlights as if she were a TV star. Not even the fanny pack stuffed with dog treats could ruin the dazzling appearance. Mari pinned Mati's competition number to Mamma's shirt as her grandma exhaled deeply.

"It's all going to go great!" Mari said in cheerful reassurance and pulled out her phone.

The judge's assistant called Mati to the arena. Mari snapped a couple of quick photos before switching to video and recording.

Mamma, her head held high, strode into the arena and lifted Mati onto the table. Our canine companion was usually afraid of heights, but he refused to let it show in that moment. The gray-suited judge scratched Mati under the chin, inspected his teeth and the shape of his head with polished movements, stroked his back, and tested the strength of his back legs. The examination was quick and efficient. Then, the judge asked Mamma to stand first in line with Mati. There were three bulldogs in the ring: a yellowish-brown male, a black and white male, and our black Mati.

"Mamma's just as nimble as Mati!" Reilika remarked when the two began jogging in a circle.

"Now we know where you get it," Sadu giggled and elbowed Mari.

"Mamma really does look good," Mari said softly. As she filmed the pair, she reckoned that her grandma could even be an actress. She had a fine "presence", as her teachers at the Vanemuine Ballet Studio said about people who looked comfortable

on stage and kept the audience riveted.

The video ended up being very short, as the lap was already complete and Mamma was walking towards them. The judge announced that the yellowish-brown bulldog would go on to compete for Best-of-Breed.

"You didn't move on," Mari said disappointedly.

Even so, Mamma was very chipper. "No matter! It means we can all go home now. Let's just wait for his certificate."

More bulldog rounds followed. Mamma was handed Mati's judging sheet, which delighted everyone.

She read the report aloud: "Second place. Compact skeleton. Well-developed muscles. Well-positioned ears. Large, expressive eyes. Strong lower jaw. Sloped neck, developed nape. Broad chest. Tail too short. Standard movement for breed."

"Tail too short!" Reilika gasped. "But his little stub is so nice!"

"You're right, it is," Mamma agreed. "But a stub isn't enough; other dogs have a little antennae. There are certain characteristics by which every breed is judged. It's not the first time we've been told that his tail could be a little longer."

"Mati, we're going to start stretching out your tail," Mari joked. She took a picture of Mati's certificate and asked Mamma to pose with the French Bulldog. He appeared to enjoy being the center of attention. Mamma was also beaming happily. Mari would've never guessed that Mati could become a show dog, but Mamma had done miracles with him.

"What are we doing now? Are we leaving?" Reilika asked.

"Yes," Mamma replied. "Attending shows is very tiring for a dog. I don't want to just stick around this environment. But look, there's Kristin, the photographer. Let's go and get a professional photo. Of Mati, that is."

Mari nodded. It certainly was hard to get a decent picture or video of Mati. The pup looked like a ghost in all of Mari's photos because of his pitch-black fur. Maybe an actual photographer could get better shots with a high-tech device.

Mamma and Mati trotted towards the photographer, who was wearing a light blue denim jacket, leaving her backpack, the camp chair, and the dog's blanket behind.

Reilika asked Mari if someone might steal their things if left unattended, but the girl just shook her head.

"Oh, no. Nobody here steals anything."

Mamma was already negotiating with Kristin for a quick photo session.

"Okay, but let's make it quick," the woman sighed.

Mamma proposed they take pictures in front of the official photo wall, but Kristin turned the idea down. She said there was always a long line there, so it'd be better to take Mati's picture somewhere else, such as in front of the exhibition center's logo in the little A Pavilion passageway. That way, you could still tell where he'd been.

Mati and his team entered the passageway between the pavilions and turned right by the first arena, where they found a sign that read "Tartu Exhibition Center" in a little recess in the wall. It was very narrow for taking pictures, but the kids circled around Mati to make space for Kristin to move, and Mamma took off his leash momentarily as well. Grandma gave the dog a treat and promised that if he sat still, then he'd get some chicken soon.

A tiny ball appeared in the photographer's hand. She was clever. Crouching low to the ground, she held the ball high above her head and started making it squeak. Mati pointed his jaw upward. The photographer only took a few shots.

"I got some that we can use," she said, satisfied. "I'll send you a couple next week. I can't promise they'll be ready any earlier. It'll take me a few days to digitally process all these pictures from the show."

Mamma reassured her that she was in no rush. She was just glad to get a high-quality photo of the dog. Mati was given a piece of chicken jerky for his good behavior, as promised. As he chewed, Mamma reconnected his leash and told the kids they could all go home now. Mari reminded her that their things were still back in the D Pavilion, so they'd have to make one more trip across the exhibition center.

Everything was still safe and sound next to Kertu's crate when they arrived. Kertu asked how Mati had done. She'd been shopping for new competition collars and missed his turn in the ring.

Mamma told her that Mati came in second, adding, "Silver's no shame." It was

something she'd heard said on Finnish TV.

Kertu's pups hadn't gotten first place, either. She reckoned the judges might not have liked their long snouts because classic French Bulldogs were very flat faced.

Kertu didn't intend to leave just yet. She said she was going to look around a little longer and maybe shop a bit, as she hadn't had a chance to check out the dog toys yet. Mamma recommended that she visit the sweets counter across from the café, where one of her friends was working.

Mari looked at the blanket-covered crate and asked sheepishly, "May Mati say goodbye to Anne, Lotte, and Emily?"

"Of course he may," Kertu said, lifting the corner of the big blanket. "It's too bad I can't let them all play together here, but we can arrange something later this week. I'm in Tartu for a couple weeks more."

Kertu stared into the crate in disbelief.

"Anne's not here," she gasped.

Mari also peered into the crate. Emily and Lotte stared back, panting happily. Anne was gone.

"Anne's escaped!" Kertu whispered, patting her pockets for her phone. "Maybe Ingrid let her out...? I'll try calling."

Ingrid answered the phone, but unfortunately couldn't shed any light on what had happened to Anne.

"She's... co-co-coming... here," Kertu stammered, looking helplessly in every direction. "I was standing here the whole time... or Ingrid was. We both were, or at least one of us, anyway. I was shopping for new show collars for a while... but we never left the crate unattended."

Reilika also peeked in to make sure Anne was really gone. She couldn't remember which of the black pups was Lotte and which was Emily, but that didn't matter. There were two dogs in the crate, and no more.

Kertu poked her head in one last time before shutting the doors and beginning to interrogate her closest neighbors.

"Sorry, excuse me, but have you seen a black French Bulldog wandering around on its own? Just now, yes. It seems my little Anne has flown the coop."