

Sophie and the secret box

By R.W. Tjerksra

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When Sophie came home from school, she found a little dog sitting in front of the door. It had been sitting there for a while, because it was covered in a thin layer of snow. "Hello," Sophie said to the dog. It got up and wagged its tail. It shook the snow out of its long coat. It was an adorable little dog with a thick red-yellow coat and a curly tail. It looked like a ball of wool.

"What are you doing here?" asked Sophie. "You are not allowed inside. Go back to your master."

At that moment the neighbour came by. "Hi Sophie," she said. "That little dog has been sitting here for a long time. I tried to chase it away, but it keeps coming back."

"He's a sweet little dog," said Sophie, while the dog licked her hand. "Maybe he ran away from home?"

"I don't know," the neighbour said. "I tried to warn your dad, but he isn't home."

"No," said Sophie. "He had to go somewhere for work. He will be home very late. I have to cook for myself."

"Poor girl, has your father left you alone again? You can have dinner with us if you want," the neighbour said. But Sophie liked cooking for herself, so she politely declined the offer. In the meantime the little dog had run away a bit, and stood looking intensely at Sophie and the neighbour. When Sophie started opening the front door he barked and came running back. He stood still at a little distance from Sophie, and barked again. Then he walked a small distance away, looking over his shoulder.

"No", said Sophie, "I will not follow you. You will have to go home by yourself. If I take you inside my father will be very angry, so you will have to go back to your master." She walked inside and carefully closed the door behind her. She heard the little dog barking outside, but she didn't open the door anymore.

When Sophie got back from school the next day the little dog was there again. He looked at her with his little eyes and held his head askew, as if it wanted to say: "Come with me, I want to show you something!" Sophie tried to go inside, but the dog barked and started running in circles around her.

"What is it?" asked Sophie.

"Whoof!" said the dog. It couldn't talk very well.

"I'm not going with you! I will go inside now," said Sophie. She stroked the dog and opened the door. The dog wanted to run inside but Sophie could just stop him.

"No way," she said. "You go back to your master, you hear?" The dog sat on the pavement and stayed there until Sophie had closed the door.

"Hello-ooo! I'm Ho-ooome!" yelled Sophie.

"So am I-ii!" her father yelled back. Sophie ran to him and kissed him.

"Did you have fun at school?" her father asked her.

"O, yes," said Sophie. "We had history and geology. About America."

"Good. It's always nice to hear children learn something at school," grinned Dad.

"Have you seen that little dog at the door?" Sophie asked.

"Little dog?"

"Yes. He was also here when I came home yesterday. It looks like he wants me to follow him. He keeps on walking away a bit and then look at me and bark. It's a bit strange isn't it?"

“No I haven’t seen a little dog. But I’ve been working the whole day,” said Dad. “You’re not to let him inside, do you hear? He will start thinking this is his home.”

Sophie promised not to let the little dog inside. Dad went back to his work. He had an important assignment to finish, and Sophie was not allowed to disturb him, he told her. Sophie didn’t mind because she was to go to her friend Linda anyway. But first she had to shop for groceries. While she was writing the shopping list, someone ringed the doorbell. Sophie got up and opened the door, but there was nobody there. When she wanted to close the door again, suddenly the little dog appeared as if from nowhere, and jumped up against her. Sophie was a little startled and moved back. Then she saw the dog holding a little note in its mouth. She sat on her haunches and took the note from the dog. Something was written on it! The note was a little dirty, so she wiped it with some snow before she started reading it. Her eyes became large with amazement when she saw what was written on the outside of the letter:

FOR SOFIE

PLEASE READ THIS NOTE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE!

Sophie was very curious now. She fumbled with the note and opened it. Inside was written in a steady, old-fashioned hand:

Dear Sofie,

You don’t know me, but I have known you for a while now. I sent Kees, my little dog, to try to bring you to me. But either you don’t want to follow him, or you don’t understand him. I would like to ask you urgently to follow him to my home. I need you to do something that is very important to me. I can’t tell you what that is in this little note, but I hope you come to me. Everything will become clear then.

Highest regards,

A Desperate Man

Sophie looked at the little dog that was waiting patiently for her. “Why do I always get these things?” she thought. “He spelled my name wrong too!” But she had become very curious now. Who was this Desperate Man? And what was it she was supposed to do for him? Why couldn’t he do it himself? “You know,” she thought, “I can just go and have a look to see where this Desperate Man lives. If I stay at a distance from the dog I can run away when it gets scary.” She got up, hoisted the shopping bag over her shoulder, and said to the dog: “OK. Bring me to your master.”

Kees had already understood what Sophie intended to do, because he started wagging his tail and running back and forth. “He’s a smart dog,” Sophie thought. “He knows exactly what I want to do.” Slowly she followed him. He turned around at every lamp post to see if she was still following her. They

walked through the street Sophie passed every day on her way to school, and along the canal, until Kees stood waiting for her at a side street. When Sophie came closer Kees ran into this street. Sophie followed him. She was in a poor neighbourhood now, with small houses. Many houses had the paint peeling from the windowsills and the doors. People who lived here didn't have much money, Sophie could see that. There were some people on the street. "Hey Kees!" they said to the dog. "Wandering around again?" They patted him on his head and stroked him. Kees liked that because he stood wagging his tail. Sophie understood they must be close to the house of the elusive Desperate Man now. She was a fair bit away from home, and she hoped the Desperate Man wouldn't come storming out of the house and grab her suddenly. She looked at Kees, who had walked on a bit and was now sitting in front of a house wagging his tail. When he saw Sophie look at him he suddenly barked long and loud! Sophie panicked a bit and didn't know whether she should run away or to stay to see what happened next. While she was nervously hopping from one leg to the other, a friendly looking man came out of the house. He strokes Kees over the head and said something to him. Sophie was too far away to understand what he said. Kees stopped barking and looked at Sophie. The man looked around him and saw her standing there. He waved at her. Sophie didn't know the man at all, and she shyly raised her hand to him. She stayed where she was. If the man wanted something from her he would have to come over to her.

"Sophie!" the man yelled at her. "I have something for you. Don't walk away!" He disappeared in his house and came back a few moments later, holding a note. He also wore a coat now. He walked towards Sophie. Sophie put her hands in her coat pockets and leaned against the house that she was standing next to. She tried to look tough, but she didn't succeed very well. Deep inside she was a bit scared.

"Don't be afraid, I won't hurt you," the man said. He looked her friendly in the eye.

"Yeah right," Sophie thought. "I bet they all say that."

"Are you the Desperate Man?" she asked.

"Yes," the man said. "But my real name is Joe. And I desperately need you to do something for me."

"How do you know my name? And why do *I* have to do something for you? Why don't you do it yourself, or ask someone you know?"

"That is a long story," the man said. "Why don't you come inside. I will make you a nice cup of hot chocolate, and I will tell you everything."

"I'd rather stay outside, thank you," Sophie said.

"As you wish," the man said. He picked up some snow, rolled it into a ball and threw it far away. Kees ran after it, yelping and jumping. Sophie had to laugh. The high jumps the dog made were so funny!

The Desperate Man stared in front of him for a long time. It looked like he was lost deep in thoughts. Suddenly he said:

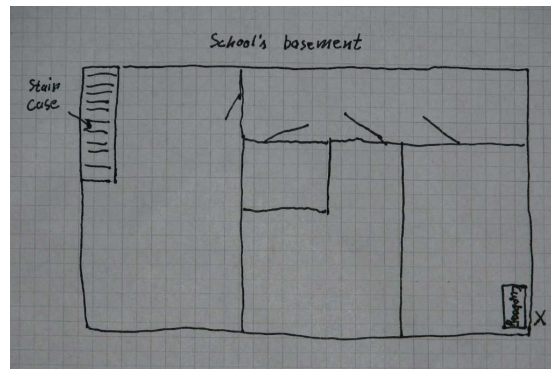
"I understand you don't want to listen to a weird old guy like me. But I really want to ask you something. When I was a little boy I had a very good friend. We played together every day, and one day we hid a small box at school. Coincidentally, the same school you go to now. I would really like you to find this box and give it to your father."

Sophie looked at the man with a puzzled look on her face. What a strange story. "Why do I have to give it to my father? What's in it?" she asked.

“You can see that yourself when you found it” the man said. He looked at pleadingly. “Will you do it, please?” he asked. “It would mean a lot to me.” He looked very Desperate now.

Sophie thought for a while. “OK, I’ll do it,” she said. “I hope it’s still there.” She took the note from the man. “Now I have to go home, or else my father will be mad at me. Bye!” She waved to the man and ran to the supermarket.

The next day was wednesday. Sophie had the afternoon off. Dad had been very mad at her the night before. She had to be home before dark in the winter, and she was far too late. And Linda had called Dad to ask where Sophie was. Now Sophie was grounded for the day. She also had to clean the bathroom. After she finished that she sat in her room and looked at the note Joe had given her. She still didn’t understand what Joe wanted. And how did he know her name? She opened the note. There was a drawing on it. It looked like a treasure map:



Joe had drawn the map himself, and Sophie had a hard time deciphering his handwriting. A staircase that led down was drawn. If you went down there, you came into a large room. In this room, opposite the stairs, was a door. Behind that was a corridor with three doors leading to rooms. The last door in the corridor led to a small room with a cupboard in one of the corners. Behind the cupboard, Joe had drawn a cross on the other side of the wall. That was strange. The box couldn’t possibly be in the wall, could it? Or had Joe drawn the cross there because he couldn’t draw it in the cupboard? He had written the word ‘cupboard’ in the cupboard, which left no more space for other things.

Sophie had never been in the basement of her school. She knew stuff like notebooks were kept there, and the Christmas tree, but there weren’t often people in the basement. Most teachers had notebooks in their classrooms because the basement was cold and clammy. Sophie was excited about exploring the basement! The only problem was: how should she go there without being seen? She wasn’t keen on telling the whole story about the Desperate Man to her teacher. Therefore she had to come up with a cunning plan. “Hmm,” she thought. “What if I ask my teacher if I can go to the bathroom?” But that was not such a good idea; she probably needed quite a lot of time. More than she

needed to go to the bathroom. She thought some more. "How about during the break in the morning?" No, there would be too many teachers walking around then. She kept thinking, and finally she came up with the perfect plan. She would go to the basement during Sinterklaas' visit!

Sophie lived in the Netherlands. Every year in late November Sinterklaas comes from Spain to the Netherlands on his steamship, bringing gifts for all the Dutch children. Most children loved the big man with his white beard and his big red cloak. He would travel through the country on his grey horse, together with his helpers, who were all called Pete. He would visit a lot of schools, and Sophies school was one of his favourite schools.

Every year on December 5, Sinterklaas would magically shower the country with gifts for all the children. Many grownups got presents as well. Sophie and all her friends at school knew that Sinterklaas didn't really exist, and that their mothers and fathers bought all the presents. But they liked the presents and the cosy winter evenings so much that they all acted like Sinterklaas was a real person and he really wrote all the little poems that came with their presents.

Sinterklaas would not be for another three days in Sophies school, and she started to become a little nervous. What if she met one of the teachers in the basement during the Sinterklaas' visit? Wouldn't it be better to tell everything to her father, instead of keeping her secret? "No," she thought, "he will be really angry when he finds out I lied to him and I talked to a strange man." She hoped everything would turn out all right. Joe had to know Dad. Why else would he want to give the little box to him?

Finally the big day came. All the children were allowed to dress up in their princess- or knights dresses, or anything else they liked to wear. Sophie always liked to be Pete. Her father had painted her face. He had also given her a nice suit, with purple balloon sleeves and red tights. She had also gotten a black wig, but it itched so much she wouldn't wear it. Therefore Dad tried to put all her hair underneath the cap she had to wear. After that she went to school, with Joe' map tucked neatly in her bag.

At half past nine all children had to come together in the sports hall. All the teachers were there too. Sophie walked to the hall together with her friend Linda. In the school corridors there were already a few Petes running around with big sacks on their backs. The sacks contained presents and candy. One of the Peteen suddenly said: "Hello Sophie." Sophie looked up, surprised, but the Pete had already run away. "Those Petes know everything," said Linda.

The gymnasium was crowded. All the small children were in the front of the hall, so they could see Sinterklaas really well. Sophie and Linda were in the highest class, and therefore they had to sit at the back. This was perfect for Sophie, because now she could walk away without being seen. "I will slip out for a while in a moment," she told Linda.

"What are you going to do?" Linda asked surprised.

"I'll explain later," said Sophie. "I am in the bathroom if they are looking for me, OK?"

Linda shrugged. "OK. O, look, there is Sinterklaas!"

And indeed, Sinterklaas was striding through the big door through which Sophie and Linda had just come in. Some Peteen walked around him and

threw candy through the entire hall. Everyone cheered and tried to grab as much candy as they could from the floor. Everyone except Sophie, because she was looking around to see if all the teachers were there. She wanted to go down as soon as possible, to be back before the party was over. She counted: "Miss Vermeer, miss Yellowfish, mister Von Neften, miss Green, mister Bennink, mister Farmer..." Yes, they were all here.

"I'm off," Sophie whispered to Linda. She opened the door and slipped through the narrow opening.

Sophie walked through the corridors as fast as she dared. She didn't dare to run because that would be too noisy. Ah, there was the door to the basement. Sophie pulled the door. It was a bit stuck, but she managed to get it open. She slipped through it and closed the door behind her. She was now at the top of a stairway leading down. It was very dark, and Sophie felt the wall until she found the light switch. She flipped it, and at the other end of the stairs a dim light began to shine. Slowly Sophie walked down the stairs to the basement. She came to a big room with a lot of wooden bookcases in it. Most of them were empty, but some of them contained books and notebooks. Near the ceiling was a small window that was so dirty Sophie could hardly see through it. And opposite the stairway was a door, just as Joe had drawn on his map. It was ajar, and Sophie could see a dark corridor behind it. She walked to the corridor, and felt the wall for another light switch. She found it and flipped it, but nothing happened. "Bummer!" Sophie thought. She hadn't brought a torch with her. Well, hopefully there would be enough light in the room where she had to find the box. She opened the door to the room with the dim light as far as possible to be able to see something. Now she could see the corridor. It was longer than she expected. On the map it looked like the doors were really close to each other, but there really was a lot of space between them. Sophie had to walk all the way to the end of the corridor. It was quite dark over there, and the corridor was really dirty. There was a thick layer of dust on the floor, and the paint peeled from the walls. Sophie walked through the corridor and felt the doors. One..., two..., three. Yes, this was the door she had to go through. It was so dark here that Sophie could hardly see anything. She waited until her eyes were adjusted to the darkness, but that didn't help much. She listened if someone was coming down the stairs, but everything was quiet in the basement.

The door to the room in which the cupboard was with the box in it was closed. Sophie pulled it, and, squeaking, it opened slowly. It looked like it hadn't been opened in years. Curiously, Sophie peered inside. She looked into a large classroom, filled with old moldy benches and stairs. Everything was covered in a thick layer of dust, and here and there she saw mushrooms growing on the wood. This room was much more moist than the rest of the basement. Sophie looked around a bit more. "O!" she thought, "now I see. The window is broken. That's why it is so light here." A large piece of glass had fallen to the floor of the classroom, revealing a hole in the window that let the rain and the light through from outside.

Sophie was in a bit of a hurry now, and looked for the cupboard in the corner. It was exactly in the same place as Joe had drawn it. It was an old heavy black wooden cupboard, with large doors in it. Sophie opened one of the doors. Old musty air streamed towards her. Sophie had to step away because it didn't smell very nice. She flapped her hands to get rid of the old air, and went

to investigate the insides of the cupboard. There were a few books and a lot of old notebooks from children that had long ago left the school there, but Sophie didn't see a little box anywhere. "Maybe Joe really meant the box to be behind the cupboard," Sophie thought. She decided to look under the cupboard first. She sat down on the floor and looked under the cupboard. It was so dark she couldn't see anything.

"I'm not going to feel with my hands under there," thought Sophie. She stood up and looked around. There was a long pole standing next to the board against the wall on the other side of the classroom. She took it and felt underneath the cupboard with it. She found nothing but dust there. Sophie began to be really nervous now. She had been away for quite a long time now. She had to get back. But she was determined to find the box now. So far, Joe hadn't let her down. She tried to feel behind the cupboard with the stick. That was not so easy. She had to push the stick flat against the wall to be able to feel behind the cupboard. She felt there was something there, but she couldn't make out if it was the little box she was looking for. She decided she had to look inside the cupboard to see if there was a way to get behind it.

Sophie opened both of the cupboard's doors wide, and looked at the back wall. It consisted of vertical wooden planks. She felt them with her fingers. "Hey," thought Sophie, "one of them seems loose or something!"

She pushed the plank.

It moved a bit.

She felt again on the edge of the plank, and found she could pull it with her fingernails. She pulled it, and suddenly it fell to the ground with a loud 'wham'! Clouds of dust flew through the classroom. Sophie was so shocked she sat down on the classroom floor and looked wide-eyed at the dustclouds around her, and the classroom door. She expected someone to come storming in any time now. She waited a bit for her heart to calm down, and sprung back to her feet. She really had to hurry now. She had been away for so long! She looked in the cupboard. There was a little niche in the wall behind the plank she had just pulled out! She could just make out the little box in the dark of the niche. "Yes!" Sophie thought, and did a little dance in her head. She found it! Carefully she picked up the box and put it on the floor. She put the plank back where it belonged, picked up the box again, and crept up the stairs as fast as she dared. At the top of the stairs she waited a bit to listen. Everything was quiet. She dimmed the light and slowly opened the door. She slipped through it and ran to the coat hooks. Here was her schoolbag, in which she pushed the little box. After that she walked back to the party. At the door she heard the children singing. "Phew, I'm not too late," Sophie thought. She opened the door and slipped inside.

"Where were you?" asked Linda. "I've been waiting forever for you!" She looked Sophie up and down. She wrinkled her nose. "What have you done? You're filthy!" Sophie looked down at her clothes. Indeed, she was covered in a layer of dust. "Come," Linda said, and she pushed Sophie out the door again and to the bathrooms. "Let's get you fixed up a bit."

Whilst Linda and Sophie were trying to clean up Sophie's clothes a bit, Sophie told Linda everything about the Kees, Joe and the little box. "Please don't tell anyone," she begged Linda. "If my father hears this he will be so mad!"

“He will find out one way or another,” Linda said. “He will never believe you if you say you happened to find that box. Nobody ever is in that basement. Your father knows that very well.”

Of course Linda was right. Sophie's father came to her school a lot. He helped with things like repairing doors and windows. The tools he needed for that were kept in a big cupboard in one of the classrooms. Sophie thought for a bit. “What can I say about my dirty clothes? Shall I pretend I fell down?”

Linda looked at Sophie. “You're still pretty dirty. You must have fallen in a really filthy place. I think it's best if you just tell your father the truth.”

Sophie looked anxiously at Linda. But she couldn't come up with a better idea. Hopefully Dad would be hard at work when Sophie came home. Then she could throw her clothes in the laundry without him noticing. She decided to try that. Linda had, in a last attempt to clean her friend, used water, and now Sophie's clothes were more or less clean, if only a bit wet.

Sophie and Linda returned to the corridor. The Sinterklaas party was over, and everyone was free from school now. There were a lot of children walking around in the corridor, with schoolbags on their backs. There were also a few Petes. One of them waved to Sophie. “He likes you,” grinned Linda. Reluctantly, Sophie waved back. The Pete came towards the girls.

“Hello Sophie and Linda,” he said. Sophie looked startled. His voice was very familiar. The Pete was Dad! She hadn't recognized him at all. O boy, what should she say to him?

“Have you been splashing water around girls?” Dad asked.

The girls nodded their heads: yes.

“Did you lose your voice? I wanted to ask you if you'd like to come and eat pancakes with me,” Dad asked. Linda smiled and looked happily at Sophie. Both girls loved to eat pancakes! Linda called her mother to ask if it was OK that she ate at Sophie's. Meanwhile Sophie hoisted her schoolbag, which was heavy from the box, on her back.

When Sophie got home she walked upstairs to change her clothes immediately. Linda helped her to get rid of all the paint on her face, and afterwards Sophie helped Dad to get all the paint off his face. The paint on Dad's face was still a bit wet and sticky. There was also a lot of paint in his hair. “O well,” he said, “I will take a shower before I go to bed this evening.” When Sophie and Dad had clean faces again they went downstairs to bake the pancakes.

During eating Dad told Sophie and Linda that he was called to school by miss Yellowfish. Someone had fallen sick, and Dad had to play Pete. He had gone to the school when Sophie was already there. He was painted by miss Yellowfish, and because the paint was wet and sticky his eyelids kept sticking together when he blinked. The girls loved the story and shrieked with laughter. “What did Sinterklaas look like?” Dad asked Sophie and Linda.

“Well,” said Sophie, “he wore a red cape and a mitre.”

“O. Good,” Dad said. “He must have looked really real.” The girls grinned.

After dinner Linda had to go home. Finally Sophie had time to take a close look at the secret box. She sat on her bed, that hung from the ceiling on four nearly invisible spider's threads. The box was made of metal. It was painted white, and was locked with a small padlock. The paint had peeled off the box here and there, and there was quite a bit of rust. But the box was still

strong. Sophie couldn't open it. She fumbled with the padlock. It was really strong. Sophie decided she needed an iron file or something, but she had to ask permission to Dad before she could use that. Dad would of course want to know what she needed it for, so Sophie was reluctant to ask him. She stared at the box with a pensive look on her face. She was so lost in thoughts that she didn't see her father opening the door slowly. He stared to the box, surprised. Slowly he went to Sophie and sat on the floor next to her.

"Where did you get that?" he asked. Sophie was scared stiff!

"Hey! Couldn't you knock the door? You frightened me to death!" she yelled.

"Sorry Sophie," said Dad. "But where did you find that box? I nearly forgot we hid it at school a long time ago!" He looked at her inquisitively. "How long do you have this already?"

Sophie had a lump in her throat. She would have to tell Dad the whole story. She swallowed. "I got it out of the basement today," she said. "Do you remember that little dog that sat in front of our door a few days ago?"

Sophie told her father everything. How she followed Kees to the poor neighbourhood, and how she met Joe there. She specifically told him she had not followed Joe into his home. "He was a bit scary," she told Dad. Dad was too surprised and curious to be very angry.

"When I was your age Joe and I were very good friends. We did everything together. We saw each other more often than Linda and you! We often slept at each other's, and on Saturdays we often went fishing in the ditch around the field where that big factory is now," he told Sophie. "The basement of the school wasn't used much even then. We often played hide-and-seek there during the afternoon break. We weren't allowed to by the teachers, but because it was so dark there they usually couldn't find us when they came looking for us there. That made the game extra exciting!

One day Joe had the idea to hide a treasure in the niche behind the cupboard. He had discovered the niche when one day he wanted to hide behind the cupboard. We pried one of the planks from behind the cupboard and sawed a bit off it to be able to get behind the cupboard more easily. That took a lot of time because the teachers weren't to find out about it of course! We were busy for days; every day we sawed a tiny bit. We couldn't use much force because of the noise. Therefore the whole sawing thing took so long. And when we finally finished preparing the niche we filled the box with our stuff and put it in there."

"Do you still know what's in it?" asked Sophie curiously.

"Joe had put in a picture of his dog. He also had a Keeshond then, and he was very fond of it. Whenever we went biking or angling the dog would go with us. And I put in a toy car or something... I don't know exactly. Anyway, we also put a little note in it that tells you who we are and what you must do when you found the box."

"And now I found it," said Sophie.

"Yes, so you get to open it!" laughed Dad.

"I need an iron file or something," said Sophie. She ran downstairs to get Dad's toolbox.

A while later Dad and Sophie had managed to open the box. The inside was neatly lined with green corduroy. It smelled a bit musty, but that was to

be expected after having spent twenty years behind the cupboard in that must basement. There was a lot of stuff in there:

- A goose feather that had been cut into a pen
- A toy car
- A note containing the address of Grandpa and Grandma
- A picture of a little dog that looked just like Kees
- A folded poster of the Cylinderheads
- A rolled-up note, neatly tied with a ribbon

“You remembered everything!” Sophie said. “You’re cool Dad! The little dog looks a lot like Kees!” Sophies father had unfolded the poster and was staring at it dreamily.

“The Cylinderheads...” he mumbled. “I used to be crazy about them. I still have all their records upstairs. I delivered thousands of newspapers just to buy one of their records.” He looked at the poster again. There were a few badly dressed men on it, with lots of hair. They all held guitars and tried hard to look very cool.

“What a bunch of dorks,” said Sophie.

“You wait until you’ve heard them, girl,” Dad said, and he jumped to his feet. “I’m going to get their records from the attic.”

“Dad, we don’t even have a record player! How do you want to play these records?” Sophie said. “I’d rather see what’s on the note! Aren’t you curious?”

Dad sighed. “You’re right dear,” he said. “Let’s have a look.” He took the ribbon off and opened the note. He cleared his throat and read:

To whomever reads this. We are Joe von Dyk and Marten Vermeer. We are both in the fifth year of this school. We hid this box here so people can find it when the school is demolished. We hope you will warn us then. We put a few things in the box we really like. The dog in the picture is Joe’s dog. His name is Max and he is always happy. And we wrote this note with the feather that’s also in the box. Marten really likes this car. It is a Ferrari. Marten wants a real Ferrari when he is grown up. And we are both huge fans of the Cylinderheads. That is a really cool band. Well, we will stop now. Could you bring this box to Marten’s parents? Because Joe will move soon. The address is Beethoven avenue 11. Kind regards from Joe and Marten.

“They still live there,” Sophie said.

“Yes,” said Dad. “But tell me, what did Joe look like? I haven’t seen him in twelve years. I am very curious what has become of him. He hasn’t even been to our wedding.”

Sophie looked at Dad. She was surprised. “Have you been friends for so long?” she asked.

Dad stared dreamily on front of him. “Yes,” he said softly. He looked at his watch. “It is too late to visit him tonight. Did he tell you what to do after I had opened the box?”

Sophie shook her head. “No, he only told me to give it to you,” she said.

“Shall we visit him tomorrow then?” Dad asked. Sophie thought that was a good idea.

The next day Sophie and Dad walked through the streets of the city. The snow was melting, and there was a lot of dirty brown slush on the streets, with puddles around it. The street where Joe lived hadn’t been gritted, and it now was very slippery and dirty. Sophie and her father slithered forth carefully until they arrived at Joe’s house. Sophie hoped he was home. To her relief, she heard Kees barking loudly when she rang the bell. A little while later Joe opened the door. He looked from Dad to Sophie, and from Sophie back to Dad. And then a big grin appeared on his face.

“Marten!” he yelled. He grabbed Dad’s hand and started pumping it violently.

“Hey Joe, long time no see,” Dad joked, but Sophie could hear in his voice that Dad was really glad to see Joe again.

“Come in guys,” Joe said, and pulled Sophie and Dad inside.

A while later Joe had made tea and coffee, and they all were gathered in Joe’s small living room. Kees had laid his head on Sophie’s lap, and he let her stroke him. Meanwhile, Joe told his story:

“Your father and I were the best of friends already in the first year of primary school. We did everything together: we made our homework together, went fishing during the weekend, and we ate at each others’. After we went to highschool we stayed good friends. We were on the Hoogland College, do you remember Marten?”

Dad nodded. “Yes,” he said. “I still remember how disappointed we were when after the first year we were assigned different classes. I was considered smarter, so I had to follow the lessons together with the nitwits, and I had to learn all these difficult languages.”

“Luckily we could still see each other during the breaks,” Joe said. “And your father helped me with my homework when I didn’t understand it. I was terrible at maths, and your Dad is very good at that.”

“In our third year in highschool suddenly this new girl appeared. She was a bit shy, and it took us weeks to find out her name. Marten and me soon were very good friends with her. We two still hung out a lot, but Maria (that was her name) came along often. We would take long rides on the bike to go picknicking, or we went to bake pancakes at one of our parent’s houses.

“The years went by. Because Marten had to learn more I finished school a year earlier than him and Maria. I wanted to start a restaurant, and I went to school for that. Of course I saw less of your father and Maria, but they had to come and visit me often to taste my new creations. We stayed good friends.”

“Joe always liked to cook,” said Dad. “He can conjure up fantastic things with the simplest ingredients.”

Sophie said nothing. She was thinking. Dad almost never talked about Maria. And he had never told her about Joe. Why was that? Sophie didn't even know Joe existed before she met him.

Joe went on: "Your father and Maria both went to the University in this city. I was really proud to have two smart friends! Maria often came to me for dinner when Marten didn't have time, because he had to study or to work. I loved that. I took me a very long time to find out that there was more going on between your father and Maria. I was extremely jealous of Marten, but what could I do? I didn't want to lose Maria and him. We still went out for dinner or other things quite often, but I more and more felt the odd man out. That was not a nice time." He stared at the wall. Sophie poured him a new cup of tea, which he drank gratefully.

Dad went on: "One day Maria and I decided to get married. I had asked her at the market, after we had eaten a herring. Of course we were very happy together, and we decided we had to tell Joe straight away. After all, he was our best friend. He lived very close, so we hauled our grocery bags over there and rang the bell."

"I can tell you now, Marten, that I felt very disappointed when I heard the news. Of course I had seen it coming, but I had the feeling I had lost two good friends in one blow. My world collapsed at that moment. I didn't know how to behave."

"You acted a bit strange indeed," said Dad. "You were a bit silent. We hadn't expected you to be overjoyed, but a bit more compassion would have been nice. We didn't understand what was wrong with you until you had suddenly disappeared. And then it was too late to try to make you change your mind."

Joe bit his lip. "I have said some things then I still regret to this day," he said. "I didn't want to stay in this city. Luckily I had just finished my study, so I could go and find a job. I started work as a cook on a cargo ship. I cooked for ten people. We were on the sea for weeks on end. It could be fun, but it was also boring sometimes. Sometimes I also had people for whom my food was never good. I let them cook for themselves in the end..."

"Now and then I heard where you were from your parents. Maria wrote postcards to you, in which she begged you to come back. She missed you so much!" Marten said softly. "And after Maria died I worked for days to find out where you were. I was so sad that you couldn't be at the funeral."

"I have never seen one letter or postcard in all those years," Joe said. "I lived in a dream. But approximately a year ago I was standing on a ship, looking at the harbour that was coming closer and closer. The weather was good, and the city looked beautiful. After the ship docked I went to my parents immediately. They were very glad to see me of course. I've lived with them for a while, before I started renting this house. My parents told me that Maria had died shortly after giving birth to Sophie. That was terrible news of course." He looked at Dad with tears in his eyes. "I'm so sorry for you," he said. "I've been to her grave. I didn't dare look you up because I was so afraid you would be mad at me for leaving you alone like this."

The three people in the room sat staring in front of them in Joe's small, dark living room. Kees sat next to Joe and licked his hand. Sophie had tears in her

eyes. Her father put his arm around her shoulders. "I wasn't angry, just very sad," he said. "Of course I also had a lot of time to think, and Maria and I talked a lot about you. Maria understood a bit how you must have felt. She often told me things about you even I didn't know. You two were very good friends, I was was happy about that, because I was scared I would lose you when Maria and I got married. And when Maria suddenly died I had no-one to cheer me up. That was a very hard time for me. A newborn daughter, a new job, and no friends around to help me. Luckily Maria's parents helped me raise Sophie those first years."

Again the three people in Joe's small living room were silent for a long time. Then Sophie asked softly: "How did you know I was Dad's daughter? And why did you let me get the box? Why didn't you just ring the bell?"

"I was too afraid they your father would still be mad at me. But I really wanted to see him again. So I had to come up with a cunning plan," Joe told her. "Kees was an eight week old pup when I got him from my parents. That was a month after I moved in with them. I suspect they were afraid I would leave them again, so they bought the dog to keep me here. I started learning him tricks, just like the dog I had before. Meanwhile I was busy searching for a good place to start a restaurant. Because you live near the city center, I came past your house almost every week. I have seen you play in the garden there. Sometimes there was another girl with you."

"Linda," said Sophie. "She is my best friend."

"One day I thought:" If I was Marten I would send my daughter to the same school that I was on. That's a typical 'Marten' thing to do. So I went to the school, and indeed, I saw you there in the schoolyard. I heard the other children call you Sophie. That's how I found out your name."

"You spelled it wrong in your note though," said Sophie. "It's with PH, not a F."

"I could not have known that of course," said Joe. "In any case, I stayed there until the lessons started and you disappeared inside. At first I wanted to ask the teacher to give you the note, but I was afraid she wouldn't want to help me. So I had to think of something else. And then I suddenly remembered the little box Marten and I hid behind the cupboard! Of course it was a gamble, because I didn't know if it was still there, but I had to try."

"Why didn't you just throw a note in the letterbox?" asked Marten.

"I didn't know what to write. "Hello, I'm Joe, shall we meet?" just seemed wrong somehow," said Joe. "I taught Kees how to give a note to Sophie, and luckily Sophie is the inquisitive girl I took her to be, so she went after him. I wanted to tell Sophie everything, but she is not allowed to talk to strange men. Therefore I gave her the map of the basement."

Dad pulled Sophie closer to him. "That's my girl," he grinned.

"It was a difficult map," said Sophie. "It wasn't at all clear that the box was behind the cupboard, and that there was a loose plank in there. And the basement was very dirty and dark."

"And on top of that, I was Pete!" grinned Marten.

"I'm sorry it was so much trouble for you," said Joe. "Frankly I didn't remember very well how we hid the box. I hope your father didn't punish you too much."

Sophie put on her angry face. "He grounded me," she said. "I was home far too late the day you gave me that map. I couldn't go to the movies with Linda."

Instead she went with Monique, and she is stupid!" She mumbled a bit more.

"Well, I guess I have to treat you two to some cinema tickets then," said Joe.

"Yes!" Sophie yelled happily. "We will go to this new Dutch movie. That one is very good, and there are a lot of handsome boys in it!"

Marten grinned at Joe. "She's growing into a big girl already," he said. There was a twinkling in his eye.

Joe looked Marten in the eye. "I acted like an idiot. How could I have been so stupid to think only about myself and not about you and Maria and Sophie? I was so afraid that you didn't want to see me again it never occurred to me that things could be different. I hope you can forgive me..."

"What do you think?" Marten yelled. "I am very happy to see you again! Sophie, over there you see the best cook of the whole city. Finally we can have a good dinner without going to the Chinese restaurant!"

Joe laughed through his tears. "I guess I'll start cooking for you two then," he said.