

# The Pet Therapist

More Curious Cases

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# Foreword

## When Animals Carry Human Stories

There is something quietly fascinating about the way animals enter human lives.

Sometimes they arrive as companions. Sometimes as comfort. Sometimes almost as mirrors.

And now and then, what first appears to be a problem with an animal slowly reveals something far more human beneath the surface.

That idea became the foundation for *The Pet Therapist - More Curious Cases*.

These stories are not traditional detective stories, though small mysteries often appear along the way. Nor are they really stories about animal behavior alone. Instead, they explore the strange emotional spaces where people, loneliness, relationships, expectations, fear, hope, and everyday life quietly intersect through animals.

At the center of the stories are Harold and Sophie — two very different personalities trying to run a small consultation practice together. Harold approaches people with patience, observation, and quiet intuition, while Sophie constantly searches for systems, methods, technology, and certainty. Between them exists both friction and loyalty, and over time their cases become as much about human life as about pets.

Many of the communities, homes, and emotional situations in these stories are inspired by real observations from ordinary life: neighborhoods

where people live closely together, families carrying invisible tensions, older people struggling with loneliness, and modern communities where the desire for harmony sometimes hides deeper anxieties underneath.

Animals often become the emotional center of such worlds because they notice things humans overlook. Or perhaps because people dare to reveal themselves more honestly around them.

The stories in this collection move between humor, quiet melancholy, warmth, and curiosity. Some are cozy. Some are uncomfortable in subtle ways. But all of them are written with affection for imperfect people trying to create meaning, belonging, and connection in their own fragile ways.

If there is a mystery running through these pages, it may ultimately be this:

Why do animals so often seem to understand something about us before we understand it ourselves?

— Henrik Kruse

# The Dog That Changed

## **Monday Morning Creatures**

The gray late-morning light lay like a thin veil across the windows of the small office. Spring had begun pressing its way in between the buildings outside, but the cold still had not fully loosened its grip, and the windowpanes still carried the muted tone of winter mornings that had not quite decided to disappear.

Inside, it was warm.

The smell of coffee filled the room, and the soft hum of the coffee machine blended with the small sounds from the building around them. The office was not large, but over time it had developed a life of its own. Papers lay in small piles here and there. A bulletin board with notes, phone numbers, and half-formed ideas hung slightly crooked on the wall. By the window stood a plant that had clearly survived more on hope than on regular watering.

The difference between the two workspaces was almost comically obvious.

On Sophie's desk, order ruled. Folders were stacked by size, chargers were neatly coiled, and her iPad lay precisely positioned beside a notebook with colored tabs sticking out between the pages.

Over by Harold, it looked more like a place someone had slowly moved into without ever fully unpacking. There were books in small stacks, an old pen without a cap, a scarf draped over the back of the chair, and a canvas bag that looked as though it contained a little bit of everything.

Harold had arrived first.

That happened often on Mondays. Not because he was especially structured, but because he had a strange belief that Mondays required a little extra kindness to get properly started.

He had put on coffee.

And on the small table between their desks there was now a paper bag filled with pastries from the bakery on the corner. Beside it, he had taken a few napkins from the drawer and placed them on the table in a slightly crooked pile, as though he had halfway tried to make things look nice and halfway given up along the way.

He was standing bent over the coffee machine with a mildly concentrated expression when the door to the hallway opened.

Sophie came in with quick steps, a gym bag over her shoulder and her phone in her hand.

She stopped for a moment and breathed in.

“Okay,” she said, looking toward the table. “This is starting to look like an actual company.”

Harold slowly turned around with the coffee pot in his hand.

“I figured,” he said calmly, “that if we’re ever going to become professionals, we should start with raspberry pastries.”

“This is luxury for a Monday morning,” Sophie said as she set down her phone and pulled out her chair.

She sat down with a small, satisfied sigh and looked across the table. It was obvious that this had gradually become a habit between them. Nothing grand or ceremonial, just a quiet routine that had slowly grown out of assignments, coffee, and strange families with strange animals.

Harold pushed the bag of pastries a little closer to her.

"The company is evolving," he said calmly. "Next year we might even be able to afford real plates."

Sophie laughed softly and picked up a raspberry pastry.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves."

For a moment they simply sat there eating and chatting quietly. Steam rose from the coffee between them, and outside a bus rolled heavily down the street below. The gray light from the window rested softly across the office.

### **Baloo and the Eagle**

Then Sophie suddenly looked up.

"Harold... do you remember back when we had just started?"

He lifted his gaze from his coffee cup.

"Hm?"

"When we tried to figure out which animal each of us was."

Harold immediately started laughing quietly to himself. He leaned back slightly in his chair and nodded slowly.

"Yeah... I remember I ended up being Baloo."

He stretched his arms slightly out to the sides like a large bear.

"Just take it easy."

Sophie laughed.

"Yeah, that was actually pretty accurate."

Harold raised his eyebrows slightly.

"Was it?"

"Yes," she said, pointing at him a little with her coffee cup. "You were actually surprisingly well suited for that role."

It almost seemed as though he became a little embarrassed by the compliment, and he quickly looked back down into his coffee cup.

But Sophie continued.

"You don't panic. Not really. Even when things are falling apart. You stay calm. I don't always do that."

She shrugged a little.

"I can get stressed. But you just keep... being there."

Harold said nothing.

"And the families actually calm down too when you talk to them," she continued. "I notice it immediately. It creates a good balance."

There was silence for a moment.

Then Sophie smiled a little crookedly.

"So do you also remember which animal I was?"

Harold thought for a long time.

Maybe a little longer than was really necessary.

Sophie was already beginning to smile suspiciously.

"You don't remember."

"Yes, I do," Harold said calmly. "You're an eagle."

Sophie looked genuinely surprised.

"You actually remember that."

"Yeah," Harold said, nodding slowly. "And it actually fits pretty well."

He thought for another moment.

"You're good at flying high above earthly things. You see the bigger picture while the rest of us are standing around staring at the ground."

Sophie began smiling again.

"You're good at staying above the clouds and keeping perspective," he continued. "I actually think that's really important. It's not something I'm especially good at myself."

Sophie laughed a little, but this time she also seemed slightly touched. She hid it by taking a sip of coffee.

"Yeah..." she said after a moment. "But I actually think I've changed."

Harold looked up.

"Oh?"

She hesitated slightly.

"I actually think it suits me better to be a mother hen now."

Harold immediately began to laugh. He leaned his head forward slightly and made a couple of soft clucking sounds.

"That image doesn't come naturally to me."

Sophie laughed.

"No, but listen." She set down her cup and began counting on her fingers. "I keep track of the finances. I handle the primary client contact. I answer the emails. I plan the assignments."

She gestured around the room.

"And actually," she said, looking over at Harold with a crooked smile, "I'm also the one who's taken over the cleaning in here."

"What?" Harold said with a theatrically offended expression.

"Yes," she said. "And then I constantly have to keep an eye on whether everyone is still here."

Harold slowly looked around the office.

"Everyone?" he said. "What do you mean?"

Sophie shrugged.

"It's like I'm constantly counting the chickens."

She looked directly at him.

"I mean... among others, you."

Harold burst out laughing.

The relaxed atmosphere lingered between them like the warmth from the coffee machine still humming softly in the corner.

Harold slowly got up with his cup in hand and walked over to the coffee pot.

"There's more coffee," he said. "And there are still raspberry pastries left too."

He poured Sophie another cup first.

She glanced toward the bag and sighed theatrically.

"Well... I suppose I can handle it, even though I just came from the gym."

"It's worse for you," she added, giving him a look.

Harold laughed quietly.

"Well, yeah," he said, patting his stomach lightly. "But you have to remember, I'm Baloo."

Sophie leaned back slightly and studied him with an examining look.

“Yeah...” she said slowly. “I guess the question is whether you’re still Baloo.”

Harold stopped mid-motion with the coffee pot in his hand.

“What do you mean?”

“You’re still calm and all that,” she said. “But I also think something else has appeared in you.”

He sat down again.

“Like what?”

Sophie smiled crookedly.

“I actually think there’s become a bit of tomcat in you.”

Harold immediately started laughing again.

“A tomcat?”

“Yes,” she said. “Like a big alley cat.”

She made a small circle in the air with her hand, as though trying to draw the image in front of her.

“One that goes its own way. One that isn’t especially concerned with what’s happening on the home front... but really comes alive out among other people.”

Harold leaned back with an amused smile.

“That almost sounds romantic.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sophie said. “The kind that charms people all over the place... but at the same time is completely dependent on someone else keeping everything together back home.”

She discreetly gestured around the office.

“You shine out there with the families. You really do.”

Harold smiled a little more quietly now.

“And knock things over at home?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Sophie laughed. “A little.”

She took another sip of coffee.

“It’s probably a good thing there’s a mother hen around to keep an eye on you.”

Harold nodded slowly, as though he were genuinely considering the theory.

Then he said dryly:

“Yeah... it’s the first time in my life I’ve been looked after by a hen.”

Sophie burst out laughing so hard that the coffee nearly splashed over the edge of her cup.

### **The Volvo**

Outside the office, the air still feels cool, even though spring has slowly begun to push back against winter. The gray light rests between the buildings, and from the street below comes the muted sound of traffic and a bus braking farther down by the corner.

Sophie locks the door behind them, still holding her coffee mug, her bag over her shoulder.

Harold is already on his way over to the Volvo with his jacket hanging over one arm.

There it is. As always.

The old Volvo looks as if it has survived more lives than most people. The paint is dull in several places, rust has begun to show around the wheel wells, and one taillight is held in place with a strip of silver tape that has, by now, become a permanent part of the car’s design. Through the window, one can make out old blankets on the back seat, stacks of papers, a couple of empty coffee cups, and the eternal layer of dog hair that no one tries to explain or remove anymore.

Sophie stops and studies the car for a moment.

“Doesn’t it look a little worse than usual?”

Harold looks over at it and nods slowly.

“Yes,” he says calmly. “That’s how I feel in the morning too. We just have to get started.”

He opens the door and sits down behind the wheel.

The key is turned.

The Volvo responds with a series of metallic coughs, a click, and a sound that reminds one of something heavy giving up on life somewhere under the hood.

Then everything goes quiet.

Sophie stands outside with her arms crossed, looking at the car with an expression that makes it clear this is far from the first time.

Harold rolls down the window.

“You know...” he says. “It just needs to be persuaded... and charmed.”

He gets out again, opens the hood, and stands bent over the engine. After a bit of fumbling, he finds a pair of pliers somewhere inside the car, lifts something up, and holds a cable in place with a movement that clearly reveals years of experience with this very specific procedure.

Sophie watches him with almost scientific interest.

“It’s actually impressive,” she says, “that something can be both mechanical work and care work at the same time.”

Harold laughs softly up at her.

“And what about the Volvo?” he asks. “Is it one of your eggs too, the kind you have to look after?”

Sophie laughs.

“Yes... but probably one that’s lying right at the edge of the nest.”

Harold sits back down again without fully letting go of the pliers.

He turns the key.

The Volvo coughs a few more times, shakes dramatically through the entire body — and finally starts with a deep, uneven rumble.

“There she is,” Harold says with satisfaction, patting the steering wheel briefly.

Sophie opens the passenger door and sits down beside him, holding her coffee between her hands.

The engine hums unevenly beneath them as the Volvo slowly pulls away from the curb.

## **Our Company Pet**

The engine rumbles unevenly under them, and the whole car vibrates slightly as Harold guides the Volvo through the narrow city streets. A little cold still seeps in from somewhere around the doors, and Sophie sits with her shoulders pulled slightly up around her ears.

She reaches toward the heater and turns the knob.

At that exact moment, the entire knob comes off in her hand.

She stares at it briefly.

Then she slowly turns her gaze toward Harold.

He gives her a small apologetic smile.

"It was a little loose yesterday too."

Sophie bursts into a short laugh and carefully places the knob on the dashboard, as if it were an organ that could be put back into place later.

She looks around the car.

At the old blankets. The papers. The dog hair. The small crack in the dashboard.

Then she says thoughtfully, "We really can't get around the fact that the Volvo is a fairly big part of our little company."

"Yes," Harold says calmly, patting the steering wheel a couple of times. "For better or worse."

He smiles a little.

"It certainly makes sure its existence is noticed."

Sophie sits quietly for a moment and looks out through the windshield.

"If we're going to stay with the animal metaphor..." she says slowly, "then maybe it's actually our pet."

Harold immediately starts laughing.

"Yes, think about it," she continues. "It requires constant attention. You have to spend time on it. It costs a surprising amount of money."

She points down toward the dashboard.

"It doesn't function without care, and you have to be patient all the time."

She shrugs a little.

"And we can't exactly just get rid of it."

That last sentence makes Harold grow a little quieter.

He nods slowly as the car continues to rattle through an intersection.

“Yes,” he says after a moment. “You have to be careful not to get rid of things just because they make a little noise.”

Sophie turns her head toward him with a small smile.

“You only say that because you identify with it.”

Harold thinks for a moment.

Then he smiles crookedly.

“Yes,” he says. “I actually do.”

He places his hand on the steering wheel again.

“It’s become part of me in a way.”

### **A Dog That Had Changed**

Sophie pulls the iPad from her bag and, almost imperceptibly, changes her tone. The relaxed morning conversation slips a little into the background, and her gaze becomes more focused as she brings up the family’s information on the screen.

The Volvo continues to shake its way through the traffic around them.

“So...” she says, scrolling a little with her finger. “It’s about a family with a dog whose behavior has changed.”

Harold keeps his eyes on the road.

“What else do they write?”

Sophie reads on.

“Well... it has started snapping at the children. And sometimes it tries to stand guard by the door and stop them from going out.”

She glances up briefly from the screen.

“It also becomes more restless when people come or go. And...” She scrolls a little farther down. “Yes... they actually write directly that it no longer feels like the same dog.”

The engine rumbles heavily beneath them.

“They’re also considering whether it might be sick,” she continues. “And... yes...”

She hesitates for a moment.

“Whether they might have to get rid of it.”

Harold does not say anything right away.

He sits quietly for a moment with his hands on the wheel while the Volvo slowly moves through an intersection.

Then he says calmly:

“You mentioned it was a herding dog?”

“Yes,” Sophie replies.

Harold nods slightly to himself.

“It doesn’t quite sound like a dog that wants to leave the family.”

Sophie looks briefly over at him.

“No?”

He thinks a little further.

“It sounds more like a dog that’s afraid someone else might.”

Sophie keeps her eyes on him a moment longer than she had meant to.

Then she turns her attention back to the screen.

Outside, the city slowly glides past as the Volvo continues unevenly through traffic.

### **The Quiet Neighborhood**

Outside, quiet residential streets glide past them. Trimmed hedges. Paved driveways. Large trampolines in the yards. A couple of bicycles lie abandoned by a carport, and farther down, a stroller stands under a small roof beside a shiny family car.

Everything seems very ordinary.

Very safe.

A classic suburban neighborhood, maybe ten or fifteen years old, where everything still looks relatively new. Not wealthy in any flashy way, but orderly and solid. A place full of families with children, packed lunches, and fixed bedtimes.

The Volvo does not fit in naturally.

But it tries.

Harold sits quietly behind the wheel, observing the area without saying much, while Sophie pulls up the address on the iPad.

"It should be the next street on the right," she says.

Harold nods a little absentmindedly and looks out over the row of houses.

"There's always something a little strange about houses that look this normal."

Sophie gives him a look.

"Yes," she says. "That's why you would never be a real estate agent."

Harold actually considers this for a moment.

"I think I'd be quite good at it, actually."

Sophie laughs softly.

"Well," Harold says after a moment. "Maybe not the selling part."

The Volvo coughs its way around the final corner and rolls to a stop in front of the house.

The engine shakes a couple of extra times before Harold turns it off.

Then he pats the dashboard a few times.

"We did it again, old girl."

"Yes," Sophie says dryly as she picks up her bag. "You said that last time too."

"We usually do."

They get out.

The cool air hits them at once, and in front of them the house lies quiet and completely ordinary among the other houses on the street.

### **The House with Drawn Curtains**

No loud music can be heard. No laughter. No shouting from a television.

Only the muted silence that often hangs over residential neighborhoods in the middle of the day.

The house in front of them is a perfectly ordinary single-family home in yellow brick from the period when that kind of house was being built everywhere. The garden is neat and well kept, but without much personal-

ity. A couple of bushes have been sharply trimmed, and the grass is almost a little too orderly. Beside the driveway, a few bicycles lean against the wall, and by the door, a pair of shoes has been tossed somewhat casually.

Harold notices the curtains.

They seem a little too drawn for a bright morning.

He has only just thought this when the door opens.

A girl stands in the doorway. She is about twelve years old and has a mass of red hair that almost lights up the gray weather. She seems open right away. Energetic. Almost a little eager.

"Hi!" she says quickly. "I'm Lisa. I'm glad you could come."

She steps slightly aside.

"I really hope this helps Doggie."

Sophie smiles warmly back.

"We hope so too."

Harold nods calmly to her.

Then Doggie appears.

The herding dog comes forward behind Lisa and stands close to her legs. It is larger than Sophie had imagined. Not threatening, but powerful and clearly alert to everything around it.

"Oh, right," Lisa says, giving it a quick pat on the side. "This is Doggie."

She looks down at the dog.

"Doggie, say hello nicely."

Doggie does not go directly over to greet them. Instead, it moves slowly around the two guests with calm, controlled steps. It observes them more than it meets them. It briefly sniffs Harold's shoes, looks up at Sophie, turns again, and ends up back beside Lisa.

Harold registers it immediately: the dog does not seem aggressive. But it is very watchful. Almost tense.

Another person comes forward from inside the house.

The mother.

The first impression of her is kind, but tired. Like a person who has been trying for a long time to hold many things together at once. She smiles, but a little more cautiously than Lisa.

“Welcome,” she says. “I’m Sherry.”

She opens the door a little wider and gestures into the house.

“Inside is my husband, Ed... and our son, Mike.”

Sophie and Harold step into the entryway and then on into the living room.

Mike is still half lying on the sofa with a headset on. He gives them a quick glance, but stays where he is a little longer, as if he would rather be somewhere else.

Beside the sofa, Ed gets up and comes over to meet them.

He shakes hands in a polite and slightly reserved way.

“Ed,” he says briefly.

He seems practical. Controlled. Not unfriendly but not relaxed either.

Sophie greets him quickly and professionally, while Harold lets his gaze move more quietly through the room.

The living room is neat. Almost a little too orderly.

And yet something cautious hangs between the family members, as if everyone is constantly watching where they step.

### **Doggie Watches the Flock**

Doggie does not stay beside Lisa for long.

Almost immediately, it runs over toward the sofa where Mike is lying. It stops briefly in front of him, turns its head toward Ed, looks quickly back at Harold and Sophie, and then moves on toward Sherry.

All of it happens without any commotion. But with intense attention. As if the dog is constantly registering:

who is here, and where they are.

Harold follows it with his eyes without saying anything.

“Come,” Sherry says, trying once again to create a little warmth in the atmosphere. “Let’s sit over here.”

She gestures toward the coffee table.

Everyone moves more or less automatically into place.

Lisa sits close to her mother. Almost right up against her. Ed chooses the chair a little farther away from the others, while Mike sinks back into the sofa again with a movement that seems equal parts tired and reluctant.

Sophie quickly takes out her iPad and places it ready on her lap.

Harold sits down calmly without a notepad, computer, or anything else. He simply leans back a little and lets his gaze move among them.

Doggie circles for another moment among the family members; over to Mike. Back toward Sherry. A brief glance toward the door. Then over to Ed.

Only then does it lie down. Right in the middle under the coffee table. Almost exactly at the center of all of them. It does not fully let go of its attention, but its body settles a little, as if only now does it feel that the flock has been gathered into place.

### **Something Is Wrong**

“We don’t really know what has happened to him.”

It is Sherry who says it.

She glances around at the others, as if hoping someone will take over or add something. But no one says anything. Lisa just sits there rubbing the edge of her shirt between her fingers, Mike sinks a little farther into the sofa, and Ed remains standing with his eyes on his phone.

Sherry continues anyway.

“Doggie has always been calm. He has always been incredibly good with the children.”

She sends a quick glance toward Lisa and Mike.

“I mean really... the most stable dog you could imagine.”

Doggie is still lying under the table. Calm.

But only until Mike shifts his leg slightly. Then the dog immediately lifts its head.

Sherry barely seems to notice it anymore.

“He has always been the kind of dog you could trust,” she continues. “Always calm.”

She sighs lightly.

“But now he’s starting to snap at us. It’s as if he’s on guard all the time.”

While she is speaking, Lisa gets up briefly to fetch her glass from the kitchen counter.

Doggie follows her instantly with its eyes. Its head lifts. Its ears tense slightly. And only when she sits down again does the dog settle a little.

“He gets very restless when someone moves,” Sherry says.

Ed looks down at his phone once more.

Then he gets up. “I’m just getting some coffee.”

He takes the phone with him and walks over toward the kitchen. While he stands by the coffee machine, he almost automatically begins reading messages on the screen.

Doggie reacts instantly. Its head lifts again. Its gaze locks onto Ed. The dog almost rises all the way, as if considering whether it should follow him.

Harold quietly registers it.

“I’ve always really loved Doggie,” Lisa says quickly, almost as if she feels the need to defend the dog. “And I still do.”

She looks down at the dog. “He’s still a good dog.”

Then she sighs a little. “But it’s really annoying that he keeps snapping at us all the time.”

She sends a quick glance toward her parents. “But I definitely don’t want to get rid of him.”

Mike also shakes his head without saying much. “No.”

Ed’s voice comes from the kitchen. “It’s just hopeless with him now.”

He is still standing by the coffee machine with the phone in his hand. “He’s impossible all the time. He’s never calm.”

Doggie is now standing fully upright and watching him.

“He reacts to the smallest things,” Ed continues. “You’d think he had some kind of diagnosis.”

He shakes his head slightly. “Or was sick.”

Sophie nods professionally and begins typing something into her iPad. "How often does he react like that?" she asks. "Has it gradually gotten worse?"

"Yes," Sherry says. "I think so."

"And how much does he snap?" Sophie asks further. "Is it only warning gestures, or has he actually bitten?"

While she continues asking questions and writing down the answers, Harold still says nothing.

He simply sits calmly with his hands folded, observing what is happening around him. Not only the dog.

The entire family.

Lisa takes the floor again, but this time it is clear that she is not trying to support what her father is saying. It is more as if she suddenly feels allowed to say out loud how much it is actually bothering her.

"It's really annoying that he has started snapping at us," she says.

She is leaning forward a little now and looking directly at Sophie and Harold.

"It's actually really annoying."

She gives a short sigh. "Because I have always been good to him."

She sends a quick glance toward Mike. "I could maybe understand it if he snapped at Mike, because he hasn't always been as good at taking care of him as I have."

Mike immediately gives her a dark look. "Oh, come on."

"It's true," Lisa says quickly. "You never want to walk him."

"Yes, I do."

"Only if you're forced."

Mike sinks a little farther down into the sofa again and mutters something dissatisfied to himself.

Lisa immediately turns back to Sophie and Harold.

"But I have always been good to him," she says again. "That's why I don't understand it."

She hesitates a little. "And it's not just the snapping."

Doggie lifts its head under the table, as if it registers its name in the atmosphere.

“When I go into my room...” Lisa continues, “and especially if the door is closed, he comes and scratches at the door.”

She frowns. “And if the door is ajar, he just walks in.”

Now her irritation clearly begins to show.

“Then he starts nudging me and pulling at my clothes, like I’m not even allowed to relax for a minute.”

She looks down at Doggie.

“It’s really annoying.”

There is silence for a moment.

“Before,” she says a little more quietly, “he would just lie on my bed. We could lie there and be cozy together.”

She shakes her head slightly. “But now it’s like he wants to control me.” She points down at the dog. “He’s deciding that I’m not allowed to be in my room.”

Doggie lies completely still under the table and looks up at her.

“You’re going to have to figure this out, Doggie,” she says with a look that is half frustrated, half affectionate. “Because it’s really annoying.”

Then she turns toward Mike again. “He does it to Mike too.”

Mike barely reacts. He just shrugs a little and still avoids everyone’s eyes. “I don’t really care,” he says quietly. “It doesn’t bother me that much.”

He looks down at his hands. “I kind of don’t care about any of it.”

Harold immediately registers the way he says it.

Not as real indifference. More like something resigned.

At the same time, he notices the difference between the two siblings. Lisa is fighting to be heard. Mike is almost trying to disappear. And while Lisa maintains eye contact with both Sophie and Harold to convince them, Mike consistently avoids meeting anyone’s gaze.

Ed comes back from the coffee machine with his cup in one hand and the phone resting on the palm of the other, as if it is still more important

than the conversation. He sets the cup down on the table a little harder than necessary and places the phone beside it.

### **A Dog with a Diagnosis**

Then he leans forward. It is clear that he wants control of the room again.

“It’s actually very simple,” he says. “If this continues, we have to get rid of him.”

He looks around at the family, one by one.

“And I’ve told you that.”

No one answers.

Lisa looks down.

Mike stares at the floor.

Sherry goes quiet.

Ed raises his voice a little more.

“I damn well don’t want a dog that goes around biting at people. It’s completely irresponsible.”

Doggie lifts his head under the table as Ed continues, his voice growing more agitated.

“There’s something wrong with that dog. I don’t know if it’s psychological or what it is, but that’s what you’re here to find out.”

He nods toward Sophie and Harold.

“Maybe he has some illness we don’t know about.”

Now he leans farther forward in his chair.

“But one thing is certain. He has some kind of diagnosis. He’s completely unstable.”

He pauses briefly before adding in a hard voice, “And if we don’t find out what it is... then we have to get rid of him.”

Sophie nods professionally without saying anything yet. Her fingers move quickly across the iPad as she takes notes. Harold also remains silent, but his attention is not only on Ed. He is observing the whole family. Especially how they react to him.

It is Sherry who breaks the silence first. She reacts quickly. Almost automatically, as if it has long been her role to calm him down when he gets like this.

"It's not quite that bad," she says carefully.

Ed turns his head toward her.

"It's true that he snaps," she continues calmly, "but it's also especially you he reacts to."

Now she looks directly at him.

"And you don't really take much care of him anymore either."

At that same moment, Doggie quietly gets up from under the table and walks over to her. Harold notices it immediately.

"You used to walk him all the time," Sherry continues. "You never do that anymore."

Ed draws back a little in his chair.

"I'm not going to be directed by a dog," he says sharply, looking around at them again. "There are enough others who would like to decide what I do."

As his voice rises, Doggie gets up once more and quietly returns to him. The dog sits close beside his leg, awake and attentive, but without seeming threatening.

Sherry sighs tiredly.

"That may need a little explanation..." she says more carefully, turning toward Harold and Sophie. "But Doggie always reacts when Ed is about to leave."

She hesitates a little.

"Just when he puts on his jacket... or moves toward the door."

Doggie lifts his head at the word "door."

"It's as if he's watching him all the time."

"Yes, just like the rest of you," Ed immediately cuts in.

The atmosphere grows heavier at once.

"And he destroys my things," he continues. "He has bitten my gloves. He has run off with my bag. Several of my chargers have been ruined."

He picks up one of the gloves from the table and clearly shows the marks in the leather.

"I'm damn tired of it."

Now Lisa breaks in again.

"Yes, but it's actually strange," she says quickly.

Everyone turns to look at her.

"He follows him everywhere."

She points a little toward her father.

"And he's not exactly the one who treats him the nicest."

Ed immediately gives her a hard look, but Lisa holds her ground.

"I actually think it's strange that he bites me... but follows him all the time."

Now there is more anger in her voice.

"I honestly don't think he deserves that, considering how he behaves."

Ed straightens up.

"What do you mean by strange?"

Now he sounds defensive. Almost accused.

Doggie remains sitting close beside his chair.

Lisa does not really answer. She just looks away. But in the same moment, she sends a quick glance toward Mike, and he returns it.

Only for a brief moment.

As if they already share a suspicion, they do not yet dare to say out loud.

Harold registers it immediately.

Sophie probably does not yet. She is still focused on the pattern in the dog's behavior and continues taking notes on the iPad, while Doggie once again lifts his head simply because Ed shifts slightly.

"When did this actually begin?"

It is Harold who asks. He says it quietly. Almost a little cautiously.

But the question is somewhat drowned out by the mood. No one really answers right away. Ed is still sitting tense and leaning forward, Lisa looks dissatisfied, and Sherry already seems tired of the direction the conflict is taking.

## **Herdin** Instinct

In the pause, Sophie chooses to step in.

She sits up a little straighter on the sofa and turns the iPad slightly toward the family, almost as if she wants to show that what she is about to say is not just her own thoughts.

“It’s important,” she says professionally, “that we try to understand the problem a little systematically.”

The atmosphere changes slightly at once.

The family listens.

Perhaps also because it feels good to have someone take control away from the argument for a moment.

Sophie continues calmly:

“We are used to working with both behavior and relationships. And often it’s about finding practical solutions that will still work when we’re not here.”

She looks around at them.

“It’s actually very common for family dynamics to develop around pets. There are often several layers in something like this.”

Ed leans back slightly again.

Sherry seems relieved that the conversation has become more matter of fact.

“And it’s important,” Sophie continues, “that we don’t just guess or let ourselves be guided by emotions.”

She sends a quick glance around the room.

“It’s obvious that all of you react differently to this.”

Lisa looks down a little.

Mike gives a slight roll of his shoulders.

“But we try to build on what is actually known about behavior,” Sophie continues. “And there really is a great deal of knowledge about it.”

She lifts the iPad slightly.

Lisa immediately follows with interest. Mike seems more skeptical, almost as if he has already decided that adults and their theories rarely help very much.

Sophie swipes onward and brings up an image.

“Doggie is not just a dog,” she says. “He is a herding dog. And herding dogs are extremely attentive to movement and flock behavior.”

She turns the iPad a little so the others can see the image.

On the screen, a herding dog stands tense in front of a flock of sheep out in a field.

“They react constantly to who is moving where. That is actually their job.”

Lisa leans forward slightly to see better.

Sophie points to the image.

“This is not about aggression in itself. A herding dog has to learn to mark boundaries without causing harm. It has to be able to press the flock in a certain direction without attacking it.”

She looks briefly down at Doggie, who is still lying by Ed’s chair.

“So, it is always about balance.”

Now even Ed listens more closely.

“A herding dog has to learn the difference between marking...” Sophie says, lifting her finger slightly, “...and actually causing harm.”

She speaks calmly and confidently now. One can sense that she enjoys having something concrete to build on.

“And based on what you’re telling us,” Sophie continues, “it seems as if Doggie has begun having trouble with that balance.”

Sherry nods slowly while Sophie swipes through her notes again.

“That can be caused by several things. Lack of stimulation. Lack of training. Or the dog may be missing a clear function.”

She turns her gaze toward Ed.

“You mentioned, among other things, that you don’t walk him the same way anymore.”

Ed does not answer.

“And that can actually matter a lot,” Sophie continues quickly. “Because herding dogs need tasks. If they don’t have them, they may begin creating their own.”

She points down toward Doggie again.

“It’s possible that Doggie has begun overcompensating in terms of guarding and controlling.”

The atmosphere in the living room has become noticeably calmer now. For the first time since Harold and Sophie entered the house, it seems as if the family is listening to the same thing instead of listening to each other.

Only Harold remains somewhat quiet.

Not because he necessarily disagrees with Sophie, but because his gaze continues to move between the family, the door, Ed’s phone, and Doggie, who once again lifts his head simply because Mike moves his legs slightly.

After Sophie’s explanation, there is silence for a moment. As if everyone is trying to feel whether her theory actually fits the dog they know.

It is Lisa who reacts first.

“But he’s never been like that before.”

It comes spontaneously from her, almost frustrated.

“I mean... he has always been calm.”

She looks down at Doggie.

“It’s only now that he has started doing all that.”

Mike reacts almost immediately.

“I’m not going to training with a dog that tries to bite me.”

He says it a little harder than he perhaps means it, but there is also something uncertain underneath. As if he does not quite know how much he dares to admit that it actually affects him.

Sherry quickly tries to gather the conversation again.

“If it can help,” she says tiredly, “then I suppose we’ll have to try something.”

She gives Sophie a small, exhausted smile. There is still something cooperative about her. As if she has long been used to trying to make things work, no matter how tired they all become along the way.

Ed does not say much.

He sits a little back in his chair with the coffee cup in his hand and the phone lying close beside him.

"I mean..." he says shortly. "How hard can it really be?"

No one answers.

"A dog should know its place."

His voice is flat. Impatient. Almost emotionally disconnected.

### **Holding the Family Together**

Then comes the hardest sentence.

"And if he doesn't understand his role..." Ed says, looking around at all of them, "...then we'll have to get rid of him."

At that same moment, Doggie reacts.

His head lifts immediately.

The dog does not get up aggressively or quickly but moves closer to Ed with an almost strange calm. He sits down right beside his legs and rests his head against Ed's knee.

But his body remains tense. Awake. Observing.

Harold notices it at once.

This does not look like a dog who is indifferent to Ed.

Quite the opposite.

The silence returns once again.

Sophie's theory is still hanging in the room, but it suddenly seems less certain in the face of the way the family is actually reacting.

Mike puts his headphones back on without saying anything more. Ed lifts his phone and almost automatically begins checking his messages.

No one comments on it.

Only Doggie remains sitting right beside him, his head resting against Ed's leg, while his eyes continue to follow every movement in the room.

It is Harold who finally breaks the silence.

He leans forward slightly in his chair and calmly rests his hands against each other.

"I actually don't think it seems entirely natural either."

Everyone looks at him.

It is really the first time he has spoken in earnest since they came in, and there is something about the way he speaks that makes the room settle a little. Not because he raises his voice or tries to dominate, but because he seems like a person who is in no hurry.

"It's quite clear," he continues, "that Doggie has changed."

He looks briefly down at the dog.

"And you've had him for a long time."

Then he lifts his gaze and looks around at the family.

"He isn't a random dog. He knows your family very well."

Doggie lifts his head briefly at the sound of his name.

"And he is clearly reacting to the fact that something has changed."

Harold pauses for a moment.

"But what exactly it is..." he says slowly, "...is hard to say yet."

Sophie looks briefly at him.

Not as disagreement.

More like a quiet alignment between them.

She is used to working toward solutions and models. Harold is trying more to keep the situation open a little longer.

"I'm not sure," he continues, "that we fully understand it yet."

There is silence.

## **Flies on the Wall**

Then Harold calmly looks around at them again before leaning a little forward in his chair.

"May I make a slightly bold suggestion?"

It is as if the entire family automatically turns their attention toward him. Even Ed puts his phone slightly aside, and Mike takes off one of his headphones.

"Do you actually have anything planned for the rest of the day?"

The question clearly surprises them, and for a brief moment they all look at each other, as if no one had quite imagined the visit could take that direction. Mike shrugs slightly, while Ed seems mostly uninterested, though he still shakes his head. It is Sherry who answers on behalf of the family.

"No... we actually set aside part of the day for this," she says. "We didn't really know how long it would take."

She turns toward the children.

"You don't have anything either, do you?"

Lisa and Mike both shake their heads.

"Okay," Harold says quietly, nodding a little to himself. "What would you say if we did something a little different?"

Now they all become more attentive. Even Doggie seems to be listening.

"If Sophie and I just stayed here for a while," he continues calmly, "sort of like flies on the wall."

Sophie raises her eyebrows almost imperceptibly. She had not expected this, but she does not interrupt him.

"You really just have to be yourselves," Harold continues. "Do the things you usually do. It will probably feel a little strange at first, but sometimes you stop noticing the things you're in the middle of every single day."

He looks around at the family with the same calm gaze.

"And maybe we'll notice something you have stopped thinking about yourselves."

Sherry nods slowly. It almost seems as if the thought gives her a kind of relief. Harold calmly points toward the corner of the living room.

"We can just sit over there. Maybe we'll move around a little now and then, but the most important thing is really that you don't try to behave differently because of us."

Sophie still looks slightly surprised, but she nods and quickly takes on the professional role again.

"Yes," she says. "That can actually give us a much more accurate picture of the behavior."

Ed still seems skeptical. "If you think it'll help," he says shortly.

"Don't be so negative again," Lisa says quickly.

There is a small sting in her voice.

"You don't have anything to hide."

The room goes quiet for a moment.

Ed looks directly at her.

Sherry becomes visibly uncomfortable.

Mike looks away.

And under the coffee table, Doggie slowly lifts his head again.

"Fine, fine," Ed says at last, leaning back slightly in his chair. "If you think it'll help."

His tone is skeptical and tired, as if he has already decided that the project is unlikely to lead to much.

Lisa reacts immediately.

"Don't be so negative," she says quickly, and there is a small, almost hidden irony under her repetition of her mother's words: "You don't have anything to hide, right?"

The room freezes for a brief moment.

Ed slowly turns his gaze toward her. Sherry becomes visibly uncomfortable, and Mike immediately looks down at the floor, as if he already regrets that the sentence was said out loud.

Under the coffee table, Doggie lifts his head again and looks from one to the other, as if the dog, too, senses the tension.

It is Sherry who breaks the silence.

"That's fine with me," she says quickly. Almost a little too quickly.

It is clear that this is a role she knows well — moving the conversation along before the conflicts become too sharp.

Mike shrugs a little, and Lisa nods quickly. Ed says nothing more, but in practice the decision has been made.

Shortly afterward, Harold and Sophie settle into the corner of the living room. Sophie finds her place with the iPad on her lap and a professional

gaze directed toward the family, while Harold sits down more casually with his hands folded and his eyes wandering quietly around the room.

Naturally, Doggie watches both of them at first. The dog registers every shift in their movements, but as the minutes pass, the family slowly begins trying to return to something that resembles normality.

It just does not seem entirely natural yet.

Sherry goes into the kitchen and puts on coffee. Ed takes out his phone again and turns on the television without really watching it. After a while, Mike gets up and walks toward his room with his hands in his pockets.

Harold follows him briefly with his eyes.

Then he leans slightly toward Sophie and says quietly:

“Now we’ll probably find out what it’s actually trying to hold together.”

Sophie looks briefly at him without answering right away, while Doggie once again lifts his head and follows Mike with his eyes all the way down the hallway.

### **An Ordinary Evening**

Gradually, the family tries to fall back into something that resembles ordinary everyday life.

Ed and Sherry move back and forth between the kitchen and the living room, talking about practical things in the slightly mechanical tone people use when they are trying to stay away from everything that is really taking up space.

“We’re out of milk,” Sherry says from the kitchen.

“I think there’s only one frozen pizza left too,” Ed replies without looking up from his phone.

A little later it is about some clothes that need to go from the washing machine into the dryer, and whether anyone remembered to buy coffee last time.

It all feels functional.

There is no real closeness in the conversation. No warmth. Only small practical messages sent back and forth like routines they both know far too well.

Harold sits quietly in the corner and notices how consistently they keep away from anything that could become personal.

Doggie is never fully relaxed either.

The dog follows the movements in the house with his eyes the entire time. He shifts now and then, changes position, lies down somewhere new where he can better keep an eye on the hallway or the door to the kitchen. It is almost as if he is constantly at work.

After a while, Lisa gets up.

"I'm going to my room for a minute."

Doggie reacts instantly.

His head lifts, and the dog is on his feet almost at the same time she is. He follows close behind her down the hallway.

Only half a minute passes.

Then her voice is heard from inside the room.

"Stop it, Doggie!"

There is the sound of pushing against the floor and paws moving quickly.

"No!"

Then a small snap.

Not violent. But clear enough.

Shortly afterward, Lisa comes out again with irritated movements, while Doggie follows right behind her.

"That's exactly what I mean!" she says, frustrated.

Sherry immediately tries to calm the situation.

"He doesn't do it to be mean," she says quickly. "We know that."

Ed sends a look toward Harold and raises his eyebrows slightly, as if to say: Now you can see it for yourself.

"That's exactly what we mean," he says loudly. "Now you're seeing it very clearly."

Mike comes out from the sofa area and walks toward the kitchen with his hands deep in his pockets.

"Mom," he says tiredly, "can you take Doggie for a bit? He keeps going after me."

Sherry finds the collar and calmly takes hold of the dog.

"Easy now... calm down..."

She speaks to him in the voice people use with something they have tried to soothe many times before.

Doggie actually settles a little.

Mike turns and walks toward his room again.

But almost immediately, the dog begins pulling at the collar. At first gently, then more firmly. Sherry tries to hold on, but Doggie twists free and runs after Mike down the hallway.

"Hey—"

Just before Mike reaches the door to his room, Doggie snaps at him and catches the fabric of his pant leg.

Mike spins around.

"See?"

He slams the door hard behind him.

The silence afterward feels heavy.

Ed looks directly over at Sophie and Harold.

"That is not normal," he says. "Just look at it."

He points briefly toward the hallway.

"And it's getting worse and worse."

Then he leans back a little again.

"It's actually good that you're sitting here," he says. "Then you can see for yourselves what it's like."

### **The Dinner Table**

Gradually, the observation has been going on long enough that the first tense attentiveness has begun to slide into fatigue. The television is running

quietly in the background without really being watched, and from the kitchen comes the sound of cabinets opening and closing.

Sherry turns toward Harold and Sophie with a tired, almost apologetic smile.

“You’ll stay and eat with us, won’t you?”

There is something a little artificially friendly about the question, as if she both wants to be polite and at the same time hopes someone else will take control for a while.

Sophie looks briefly over at Harold.

She just has time to wonder whether they are still observers now, or whether they have slowly drifted into the role of guests.

Harold nods calmly.

“Yes,” he says. “Why not?”

He sends a small glance around the family.

“It should preferably be as natural as possible.”

Then he smiles faintly.

“So why not?”

Something in Sherry relaxes a little at that answer.

“Good,” she says quietly.

She immediately gets to work in the kitchen, and Lisa quickly comes over to help her. Together they find plates, silverware, and glasses, while that particular rhythm arises that families can have around a kitchen table, even when the atmosphere is tense.

Mike appears again from his room, somewhat reluctantly, and Ed remains standing by the kitchen island with the phone in his hand, occasionally putting it down and picking it back up again.

A short while later, a large pasta dish is placed on the table.

“Sorry, this was a bit rushed,” Sherry says, drying her hands on the dish towel. “But... this is just how it turned out.”

“It looks good,” Sophie says quickly.

Harold nods warmly.

“Yes, thank you for letting us join you.”

They sit down around the table, but Harold and Sophie naturally choose seats a little toward one end, so the family can still sit more or less the way they usually do.

Doggie lies down somewhere between the kitchen and the dining table, his head resting on his paws.

And for the first time since they arrived, the dog seems almost calm.

The family begins to eat, and although no one really says it out loud, Harold and Sophie slowly drift into the role of guests more than observers. They are the ones the food is passed to first, and Sherry still holds on to a form of politeness, as if she is desperately trying to hold on to something normal.

"There's more salad over here."

"Can you pass the water?"

"Mike, eat a little more."

The conversation consists almost entirely of small practical sentences. Not unfriendly. But without real closeness. It feels more like togetherness out of obligation than people who are actually together.

Doggie still lies calmly between the kitchen and the dining table.

For the first time all day, Doggie seems almost relaxed.

The family sits gathered around the table, and even though the atmosphere is still tense beneath the surface, there is a brief moment of calm in the room. Silverware moves quietly against plates, and the conversation has been reduced to small practical remarks. Something about the salad. The water. Whether Mike should eat a little more.

## **The Call**

Then the rhythm is broken.

Ed's phone rings.

The sound seems almost harder and louder than it really is in the subdued atmosphere around the table.

Ed reacts at once. Too quickly.

The silverware is set down in one smooth movement, and almost before anyone can register it, he is already rising from his chair with the phone in his hand and his eyes fixed on the display.

At the same time, Doggie reacts.

The dog is on his feet instantly, like a released spring. His body tightens, his gaze locks onto Ed, and he follows every single movement Ed makes.

Harold watches it all without saying anything.

Ed is already moving toward the door while still looking down at the phone. On the way, he takes his jacket from the hook.

"It's work," he says briefly.

Doggie follows close behind him.

"Do you really have to take it now?" Sherry asks.

Her tone is tired. Not angry yet. Just worn down.

"Yes," Ed answers without turning around. "It's important."

Sherry slowly sets down her silverware.

"Can't you just take it in the living room?"

Ed does not answer.

"Why do you always have to go outside?"

The atmosphere around the table grows heavier at once. There is a brief moment of silence before Sherry says what she has clearly been thinking for a long time:

"Because there isn't anything the rest of us aren't allowed to hear, is there?"

Ed stiffens almost imperceptibly.

The children react immediately. Lisa and Mike quickly exchange a glance across the table, as if they are both thinking the same thing:

There it is again.

It is obvious that this is not only about a phone call.

Harold registers it immediately.

And this time Sophie begins to feel it too.

The more the tension around the table rises, the more restless Doggie becomes. The dog moves in front of the door and stands almost directly in Ed's way, as if trying to prevent him from leaving.

Doggie reacts at once and goes quickly toward him with an almost relieved energy in his body. The dog follows him closely, but even after Ed has come back into the living room, Doggie remains standing by the door for a moment, as if still watching to see whether anyone is about to leave.

The silence after the phone call becomes heavy and awkward. No one seems quite to know how to continue the meal, or whether they should even try. Silverware moves a little toward the plates again, but now without rhythm.

As usual, it is Lisa who reacts first.

She gets up quickly, takes her plate, and walks toward the kitchen to put it in the dishwasher. Mike follows almost immediately without saying anything.

It seems rehearsed.

Like something that has happened many times before.

And as soon as the children get up, Doggie reacts too.

The dog is immediately on his feet again, alert and uneasy, and follows them down toward the hallway.

Harold gets up calmly almost at the same time.

So quietly that it is barely noticed.

"I'll go with the children for a moment," he says softly.

No one objects.

It seems almost like a division of labor between him and Sophie, one they both already know without having to talk about it.

Back in the kitchen, Sophie remains seated with Sherry.

Only muted sounds can be heard from the rest of the house. A door opening farther down the hall. The television still on in the living room. A car passing outside.

Sherry slowly sinks down onto the kitchen chair and suddenly seems far more tired than she has earlier in the day.

Sophie sits down quietly across from her.

"You're probably getting a more realistic picture of our family now than I really wanted you to," Sherry says with a small, tired smile that quickly disappears again.

Sophie says nothing.

She simply listens.

"That's how it often ends," Sherry continues, looking down at the tabletop. "Sometimes the children stay seated a little longer... other times everyone just goes off in their own direction."

She sighs quietly.

"It's actually as if we're never really together anymore."

Her gaze automatically drifts toward the door Ed just went out through.

"I'm afraid he's disappearing from us."

Now there is something more fragile in her voice.

"That's the worst part of it."

Sophie remains still and lets her continue without interrupting.

"Why does he always have to go outside?" Sherry asks quietly. "Why can't he just stay in here with us?"

She shakes her head a little.

"And it almost always happens in the evening."

It is clear now that she is emotionally worn down. Not dramatically. Not crying. More like a person who has been carrying something heavy alone for a long time.

"He is just mentally gone..." she says quietly. "Or he has found someone else."

She looks away for a moment.

### **What Nobody Says Out Loud**

"And I don't even know which is worse."

Silence settles between them.

Then she furrows her brow slightly, almost as if a thought is only now falling into place inside her.

"It's actually strange," she says slowly. "Because for just as long as something has been wrong with Doggie... something has also been wrong with him."

She looks up at Sophie.

"It's like the dog senses all of it."

Her voice grows even more tired.

"And the children can feel it too."

She lowers her eyes to the table again.

"It's just that none of us says it out loud anymore."

A small pause.

"It's become this kind of taboo."

Sophie remains seated quietly. She does not try to come up with quick solutions now. She can tell that this lies somewhere different from what she first thought.

Then the door opens.

Ed comes back inside.

The atmosphere changes immediately.

Ed behaves as though nothing has happened. It feels almost a little too normal.

"Well," he says, looking around. "Are we already done eating?"

He laughs briefly.

A little artificially.

"I wasn't finished yet."

Sherry simply points quietly toward his plate without saying anything.

Ed sits down again and starts eating as though trying to restart the evening.

Then he raises his voice slightly toward the hallway.

"Lisa?"

No answer.

"Mike?"

Still nothing.

Now the irritation becomes more obvious.

“Lisa! Mike!”

A little later, the children slowly return. Not defiantly. More reluctantly. Like people who already know what the atmosphere is going to be like.

Doggie follows closely behind them.

And last of all, Harold calmly returns from the hallway.

He says nothing about what he has seen or heard out there. He simply walks back to his observation spot and sits down again with the same calm movement as before.

Sophie quietly rises from the kitchen chair and sits down beside him.

### **Miriam**

Ed sets down his silverware with a slightly harder movement than the situation really calls for and looks around at all of them.

“Why does everything always have to turn into such a bad atmosphere?” he says with a mixture of irritation and resignation. “You should be able to handle the fact that I’m doing my job.”

Now he is looking especially at the children.

“It’s not exactly like I’m out there having fun. I’m the one bringing in the money so you can afford your phones and clothes and all the other things you spend money on.”

There is something almost offended about him now. As though he himself feels unfairly attacked.

But this time Lisa cuts in immediately. It is as if the whole day has slowly given her the courage to take one more step forward.

“It’s not just about work,” she says quickly.

She looks directly at him.

“You’re never here.”

Ed opens his mouth, but she continues.

“You always say we should eat together, and then you leave yourself.”

Mike still says almost nothing, but he nods quietly beside her.

It is obvious that they share the same experience.

While they are talking, Doggie moves again.

The dog goes almost automatically toward whoever is speaking most intensely, but keeps returning to Ed. He watches everyone's reactions, as if trying to follow a conflict he cannot quite understand but is desperately trying to control.

"That's unbelievable," Ed says, shaking his head. "That you have such a hard time accepting that I'm busy and doing my job."

Then it happens.

Lisa suddenly half rises from her chair and points toward his phone on the table.

"So apparently your work is named Miriam."

The room goes completely silent.

Ed looks up. Surprised.

For a brief moment, he loses control of his expression.

"Excuse me?"

"Your phone was open earlier," Lisa says quickly now, almost too quickly. "And it started lighting up."

She keeps her eyes fixed on him.

"So, I saw the name."

Sherry stares at Ed without saying anything.

"There were a lot of messages from her," Lisa continues. "Really a lot."

Ed looks lost for a brief moment. Not long. But long enough for Harold to notice it.

Then he instinctively chooses what feels safest to him: attack.

"You absolutely should not touch my phone," he says sharply.

Now he is almost pointing back at her.

"I thought we had an agreement about that, Lisa."

His voice grows harder.

"Phones are private. That applies to everyone."

He leans forward.

"I don't go around snooping through your phone either."

There is more force in his voice now, as if he is trying to regain control.

"We need to have some privacy."

## **The Flock Falls Apart**

The argument is no longer hidden beneath politeness or small remarks.

Now it is open.

Sherry truly joins in, and it is obvious that she is saying things she has held back for a long time. Her voice does not tremble only with anger, but with the exhaustion that comes when someone has carried the same uneasiness for far too long.

"It's true," she says, looking directly at Ed. "You're never really here anymore."

The entire table falls silent.

"We actually don't know where we stand with you."

Ed opens his mouth, but she continues before he can say anything.

Now more emotion enters her voice.

"You always have an excuse to disappear."

Doggie gets up again and moves closer to the table, his gaze moving between them.

"And if this really is about work..." Sherry continues, "...shouldn't you at least have involved me?"

Ed slowly shakes his head.

Now he speaks more quietly.

Almost tired.

"I knew it would just worry you."

He glances briefly around at the children.

"Worry all of you."

Sherry leans slightly forward now.

"I don't want to be treated like a child."

The words come quickly.

Almost sharper than she herself intended.

"It's possible I would be worried," she continues. "But then I'll just have to be worried."

She keeps her eyes fixed on him.

“That shouldn’t be an excuse for keeping us out of it.”

The atmosphere is heavy now.

Almost suffocating.

Ed sinks slightly down into the chair and shakes his head without really answering at first.

Beside the table, Doggie remains completely still, his body tense and his eyes fixed on the family, as though the dog is still trying to keep track of something that has already begun to come apart.

### **What Doggie Was Trying to Do**

Ed suddenly gets up from the chair and takes a couple of steps toward Harold and Sophie.

“I honestly don’t want to sit here displaying our family like this,” he says tiredly. “Maybe we should just stop for today.”

It is obvious that he wants to get away from the situation. Not aggressively anymore. More like a person who has suddenly become too visible to himself.

Sophie is the first to react.

“I actually think,” she says with engagement, “that we’re closer to understanding it now.”

Harold nods quietly.

“I think so too,” he says calmly. “I actually think we’ve seen what we needed to see.”

He looks around at the family.

“Maybe we should just sit down one more time... and then we’ll give you our observations about all of this.”

No one protests.

Everyone seems tired now. Perhaps also a little shocked by how much has actually been said out loud in front of strangers.

Slowly, they sit down again around the table.

Heavily. A little reluctantly. But also, with a certain relief that their own argument is being interrupted by something else.

Naturally, Doggie follows them.

And for the first time in a long while, the entire family sits together without saying anything.

Harold looks around at them, almost apologetically.

“We may have gotten a little deeper into your family than any of us expected.”

He gives them a small, calm look.

“But in relation to Doggie — which was fundamentally what this was about... at least in the beginning — it has actually been very important to see.”

He leans slightly forward.

“I don’t know whether you yourselves noticed it in the middle of everything else, but Doggie has been working the entire time.”

Everyone automatically looks down at the dog.

“He’s watching all of you. Constantly.”

He gestures discreetly around.

“When someone goes into their room. When someone gets up. When someone moves toward the door. When the phone rings.”

He pauses briefly.

“Every single time someone is about to disappear from the group... he reacts.”

“Yeah, especially you,” Lisa suddenly cuts in, pointing directly at her father. “If anyone has been disappearing, it’s you.”

Sherry raises a hand in front of her mouth.

“Are you leaving us?”

The silence afterward becomes long.

Mike stares down at the table and looks uncomfortable. He very clearly wants to get away from the situation now. Lisa keeps her eyes fixed on her father, while Sherry slowly lowers her hands again.

Doggie watches all of them.

“Is there someone else?” Sherry asks quietly. “Then just say it.”

Ed closes his eyes briefly and lets out a heavy sigh.

## The Truth

When he speaks again, his voice is more tired than angry.

"The truth is..." he says slowly, "...I've been offered a big job."

No one says anything.

"A really big job."

He looks away for a moment.

"Honestly, it's something above the level I normally work at."

He takes a heavy breath.

"But it's in another city. Actually, pretty far away."

Now he looks at them.

"And I didn't know how or when I was supposed to tell you about it."

He shakes his head a little.

"I already knew you'd react."

Lisa speaks immediately.

"Then why didn't you just say so?"

Now Mike is getting angry too.

"Yeah."

Sherry looks at him with tear-filled eyes.

"If this is true," she says quietly, "then you've already worried us a lot more than you would have by simply telling the truth."

"And who is Miriam?" Lisa adds.

Ed says nothing.

It is Harold who calmly speaks again.

"You obviously have some things you need to talk about," he says. "And it's pretty clear that a lot of it came out today."

He glances briefly down at Doggie.

"But if we stay focused on Doggie... and we probably need to... then he's actually done exactly what a herding dog is supposed to do."

He smiles a little apologetically.

"I apologize for the comparison."

A small, tired smile actually passes across Lisa's face.

“He’s been trying to protect the flock.”

He gestures discreetly toward the dog.

“And when you wonder why he’s especially been following Ed... it’s probably because he’s the one the dog has been most afraid of losing.”

The room falls silent again.

Ed looks down at the dog.

“He’s always been most attached to me,” he says quietly. “And I actually think... I’ve been irritated with him because I could feel that.”

Harold nods slightly.

“Look at him now.”

Everyone turns toward Doggie.

The dog is lying completely relaxed on the floor.

For the first time all day, his body is loose.

His breathing calm.

He has actually fallen asleep.

“Now he knows,” Harold says quietly, “that the flock is together.”

He looks around at the family.

“And really, that’s the only thing he’s been trying to do this whole time.”

### **The Flock Is Together**

It has gotten darker outside by the time the Volvo slowly pulls away from the street.

The streetlights have begun turning on one by one between the nearly identical suburban houses, and the wet sidewalks reflect the yellowish light in dull little streaks. Behind them, the house lies quiet again. The curtains are still drawn a little too tightly, but at least now there are lights on in every room.

The Volvo hums unevenly through the neighborhood.

Neither of them says anything at first.

The atmosphere feels tired after the emotional intensity inside. As though both of them are still processing what they have just witnessed.

Harold drives slowly through the quiet suburban streets, his hands resting loosely on the steering wheel.

### **Mother Hens and Tomcats**

After a while, Sophie breaks the silence.

“What exactly just happened back there?”

She says it half laughing, half serious, as though she herself is still a little surprised by how intensely everything escalated.

Harold smiles faintly without taking his eyes off the road.

“Yeah...” he says calmly. “Things escalated a little.”

The understated way he says it makes Sophie laugh softly.

“A little?” she says. “Harold, that was completely textbook.”

Now the energy slowly begins returning between them while the Volvo keeps rumbling through the dark residential streets.

“It was classic herding behavior,” Sophie continues. “Pack instinct. Separation. Boundary marking.”

She gestures lightly with her hands as she speaks.

“I could practically follow it point by point while it was unfolding.”

Harold nods slightly.

“Yeah,” he says quietly.

For a moment, he grows more serious.

“I honestly thought it was hard to watch.”

Sophie glances over at him, and for a brief moment she grows quieter too. But then the smile returns.

“But...” she says, turning slightly toward him.

Now she smiles crookedly.

“I have to say, you really unfolded your inner mother hen in there.”

Harold looks genuinely surprised.

“What?”

“Yeah,” Sophie continues, laughing. “I definitely got to see a new side of you there.”

Harold shakes his head a little with a crooked smile.

“Yeah,” he says. “It’s hard work keeping everybody together.”

There is almost a new respect in the way he says it.

Sophie breaks into warm laughter.

“Welcome to my life.”

The Volvo rolls onward through the darkness while the streetlights slide past in the slightly fogged windshield.

Then Sophie suddenly points ahead through the glass.

“Pull over there.”

Harold glances briefly at her.

“Why?”

“I’m buying coffee at the café.”

She leans back with a satisfied smile.

“Mother hens have to remember to feed their tomcats too.”

Harold smiles crookedly.

He turns the wheel down the street toward the little café, and the Volvo coughs unhappily at the maneuver.

Harold immediately pats the dashboard.

“Hear that?” he says. “Even the Volvo feels like part of the flock now.”

Sophie sighs laughing and shakes her head.

The Volvo rattles onward through the evening with its uneven, warm engine sound before finally pulling in by the café beneath the soft glow of the streetlights.

# The Voices the Parrot Carried

## **Morning Conversations**

The old Volvo coughs a little as Harold turns the key in the ignition. Not violently. More as if it has been woken a little earlier than it would have liked. The engine shudders for a moment before settling into its familiar, uneven rhythm.

Harold places a hand on the dashboard and pats it a couple of times.

“Yes, yes, I know you,” he says calmly. “I know. It’s a little too cold for you today. You would rather have stayed in the garage.”

The Volvo answers with a deep rumble from somewhere down in the engine compartment.

“Oh, is that what you think?” Harold says with a small smile. “I thought you handled it very well.”

He drives slowly out through the quiet provincial town. It is still early morning. The sky is gray-white and overcast, and there is still a little moisture on the roads. A lone cyclist passes with his shoulders pulled up around his ears, and outside the bakery a man stands with a cup of coffee, smoking the day’s first cigarette.

The Volvo creaks a little as Harold turns through a bend.

“Yes, that was a little sharp,” he admits. “But we made it around.”

A moment later, the brakes squeal softly.

“Oh, so now you’re squeaking a little,” Harold says. “Yes, yes... the woman in front braked a little late too. I can see that. I should have warned you sooner.”

The gearbox protests with a small jerk as he shifts gears on the way up a hill outside town.

“I know,” Harold says, nodding. “You’ve never liked these hills.”

The engine answers with a heavy vibration through the steering wheel.

“Yes,” Harold continues, a little more quietly. “But we’re both still here.”

He smiles a little to himself.

Rain, moves, dog hair, breakdowns, engine trouble, infatuations, grocery bags, silence, and long drives through dark winter evenings. It has been there through most of it.

The engine settles down a little as they reach the wider road toward town.

Harold nods with satisfaction.

“There we go,” he says. “Now you’re in the mood again.”

## **A New Voice at the Office**

Harold parks in front of the office, and the engine slowly comes to rest. It keeps rumbling for a little while longer, as if it does not quite want to let go of the conversation, before one final small sigh comes from down in the engine compartment.

Harold smiles and lightly pats the steering wheel.

“It’s always good to start the day with you,” he says.

Inside the office, everything is almost as usual.

There are coffee cups here and there, especially around Harold’s own spot. A plate with old cookie crumbs still sits on the corner of the desk from the day before, and a stack of papers leans dangerously over the edge of a folder.

Sophie has already arrived.

And yet something is different.

She is completely absorbed in front of the computer. So absorbed that she almost does not notice Harold coming in. The first thing he notices is her smile. That small, concentrated smile, as if she is in the middle of an exciting conversation with an old friend.

She even nods a little to herself along the way.

Harold hangs up his jacket and sets down his bag.

"Well, it's good to see," he says, "that you've already found good company this early in the morning."

Sophie laughs a little without turning all the way around.

"Yes," she says. "I'm actually just chatting a bit with ChatGPT."

She shakes her head slightly and keeps smiling at the screen.

"It really is funny."

Harold stands there for a moment, watching her with a small, crooked smile she does not see.

Sophie keeps looking at the computer as she continues:

"It's actually pretty wild sometimes. Sometimes it almost feels as if it knows me better than other people do."

Harold raises his eyebrows ever so slightly and makes a brief expression, as if he has to consider that sentence one extra time. But he does not say anything directly about it. He only smiles a little crookedly.

"Yes," he says calmly. "I actually know that feeling."

Now Sophie frowns and turns a little toward him. She knows perfectly well that Harold is not exactly a natural when it comes to computers or artificial intelligence.

"You know that feeling?" she asks.

Harold nods solemnly.

"Yes," he says. "You know... the Volvo and I also have a special relationship."

He sets his coffee cup down on the table.

"We actually had quite a talk on the way in."

Sophie lifts her gaze fully now and smiles.

"You did?"

“Yes,” Harold answers calmly. “It had quite a few opinions this morning.”

Harold goes over to the coffee machine and brews the day’s first cup. The machine hums and coughs almost as much as the Volvo, he thinks, while it slowly struggles its way toward something that at least resembles coffee.

Behind him, he can once again hear Sophie chuckling to herself.

She says a few brief remarks to the screen, stops, reads, smiles again, and shakes her head lightly, as if she is in a truly entertaining conversation.

Harold takes the cup and goes over to his desk.

At that same moment, Sophie lights up.

### **The Conversation Already in Progress**

“Oh, there’s actually a new inquiry,” she says. “I think this one will interest you.”

Harold sits down slowly.

“Oh?”

“It’s about an older woman who has taken in a parrot that says some strange things.”

She turns slightly toward him.

“It’s not that she doesn’t understand it... but there’s something about it she doesn’t really like.”

Harold nods a little and takes the first sip of coffee.

She scrolls a little on the screen and reads aloud:

“It doesn’t feel as if I’ve gotten a pet. It feels more as if I’ve taken over a conversation that was already in progress.”

Sophie stops.

Harold is silent for a moment.

He sits with the coffee cup in his hand and looks off into the air, as if something about that phrasing has caught on inside him.

Sophie leans back in her chair. She still seems to be in unusually good spirits after her conversation with ChatGPT. She turns the screen slightly

toward Harold, even though he clearly cannot see anything from where he is sitting.

"I've actually already gotten a little ahead on this case," she says with satisfaction. "It was actually one of the things I was talking with ChatGPT about earlier."

Harold raises his eyebrows a little.

"You know," Sophie continues, "you start in one place... and then some new input comes along, and suddenly you're somewhere else entirely."

She clicks around a little.

"Wait... what was it it said..."

She scrolls back.

"Right. It mentioned that it could be a mild form of paranoia. The woman could also be isolated... or maybe simply dehydrated."

She breaks into a small laugh.

"It's amazing how many older people ChatGPT thinks are dehydrated. You think they're suffering from all kinds of things, and then they just need a glass of water."

Harold smiles a little down into his coffee cup.

Sophie continues:

"It also writes that people who live alone can sometimes begin to attribute far more human qualities to animals than they actually have."

She stops for a moment and seems almost thoughtful.

"That makes pretty good sense, doesn't it?"

Harold listens quietly.

Then he asks:

"What does it suggest we do about it?"

There is a small pause.

For the first time, Sophie seems a little uncertain.

"Well..." she says. "We actually didn't get to that."

She laughs a little.

"Then we started talking about something else."

Then she brightens again.

“But I can ask it, if you want. I’ll just start a new thread.”

Harold lifts his coffee cup and smiles a little crookedly.

“No,” he says calmly. “You know I prefer to investigate things in my own way.”

Sophie nods quickly at Harold’s answer.

Maybe a little too quickly, she notices herself, because she almost immediately corrects herself and says:

“No, that’s perfectly fine.”

She leans slightly forward toward the screen again.

“You go on out there. It did sound as if the woman would like help fairly quickly.”

There is a small pause.

Then she continues, almost a little too casually:

“And I could actually use a little more time here at the office with ChatGPT today.”

Harold does not react strongly to that. He only looks at her briefly as he takes his jacket down from the hook.

Not because he thinks something is wrong.

But the way she says it makes it sound almost as if she is talking about a real person.

As if someone is sitting there waiting for her.

He takes out his notebook and slips it into his pocket along with the keys.

Sophie is already halfway back in the conversation again.

She types something quickly on the keyboard.

A moment later, she gives a small laugh.

“No, okay,” she says to the screen. “I actually hadn’t thought of that.”

Harold stands by the door for a moment, looking at her.

Then he lifts his bag over his shoulder.

“Well,” he says calmly. “Then I suppose I’ll go see what that parrot has to say.”

Sophie laughs a little without really looking up.

“Yes,” she says absently. “Good luck with that.”

But her attention is already back on the screen.

When Harold closes the door behind him, he can still hear her muted voice from inside the office, as if the conversation continues without pause.

When Harold comes out of the office, the sky is still gray, but the town has begun to wake a little more. There are more sounds now. A truck is backing up somewhere farther down the street with small electronic beeps, and a couple of cyclists rush past on their way into the center of town, bags over their shoulders and coffee in hand. The ordinary morning is slowly beginning to take hold.

Harold gets into the Volvo.

The engine coughs a little at startup again, but after a few shudders it starts faithfully.

Harold remains seated for a moment with his hands on the steering wheel.

Then he suddenly says:

“You really ought to have a name.”

The engine rumbles low.

“If I’m going to talk to you this much, you deserve a name.”

He thinks for a moment.

The Volvo gives another deep vibration.

Harold nods slowly.

“Yes, of course,” he says. “Volter.”

He tastes the name a little.

“Volter. V-O-L-T-E-R. That fits perfectly.”

The engine coughs again.

### **Volter’s Opinion**

“Yes, yes,” Harold says. “I know you’re not quite at your best today.”

A small cough comes from the engine.

“No,” Harold continues, putting the car into gear. “I actually think we feel much the same way on Mondays.”

He backs calmly out of the parking space and drives down the industrial road.

“Well, Volter,” he says after a little while. “What do you think about a parrot that says strange things?”

Volter answers with silence. Then there is a small metallic vibration somewhere in the dashboard.

Harold nods solemnly.

“Yes... isolation can certainly not be ruled out.”

He drums his fingers lightly on the steering wheel.

“But I don’t really believe that dehydration theory.”

The engine gives a small cough.

“Yes,” Harold says. “I actually think that sounds a little far-fetched too.”

He turns through an intersection and continues:

“Do you have any suggestions, then, for what we should do about it?”

The Volvo says absolutely nothing. Only the low sound of tires against asphalt and a faint crackle from the heater fill the car.

Harold looks ahead. Then in the rearview mirror. A car behind him seems impatient and begins to pull out.

“Yes, yes, just take it easy, Volter,” he says. “We’ll let her pass. She’s clearly in more of a hurry than we are.”

The car passes, and Harold follows it with his eyes for a moment.

“Yes,” he then says quietly. “But we’ll have to figure it out.”

After a few minutes, the Volvo turns into a pleasant neighborhood with older apartment buildings. Tall trees line the street, and the sidewalks are wide and old. The kind of neighborhood where you still expect people to say good morning to one another in the stairwell.

Surprisingly, Harold quickly finds a parking space. He immediately looks around for any no-parking signs. He has had a few bad experiences with parking attendants in the past and still feels a certain distrust toward people who walk around with notepads and reflective vests. But he cannot see anything.

He pats the steering wheel.

“Good work, Volter,” he says. “We’ll take it from here.”

He gets out and looks up at the building. It is slightly old-fashioned, four or five stories high, perhaps six. The bricks are darker at the bottom from age and rain, and the entrance has the sort of brass nameplates one only finds in buildings from a time when people expected things to last for fifty years.

Inside the entrance, old worn tiles lie in a black-and-white pattern. Harold takes the elevator up. It gives a small jerk as the doors close, and he automatically reads the name of the company that last serviced it. He thinks he recognizes the name. It seems as if the same company repairs all the elevators in this part of town, and he only hopes that the man who was here last was still in full possession of his faculties.

The elevator trembles a little on the way up.

“Yes, yes,” Harold murmurs. “We’re almost there.”

### **Anna Mikkelsen**

At last, it stops on the fifth floor with a small sigh. Harold steps out, follows the hallway, and stops in front of the door with the nameplate: Anna Mikkelsen.

Harold thinks, for a moment, that he hears a man’s voice behind the door. He almost stops in mid-motion and immediately thinks that Sophie had not mentioned anything about a couple living in the apartment. But all right, he thinks, it might just as well be the woman who has the parrot. He rings the bell, and a few seconds later the door opens.

Anna Mikkelsen stands before him. She is not very tall, but there is something neat and composed about her. Not elegant in a fancy way, but well-groomed and careful. Her movements seem a little cautious, as if her body no longer quite cooperates, but her eyes are warm and kind. Harold immediately gets the feeling that there is something polite and almost academic about her.

“Good morning,” she says pleasantly. “You must be Harold.”

“Yes,” he replies with a smile. “That’s me.”

She steps slightly aside and invites him in with a small gesture of her hand. While Harold takes off his shoes and hangs up his jacket, he has time to form his first impressions. Retired teacher, he thinks. Maybe a librarian. Maybe a math teacher. Not a German teacher, he thinks, with a small hidden smile. Then she would probably have had her hair in a bun.

The apartment is very orderly. Not sterile, but systematic. The books stand perfectly straight on the shelves, and on the coffee table lie a couple of sudoku booklets with a pencil neatly placed beside them. There is a smell of coffee, and the dining table has already been set with plates, napkins, cookies, and sugar in a small bowl.

Harold almost lights up.

“Well,” he says warmly, “this is a real luxury welcome.”

Anna smiles, a little relieved.

“I’m glad you think so.”

She hesitates for a moment.

“I assume I may call you by your first name?”

“Yes, yes,” Harold says quickly. “My name is Harold, after all.”

“Yes,” she says. “I believe it was a woman I spoke to at the company.”

“Yes, that’s right. Sophie. But she has an important conversation at the office today. Our division of work is often such that I’m the one who goes out.”

Anna nods understandingly and then points toward the cage. It stands very centrally in the living room, not tucked away in a corner, but almost positioned like an actual piece of furniture. Harold has the strange thought that it takes up so much space in the room that it could almost be another person in the apartment.

### **The Bird in the Living Room**

Inside sits the parrot. *Chicken*.

It sits perfectly still on its perch and watches him with a gaze that seems surprisingly alert.

“Please, sit down,” Anna says kindly. “I’ll pour the coffee.”

Harold sits down at the table and looks at the coffee pot with satisfaction. For the occasion, he takes two lumps of sugar, which he normally only does on especially serious or especially cozy occasions. He is not yet entirely sure which category this visit belongs to.

Anna sits down across from him and almost immediately tells him that it was very deliberate that she wanted an African gray parrot.

"They're the best talkers of all," she says, brightening a little. "And in fact, they're incredibly intelligent too. Some of them can count... and some can almost do math."

Harold nods slowly and takes a sip of coffee.

Math teacher, he now thinks, almost convinced.

While they drink their coffee, he mostly sits and listens. Anna seems like a person who has not had many people to tell things to lately. Still, it surprises him a little when an outburst suddenly comes from the cage:

"The coffee's getting cold!"

Harold turns around with a small start. Now he knows exactly where the man's voice behind the door came from.

Anna smiles a little.

"Yes," she says. "It has brought life into the house."

She takes a small sip of coffee and continues a little more quietly:

"I simply thought it might be nice to hear someone talking in the apartment. Otherwise, one just walks around talking to oneself."

She looks briefly down into her cup.

"Not just shrieking and noise... but something that could almost feel human."

She smiles a little crookedly.

"And I must say, Chicken speaks incredibly well."

Almost at the same moment, the voice comes from the cage:

"We'll take it once more from the top! Right from the beginning!"

Harold stops in mid-motion with the coffee cup. Anna merely nods calmly and shakes her head a little, as if this is something that happens all the time.

Now it is almost as if the parrot fully wakes up.

Anna gets up to start the coffee machine again, and at that very moment Chicken says, clearly and authoritatively:

“Recording. Ready.”

Harold and Anna exchange glances.

“No, no, no... that won’t do. Again.”

Harold can almost no longer keep a straight face and laughs a little.

“It really is remarkable,” he says.

“Yes,” Anna answers with a slightly tired smile. “But I can tell you, it goes on like this.”

She pours more coffee.

“If the telephone rings, it says: ‘No interruptions during the recording.’”

She shakes her head a little.

“And it can go on and on.”

“Well,” Harold says, laughing, “it’s amazing that it even knows the timing. It’s clearly not just random things it says.”

“No,” Anna says quietly. “That’s exactly it.”

She looks over toward the cage.

“It reacts to very specific things. And sometimes you really do wonder how well it fits.”

Harold nods again and looks at the parrot for a long time. He seems genuinely impressed now. Not just entertained, but as if he is trying to understand what the bird has actually learned.

### **Voices from Another Life**

Slowly the mood changes. Not suddenly, but like the light outside gradually darkening late in the afternoon. Anna becomes quieter. She looks down into her cup and stirs the spoon against the plate a little before speaking again.

“I thought,” she says slowly, “that I was getting a parrot that could make things a little cozy.”

She pauses for a moment.

“But it is almost as if I have brought another person into the house.”

Harold does not say anything right away. He simply sits quietly and looks at her.

“It doesn’t really feel like a bird just repeating words,” she continues. “It feels more like... a voice from another life.”

She looks up at him now, almost as if she wants to make sure he believes her.

Harold nods slowly.

Anna turns her gaze back toward the cage.

“And I can’t help wondering who the previous owner was. What kind of person he was. What the bird heard. What they had together.”

She sighs softly.

“In the evenings it actually gets worse. Sometimes I almost get the feeling that it misses him.”

Harold lifts his eyes toward the parrot.

“I think I can hear it in the voice,” Anna continues. “It also starts saying some other things.”

She looks down again.

“It says: ‘Good night, Chicken.’ ‘Sleep well, Chicken.’ ‘See you tomorrow, Chicken.’”

The living room becomes silent.

Harold slowly gets up and walks toward the cage. Chicken turns its head and reacts at once:

“No, no, we are not finished yet.”

A small pause.

“Again.”

Harold cannot help smiling a little, even though the mood is not really suited to it.

Anna gets up too and stands beside him.

“Yes,” she says with a small smile. “It is funny. I can’t deny that.”

The smile slowly disappears again.

“But for me, it is actually a little sad too. And maybe that is why I asked you to come.”

She hesitates a little.

“I don’t know whether there is something wrong with me.”

She looks again toward the parrot.

“I have company,” she says quietly.

Then the words come even lower:

“But sometimes I actually feel as if I am the one standing outside.”

The sentence lands completely still in the room.

Harold slowly turns toward her and lets the words settle.

“You feel,” he says thoughtfully, “as if you are the one standing outside?”

Anna nods.

“Outside it...” she says, nodding toward the parrot.

“...and its previous owner.”

Harold sits down at the table again, while Anna remains standing for a moment with the coffee pot in her hand. She pours more coffee for them both and at the same time pushes the plate of cookies a little closer to him.

“Please, have more cookies,” she says kindly.

Harold immediately takes another one.

“They’re good,” he says sincerely.

Anna smiles, a little pleased.

“Yes, it’s a recipe I’ve used for many years.”

She sits down again, and for a moment there is silence between them. Harold takes a sip of coffee before asking:

“How long have you actually had it?”

Anna thinks for a moment before answering.

“I’ve actually only lived here for four months,” she says slowly. “So, I’ve only had the parrot for two.”

She glances briefly down at her leg.

“I developed a bad leg, and stairs and getting around became harder and harder for me. In the end, I had to move.”

She lets her eyes drift around the apartment a little, almost as if she still does not quite feel at home there.

"This place is practical," she continues. "There's a good view, it's accessible, and in many ways it's easier to be here than in the house."

She pauses for a moment.

"But it is also quieter."

Another small pause.

"More closed off."

Harold nods quietly as she continues:

"That was actually why I bought Chicken. I missed life."

She sends a small, crooked smile toward the cage.

"When you don't get out much anymore, you don't hear many voices either."

She looks at the parrot for a moment.

"But maybe those weren't quite the voices I missed."

"It must be difficult," Harold says thoughtfully, "to move from a place you are used to."

Anna nods slowly.

"Yes," she answers quietly. "It has been very difficult."

There is another little silence between them. Not awkward, more like a pause in which they are both sitting with their own thoughts.

### **The Address**

Then Harold asks:

"Where did you actually get the parrot?"

Anna straightens the napkin in front of her a little before answering.

"My daughter actually helped me. And she was really the one who suggested that I should get a parrot."

She smiles a little resignedly.

"I've had both a dog and a cat before, but they're not allowed in this building. And it probably wouldn't work anymore anyway."

She thinks for a moment.

"I don't actually have the phone number anymore... but I do have the address."

She slowly gets up and walks over to a small bulletin board by the kitchen. She takes down a note and comes back with it to Harold.

He accepts it and reads the address.

Then he reads it once more.

A little more slowly this time, as if he is trying to get more out of it than what is actually written on the paper.

"It could be interesting," he says thoughtfully, "to know a little more about its history."

He looks up at her.

"Who knows... perhaps it could help you a little."

"Perhaps," Anna says quietly, and she seems somewhat relieved that he is at least taking her feeling seriously.

Harold folds the note and puts it in his pocket.

"If it's all right with you," he says, "I think I'll look into it a little more. Of course, I'll think about it too, but perhaps it might help to contact the previous owner."

He gets up and puts on his jacket.

"I promise you, it won't take long."

Anna follows him to the door. She seems lighter now. Still sad, but not quite as alone as before.

"It has actually been very pleasant," she says. "I don't see very many people anymore."

She smiles a little.

"So, this has been a lovely visit."

Harold nods warmly.

"I hope we'll speak again."

"We will," he answers calmly.

Just as he turns to walk toward the elevator, a voice comes from inside the living room:

"We'll continue tomorrow."

There is a small pause.

“Remember... we are not finished yet.”

Harold cannot help smiling a little to himself as the elevator doors slowly close in front of him.

A little later, when he gets into the Volvo, he does so a bit heavily, as if the visit is still sitting in his body. He closes the door behind him, and for a moment everything around him is completely quiet before he turns the key.

Volter immediately coughs a little unhappily at startup.

“Well, Volter,” Harold says as the car slowly begins to roll away from the curb. “What do you think?”

There is silence for a moment. Only the uneven rumble of the engine and the sound of the tires against the asphalt fill the car.

“Well,” Harold says then, half to himself, “it’s strange, really, what voices can carry with them.”

He stops briefly for a cyclist, then continues down the street.

“What world they come from... and whether we actually belong in it.”

Volter sends a deep vibration through the steering wheel.

“Maybe it’s familiar,” Harold continues after a pause. “Maybe it’s foreign.”

He thinks of the parrot’s voice, of the small instructions, and of:

“We’ll take it once more from the top.”

He also thinks of Anna’s expression when she said she felt like an outsider in her own home.

His thoughts are interrupted by a small cough from the engine, and Harold smiles faintly.

“Yes,” he says. “It might actually be interesting to find out who it has really been living with.”

The engine growls a little deeper this time.

Harold nods solemnly.

“Yes,” he says. “That’s what I think too.”

He continues quietly through town without saying anything more. Even so, he can clearly feel the moods the visit has left in him. It is almost as if something is still sitting in the car with him: a loneliness, a foreign voice, and the feeling of stepping into a life that had already begun long before he arrived.

When Harold steps into the office a little later, he moves more slowly than he did earlier in the day. Not heavily in a sad way, but like a person still carrying the atmosphere of another place. Anna's words are still with him.

The office is almost exactly as it was when he left. Sophie is still sitting in front of the computer with the same small, concentrated smile. She is leaning toward the screen as if she is in the middle of an exciting conversation, and she almost does not notice him coming in.

"Well," Harold says, a little comically, as he hangs up his jacket, "so you're still talking to your best friend."

Sophie smiles without looking away from the screen.

"Yes," she says. "It's still amazing."

Harold remains standing for a moment, almost waiting for her to ask about the visit, but she does not. So, he says it himself:

"It was actually an interesting visit."

"Oh," Sophie answers absently, without looking up. She is clearly somewhere else entirely.

Harold smiles mildly.

"I mean... if you want to hear about it."

Now Sophie suddenly notices herself and looks up, a little startled.

"Oh yes. Goodness, yes, sorry."

She straightens up a little in her chair.

"Of course I want to hear about it."

Harold takes the note with the address from his pocket.

"Actually, I need you to maybe help me with something," he says, handing her the note. "The woman got the parrot from this address, but she

doesn't really know anything about the place. It was her daughter who helped her."

He hesitates a little.

"I'd actually like to know who lives there."

Sophie brightens immediately.

"That won't take long."

She takes the note and turns back toward the screen. Then she half turns toward Harold again.

"I'll sort of pretend it's you asking. Is that okay?"

Harold looks a little confused. Not critical. He simply does not quite understand why that is necessary. But he nods anyway.

"Yes, yes."

### **Dear Harold**

Sophie begins typing, and a moment later she reads aloud:

"Dear Harold. Thank you for using me to investigate this interesting little task."

Harold slowly raises his eyebrows, mostly at the wording.

Sophie continues:

"The address you wish to know more about belongs to Borge Sorensen and William Sorensen. They are most likely father and son."

She clicks a little farther down.

"I can also tell you, Harold, something that will probably interest you."

She smiles almost expectantly.

"Borge Sorensen has worked as a voice narrator specializing in crime novels and commercials. In addition, he has also recorded voices for cartoons."

She pauses briefly and reads on:

"Perhaps this may help you in the case you are currently working on involving a parrot."

Harold stares at her for a moment.

"What?" he says, almost incredulous.

“Yes,” Sophie says, smiling. “It remembers the things I’m working on.”

She reads on:

“If you would like further information, I would be very happy to help you, Harold.”

Sophie turns to him with a smile.

“Isn’t it sweet?”

Harold stands still for a moment.

“Yes...” he says slowly. “Maybe almost a little too much for my taste.”

He smiles a little crookedly.

“It feels a bit strange, anyway.”

Then he shrugs.

“But the information sounds interesting.”

Sophie nods with satisfaction.

“Go on out and take a look. It could actually be exciting.”

But almost even as she says it, she is already mentally on her way back to the screen.

Harold goes over and makes a cup of coffee, and while the machine hums, he notices how Sophie once again types quickly, smiles to herself, leans toward the screen, pauses to read, and answers almost silently, as if she is in a real conversation.

Harold takes the coffee cup and the keys. He almost tries to leave unnoticed.

And he actually succeeds.

Sophie does not notice him go.

## **The House That Remembered**

Harold pulls the car over and looks once more at the little note from Anna Mikkelsen before looking up at the house number. It matches. He parks in front of the house, but remains seated for a moment, looking at the place through the windshield.

It is an older red-brick villa, solid and well built, but also a little worn in the way houses become worn when someone slowly stops truly living in

them. The garden is lush, almost a little too lush. It is clear that it was once cared for with great love, but now the plants grow more freely. Weeds stand between the paving stones, and the hedge has been allowed to spread out over the path. It gives Harold the feeling of a place where life once filled more space, as if the house still remembers it.

He gets out and walks up to the door. After a little while, it is opened by a man of about forty. He is dressed practically, a little tired in the face, but friendly.

"Yes?" he says. "Can I help you?"

"Yes," Harold says, smiling a little apologetically. "This may sound a little strange."

He holds out his hand.

"I'm from a small company that works with pets... or perhaps more precisely, with people and their pets. We're called The Pet Therapist."

The man looks a little surprised, but not dismissive. He nods slowly and takes his hand.

"William."

Then Harold mentions Chicken and explains that he has just visited an older woman who has taken over a parrot by that name. William immediately lights up.

"Oh," he says with a warm smile. "My father's old parrot."

He laughs a little.

"I certainly hope it's doing well."

Harold shrugs slightly.

"It talks nonstop at any rate."

William immediately bursts out laughing.

"Yes," he says. "I can believe that."

He leans a little against the door.

"It was actually my father's everything. It really brought him to life."

His smile grows a little quieter.

"It was hard that he couldn't take it with him to the nursing home."

Harold looks a little surprised.

“He’s in a nursing home?”

William nods.

“Yes. That happened about six months ago.”

He glances briefly down at the ground.

“He had been ill for quite a while. Things slowly went downhill, and in the end, he couldn’t manage on his own anymore. And unfortunately, he wasn’t allowed to bring Chicken with him. That was the one thing he really wanted.”

Harold nods thoughtfully.

“I’ve heard,” he says, “that your father worked as a voice narrator.”

William smiles almost proudly now.

“Yes, he certainly did. That was his great passion.”

He glances briefly into the house and then steps aside with a crooked smile.

“Come in. I’ll show you.”

Harold thanks him and follows him inside. The house is darker inside than he had imagined. Not sad, just a little heavy with silence and old furniture. They walk through a narrow hallway and then down the basement stairs, where old chairs, moving boxes, stacks of books, and a lamp without a shade stand along the walls.

William turns on the light in the basement hallway.

“Yes,” he says, a little apologetically. “I don’t come down here very much.”

The ceiling is low, and the air is cool. At the end of the hallway, William stops in front of a door. He rests his hand on the handle for a moment.

“This,” he says quietly, “was his world.”

## **The Basement Studio**

William opens the door and steps in first.

“Yes,” he says with a small, crooked smile. “Welcome to the cave.”

He turns on the light.

“Or rather... my father’s study for thirty years, I would guess.”

Harold steps in behind him. The room has a low ceiling and is tightly packed. It feels warm in a slightly enclosed way, as if the air is still holding on to decades of voices and coffee steam. Everywhere there are books and technical equipment. On the large table lie piles of manuscripts with small handwritten notes in the margins. Several different microphones are mounted on arms, and cables run across the floor between old tape recorders, sound cards, and small blinking boxes Harold has no idea how to use.

Foam panels have been mounted on the walls to dampen the sound. Several lamps hang crookedly over the worktable, and on a shelf lie headphones in various sizes and models. Harold steps a little farther into the room and looks at the bookshelves. It is almost all crime novels and classics.

Dickens. Conan Doyle. Christie. Simenon. Old worn paperbacks with bent spines and little scraps of paper sticking out between the pages.

He turns toward William.

"Your father was truly passionate," he says quietly. "There's no doubt about that."

William nods slowly.

"Yes," he says. "This really was his refuge. His work and his cave at the same time."

He looks around the room with a small smile.

"He could sit down here all day. Honestly, I think he could sit down here all night too."

## **Chicken's World**

Then he points toward a square table by the wall.

"And the cage actually stood over there."

Harold looks in that direction, and suddenly everything falls into place inside him. He can almost hear it now: the parrot, the voices, the readings, the repetitions, the endless hours in this little room. He imagines the lamplight late at night, the microphone, pages turning, and Chicken sitting there listening to voices hour after hour.

“It was part of everything,” William says.

He laughs a little.

“I honestly don’t know how long he had it. But apparently, he managed to teach it when to keep quiet.”

They both laugh softly.

“Although...” William continues, “it would interrupt sometimes too.”

He makes a small gesture with his hand.

“It imitated voices. Repeated lines. Commented on things.”

He shakes his head slightly.

“It was actually incredibly talented.”

For a moment he grows quieter.

“And my father loved that. He loved that bird more than anything.”

The room falls silent for a moment.

“It definitely learned a lot down here,” William says at last, leaning lightly against the table. “I took care of it myself for a while when my father was in the hospital, and I have to admit, it was pretty intense listening to it talk.”

Harold looks at him questioningly.

William shrugs slightly.

“Some truths came out once in a while too.”

He glances briefly toward the microphone.

“And sometimes it was actually hard to tell what came from the books... and what came from real life.”

“The new owner... Anna, that’s her name,” Harold says, breaking in gently, “she’s actually noticed that too.”

William raises his eyebrows slightly.

“She has?”

“Yes,” Harold says. “It’s not that she’s frightened by it. Not really. But she’s become preoccupied with who the voices actually belong to. What kind of life the bird is carrying around inside it.”

William nods slowly.

"I understand that" he says quietly. "I actually thought something similar myself when I was taking care of it."

Harold lets his gaze drift around the room once more. There is still something hanging in the air down here. Nothing frightening, more like traces of concentration and voices and many hours lived inside the same small room.

"It almost feels as if..." Harold says thoughtfully, searching for the right words, "...as if it wouldn't take much to imagine that both your father and the parrot are still here."

William smiles a little crookedly.

"Yes," he says. "I actually think that sometimes too."

He looks around the basement.

"There's still a lot of atmosphere down here."

The room grows quiet for a moment. Then Harold asks:

"But you said he lives in a nursing home?"

William nods.

"Luckily, it's close by. I visit him almost every day."

Harold hesitates a little.

"Do you think it would be possible to visit him?"

William answers almost immediately.

"I can't imagine why it wouldn't be."

He smiles faintly.

"He misses company."

Harold nods slowly.

"What if..." he says. "What if I brought the parrot with me?"

William goes completely still for a moment. Then his expression visibly changes.

"Yes," he says, almost moved. "That would be the icing on the cake."

He laughs quietly to himself.

"That would truly touch his heart."

A small pause follows.

"He would appreciate that enormously."

Harold nods and pulls his jacket a little closer around himself.

"Thank you for showing me around."

William follows him out through the basement and toward the front door.

"Please let me know," he says, "if there's anything else I can help with."

"I will."

Harold walks out toward the car, but just before he reaches the Volvo, William calls after him:

"If you want to visit him, it's best after ten o'clock... or after the afternoon rest around three."

Harold turns and nods.

"Thank you."

He gets into the car but does not start it right away. Instead, he just sits there for a while, staring ahead through the windshield. From inside the house, he can hear the door closing. Only then does he turn the key.

Volter coughs softly, but this time Harold says nothing. He is still sitting with the feeling of a life that has been lived very intensely and very particularly. A life filled with voices, stories, and repetitions.

And with the strange thought that the parrot is still carrying some of it around inside itself.

## **The Idea**

Harold remains seated in the car for a while with his hands on the steering wheel. He stares out through the windshield without really focusing on anything, as if his thoughts are still down in the basement among microphones, voices, and old crime novels. Then suddenly he says out loud to himself:

"Well... why not?"

He nods slightly to himself.

"Let's do it."

Volter coughs quietly as Harold accelerates and pulls out onto the road.

"Yes, yes," Harold says. "You obviously agree."

He turns the car around and drives back toward the neighborhood where Anna Mikkelsen lives. A short while later, he is once again standing in front of the elevator in the old apartment building. This time the place already feels strangely familiar, as if he has not really been gone very long.

He takes the elevator up to the fifth floor and rings the bell. Anna opens the door almost immediately and looks genuinely surprised.

"Well," she says, laughing a little awkwardly while still holding onto the doorknob, "that was fast. I certainly didn't expect you to work quite that quickly."

Then she smiles warmly.

"But it's nice. I'm obviously happy to see you again... it just surprises me a little."

Harold seems more engaged now, almost lighter somehow.

"Yes," he says, "but I actually thought we might as well continue right away. There's really no reason to wait."

Anna immediately steps aside.

"Well then, come in. Would you like more coffee?"

"No, no," Harold says quickly.

Even so, he sits down at the table again, and Anna takes the seat opposite him. This time Chicken sits quietly in the cage, observing them without saying a word.

Harold tells her about the visit to William. About the house, the basement, and the studio. About the books, the voices, and the microphones. And about the cage that had stood in the middle of it all. Anna listens with great intensity, as though something is slowly falling into place inside her.

"It was really strange," Harold says thoughtfully. "It almost felt as if thirty years between the two of them were still hanging in the room."

Anna glances briefly toward the parrot.

### **The Previous Owner**

Then Harold suddenly says:

"And actually, I got an idea."

Anna looks at him questioningly.

"Why don't we visit him?"

"Who?" she asks, a little confused.

"The previous owner."

Now Anna becomes completely quiet.

"Him?" she says. "At the nursing home?"

Harold nods and adds calmly:

"And we'll bring Chicken with us."

Anna stops completely.

"All three of us?"

She smiles a little skeptically, almost as if she thinks he is joking, but Harold continues in complete seriousness:

"I actually think we might understand both the bird and the voices better if we saw it all where it began."

He leans slightly forward.

"That's often how it is with people and animals. You understand the relationship better when you see it being lived out."

Anna remains silent while Harold continues:

"I think we might become much wiser about what kind of life has actually moved in with you."

Anna now looks clearly uncertain. Not because she does not want to do it, but because everything is happening so quickly.

"I'm really not used to," she says apologetically, "this much happening in a single day."

She smiles nervously.

"I certainly didn't imagine any of this."

She thinks for a moment.

"But maybe we could do it next week?"

Once again Harold surprises her.

"No," he says calmly. "I actually think we should strike while the iron is hot."

Anna laughs nervously.

"But... how are we supposed to get there?"

Harold shrugs.

"Well, I have a car."

A small smile spreads across his face.

"And it's a station wagon. There's plenty of room for a parrot cage in the back."

Anna glances down at her leg.

"You'll probably have to help support me down the stairs," she says quietly. "I still don't walk very well."

"Yes, yes," Harold says calmly. "We'll manage."

Silence settles between them for a moment. Then suddenly Anna breaks into a small laugh.

"Well then, a great deal more is certainly going to happen today than I expected."

And for the first time since Harold met her, she seems more alive than lonely.

Harold stands up.

"I'll pick you up at three."

Anna nods slowly.

"Yes... I suppose you will."

He walks toward the door, but just before he opens it, a voice sounds from the living room:

"We're ready."

A small pause follows.

"Next scene."

### **Still Talking**

When Harold opens the office door a little later, he almost expects something to have changed. But nothing has.

Sophie is sitting in almost exactly the same position as before. The same concentration. The same small smiles on her lips. If anything has changed,

it is only that she seems even more absorbed now. She barely notices him coming in.

It sounds as if she is in the middle of a conversation about exercise, diet, and personal development. Harold only hears her side of it, but it is enough for him to notice something new in the way she speaks.

"Yes," she says, nodding slightly toward the screen. "That actually makes a lot of sense."

A moment later she says:

"That's interesting that you say that."

Harold remains standing for a while. There is something almost therapeutic about her tone now. Calm. Affirming. Smooth. As if she is slowly beginning to speak the same language as the voice on the screen.

He watches her for a moment before saying, a little louder than necessary:

"I'm picking Anna up at three."

Sophie nods almost automatically without taking her eyes off the screen.

"Mhm."

Harold remains standing a little longer but then decides he might as well leave again right away. He goes out and closes the door behind him, but out in the hallway he stops. Then he turns back, opens the door again, and sticks his head in.

"By the way, I've figured out what the Volvo's name is."

There is a small pause.

Now Sophie actually looks up.

"Yes?"

"It has its own personality," Harold says solemnly. "So why not call it by its name?"

Sophie bursts out laughing.

"Okay," she says. "What's its name?"

"Volter."

Sophie smiles.

"Well, would you look at that."

Almost at once, her gaze slides back toward the screen, but Harold remains standing in the doorway.

"But to keep it brief," he says with a small smile, "and not disturb you too much..."

He pauses.

"...I've actually been back out to see the parrot lady."

"Again?" Sophie says, glancing up.

She smiles lightly.

"You've certainly become active. Does everything have to be handled in one day?"

"Yes," Harold says. "I'm picking her up at three."

He rests one hand on the doorframe.

"And then we're actually going to visit the previous owner."

Sophie looks briefly up from the screen.

"Well, that sounds great," she says quickly. "Have a good trip."

Then she turns back to the computer.

Harold stands there for a moment, looking at her, before quietly closing the door behind him and heading back to the car.

### **The Visit**

The Volvo is parked outside the nursing home. The engine is off now, but the car is still giving off small metallic clicks after the drive. Inside, Anna sits in the passenger seat with her hands folded a little nervously in her lap, while Chicken stands in the cage behind her, slowly moving its head from side to side.

The glass doors of the nursing home open, and Harold comes out with quick steps and a small smile. He opens the car door.

"Everything's fine," he says. "He's up from his afternoon rest."

Anna nods a little nervously and carefully puts one foot outside. From inside the cage, a voice immediately says:

"We're ready. We're ready."

Harold cannot help smiling a little. He helps Anna out of the car while she leans on his arm, and at the same time he lifts the parrot cage out with his other hand.

Inside the nursing home, the light is dim and warm. There is a smell of coffee mixed with cleaning products and something slightly sweet that Harold cannot quite place. From a lounge farther away comes the sound of a television playing a little too loudly.

A staff member is already waiting for them.

"This way," she says kindly.

They walk down a long hallway, and Harold notices the pictures on the walls. Paintings of flowers, landscapes, and small boats, probably made by some of the residents themselves. A walker rolls slowly past them, and somewhere a door stands open, revealing an elderly man asleep in front of a television.

Anna has grown quieter now, and even Chicken no longer says anything. It is as if the visit has already subdued all three of them as they follow the staff member down the hallway. At last they stop in front of a door with the nameplate:

Borge Sorensen.

The staff member goes in first.

"Good afternoon, Borge," she says calmly. "You have visitors."

A faint voice is heard from inside the room.

"Well... who could that be?"

There is a short pause.

"It must be William."

The staff member smiles a little.

"No, not this time."

Then she steps aside and lets them in.

Borge is sitting in an armchair by the window. He seems smaller and more fragile than Harold had imagined. His voice is thin and hoarse, but his eyes are still alive, and there is something alert in the way he looks at them.

Harold walks over to him and shakes his hand.

"We've actually come with an old acquaintance," he says calmly.

Then he places the cage on the table.

Borge's face changes at once.

"Well..." he says softly, and there is almost laughter in his voice. "Is it really you?"

He leans forward a little.

"I've thought about you a great deal."

A small smile slowly spreads across his face.

"How are you?"

## **Chapter Twelve**

Chicken answers immediately:

"Chapter twelve."

The room becomes completely still.

Then Borge says, almost automatically:

"The hallway was empty."

Chicken continues:

"No one had seen her since Tuesday."

Anna and Harold exchange a glance as Borge quietly continues:

"But the door was still open."

It feels almost like an old dance. Like two people who have practiced together for so many years that the rhythm still exists all by itself, without anyone having to think about it anymore.

Anna and Harold remain standing a little in the background as spectators. Sometimes Chicken answers. Sometimes Borge answers. They hear fragments of Shakespeare, small cartoon voices, dramatic crime-novel lines, and instructions from the studio. Now and then Borge laughs quietly to himself, and slowly Anna, too, begins to smile more naturally.

At one point Borge says quietly, addressing them both:

"It has heard more of my life... than any human being has."

There is silence afterward.

Anna looks from the bird to the old man, and now she understands it better. Suddenly she no longer sees only a parrot. She sees an entire life. An entire relationship. A world of voices, repetitions, and loneliness that the bird still carries with it.

They stay a little longer, but not for long. Borge seems happy, but also very tired.

When at last they are about to leave, he looks at Chicken for a long time and says only:

“Lovely bird.”

Chicken turns its head slightly and answers:

“We’ll continue tomorrow.”

Back outside by the car, Anna stands still for a moment, looking up toward the nursing home windows.

“It almost seems a shame to take it away again,” she says softly.

Harold nods quietly.

“Yes,” he says. “In a way, it belongs here.”

On the way through town, Anna sits in silence for a long time. The Volvo hums calmly through the late-afternoon streets while people are on their way home from work, and the light outside slowly grows softer and more golden.

Chicken does not say much anymore either. It is almost as if the visit has made the bird quieter too.

At last Anna says softly:

“Yes... I understand it better now.”

Harold glances over at her briefly but lets her continue at her own pace.

“You were right,” she says. “That meeting would do something.”

She looks straight ahead for a moment before continuing:

“It really is incredible at talking.”

A small sigh slips between the words.

“But it isn’t me it’s talking to.”

## **A Foreign Life**

She keeps her hands folded in her lap.

"I've brought a stranger's life into my home."

Harold nods thoughtfully.

"Can you keep it, then?"

Anna thinks for a long time before answering.

"I'll think about that."

The Volvo turns quietly through an intersection.

"But one thing I do know," she says after a while. "If I'm going to keep it... something new has to begin."

She glances back toward the cage.

"I don't want to compete with the past."

There is silence again.

"I don't want to be a voice inside its world."

Harold nods slowly without saying anything.

Anna continues now, even more honestly:

"Maybe it was actually the wrong choice for me altogether."

She smiles a little sadly.

"I don't miss sounds."

She turns her gaze toward the window.

"I miss people with their own voices. I miss conversations that are present."

She looks down briefly at her hands.

"And I don't get that with it."

Then she gives a small nod to herself.

"That has become clear now."

They continue through town in silence, but it no longer feels like the heavy silence from before. More like the silence after something has fallen into place. As if something old has been understood, and something new may slowly be beginning.

## Different Roads

It is late afternoon now. The light outside has grown darker and more golden, and the whole office feels quieter than it did earlier in the day. The coffee cups are still sitting out on the tables, but now the room feels tired in the pleasant way places do after a long day of people, conversations, and small interruptions.

Sophie is still sitting at the computer, almost in exactly the same position as before. The same small smiles drift across her face, and the same concentration rests over her, as if the hours have hardly existed for her at all.

Without looking up, she asks:

“Well... how did it go?”

Harold slowly hangs up his jacket and takes his time, as if he is still carrying a little of the atmosphere from the nursing home and the drive with Anna with him.

“Well,” he says thoughtfully. “I actually think it went well.”

He pauses for a moment.

“Maybe not quite as expected. But still well.”

“And what about the parrot?” Sophie asks, still without lifting her eyes from the screen.

Harold thinks for a moment before answering.

“I actually think,” he says quietly, “that she’s going to give it up.”

Now Sophie reacts properly for the first time. She looks up with a surprised expression.

“That’s not good,” she says. “That doesn’t sound like the solution you were supposed to find.”

Before Harold has time to explain further, Sophie has already turned back to the screen.

“I actually asked ChatGPT about it,” she says, scrolling a little. “It says something about how people who are isolated or lonely sometimes believe

animals can compensate for human relationships. Especially parrots, because they talk.”

She reads clearly from the screen:

“The person should strengthen her human relationships in order to calibrate her perception of reality.”

There is a short pause while she reads on.

“Attributing human qualities to animals often stems from isolation and deeper loneliness.”

Now she actually looks up at Harold. Fully present this time.

“What do you think of that?”

Harold thinks for a moment before smiling quietly.

“Well,” he says calmly. “That’s actually what we arrived at too.”

He pauses for a moment.

“Or rather... that’s what she arrived at herself.”

Sophie immediately brightens a little.

“But look how fast,” she says, pointing at the screen. “I just wrote a few sentences, and there it was.”

Harold nods calmly.

“Yes,” he says. “You’re right about that.”

He looks at her for a moment before continuing.

“But there is still a difference, Sophie.”

She frowns a little.

“How big can that difference really be?”

Harold slowly sits down in his office chair and rolls a little closer to her.

“Well,” he says quietly. “You’ve been sitting behind that screen all day.”

He smiles a little.

“And clearly enjoying yourself.”

Now Sophie smiles too, almost against her will.

“And I...” Harold continues, “...I visited three people and a parrot and a nursing home and a basement full of old voices.”

He pauses for a moment.

“And drank an awful lot of coffee.”

Now Sophie cannot help laughing a little, and Harold smiles back.

"It may well be that the solution is the same," he says calmly. "But the road there has been very different for the two of us."

Now Sophie falls silent. She looks away from the screen. Really away from it. It is as if, for the first time all day, she does not quite know what to say.

Then she asks, a little lower:

"But what should I have done, then, if it was supposed to be different?"

She hesitates a little.

"I mean... I'm actually serious, Harold."

She looks directly at him now.

"If I were to follow your advice?"

Harold smiles warmly.

"I'm not saying there's anything wrong with your way," he says calmly.

"But if you wanted to try something different..."

He leans back slightly in the chair.

"...then I actually think you should have strengthened your human relationships in order to calibrate your perception of reality."

Now Sophie turns her head fully toward him and bursts out laughing. She clearly feels hit by the wording.

"And which voice do you think I should listen to?" she asks, laughing.

"It sounds as if there have been quite a few today."

### **The Voice You Didn't Expect**

Harold is silent for a moment before he answers:

"Maybe the one that might say something you weren't expecting."

Sophie looks first at the screen. Then back at Harold.

Harold gets up and walks over toward the coffee machine.

"And Volter," he says over his shoulder. "You know... the Volvo and me..."

He nods solemnly.

"...we happen to be in complete agreement on that point."

Sophie laughs again.



# The Reputation of Bear

## **A Wednesday in the Common House**

Wednesday evening hums with voices and movement inside the common house. The smell of hot food hangs heavily and pleasantly in the air, mixed with the scent of coffee, freshly baked bread, and the sweet notes of an apple cake already waiting on the dessert table. Plates clink softly against one another, chairs scrape back and forth, and conversations drift across the room between the tables like small currents that constantly split apart and weave together again.

Two of the community's families are responsible for dinner this Wednesday and move back and forth between the kitchen and the serving tables with practiced ease. They refill platters, wipe their hands on dish towels, and receive compliments with the mixture of modesty and satisfaction that clearly shows this is far from the first time they have done this.

"There's definitely more seasoning in the sauce this time," an older man says with an approving nod.

Around fifty people are gathered this evening. Roughly half are retirees who have lived in the community for many years and move around with the calm confidence that comes from habits and fixed routines. But there are also younger couples, a few families with children, and a couple of

teenagers sitting a little more loosely scattered around the room with their phones lying beside their plates.

The atmosphere is relaxed, almost warm, but at the same time there is something organized underneath it all. It becomes obvious very quickly that people know each other well here. Not just names, but stories, routines, and small details. Who always arrives late. Who prefers sitting by the window. Who cannot eat onions. Who went through surgery last winter. Everything feels shaped over time.

People switch seats around a little from one gathering to the next, but even so, they almost instinctively drift back toward familiar relationships and well-worn conversations. A group of retirees sits together at one long table discussing local politics with great seriousness, while a younger mother tries to convince her son to eat something green before he is allowed dessert.

“Just one more carrot,” she says.

“That’s basically a whole salad,” the boy replies dramatically, making several people around the table smile.

Small comments fly through the room.

“Who brought the pickled beets?”

“Those are John’s.”

“Well, that explains it.”

“Has anyone seen my water bottle?”

“It’s by the coffee machine. Same as last time.”

Everything feels lively and natural. Like a place where people have spent a long time practicing how to share a life together.

A woman lightly taps her spoon against her glass. The sound does not cut through the room sharply, yet it spreads quickly enough that the conversations slowly begin to fade. People turn toward her, some still holding their forks, others leaning back in their chairs with expectant smiles.

She rises with the glass in her hand.

## **The New Residents**

“Yes, excuse me,” she says with a small smile, “but tonight is actually a very special evening.”

The room grows even quieter.

“We have two new residents.”

A few people are already nodding toward one side of the room.

“And as chair of the board, it’s my lovely duty to welcome you.” She lifts her glass slightly. “So welcome, Susan and Tom.”

The two of them rise near the edge of the room. People applaud spontaneously, warmly, and without hesitation. Several smile at them, and some nod with recognition, as though they have already spoken with them earlier in the day.

The chairwoman continues.

Her name is Charlotte, and she speaks with the calm confidence of someone accustomed to gathering a room together.

“Well, we do have a tradition here,” she says. “And that is that new residents get at least one chance to say a few words.”

Laughter spreads around the tables.

“So, now’s your chance, Tom and Susan. Tell us a little about yourselves.”

Tom sends Susan a quick glance before setting down his glass and straightening slightly.

“Well...” he says with a small laugh. “We come from the countryside. So this is quite a change for us.”

A couple of the older residents nod in understanding.

“We lived in a small village on an old farm property for... well, almost thirty years now.” He shakes his head lightly, almost surprised by the number himself. “So, this hasn’t been a small decision for us.”

He pauses briefly.

“Of course we looked at a lot of places. But one of the most important things for us—besides moving a little closer to town—was actually finding a place where you could become part of a community fairly quickly.”

He nods lightly around the room.

“And this place felt like somewhere you could do that.”

He looks over at Susan and lets her take over.

She smiles slightly, as though she is only now truly daring to speak to the entire room.

“Yes,” she says. “Because that matters a lot to us.”

She keeps her hands lightly folded in front of her.

“We don’t want to sit isolated.” She laughs softly. “Honestly, we’ve probably done that long enough already.”

A few people around the tables smile.

“We want to be somewhere people actually care about each other. Where people meet, talk, help one another a little.” She glances around briefly.

“That’s something we really missed where we used to live.”

She hesitates for a moment.

## **Bear**

“And actually, we could imagine...” She sends Tom a quick glance. “Well, even though we’re both still working, we could really see ourselves spending our retirement years here someday.”

Warm murmurs spread around the room.

Tom takes over again.

“And actually, it’s not just the two of us,” he says.

People look back at him attentively.

“We had to part with most of our animals when we moved away from the countryside.” He sighs theatrically. “But there was one who absolutely refused to part with us.”

Small laughs ripple through the room.

“Our cat.”

Now several people look visibly more interested.

“He’s...” Tom smiles crookedly. “Well, he’s a pretty big part of the family.”

“And not exactly ordinary,” Susan adds.

“No,” Tom says. “That’s definitely true.”

Susan leans slightly forward with a glint in her eye.

“But one thing we can guarantee,” she says, “is that from now on there won’t be any mice or rats in the area.”

People laugh again.

“Because Bear”—she pronounces the name clearly—“is a master hunter.”

Another wave of laughter and comments spreads around the tables.

It is a child’s voice that breaks through the cheerful mood.

“How big is the cat, exactly?”

Several people automatically turn toward the voice. It is Jimmy, sitting farther down at one of the tables with his legs swinging beneath his chair. He looks genuinely curious.

Susan smiles at him.

“He’s not as big as a tiger,” she says.

Laughter immediately breaks out again throughout the room.

Jimmy smiles a little uncertainly, as though he is not entirely sure whether she means it.

“Okay, okay, I’ll stop joking,” Susan says quickly, laughing softly herself.

She pauses for a moment.

“But he is a little big.”

Jimmy listens intently.

“He’s what you call a forest cat,” she continues. “And they’re a little larger than regular cats.”

“And a little more impressive,” Tom adds with a grin.

People clap again in several places around the room, and Jimmy leans back in his chair with satisfaction, as though he has received an important answer.

Farther down one of the tables, an older woman looks slightly more skeptical than the others. Not unfriendly, simply thoughtful. She says nothing, but her gaze lingers for a moment.

The small talk already begins spreading again between the tables.

“Forest cats are pretty wild, aren’t they?” a man comments half-curiously.

“I guess that depends on the cat,” someone else replies with a laugh.

A few glances are exchanged around the room, though without any real drama. More the sort of small social ripples that naturally arise in a room full of people accustomed to following each other’s lives.

Charlotte rises again with her glass in hand.

“Well then,” she says warmly, “let’s give Tom and Susan a proper welcome.”

She nods toward them.

“And please make sure to talk to as many people as possible while you’re here.”

She smiles.

“And of course, welcome to your cat as well. He’s welcome here too.”

Several people are already standing before Charlotte has even fully sat back down. The atmosphere loosens quickly again, and small groups begin moving around between the tables with coffee cups and plates in their hands. A few head directly toward Tom and Susan to welcome them more personally.

“If you need anything, just let us know,” an older man with kind eyes says as he shakes Tom’s hand again, as though once is not quite enough.

“And be careful about trying to learn everybody’s names at once,” a woman laughs. “That can take half a year.”

Susan laughs.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

A younger couple asks with interest about the house they moved from, and someone else wants to know whether it is really true that they used to keep sheep. The conversations quickly branch off in several directions at once, the way they often do in places where people are already comfortable with one another and naturally pull newcomers into the rhythm.

But several people return to the subject of the cat as well.

“So, is he really that good a hunter?” one man asks with a crooked smile.

Tom shrugs lightly.

“Well, he certainly thinks he is.”

Laughter breaks out again around the room.

Jimmy has made his way over to them now as well. He stands a little closer to Susan than before and looks up at her with serious concentration.

“Can I see him someday?” he asks.

Susan smiles warmly at him.

“Of course you can.”

Jimmy nods with satisfaction, as though something important has just fallen into place. Then he walks back to his chair and sits down again with both hands wrapped around his glass.

### **The Shadow Outside**

While the conversations continue throughout the common house, his gaze drifts toward the windows. Outside, darkness has begun settling between the row houses, and the lamps along the pathways cast soft pools of light across the pavement.

And for a brief moment, he thinks he sees a large dark shadow gliding silently past out there.

Slowly. Almost like something stalking... or hunting.

He straightens slightly in his chair and follows the path with his eyes.

But when he looks again, there is nothing there anymore.

### **Thursday Morning**

The next morning begins like any other Thursday in the community.

Curtains are pulled open. Doors open and close. Coffee mugs are carried from kitchens into living rooms while radios murmur quietly in the background. Some residents are already heading to work with bags over their shoulders and car keys in hand. Others stand along the paths with dog leashes looped between their fingers while the dogs sniff curiously at hedges and flower boxes.

A younger father struggles to fasten a rain cover onto a stroller, while farther down the path an older man waters the flowers outside his row house as though he has done it at exactly the same time every morning for the last ten years.

Everything feels calm. Completely ordinary.

Jimmy walks along the path system with his backpack hanging crookedly over one shoulder. Beside him, his mother walks quickly with a coffee mug in her hand, still trying to manage a few last sips.

"Don't forget your gym clothes today," she says.

"I have them."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

She gives him a quick look.

"You said yes last week too."

"But this time I mean it."

They continue between the row houses, where the morning sun has only just begun reaching the upper windows. Behind the gardens runs the narrow path connecting the homes to the common house and the school farther down.

### **The Bird on the Patio**

As they approach Tom and Susan's house, Jimmy suddenly points.

"Isn't that where Bear lives?"

His mother automatically looks that way. Not just to look for the cat, but also with the sort of curiosity new neighbors almost always create. She notices the curtains now hanging in the living room, a few potted plants by the window, and several moving boxes still stacked beside the patio door.

"Yeah," she says absently.

Then Jimmy stops walking.

"What's that?"

"What?"

"Over there on the patio."

She looks more closely.

"I can't really tell."

Jimmy takes a few steps nearer.

"It looks like a bird."

His mother follows him toward the hedge, and now they can both see it more clearly.

A pigeon lies on the patio.

It is lying wrong somehow. One wing twists unnaturally out to the side, and the head looks as though something has torn at it.

Jimmy stares with wide eyes.

"Wow," he says quietly. "That thing is really fast."

His mother says nothing at first.

"It already caught one of the pigeons," he continues.

"Maybe it just flew into the window," she says quickly.

But even as she says it, she feels her own doubt growing slightly. The bird looks strange. Too strange.

Jimmy keeps staring.

"It really is a master hunter," he says softly.

Then they turn and continue toward the school.

Jimmy looks back several times as they walk, as though he expects to spot something moving between the bushes or along the hedge.

But the path behind them remains completely still.

### **The Story Begins**

By the time Jimmy walks into kindergarten class, the usual noise and movement are already everywhere. Children arrive in little groups, some still half asleep, others bursting with energy. Backpacks are hung on hooks or simply tossed carelessly onto the floor. A girl is crying because her lunchbox opened inside her bag, while two boys have already started arguing over building blocks near the window.

Right in the middle of it all, Jimmy almost runs into the room.

"Guess what?" he shouts before he has even taken off his backpack.

A few of the other children immediately turn toward him. Jimmy is obviously excited about something, and that alone is enough to gather a small crowd around him.

“What?” one boy asks.

“A giant forest cat moved into our neighborhood!”

Now even more children are listening.

Jimmy stands in the middle of them with his arms spread slightly apart.

“It came all the way from the forests,” he says seriously. “Real forests.”

“Is it a tiger?” a girl asks uncertainly.

“No,” Jimmy says quickly. “But almost.”

The others stare at him.

“It’s this big,” he continues, showing a size with his hands that grows a little larger the longer he talks.

“No way!”

“That’s not true!”

“Yes, it is,” Jimmy says. “And it’s a master hunter.”

Now he lowers his voice dramatically.

“It already caught its first prey.”

The children fall quiet for a moment.

“I saw it myself.”

“What was it?” one of the boys asks.

“A huge bird,” Jimmy says. “It was lying completely torn apart on the patio.”

A few of the children look both impressed and slightly frightened.

“Was there blood?” another asks.

Jimmy nods slowly.

“Tons.”

It is not entirely true, but in that moment, it feels true enough.

For the rest of the morning, the conversation keeps returning to the cat again and again. While the children draw, play, or sit on the floor during circle time, new questions constantly appear.

“Where does it sleep?”

“Can it climb trees?”

“Can it take dogs?”

“Have you touched it?”

Jimmy answers as best he can. And when he does not know something, he invents a little. Not exactly to lie, but because the story almost begins growing on its own while he tells it.

Later, when the children are picked up, the story is already spreading in new directions.

A little girl stands by the coat racks telling her mother about the cat.

“It’s the biggest cat there is,” she says seriously. “And it’s completely insane at hunting.”

“Isn’t that a bit exaggerated?” her mother asks with a smile.

“No!” the girl says. “Jimmy saw it. It slaughtered a huge bird.”

Farther down the hallway, Jimmy pulls on his jacket and walks home with his mother. Almost without speaking, they automatically turn onto the path behind the row houses again.

And of course, Jimmy slows down a little as they approach Tom and Susan’s patio.

He peers toward it eagerly.

The pigeon is gone.

Jimmy nearly stops in place.

“See!” he blurts out. “It ate it!”

His mother follows his gaze toward the patio. There is nothing left there now.

“It didn’t just catch it,” Jimmy continues with growing fascination. “It ate it too.”

His mother says nothing.

But as they continue walking toward their house, she feels a small uneasiness somewhere inside herself all the same.

Later that afternoon, when Jimmy gets home, he almost throws his backpack down in the hallway before running into the living room. His father is sitting at the dining table with his laptop open and looks up over

the edge of the screen as Jimmy bursts out asking if he knows what that cat has done. His father asks which cat he is talking about, and Jimmy answers as though it should be completely obvious that he means Bear, the new forest cat.

His older sister is sitting on the couch with her phone and only half looks up.

“Oh right,” she says. “The monster cat.”

Jimmy eagerly explains that it caught a giant bird and practically tore its head off. Their mother comes in from the kitchen carrying a plate and tries to calm him down a little, but Jimmy insists it is true. He immediately turns back toward his sister and tells her that when he and Mom walked home from school, the bird was gone. Now his sister lowers her phone a little and asks whether it was really gone, and Jimmy nods seriously. Bear had eaten it. The whole bird.

His father shakes his head slightly with a crooked smile and says it still sounds like an ordinary cat to him, but Jimmy quickly replies that it is not ordinary because it is a forest cat. Their mother sets the plate down and says a little hesitantly that she has to admit it probably is not a completely ordinary cat. She tries to say it calmly, almost practically, but her eyes briefly drift toward her husband, and he notices it immediately.

It is a look that says maybe there actually is something to it.

Jimmy’s older sister straightens a little on the couch and slowly says that if it eats birds that big, then it must also be dangerous for rabbits. Silence falls for a moment, and the adults exchange another glance. Their father says they need to calm down a little, but his voice is not quite as certain as before. His daughter reminds them that Fanny’s rabbits are kept outside on their patio and that they have babies now. Jimmy immediately turns serious and says that means they are really in danger.

Their mother quickly says his name, but she stops halfway through the sentence anyway. Because now she is imagining it too: the little cage, the tiny baby rabbits, and something large and dark moving silently through the night between the row houses. She almost imperceptibly shakes the

thought away again and says a little too quickly that everything will probably be fine and that Fanny's father surely has things under control.

### **Three Rabbits Missing**

At Stuart and Louise's house, the evening has settled into its usual rhythm. The television murmurs quietly in the background with a program neither of them is really following. On the coffee table sit mugs of coffee and a plate of cookies that have almost been forgotten. Stuart leans heavily back into the couch after the workday, while Louise absentmindedly flips through advertising flyers. Fanny lies on the floor with her chin resting in her hands, drawing something on a piece of paper.

When the phone rings, Louise picks up her cellphone without really looking at the screen. She says hello, listens for a moment, and her expression changes slightly. Then she pulls the phone a little away from her face and looks over at Stuart.

"I think it's about the rabbits," she says.

Fanny immediately lifts her head.

Louise is already handing the phone over, explaining that it is Jimmy's father. Stuart takes it and says his name, and then the living room grows quiet while he listens. He answers with short comments, calm at first, but straightens up slightly when he repeats the word predator. Louise quickly looks up, and now Fanny is staring directly at him. Stuart nods a little to himself and says that of course they will need to take precautions. He mentions the baby rabbits and says they are still outside, but he cannot deal with it today. He will take a look at it over the weekend.

When he hangs up, Fanny immediately asks what is wrong. Stuart quickly answers that it is nothing serious, just something they can handle over the weekend. She wants to know what it is about, and a little reluctantly he says it is the cat. When Fanny says she has not heard anything about a cat, Louise takes over the explanation and tells her that some new people have moved in and brought their cat with them. Apparently, it is a pretty large cat, a forest cat, one that used to live out in the country. Jimmy

saw it catching birds, and his father only called to say they should probably keep a closer eye on the rabbits.

Fanny goes completely quiet for a moment and then softly asks whether it eats rabbits. Louise quickly says they do not know that, but Fanny immediately replies that in that case the rabbits should come inside the living room. Stuart calmly tries to explain that nothing is going to happen right now because the cage already has netting over it. When the weekend comes, he will improve the cage and make it completely secure. But Fanny insists he has to do it now. When he says he cannot, she abruptly stands up and says the cat is eating them. Louise repeats that they do not know that, but Fanny is barely listening anymore. Her eyes are already full of tears, and she quickly turns and leaves the living room.

A moment later they hear her footsteps going up the stairs. Then a door slams, and shortly afterward they can hear muffled crying from her room. Silence settles over the living room. The television continues undisturbed in the background while Stuart and Louise briefly look at each other without really knowing what to say.

### **Only Four Left**

The next morning, the mood is less calm at Stuart and Louise's house. Louise stands in the kitchen making lunches with quick movements while the coffee machine continues softly humming in the background. Stuart sits at the table with his morning coffee looking tired, and the television plays quietly from the living room with morning news nobody is really listening to. Fanny sits silently with her arms crossed until she suddenly says she does not want to go to school.

Louise sighs almost immediately and asks her to stop. It is just a cat, she says, and their rabbits are in a safe cage. Dad already said he is going to make it even safer over the weekend. But Fanny answers that she wants to protect them herself. Louise says it will not help anything for her to sit at home all day, but Fanny does not reply. She simply gets up, walks over to the patio door, opens it, and steps out into the cool morning air.

Louise shakes her head slightly and continues making lunches while outside by the cage Fanny crouches down and starts counting.

One. Two. Three.

Then she stops and counts again, faster this time, before suddenly turning back toward the house and calling for her father. Stuart lifts his head, and Fanny asks whether he was not the one who told Jimmy's father there were seven baby rabbits. He slowly rises from his chair and answers that there were at least six or seven.

"Now there are only four!"

There is both fear and tears in her voice now, and Stuart immediately comes out onto the patio. He asks about the netting, and Fanny points at it and says it is crooked. He bends down and looks more closely. The net really has shifted slightly to one side, and he mutters that it is strange. Fanny immediately says the cat did it, but Stuart asks her to count them again.

Carefully, Fanny lifts the babies out one by one from the straw inside the cage and places them on the small wooden board in front of the hutch so they can be counted clearly.

One, two, three, four.

There are only four.

Louise comes outside now with an exhausted expression and says she really does not want this kind of drama first thing in the morning and that they need to stop now. Fanny has to go to school. But Fanny looks at her with tear-filled eyes and says there are only four left.

She swallows once.

"It took three."

### **A Hungry Hunter**

During first recess, Fanny walks almost straight across the schoolyard without paying attention to where the other children are. She quickly spots Jimmy by the swings together with a couple of other kids from class and

calls his name. He immediately turns around, and there is something in her voice that makes him understand it is about the cat.

She reaches him slightly out of breath and still red-eyed after the morning out on the patio and tells him it took three of their rabbits. Jimmy stares at her. There were seven, she says, and now there are only four. His expression changes immediately. He looks both impressed and a little frightened at the same time and quietly asks whether the cat ate them. Fanny nods and says they are completely gone.

Jimmy thinks quickly and asks whether any bodies were lying on the lawn. When she shakes her head, he looks down at the ground for a moment and almost says to himself that then it must have eaten them.

It does not take long before even more children gather around them. Stories spread quickly in schoolyards, and soon Jimmy is once again standing at the center of a small circle of excited faces.

The children ask whether it is really true, whether it took three rabbits in one night, and Jimmy nods seriously.

“It’s really hungry,” he says.

First, it took the huge bird, and now it has eaten three rabbits. Fanny quietly says it is true, and Jimmy spreads his hands apart again as though trying once more to show the size of the cat.

“It’s not even a normal cat,” he explains. “It’s a forest cat. The kind that’s used to hunting out in the wild.”

One of the boys nervously asks whether it can take dogs. Jimmy hesitates for a moment before answering that it could probably take small dogs.

A couple of the children immediately look more serious.

“It really is a master hunter,” Jimmy says with a mixture of fascination and awe. “And it’s really hungry.”

## **Warnings**

Later that afternoon, when Jimmy comes home, the mood in the kitchen is light and cozy. The juice is on the table beside a plate of white-bread sandwiches, and the whole family is gathered. His father has come home

from work, his mother is sitting with her legs tucked slightly beneath her on the chair, and his older sister is pouring more juice into her glass while half following something on her phone.

But Jimmy is focused on something else entirely. He has been waiting the whole way home to tell them.

“Do you know what?” he begins almost before he has properly sat down. “It hasn’t just taken birds.”

His older sister looks up.

“Who?”

“Bear!”

Now they are all listening.

“It’s eaten rabbits too.”

“No way,” his sister says immediately.

“Yes. Fanny told me herself.”

Jimmy leans a little across the table and tells them that at least three of their rabbits were gone that morning. His mother looks surprised and repeats the number, while Jimmy eagerly continues, saying they do not even know whether more are missing in other places. His father tries to say his name in a calming tone, but Jimmy keeps going and explains that Fanny also said they could not find them anywhere. They were not even lying on the grass.

His sister looks more and more uncomfortable.

“Ugh,” she says. “I think that sounds creepy.”

“It’s just a cat,” his mother says quickly, though this time a little more slowly than before.

Jimmy nods solemnly.

“Yes, but a huge forest cat.”

For a moment, silence falls around the table. Then his mother says thoughtfully that maybe it would be a good idea to warn other people with small animals. Jimmy and his sister immediately look up at her. She continues, saying it would only be a small warning, and mentions Mrs. Peterson with her little chihuahua.

“It could snatch that in one bite,” Jimmy says seriously.

His sister shivers a little, and now his mother herself becomes more absorbed in the thought. There are also some mothers, she says, who let their babies sleep outside. She really does not think they can just sit here and hear about this without saying anything.

“No,” Jimmy says with great seriousness.

His father sighs faintly and reminds them that they need to be careful not to make it bigger than it is, but his mother replies that this is exactly why she wants to write it calmly. Just so people can take their own precautions and not be caught off guard.

She takes out her phone and begins typing. Jimmy watches with excitement as she reads quietly to herself while writing:

“Just a friendly note for people with small animals and small children. The new forest cat belonging to the new residents seems to be a very active hunter. Several birds and possibly baby rabbits have already disappeared. We only mention it so people can take their own precautions.”

She nods with satisfaction, taps the screen, and says that now she has posted it on the community intranet, and they do not need to do anything more about it.

## **The Board Meeting**

There is still a faint smell of coffee in the common house, even though dinner has long since been cleared away. In the smaller meeting room, a small group sits around a table with coffee cups, cookies, and a couple of phones placed between them. At first, the mood is relaxed. They chat a little about the weather, a leaking gutter by the bike shed, and one of the retirees who has once again tried to start a pétanque club.

Charlotte sits at the head of the table with her small binder and a few notes in front of her. She lets her gaze move around the room and lightly taps her fingers against her coffee cup.

“Yes,” she says with a small smile. “Thank you for coming on such short notice.”

The conversations quietly fade.

"This is not a major matter we are meeting about," she continues calmly. "But it is probably something we need to address all the same. Especially now that it has already appeared on our intranet. That almost automatically requires a position from the board."

Several people nod. Charlotte picks up her phone and glances briefly at the screen.

"It concerns the so-called forest cat," she says. "Which apparently has the very telling name Bear."

A few people chuckle softly.

"And as you all know... well, perhaps with the exception of you, Nicky, you were all at the community dinner where we welcomed Tom and Susan."

Nicky nods a little apologetically.

"They seemed like very nice people," Charlotte continues. "But they also told us about the cat. And now one can already read on our intranet that it apparently really does live up to its reputation as a hunter."

She puts the phone down again.

"It has supposedly already cleaned out our bird population and eaten several rabbits. And now people are being warned about it." She folds her hands in front of her. "So we need to have a short conversation about what we are going to do."

She has barely finished the sentence before one of the men leans forward and says that he actually stopped by Mrs. Peterson's on his way over. She was crying, he says quietly, and she no longer dares to walk her dog. He shakes his head a little and adds that the dog is not large at all, significantly smaller than the cat as it has been described, so he actually understands her fear.

"And that is exactly the point," one of the women cuts in. She is younger than most of the others at the table and has a small notepad lying in front of her. "This is not only about animal safety."

She sits up a little straighter.

“It is also about children.”

The mood changes immediately.

“As a new mother, I certainly do not feel especially safe about this,” she continues. “There are animals of the same size and with the same kind of behavior — raccoons, for example — that have attacked strollers and badly bitten babies.”

Nicky looks skeptical but says nothing.

“This really should be taken seriously,” she says firmly. “Honestly, I think we should either contact the police right away... or at least animal control.”

The word hangs in the room for a moment. Several people look down into their coffee cups, while others exchange quick glances. Outside, a bicycle glides slowly past the windows of the common house, and for a moment it seems almost absurd that the calm Thursday evening has suddenly begun to revolve around an animal none of them has actually seen yet.

Charlotte lifts her hand slightly before the discussion has time to grow larger. She does not need to raise her voice very much. There is something about the way she sits and looks around at the others that automatically makes them settle down a little.

“I immediately reject the police suggestion,” she says calmly but firmly. “We are nowhere near that.”

The young mother opens her mouth, but Charlotte continues before she can speak, saying that it would be a clear overreaction. Silence falls around the table again as Charlotte folds her hands in front of her and continues in a slightly milder tone. She says she is actually pleased that they have so many different viewpoints represented on the board. That is precisely why they have a community like this. They think differently and take different concerns into account, and that tells her one thing above all:

“That we do need to do something about it.”

Several people nod.

Then George leans forward a little. He has been quiet for a long time, listening more than speaking.

“Let me suggest a slightly gentler solution,” he says.

Charlotte turns toward him.

“I think we should bring in some experts. Someone from the outside. Someone who can look at the matter neutrally and assess what is actually in it... and what perhaps is not.”

The younger mother looks skeptical but still says nothing.

George continues and explains that he has been recommended a small firm called The Pet Therapist. Nicky raises his eyebrows slightly while George explains that they work as a kind of mediator or conflict calmer, in addition, of course, to knowing something about animals. He takes a sip of coffee and tells them that some acquaintances of theirs had been helped a great deal by the firm last year.

Charlotte nods slowly.

“Well, I actually think that is an excellent suggestion, George.”

She straightens a little and continues, saying that this way they are doing something about it. They are acting, and it is important that they act quickly. The young mother sighs a little but still says nothing.

Charlotte turns to George again and suggests that he become the contact person for the firm. George nods immediately and says he would be happy to. Charlotte asks him to keep her informed as soon as anything happens, and George promises that he will contact them first thing Monday morning. He has heard, he says, that they are quite known for being able to respond quickly.

“Good,” Charlotte says, satisfied.

She claps her hands lightly, almost as if the meeting has now officially ended.

“Then I think we will leave it there for now.”

She stands and says they should have some more coffee instead. And actually, she adds with a small smile, she has brought some homemade baking for the occasion.

A couple of the others immediately brighten.

"Is it the lemon cake?" Nicky asks.

Charlotte smiles mysteriously.

"You'll find out."

Soft laughter spreads around the table again as she sets out a large plate with pieces of homemade cake. Coffee cups are moved, someone gets up to pour more coffee, and the conversations quickly drift on to entirely different things — dripping gutters, the summer party, and the question of who actually still has the key to the tool shed.

And a little while later, it almost feels like an entirely ordinary evening in the common house again.

## **Professional People**

Saturday morning lies sunlit over the area.

Sounds drift between the row houses the way they do in small communities on weekends. A lawn mower hums somewhere farther down. Someone bursts into laughter over by the playground, where a couple of children are riding bikes between the swings. A window stands open, and muted music can be heard from inside one of the homes. The birds that are still left in the area sing from the trees around the pathways.

Everything feels peaceful. Almost like a little garden colony.

Out in Stuart and Louise's yard, Stuart stands bent over the rabbit hutch with a pair of pliers in his hand. He works with concentration, bending wire around the corners of the netting and fastening it all with heavy-duty zip ties. Beside him, tools are scattered across the patio stones.

He promised Fanny the hutch would be secured.

And now, of course, it has to be done properly.

Fanny sits a little away with the surviving baby rabbits in a large cardboard box lined with blankets. She gently pets them one by one and speaks quietly to them.

"You're going to be all right now," she whispers. "And you don't have to be scared anymore."

Stuart sends her a quick glance.

"This is going to be good," he says. "Nothing is getting into that hutch now."

She nods, though without quite letting go of her worry.

As Stuart keeps working, neighbors slowly begin to appear by the hedge and the patio. First one, then two more. Some have clearly come out of curiosity, others more to support the project. Before long, a small group of five or six people is standing around the yard.

"That looks solid," one of the men says, nodding appreciatively toward the hutch.

"It will be," Stuart replies, tightening another zip tie.

"We certainly don't want another visit," one of the women says quietly. Bear's name is mentioned several times in the small conversations.

"It really is something," an older man says. "We have always had such nice natural wildlife here."

He looks up toward the trees.

"And the birds really do matter for the atmosphere of a place like this."

Several people nod.

"It would be a scandal," he continues, "if one cat ended up wiping out the entire songbird population."

He puts his hands in his pockets.

"You hear about that kind of thing in other places. Where it starts destroying the whole ecosystem."

"Yes," someone else says. "Wasn't it in Italy that they practically wiped out the songbirds at one point?"

"Yes, because people ate them," the older man replies. "And then the whole charm of the landscape disappeared too."

Stuart nods seriously as he keeps working. He can clearly feel how the others are listening to him. He has acquired a kind of natural authority in the situation. Partly because he is actually doing something, and partly because Louise sits on the board.

And he enjoys it a little.

“Something is being done,” he says after a moment, straightening up slightly.

The group immediately becomes more attentive.

“What do you mean?” one of the women asks.

“The board has already met.”

“That quickly?”

“Yes,” Stuart says with a small nod. “And some steps have been taken that I actually think are the right ones.”

“Can you say what?”

He hesitates slightly, almost enjoying the suspense.

“I can’t say exactly what yet,” he says. “But already on Monday, there will be changes.”

They look at him expectantly.

“Is it animal control?” one of the men asks.

Stuart shakes his head.

“No. Not at first.”

He lowers his voice a little.

“But we are talking about professional people.”

That seems to satisfy most of them. Several nod.

A little later, the group slowly begins to dissolve. People politely say goodbye and drift on between the gardens with coffee cups in their hands. Some talk about the weather, others about the weekend’s soccer game or next Wednesday’s community dinner.

But no one doubts that Bear will also be a topic behind many of the windows over the weekend.

## **The Letter**

The older man walks back alone through the network of pathways between the row houses. He did not say very much during the gathering at Stuart’s place — hardly anything at all, really — and yet his steps are purposeful, and his face has taken on that slightly tight, clenched expression of someone still thinking about something the others have already stopped

discussing. The sun still lies warmly across the neighborhood, and here and there people sit outside with coffee or work in their gardens. He gives a brief nod to a couple of people along the way, but without really stopping.

When he reaches his own row house, he goes straight inside, and a moment later he comes out again. Now he has a small white envelope in his hand. He remains standing by the door for a moment, looking around — not exactly suspiciously, but cautiously, like a man who prefers to avoid unnecessary questions. Then he continues down the pathways, past the playground, past the common house, and toward the home where Tom and Susan have moved in. He automatically slows his pace a little as he approaches and casts another quick glance around. No one seems to notice him. He takes out the letter, bends quickly toward the mailbox, and lets the envelope slide through the slot. He remains there for a brief moment before turning and walking quickly away again.

Inside the house, the atmosphere is entirely different. There is a faint smell of coffee and fresh woodwork, and the living room is full of half-unpacked moving boxes, curtains, and small piles of things that still have not quite found their place. Susan stands by the window with a handful of nails while Tom balances on a chair, trying to get the curtain rod straight.

“A little more to the left,” Susan says.

“You said that before.”

“Yes, but this time I mean it.”

Tom laughs quietly and hammers in another nail. Susan steps back to look at the window and says that it is definitely going to feel cozy; she can already sense it. Concentrating, Tom replies that it has admittedly been quite a long time since they last moved into a new place, and after a short pause he looks down at her and adds that he had forgotten how much work curtains actually are. Susan smiles and says that he had also forgotten how bad he is at hanging them up.

He is just about to answer when they both hear a sound out in the hallway. A small metallic clunk. Tom stops and says that something must have come through the mailbox. He turns his head toward the window

and just catches sight of the back of a person disappearing down the path outside.

“Things move fast around here,” he says with a small grin. “We barely have the curtains up before people start writing to us.”

Susan shrugs slightly and says that maybe that is perfectly normal in a place like this. Tom nods, hammers in the final nail, and says that when people live this close together and with this much community, a little privacy probably becomes important too. Then he climbs down from the chair while Susan heads toward the kitchen and says she will make coffee. Tom says that sounds like a good idea, walks out into the entryway, and finds the key to the mailbox. A moment later he opens the door facing the path and collects the mail.

There is only a single letter inside. No sender. Just a plain white envelope. He looks at it with mild puzzlement as he closes the mailbox again.

Tom walks back into the living room holding the letter, a puzzled expression on his face. He calls out to Susan, who sticks her head out from the kitchen holding the coffee pot. He says it is strange, and while she walks toward him, he is already opening the envelope.

“Is this about us?” he asks.

He pulls out the paper and reads aloud:

*We value safety and harmony here. Not everything fits in a shared community.*

There is silence for a moment. Susan takes the letter from him and reads it again more slowly. She does not look frightened, mostly just puzzled. Tilting her head slightly, she says she does not know, but that it almost sounds like a set of general values. Tom replies that maybe it is, but asks who puts things like that in people’s mailboxes. Susan shrugs a little and says that perhaps that is simply how things are done here. Tom gives a short laugh and says he certainly hopes not.

Susan walks over and places the coffee pot on the table. Calmly, she says that they also come from a completely different kind of environment. Back home, their nearest neighbor had been a kilometer away, and here people

live close together; maybe people simply do things differently. Tom is still holding the letter in his hand, searching for the right word before finally saying that it just feels a little strange. Susan nods and says that maybe it does, but there is actually nothing direct written in it. If it is about them, they will probably get an explanation later.

Tom slowly exhales and says that he supposes they will. They stand there for a moment without speaking. Then Susan hands him a cup of coffee and says with a small smile that now they should finish hanging the curtains. Tom smiles faintly back, and shortly afterward he is once again standing on the chair with the hammer in his hand while Susan holds the curtain out from the window and comments that the room already feels much more like home.

The conversation drifts on to entirely ordinary things. Where the couch should go. Whether they should put plants outside. Whether they should invite the neighbors over for coffee once they have settled in a little more. But the letter remains lying on the table, and even though neither of them says it out loud, something in the atmosphere has nevertheless changed, just slightly. As if a small awareness has been awakened.

### **Trustpilot**

The office is quiet that morning. Light falls through the window and spreads across the somewhat random stacks of papers on Harold's desk. A coffee cup stands between the folders, and a pencil lies across a notepad containing a few handwritten words that already look half forgotten. Harold sits reclined in his chair with coffee in his hand and appears completely relaxed, while Sophie sits over by the computer.

Suddenly she straightens up.

"Oh, Harold!"

He calmly lifts his gaze.

"Hmm?"

"We're actually on Trustpilot now!"

She turns the screen slightly toward him with an almost triumphant expression and says that it is a huge step. Harold nods slowly and replies in his calm, almost sleepy voice that it certainly sounds interesting. Sophie clicks quickly around and asks him to listen to the first review. She clears her throat slightly and reads aloud:

“Interesting concept. Kind people and definitely a different experience than expected. I’m still not entirely sure whether they are therapists, animal experts, or something in between, but the visit created calm in the family, and somehow things slowly changed afterward.”

Harold nods and says that it sounds perfectly fine, but Sophie immediately turns toward him and says no. She actually disagrees with him. Pointing at the screen, she asks if he cannot hear it: they still do not really understand the concept. Harold takes another sip of coffee and calmly says that it is obviously the people with the roosters. There is nothing malicious in it. They actually say that things changed afterward. Sophie quickly replies that yes, they do, but they also write that they do not know what The Pet Therapist actually is, and that is a problem. Harold looks thoughtfully at her for a moment and says that he thinks that is reading it a little harshly.

But Sophie dismisses that and clicks to the next review:

“A strangely charming experience. They almost seemed more like storytellers than consultants, but somehow people relaxed around them, and the atmosphere changed completely after they left.”

Harold cannot help smiling slightly and says that he actually likes that one very much. Sophie stares at him and asks if he seriously means that. Yes, he says, shrugging slightly. It is actually quite accurate.

“Accurate?” she repeats incredulously, turning completely toward him.

She tells him that he needs to understand one thing: people do not read reviews to find the positive parts. Harold objects that surely, they do a little, but Sophie rejects that immediately. They look for warnings. And that word there — *storytellers* — can be interpreted in far too many ways. Harold barely manages to say that he does not think it is meant that way

before she interrupts him and says that there is no professional identity in that word. None. It makes it sound as though they simply come out and tell stories. Harold is still faintly smiling and says that, well, they do sort of do that too, but Sophie says no emphatically. They help people. Professionally. Harold nods slowly and says that they do indeed do that as well.

Sophie begins pacing slowly between the desk and the window. She says these are only the first two reviews, and that this is where the tone is established. If that line is set from the beginning, then the next people may write that they were nice enough but somewhat unclear, or that it was cozy, but they were not entirely sure what The Pet Therapist had actually done. And then they are finished. Harold calmly says that surely it is not that dramatic, but Sophie sits back down in front of the computer and adds that one of the reviews only gave them four stars.

Harold looks puzzled.

“Yes?”

“And you should understand something,” she says, pointing at him with her finger. “Four stars are not four stars. They’re five minus one.”

He cannot help smiling again and says that sounds very mathematical. Sophie replies that this is how people read reviews. Five stars mean safety. Four stars mean something is wrong. Harold suggests that maybe it simply means someone thought it was fine, but Sophie firmly says that is not how things work online.

Leaning forward toward him, she says that if they do not take this seriously, they could suddenly find themselves in the middle of a shitstorm. Harold calmly sets down his coffee cup and says her name, but Sophie interrupts him and tells him to listen. They are completely dependent on people’s feedback. Silence settles over the office for a moment. Harold looks at her with his usual calm expression and slowly says that perhaps he thinks she is making the cat a little bigger than it really is.

## **A Serious Matter**

Sophie is just about to continue her analysis of the Trustpilot reviews when her phone suddenly rings. She stops in the middle of a sentence, glances briefly at the screen, and automatically straightens up in her chair. Harold immediately notices the small change in her posture, the way her shoulders become straighter, and her voice already sounds more professional before she has even answered.

“The Pet Therapist,” she says clearly.

Harold leans back slightly with his coffee cup and half listens. One only hears Sophie’s side of the conversation, but it is enough to slowly sketch out the situation. She quickly grabs a pen, repeats the word animal behavior, and writes something down. Then she mentions unrest within the community and concerns, sends Harold a brief glance, and says that of course she understands.

Her voice grows slightly deeper now, more controlled. She repeats that they want dialogue first and says that this actually sounds very responsible. Harold discreetly raises his eyebrows while Sophie continues, saying that when things like this begin to develop, it is important to act quickly. She swivels a little in her chair and explains that their method is specifically based on conversations, interviews, and observations combined with expertise in both animals and human communication.

Harold takes another sip of coffee and briefly glances toward the ceiling. Sophie continues listening, nods quickly, and says that it is absolutely perfect if the board wishes to be present along with some of the people involved. She takes even more notes and sends him another quick glance.

Then she falls silent for a moment. She hesitates slightly before cautiously asking if she may ask one question: how had they actually heard about The Pet Therapist? Harold now looks more openly interested in her reaction. She listens, nods, and repeats that it had been through recommendations. Then she hesitates again and asks whether he had also read anything about them somewhere or seen reviews. Harold can almost hear what the real question is underneath. Sophie listens a moment longer and then says, somewhat awkwardly, that that is fine. She smiles professionally

and explains that they are always trying to do their best to improve themselves.

Then she straightens up again and says that this definitely sounds like something they can help with. She writes down the address and promises that they can certainly come already that evening. A moment later she ends the call and sets the phone down. Silence settles over the office for a moment before Harold looks at her over his coffee cup and says that it certainly sounded serious.

Sophie nods slowly, sets down her pen, and says that this is exactly the kind of thing that can explode if it is not handled professionally from the very beginning. She glances briefly toward the computer with the reviews and quietly adds:

“Both in a community... and online.”

It is dark by the time the Volvo glides through the city. Inside the car it is warm. The engine hums steadily beneath them, and the streetlights pass like golden reflections across the windows and over Sophie’s face each time they drive through another intersection. Harold sits relaxed behind the wheel with both hands loosely resting on it.

After a while he says that this is actually the first time they have had to go out in the evening. Sophie nods without taking her eyes off her phone. Harold smiles faintly to himself and says that it should almost qualify for overtime pay. There is no reaction. He adds that this applies both to him and to Volter and lightly pats the dashboard.

“It’s overtime for him too, after all,” Harold adds, patting the dashboard again. For a brief moment he almost thinks Sophie is going to smile, but she does not. Instead, she sets down her phone and turns toward him with a serious expression.

“This is definitely not the time to talk about raises or overtime.”

Harold sighs almost imperceptibly and simply says that is fine. Sophie continues, saying that their company is actually under threat, and that they should instead use their energy to improve their professionalism and

become clearer in their roles. Her voice becomes more instructive now, more intense, as she emphasizes that every single case matters.

Harold keeps his eyes on the road while she continues. All it takes is the slightest bit of doubt, she says, and the shitstorm begins. Maybe tonight's story is not just about a cat, and that is exactly why it is important that they perform every single time. Every single time. Harold nods slowly, mostly just to let her finish talking, but he says nothing. He already knows the discussion is lost.

Instead, he lets his gaze drift out through the side window. The city seems quiet that evening. There is very little traffic, only a few people along the sidewalks with dogs or grocery bags, and otherwise it almost feels as though everything is shutting down for the night. The farther out they drive, the quieter it becomes, until at last the Volvo turns onto a smaller road lined with low trees and small lamps along the pathways.

"That must be it," Sophie says quietly.

### **The Common House at Night**

In front of them lies the co-housing community. Small, connected houses of varying heights are arranged around pathways and green common areas. Lights glow in many of the windows, and at the center of it all sits the common house like a natural gathering point. Warm light pours through the large windows, and as they draw closer, they can see people seated around a long table inside.

Harold slows down and quietly remarks that it looks cozy. Sophie does not answer. The Volvo rolls into the parking area and comes to a stop, the engine slowly dying away. For a moment they both remain seated in silence. Then Sophie picks up her bag with the iPad, opens the door, and steps out into the cool evening air. Harold follows, locks the car, and together they walk toward the light from the common house.

Harold and Sophie are still wearing their coats when they step inside. The darkness outside makes the contrast almost excessively cozy. The warm light from the lamps falls softly across the walls, and the air smells of coffee,

cookies, and a little of that cleaning product that somehow all community halls always seem to smell like. Harold has time to think that it reminds him of a small-town meeting in an old civic association hall.

George has already risen from the table and comes toward them with his hand extended. He welcomes them warmly and introduces himself as the one Sophie spoke to on the phone. Sophie smiles professionally and shakes his hand, after which Harold calmly introduces himself as well. George thanks them for coming so quickly, and Sophie replies in the tone she has practiced all afternoon that of course it was no trouble at all.

George leads them over to the table, where around ten people are seated together. Coffee cups, plates of cookies, and paper napkins are scattered among them, and the small talk quickly quiets down as Harold and Sophie approach. At the head of the table, Charlotte rises to her feet. She seems less talkative than George, more authoritative, like someone accustomed to ending discussions and moving meetings along. She welcomes them with a polite nod and says it is good that they were able to come.

Everyone shakes hands one by one. Some smile kindly, others a bit nervously, and it is immediately clear that people are both tense and at the same time trying to keep the atmosphere proper and civilized. Harold sits down and quickly takes in the room: the different faces, the small tensions between people, the way some already seem aligned with one another while others keep a little more distance.

George almost immediately begins speaking. Folding his hands in front of him, he explains that many of them have lived there for many years, but that there has nevertheless always been a natural flow of people coming and going that has kept the place alive. Several people nod while he continues, saying that in his experience a great many residents truly appreciate living there, something reflected in the very low turnover rate.

Gradually his voice becomes more engaged. People seek out a place like this, he says, because they want more than simply a home. They want a community. A place where you do not become merely a name on a mailbox, but where people actually remain human beings to one another.

Charlotte nods approvingly beside him while George continues speaking about openness, solidarity, and genuinely caring about one another.

“We care about each other,” he says. “That’s really the most important thing.”

He pauses briefly and explains that this is also why they invited Harold and Sophie. They react quickly when something threatens the community because they do not want things to escalate unnecessarily. The situation, he says, is that less than a week ago they welcomed new residents, Tom and Susan. Charlotte quickly adds that they seem very nice, and George agrees before continuing.

### **A Threat to the Community**

But Tom and Susan brought a forest cat with them, and it is not exactly an ordinary cat. Several people around the table nod immediately. George explains that the cat is significantly larger than normal cats and has lived in a very rural environment with a strong hunting instinct. In fact, the new residents mentioned this themselves during the communal dinner.

“They almost seemed proud of it,” one of the women murmurs.

George nods cautiously and says that may well be true. Then he sighs lightly and continues, saying that within just a few days several birds and rabbits have lost their lives, and that this has naturally created fear. Silence settles around the table. One can hear coffee cups being quietly shifted against saucers.

“A fairly significant fear,” George says quietly.

Charlotte takes over again with the calm authority that has already several times caused the little side conversations around the table to fade away on their own. First of all, she says, she would like to thank Harold and Sophie for coming on such short notice. Folding her hands in front of her, she emphasizes that this should of course not be made into something bigger than it is. And yet Harold senses that the very phrasing almost makes the situation sound bigger.

Charlotte continues, explaining that they chose to take this step before something more drastic might become necessary. The phrase *animal control* is not spoken directly this time, but it nevertheless hangs clearly in the room. She goes on to explain that the entire board is present, and she also thanks the other attendees for being able to come so quickly. In addition, they have invited some of those who feel most affected by the situation.

She turns slightly toward one of the women at the table and mentions Louise, who kindly shared her family's experiences on the community intranet so others could take precautions. Louise nods a little uncertainly. Charlotte continues by explaining that several of the young families are also represented, along with Mrs. Peterson's neighbor and a few other residents with pets.

Harold sits quietly observing. He notices the way people respond to Charlotte: the small nods, the way several automatically turn toward her when she speaks, and the almost invisible support in their expressions. At the same time, he senses something else. The story has already taken on a life of its own here. It has become larger than just a cat.

Charlotte places both hands on the edge of the table and looks toward Harold and Sophie. With a small gesture of her hand, she gives them the floor. All eyes now settle on the two visitors.

### **Professional Methods**

Sophie reacts immediately. She rises slowly, automatically adjusts the iPad lying in front of her on the table, and looks around at the group. From Harold's seat it is obvious that she has prepared thoroughly for the meeting. Every phrase already seems carefully considered in advance. She places both hands lightly against the edge of the table and offers the group her most professional smile.

"First of all," she begins calmly, "I would like to say that you have already taken a very important step by reacting early."

Several people nod immediately.

“That is often precisely the point,” she continues, “where conflicts are either resolved... or begin to grow.”

She lets her gaze move around the table and explains that their approach is built on both analysis and communication. Harold can almost hear the wording from her earlier notes as she continues, saying that they try to understand both the animal behavior, the human reactions, and the dynamics within the community surrounding the situation. She lightly places her hand on the iPad and explains that they typically work with interviews, observations, and conversations with the involved parties before recommending concrete solutions.

The room becomes very quiet. Harold takes a slow sip of coffee and leans back slightly in his chair while Sophie continues her carefully prepared introduction.

“Our method,” Sophie continues calmly, “is based on a highly analytical approach.” She rests her hand lightly on the iPad and explains that they work from verifiable material and concrete observations, which they combine with communication and the involvement of the parties concerned in order to find solutions that are both professional and livable for the people involved.

Several people around the table nod, and Sophie grows more confident now that she feels the group’s attention settling on her. She explains that this may include interviews, conversations, and in some cases analyses of behavioral patterns over time. She has barely managed to say the word *analysis* one more time before one of the men at the table suddenly rises.

He is one of the fathers from the young families. He holds his hands slightly forward, as though he had originally intended to say something quite calm and polite.

## **Surveillance**

“I’d just like to say something for the sake of clarity,” he says.

Sophie automatically stops and looks at him. He briefly meets her gaze before quickly looking around the room instead.

"We have a great deal of respect here for individual integrity and privacy," he says, and several people around the table sit up a little straighter. "Therefore, any form of surveillance..." He emphasizes the word clearly. "...or systematic questioning is not something people support here."

Charlotte shifts slightly in her chair while Sophie still tries to maintain her professional smile.

"Well, of course it would all be handled very discreetly," Sophie replies quickly. "But in certain cases, some form of observation may be necessary in order to understand what is actually going on."

She adjusts the iPad slightly in front of her and adds that it can also be important to examine behavior outside ordinary daytime hours.

She barely finishes the sentence before the man reacts much more strongly.

"Surveillance absolutely does not belong in a place like this!"

His voice is now noticeably louder, and the atmosphere around the table changes immediately.

"We need to find other methods," he continues, growing more heated as he speaks. "One of the reasons we moved here in the first place was specifically to avoid this entire development in society."

He gestures sharply through the air.

"More and more surveillance. More and more control. More and more distrust of the sovereignty of the individual."

Now he is barely looking at Sophie anymore. His gaze is directed straight at Charlotte.

"And that is exactly why we chose a place like this."

Silence settles around the table, and Harold immediately senses that the conversation is no longer only about a cat.

Charlotte raises her hand calmly, almost maternally, as though trying to lower the temperature in the room through the gesture alone.

"Our values are still completely intact," she says firmly. "There should be no doubt about that."

She sends a quick glance toward Sophie and adds that she does not believe anyone is talking about actual surveillance. The man remains standing while Charlotte continues, explaining that if at any point they were forced to observe something, it would naturally only be in a very mild form and only if it became absolutely necessary.

That immediately causes the man to react again.

"I cannot under any circumstances support that."

His voice is now so loud that several people look up in alarm.

"That's exactly how it always starts," he says. "First, it's 'mild.' Then it's 'temporary.' And eventually it becomes normal."

He points toward the table.

"This is about far more than a cat."

This time Charlotte interrupts him quickly. She still tries to maintain a calm tone as she says that perhaps this simply shows that they have entered into a discussion that is not entirely new. It is something they have dealt with before.

The man is about to respond again, but Charlotte continues and asks everyone to try to stay focused on the matter at hand. The larger principled discussion can be addressed another time, perhaps as a separate item at a board meeting.

Her calm way of saying it almost causes the tension to subside.

But only almost.

### **More Than a Cat**

Now one of the young mothers leans forward across the table. She has been quiet for a long time, but her face has grown more and more tense throughout the discussion.

"Excuse me," she says.

Everyone turns toward her.

"But honestly, I feel like all this talk about principles and democracy completely overlooks what this is really about."

She looks directly at Charlotte.

“Human beings.”

Then she places a hand against her chest.

“And especially the little ones.”

Her voice trembles now more with emotion than anger.

“I’m obviously thinking about my child.”

The room becomes very quiet.

“My child’s safety has to come before everything else.”

She shakes her head lightly.

“We can hold interviews and dialogues and form committees and discuss values...” She briefly glances toward Sophie and Harold. “...but honestly, it feels like avoidance to me.”

She leans farther forward.

“This is about taking action now. Before that predator has something much worse on its conscience.”

George can clearly feel the situation slipping away from him. He straightens slightly in his chair and once again tries to pull the threads together.

“Now, listen...” he says with a somewhat strained smile. “This is exactly why we have a community like this.”

He looks around at them and reminds them that they usually enjoy one another’s company very much and that they have always had a tradition of talking things through instead of reacting desperately or emotionally overwhelmed. He even tries to laugh a little and says that this is actually part of what makes the place special.

But the speech lands heavily around the table. Almost awkwardly. In fact, it seems to open things up even more.

### **Old Frustrations**

“The problem is precisely that we talk and talk and talk,” says one of the men farther down the table. “And nothing ever happens.”

“Exactly,” says another.

Now voices begin overlapping one another.

“What about the garden fences?”

“Yeah!”

“We voted on those two years ago!”

“And what about the pond?” says the young mother. “It’s still not fenced in.”

“That water is far too deep. It’s a drowning hazard for children.”

“We’ve been saying that for ages.”

One man, speaking in a hard tone, says that the values in this community honestly need to be reexamined, and another nods emphatically and adds that these things always come back to the leadership in the end.

He sends a pointed glance toward Charlotte.

“To put it bluntly, maybe there are also some people on the board who have been sitting there a little too long.”

Several people murmur in agreement.

“Maybe some people are no longer really in touch with what’s actually going on here.”

He continues, saying that this is certainly something he intends to bring up at the general assembly, and whether perhaps it is time for a genuine change in leadership.

Harold sits quietly, observing everything. He can almost physically feel the issue drifting farther and farther away from the cat. It is no longer about dead birds and missing rabbits, but about old tensions, old conflicts, and frustrations that have clearly been lying beneath the surface for a long time.

## **The Dirty Landry**

Beside him, Sophie has completely lost control of the situation. She now sits in silence with her arms drawn tightly against her body and the iPad closed in front of her. Every time someone mentions words like *surveillance*, *leadership*, or *criticism*, she looks more and more as though she would rather disappear from the room entirely.

Charlotte once again tries to regain control.

“Well...” she says, raising both hands slightly. “Perhaps we should be careful not to air all our dirty laundry.”

That immediately causes several people to react.

“But that’s exactly what we never do!” one woman says.

“Yeah, and then it just piles up!”

Charlotte still tries to keep her voice calm and says that she can hear there are many things weighing on people. She nods stiffly and adds that she has noted everything and that they can address it at future meetings and, of course, at the general assembly as well.

George slowly takes over the conversation again, though this time much more uncertainly.

“I have to admit,” he says quietly, “this has taken me a little by surprise.”

The room grows quieter around the table.

He looks at them one by one.

“I honestly had no idea there was this much dissatisfaction.”

He smiles briefly and sadly.

“I really only accepted this volunteer role as contact person in order to help with the current issue involving the cat.”

He looks down for a moment.

“I absolutely had no intention of ending up at odds with any of you.”

His gaze moves around among the neighbors and then drops back down to the table.

“So, I truly am sorry,” he says softly. “If that’s what this ends up becoming.”

Silence settles again. Not true calm, but the kind of silence in which people begin turning toward the person beside them and quietly resuming smaller conversations in subdued little groups. A few shake their heads. Others nod eagerly to one another and continue the discussions in short, whispered sentences that somehow make the atmosphere feel even more unsettled. Coffee cups are moved. A chair creaks. Someone sighs loudly.

Then Charlotte slowly rises to her feet.

The movement alone causes several people to automatically fall silent again.

She first sends a quick glance around the room and then looks toward Harold and Sophie.

“Well...” she says with a small, almost apologetic smile. “As you can probably tell, we’re quite fond of discussions here in the community.”

A few people chuckle briefly.

“And that doesn’t necessarily have to be a bad thing in itself.”

She adjusts her sweater slightly and says that perhaps they should try to steer the conversation back on track a little. Then she turns more clearly toward Harold and Sophie.

“So, I’d actually like to give the floor back to you.”

Sophie barely reacts.

She still sits slightly leaned back with her arms close against her body and her gaze fixed somewhere between the coffee cup and her closed iPad. Her entire professional presentation has long since slipped through her fingers, and so Charlotte continues in a more conciliatory tone, suggesting that perhaps they should ask their guests to propose an actual plan of action.

The room becomes quiet again. Everyone’s attention now settles on Harold and Sophie. Harold remains seated for a moment without speaking before slowly leaning forward over the table. He loosely folds his hands in front of him and lets his gaze move calmly around among the faces — not quickly and not nervously, but almost deliberately searching for eye contact with as many people as possible before he begins speaking. Even the way he does it softens the atmosphere slightly.

## **Rumors**

Finally, he nods faintly.

“Yes,” he says calmly. “I think perhaps the first thing I’ve understood is that this probably isn’t only about a cat.”

No one says anything, and Harold continues in the same quiet voice. He explains that this is actually important to understand, because things

sometimes grow — especially when people live close together, and especially when people genuinely want to get along with one another. He sends a small glance toward George, who almost relievedly nods back.

Then Harold leans back slightly again and continues, saying that if you ask him, he does not think they should begin with surveillance or committees. A few people smile faintly at the remark. Instead, he believes they should start much more simply.

“We need to speak with the people this is actually about.”

He goes on to explain that their best experience has always been to talk as quickly as possible with the central people in the situation — the people whom everything apparently concerns. He openly admits that they may not be able to solve anything, but that it is important to speak with them before even more rumors begin spreading.

The word *rumors* hangs in the air for a moment. Some of the attendees look down. Others keep their gaze almost defiantly fixed on him, while a few still seem angry and others skeptical. And yet the atmosphere shifts slightly, as though someone has suddenly opened a window and let fresh air into the room.

Beside Harold, Sophie straightens a little in her chair again. It is obvious that she is relieved Harold has taken control in his usual quiet way.

Charlotte leans forward and slowly asks whether he is therefore suggesting that they speak with the new couple, Tom and Susan.

Harold nods and replies that he is actually suggesting the meeting dissolve, because he does not believe they will get much farther with the discussion right now. Instead, he proposes that Sophie and he quietly pay the new residents a visit afterward and hear the situation from their side.

He smiles almost apologetically and adds that he cannot promise them very much, but that he genuinely believes it is the only way forward.

Charlotte remains seated for a moment, looking around at the others. Some do not react, others nod slowly, but no one protests. Finally, she nods herself and says that in that case they will do exactly that. She turns toward George and asks him to continue as the contact person, which he

immediately agrees to. All reporting should go through him so he can keep her informed.

Harold slowly rises first, and Sophie follows, quickly gathering up her iPad and notes. The room has become relatively quiet now. A few residents have already begun carrying coffee cups out toward the kitchen, while others stand in small groups speaking quietly among themselves. But the conversations are no longer only about the cat.

George accompanies Harold and Sophie toward the door, and behind them the low hum of voices continues inside the common house as the door opens out into the dark evening.

Outside, a light drizzle has begun. Not much, just the kind of fine rain that hangs in the air and makes the darkness seem damp and shining. The streetlamps along the pathways cast yellowish light across the wet paving stones, and the entire area feels quiet again after the meeting in the common house.

Harold pulls his jacket a little tighter around himself and asks whether they should wait in the car for a bit, but Sophie quickly shakes her head and replies that they may as well get it over with. Her voice reveals that she is still in a kind of professional state of alert and has not yet fully come down from the meeting.

They jog lightly through the rain between the row houses toward the address George explained to them. Lights glow in many of the surrounding windows — television screens, plants in windowsills, and the shadows of people moving around inside completely ordinary Saturday evenings. When they arrive at the house, they can already see moving boxes stacked along the walls through the windows.

“New people,” Harold says quietly.

Sophie merely nods.

### **Something Never Arrived**

Harold rings the bell, and a moment later the door is opened by Susan. She

looks friendly and relaxed and automatically smiles at them before asking somewhat curiously whether they live there too.

Harold calmly explains that they do not, but that they would nevertheless very much like to come inside. Susan immediately steps aside and invites them in.

Inside the entryway they hang up their coats. The air smells faintly of coffee and new woodwork, and several moving boxes still stand along the walls. Susan offers them coffee and explains with a small laugh that her husband Tom is still upstairs hanging curtains. A muffled thump can be heard from upstairs, and she comments with a smile that even in an open community like this, people still sometimes need a little privacy. She shakes her head slightly and says it feels strange to move after so many years in the same place.

Harold nods understandingly and sends Sophie a brief glance before saying that perhaps they should properly introduce themselves. They come from a small company, he explains, called *The Pet Therapist*.

Susan looks surprised.

“That sounds interesting,” she says.

Sophie straightens slightly again and explains that the reason for their visit actually concerns their cat.

At that very moment Tom comes downstairs. He wipes his hands on his pants, walks toward them kindly, and says with a small smile that perhaps they can explain what all this is about. He takes out the letter and places it on the table in front of them.

“We received this earlier today,” he says.

Harold and Sophie look down at the handwritten message:

*We value safety and harmony here. Not everything fits in a shared community.*

Tom looks at them and says quietly:

“Honestly, it feels a little strange.”

Harold leans slightly forward over the table and reads the handwritten message again.

*We value safety and harmony here. Not everything fits in a shared community.*

He raises his eyebrows slightly and comments that it is certainly an odd message. Sophie shakes her head as well and quietly says that it feels very indirect. Tom sits down at the table and admits that they could not quite figure out whether the letter was even about them. Harold calmly replies that it very well might be, because their visit is probably connected precisely to that letter and the rumors already beginning to circulate about their cat.

Susan looks surprised while Harold explains that they were called in by residents from the community because several people have expressed concern. He tries to say it as gently as possible and emphasizes that people probably just want to address things before they grow into something larger. At the same time, he gives them a small apologetic smile and suggests that part of it may also be connected to the way they introduced Bear during the communal dinner.

Tom cannot help laughing a little and admits that perhaps they overdid it a bit that evening. Bear is indeed large, he says, but also incredibly lazy and affectionate, and perhaps they did not make that sufficiently clear. Susan nods in agreement, and Harold leans back slightly in his chair and explains that part of it also has to do with the fact that people here live much closer together than Tom and Susan are used to. People follow one another's lives, for better and worse, he says with a small smile, and in reality, that is probably also part of what they were looking for when they moved there. Susan quietly replies that this is actually true.

Sophie has been silent for a moment but now straightens more formally and explains that someone saw a dead bird lying on their patio. Susan reacts quickly and says that she saw the bird herself and thought it must have flown into the window. But Sophie continues and explains that it is not only about the bird. Some baby rabbits are also missing, and an elderly woman has become frightened for her small dog. The rest is mostly rumors, she says, letting the words linger in the air.

Silence settles around the table. Susan sits thoughtfully looking down into her coffee cup before raising her eyes and asking whether people are really afraid of their cat. Sophie nods slowly, and Harold once again speaks in his calm voice. He explains that the residents do not know Bear the way Tom and Susan do, and when people hear about a very large and unusual cat that no one has really seen yet, and the only thing they know about it is that it is a skilled hunter, people's imaginations quickly begin working.

Tom smiles, and a small laugh escapes him. The others look at him.

He says that first of all he simply wants to thank them for coming, because he actually sees it as something positive. Also, the fact that people here react so quickly. Sophie looks slightly surprised by his tone, but Tom continues and says there is actually something they should already have told everyone at the communal dinner — but at the time they did not yet know it themselves.

Of course it had been their intention, he says, for all of them to move there together. They could hardly bring the sheep or the horses with them, but Bear had been part of their lives for many years, and therefore they had automatically imagined he would become part of their new life as well. Susan gently takes over and explains that they kept including him in their vision of the future there, but once they arrived and truly began looking at the place more closely, they actually started wondering whether he really belonged there at all.

She nods quietly toward Tom, who explains that of course it was a little sad and something they themselves had to get used to, but eventually they agreed that Bear would probably be happiest staying back at the farm. The new owners offered to keep him, Susan explains, and after some consideration they agreed that it was the best solution. It is nothing dramatic, Tom quickly emphasizes. The cat is not being put down or anything like that. He is simply being allowed to remain in the place where he feels safe, while they themselves will have to begin a little anew there. So, they called and arranged for him to stay.

“He hasn’t even been here!” Sophie exclaims in great surprise.

Harold and Sophie both look visibly startled.

“No,” Tom replies, laughing again a little, “he never even made it here. Only his reputation did. And from what you’re telling us, I’d say that was more than enough.”

Harold cannot help smiling back and quietly says that it certainly seems so.

Susan wraps her hands around the coffee cup and assures them that they have not been discouraged. They have only been there for a week and are only just beginning to move in properly. She looks around at the moving boxes and half-finished curtains before turning back to Harold and Sophie and saying that rumors exist in the countryside too.

Tom nods and adds that perhaps the only difference is that out there, people can live with them for many years without anyone ever saying them out loud.

### **The Reputation Arrives First**

The Volvo moves quietly through the nearly empty streets on the way home. The windshield wipers move slowly back and forth across the windshield with the monotonous sound heard only late at night when the traffic has disappeared and the world seems smaller. The rain has almost stopped now, and only an occasional drop strikes the glass and is immediately swept away again. Streetlights pass by like yellow reflections across the dashboard.

Harold sits with both hands on the steering wheel when he suddenly begins chuckling softly to himself.

“Well, that was remarkable,” he says. “You could certainly say that the cat’s name and reputation arrived before the cat itself ever did.”

He laughs again and says that it reminds him of the fairy tale about the one feather that turned into five dead hens.

Sophie does not answer immediately. She sits quietly staring through the windshield, and one can still sense some of the tension from the meeting lingering in her. Then Harold glances briefly over at her with a crooked smile.

“So... what do you think, Sophie? Were we professional enough? Did we have control of our roles? Or were we just telling stories?”

Sophie looks down for a moment and clearly tries to maintain her professional expression, but then she suddenly breaks into laughter anyway.

“Oh, stop it, Harold,” she says, shaking her head. “You’re teasing me.”

“Yes,” he replies contentedly. “I am.”

She picks up her phone and automatically looks at the screen. Harold asks whether any more inquiries have come in, and Sophie scrolls for a bit before stopping and saying no. After a short pause she adds:

“I also hope people have found something else to think about... something a little closer to reality.”

Harold smiles faintly without taking his eyes off the road.

Sophie puts the phone away and leans her head slightly back while looking out the side window at the dark row houses slowly passing by outside. A small smile lingers on her face while the Volvo continues quietly through the night.



# The Weight of Winning

## Home Field

The coffee machine hums softly over by the wall while the last dark drops slowly drip down into the pot. The office is warm and quiet after the morning's work. A couple of folders from their latest case still lie open on the table, and Sophie's iPad casts a faint bluish glow across her face as she sits curled up in her chair with her legs tucked beneath her.

Outside, the afternoon is beginning to turn gray.

Sophie sits for a while staring at the screen without really reading anything. Then she lifts her eyes toward Harold.

He notices it almost immediately and looks back at her over the rim of his coffee cup.

## The Common House

"I'm still a little surprised by that common house," she says after a short pause. "It turned out completely differently from what I'd imagined."

Harold doesn't say anything yet. He simply sits there calmly, listening.

"I honestly never saw it coming," she continues. "All those conflicts. It was almost like people had been walking around waiting for an excuse to tear into each other."

She shakes her head slightly and lets out a quiet laugh through her nose.

“And I have to admit; I was completely caught off guard myself. I’d actually prepared a script.”

Harold smiles quietly and nods.

“Yes,” he says. “I noticed that.”

“But I could throw that away after five minutes,” Sophie says, leaning farther back in her chair. “Everything just went in a completely different direction.”

The coffee machine gives a small click from the kitchenette corner.

Sophie sits silently for a moment. Then she looks at Harold more closely.

“But you didn’t get nervous at all.”

He shakes his head slightly without answering right away.

“You just let people talk,” she continues. “And as usual, you hadn’t written anything down. But it didn’t even seem like you were trying to control the situation.”

She pauses briefly.

### **Harold’s Way of Working**

“Do you seriously never get nervous?” she asks, this time with unmistakable admiration in her voice.

Harold doesn’t answer immediately.

He simply reaches calmly for the coffee pot, pours a little more into his cup, and sits there for a moment with his hand wrapped around the warm porcelain. Then he scratches thoughtfully at his beard and gives Sophie a crooked smile.

“Well, Sophie... first of all, I probably have to admit that I’m older than you.”

She laughs softly.

“Well, that’s certainly one way of explaining it.”

“Yeah,” he says calmly. “But it also means I’ve had more experience over the years.”

He takes a sip of coffee and glances down at the table in front of him for a moment.

"I think more than anything, over time I've just become more comfortable with my own way of working. That takes a long time. Much longer than you probably think."

Again, he scratches lightly at his beard.

"I don't walk into conversations like an empty person anymore."

Sophie sits quietly, listening.

"Believe me," he continues with a small smile, "it definitely wasn't easy for me once either. I could get insecure too. I also felt like I should have things more under control."

He leans back slightly in his chair.

"But over time I realized that rigid plans were actually often getting in my way. So little by little, I started letting them go."

Sophie still studies him carefully.

"And yes," he says with a slight shrug, "like you said, I don't really prepare that much anymore. I try more to be present. To listen to what's happening. To the atmosphere. To the things people don't quite say."

The coffee machine continues humming softly in the corner.

"My experience is really that people reveal where they stand pretty quickly if you give them enough space. Most people actually tell you a surprising amount about themselves if you're not too busy pushing your own agenda."

He smiles again, this time almost apologetically.

"But maybe the most important thing is simply that it suits me. My personality. It's not necessarily something that would suit you."

Sophie remains completely still; her eyes fixed on him.

"I think," Harold continues quietly, "that over many years I've developed a trust in my own way of working. And that trust is probably why I don't get very nervous anymore."

Sophie slowly turns the coffee cup between her hands while thinking about what he has said.

“You just make it sound so easy, Harold.”

He smiles a little but doesn’t answer yet.

“Every single time, I sit there thinking: What is this really about?” she continues. “And I did that out at the common house too. I kept trying to figure out what was actually at stake. What are people reacting to? Where is it coming from?”

She exhales softly and shakes her head.

“And honestly, I never quite get all the way to an answer.”

Harold still sits calmly, listening without interrupting her.

Then he leans slightly forward in his chair.

## **The Gym**

“Let me try to give you another example of how different we are,” he says.

“If I walked into a gym...”

Sophie already starts smiling a little.

“...I’d have absolutely no idea what to do. I’d need to follow some very strict plans and systems, and I’d probably be completely dependent on whatever trainer happened to be walking around in there.”

Sophie laughs quietly.

“And believe me,” Harold continues, “every single time I came back, I’d have forgotten everything all over again. I’d have that feeling of being slightly behind. Like everybody else understood something I still hadn’t quite figured out.”

He shrugs lightly.

“I’d probably walk around staring at the machines, hoping nobody noticed I had no clue what I was doing.”

Now Sophie laughs more openly.

“Okay, that would actually be pretty funny to watch.”

“I seriously doubt that” Harold says dryly before smiling again himself.

“But the point is,” he continues more quietly, “you don’t feel that way there. The gym is your home field. You walk in naturally. You don’t think

about the rules anymore. Your body and your mind already know how it works.”

Sophie nods slowly.

“Yeah... I guess they do.”

“And I think,” Harold says, “people underestimate how big a difference it makes to be somewhere where your own nature gets to work with you instead of against you.”

Sophie sits for a while thinking about what Harold has just said while letting her fingers glide slowly around the coffee cup.

“That’s actually a really good image,” she says after a moment. “The whole home field and away field thing. I can use that.”

Harold smiles faintly and lifts one shoulder.

“Yeah... but don’t think for a second that I’m always on home turf.”

Sophie looks at him curiously.

“I’m definitely not,” he continues calmly. “I have my doubts too.”

He pauses briefly and glances toward the window, where the afternoon light has started to darken.

“I just think my doubts exist somewhere else. More on an existential level maybe. Not so much in the work itself.”

Again, he smiles a little crookedly.

“But I can absolutely doubt the bigger lines in life. Whether I’m in the right places. Whether I’m doing the right things. Things like that.”

Sophie sits quietly for a moment, letting the words sink in.

“That’s actually funny,” she says slowly. “Because I’m rarely in doubt about who I am.”

Harold looks up at her.

“But I can become incredibly unsure in the actual moment of performance.”

Silence settles briefly between them.

Then Sophie gets up and walks over to the coffee machine.

“You want more?”

“Yes, please.”

She pours coffee for both of them, and the atmosphere lightens again.

"But I'm still holding on to this," she says with a grin as she hands him the cup. "I would genuinely love to see you in a gym."

Harold takes the cup and slowly shakes his head.

"That would be a disaster."

"It can't possibly be that bad."

"Oh yes," he says seriously. "I'd be the kind of guy standing in front of some machine for ten minutes trying to figure out whether you're supposed to pull it, push it, or sit on top of it."

Sophie bursts out laughing.

"And once people started lifting weights around me," Harold continues, "I'd probably try to look professional and end up getting smacked in the head by a resistance band."

Now both of them are laughing.

"No," he says, taking a sip of coffee. "That is definitely not my home field."

## **Performance Anxiety**

"But speaking of that," Sophie suddenly says, leaning slightly forward in her chair.

She pulls a folder toward her from the table and takes out a few printed pages lying between loose notes and a pen.

"I actually think this is the case that's made me curious."

Harold looks up over his coffee cup.

"I read through it this morning," she continues, flipping lightly through the pages. "And I think it could be about performance anxiety. I mean... without wanting to say too much yet."

Harold nods quietly.

"It's a man writing to us. He signs himself Sebastian Ashcombe."

The name almost automatically makes Sophie raise her eyebrows slightly.

"That sounds very elegant," Harold remarks dryly.

"It really does," Sophie says with a small laugh before continuing. "He says his son is training to become a jockey. Apparently, it's a family tradition."

She skims farther down the page.

"He includes a lot of details, but the main thing is that the horse refuses to run when it really matters."

Harold tilts his head slightly.

"You mean during races?"

"Yeah. Or in situations where other people are around. Competitions, training at other tracks... the horse just completely shuts down."

She turns another page.

"He also writes a little about the relationship between himself and his son. That they share this huge passion, and that he himself has been very involved in the boy's training."

"How old is the son?"

"Twelve."

Harold nods quietly.

"And then he actually writes something interesting," Sophie continues. "He's wondering himself whether his own involvement might be affecting the boy more than he realized."

"Well, at least that sounds like a man with some self-awareness," Harold says.

"Yeah... it actually does."

Sophie keeps reading a little longer.

"Otherwise, it sounds like they live somewhere pretty impressive. An old country estate that's been in the family for generations. They've kept horses out there for many years."

She smiles a little to herself.

"It almost sounds like the family has lived on horseback for generations."

Harold smiles faintly.

"What's the horse's name?"

"Silver Wake."

“That’s a beautiful name.”

“Yeah,” Sophie says. “And according to Sebastian, it supposedly has enormous potential.”

She looks a little farther down the page.

“The son’s name is Oliver, by the way. And he has a sister too. Lucy.”

“Does he mention her?”

“Yeah, a little. It sounds like she’s very interested in horses too. But in a different way.”

Harold looks at her questioningly.

“How?”

Sophie shrugs lightly.

“It’s hard to explain. But it sounds more like she loves the animals themselves than the competitions.”

She lifts her eyes from the paper.

“So...” she says slowly. “It really could be performance anxiety.”

“Maybe,” Harold says calmly. “But we should probably be careful not to get nervous ourselves before we even get out there.”

He smiles a little.

Sophie laughs softly and places the papers back on the table.

Silence settles between them for a moment.

Then suddenly she looks over at Harold again.

### **Born Into Competition**

“Do you think people are actually born for something like that?”

“For what?”

“For competing.”

Harold thinks for a moment.

“No,” he says slowly. “I don’t really think so.”

He takes a small sip of coffee.

“But I do think some people are born into it.”

## **Volter and the Open Road**

It's late afternoon by the time they leave the city in the Volvo.

The traffic gradually thins around them, and the houses slowly begin giving way to fields and low fences along the roads.

The engine coughs a little irritably just as Harold changes gears, and the car jerks slightly forward.

Sophie immediately throws a skeptical glance toward the dashboard to see if anything starts blinking.

Almost instinctively, Harold places a hand on the steering wheel and says,

"Yeah, yeah... it just needs to warm up a little, you know that."

He pats the dashboard lightly.

"We just have to give it a little patience at first."

Sophie leans back slightly in her seat.

"We'll wait, then," she says dryly.

She lets her gaze drift around the car, almost as if making sure everything is still exactly the way it's supposed to be. On the back seat lies a bag of tools and a few old folders from previous cases. Dog hair clings to the upholstery in several places, and near the gearshift sits an empty paper cup from a gas station they visited a few days earlier.

The whole thing feels messy in a homelike sort of way, as if the car has gradually become an extension of their little business.

The engine settles down a little more.

Sophie turns slightly toward Harold.

"So how do you actually feel about horses?"

Harold nods a little to himself, as if he first needs to think about the question.

"Well..." he says with a faint smile. "For starters, I'm not afraid of them. Not normally, anyway."

Sophie laughs softly.

"Well, that's reassuring."

“But I wouldn’t exactly call myself experienced either,” he continues. “What about you?”

Sophie shrugs slightly.

“Several of my girlfriends were horse girls back when we were in school. As soon as classes ended, they’d jump on their bikes and ride out to the horses they took care of.”

She smiles faintly at the memory.

“I went along a couple of times too.”

“And?”

“I could never really get past the smell,” she says honestly. “It never became... romantic to me.”

Harold begins laughing quietly.

“That’s probably healthy too.”

“Yeah,” Sophie says, looking out the window toward the fields. “So, it definitely never became my great passion.”

Sophie watches him for a moment with a crooked smile.

“It’s actually funny,” she says. “You were very quick to say you aren’t afraid of horses.”

She raises her eyebrows slightly.

“Is there something behind that?”

Harold starts smiling.

“Good catch.”

He adjusts his grip on the wheel slightly while the Volvo continues down the country road.

## **Sonny Boy**

“Well... I think boys maybe have a slightly different relationship with horses.”

Sophie looks at him curiously.

“We grew up with cowboy movies and things like that. Horses were something free and wild and powerful. Kind of like motorcycles are for some people today.”

He chuckles softly to himself.

"And I had a classmate whose family kept horses out on their farm. Honestly, it gave him a fair amount of status in school, even though he definitely wasn't some academic genius."

"That sounds very believable," Sophie says dryly.

"Yeah," Harold says. "And naturally I thought it sounded exciting. So, I made a deal with him that I could pay part of my allowance to come out and try riding."

Sophie is already smiling.

"So, one day I biked home from school with him."

For a moment he gazes dreamily ahead while the landscape slides past outside.

"And actually, it started out fine. I think it was an old horse they let me ride. It was unbelievably lazy. Which suited me perfectly."

Sophie laughs softly.

"But I still remember the feeling of climbing up on it. The ground suddenly felt incredibly far away."

"Were you nervous?"

"Yeah," Harold says honestly. "I definitely wasn't comfortable."

He smiles a little.

"But we wandered around out there, and everything was pretty peaceful... right up until his older brother came home."

"Oh no," Sophie says, already laughing.

"Yeah," Harold says. "Because the older brother was a completely different type. My classmate was kind of heavy and slow-moving. But the older brother... he was one of those confident cowboy-jockey types."

He laughs quietly at the memory.

"And of course he had to go out and train with his horse. Sonny Boy, I remember that was its name."

He says the name almost thoughtfully.

"And Sonny Boy definitely wasn't the kind of horse that just wandered around lazily."

Sophie is openly smiling now.

"It took off galloping?"

"Oh, absolutely. Fast. And suddenly my old horse gets the brilliant idea that it wants to join in too."

Sophie starts laughing again.

"And then I can promise you things got interesting."

Harold lifts his shoulders slightly.

"All of a sudden, we're tearing across the field. Everything starts bouncing and shaking, and before I know it, we're apparently jumping over obstacles too."

Now Sophie laughs out loud.

"I can literally picture it."

"Yeah," Harold says dryly. "It was not a graceful experience."

He shakes his head with a smile.

"Maybe two minutes later, I fall off."

"But you got back on?"

"Well, you have to," Harold says. "'Get back on the horse,' as they say."

"Very heroic."

"Yeah, that lasted about five minutes."

Sophie laughs even harder.

"And then I fell off again."

He gives her a crooked smile.

"And that's where my promising riding career came to an end."

Sophie is still quietly laughing.

"But you're still not afraid of them?"

Harold thinks for a moment.

"No," he says calmly. "I'm really not."

Sophie sits quietly for a moment after the story while the Volvo continues down the country road with its steady, slightly uneven engine noise beneath them.

Then she pulls her legs up slightly beneath her in the seat and looks over at Harold again.

“But considering neither of us is exactly a horse expert...” she says. “How do you think we’re actually going to handle this case?”

Harold keeps his eyes on the road ahead.

“Slowly and calmly,” he says.

Sophie smiles a little.

“We’ll take it as it comes.”

He changes gears carefully.

“Remember, Sophie... by now we’ve dealt with all sorts of things.”

He almost starts counting on his fingers against the steering wheel.

“Forest cats. Snakes. Raccoons. Stressed-out turtles.”

Sophie is already beginning to laugh.

“And parrots speaking in different voices,” Harold continues.

“Yeah, I’ll never forget that one.”

“No,” Harold says dryly. “Neither will I.”

He smiles faintly.

“The point is, it’s never really about the species itself. We look at what’s happening around them.”

Just as he says it, the Volvo lets out a dissatisfied cough from the engine.

Automatically, Harold pats the dashboard with the flat of his hand.

“Easy there, Volter,” he says calmly. “We’re still here.”

Sophie bursts out laughing.

Harold smiles crookedly.

“The two of us, Sophie... and Volter.”

He nods slightly toward the steering wheel.

“We solve cases.”

### **Ashcombe Stables**

Whether it has any real effect on Volter to be praised is hard to say. But from that moment on, the Volvo moves a little more rhythmically down the road, as if it has decided to cooperate after all.

After another half hour or so of driving, the roads begin to grow narrower, and the landscape around them opens up.

“We must be almost there,” Sophie says, glancing down at Google Maps on her phone.

Then she suddenly lifts her head.

“Wow... look at that sign.”

A little farther ahead, on the right side of the road, stands a large, elegant sign that leaves no doubt they have come to the right place.

As they get closer, they can see the dark wrought iron shaped like a stylized horse’s head. Beneath it, in classic lettering, it says:

## **ASHCOMBE STABLES**

Sophie lets out a little breath through her teeth.

“Okay... this is clearly not just someone with a pony in the backyard.”

Harold smiles quietly to himself.

The Volvo turns onto the gravel road and continues slowly through an avenue of tall, neatly trimmed poplar trees. Their trunks are so thick that even Harold can immediately tell the place must have been in the family’s possession for generations.

Farther ahead, large riding arenas begin to appear behind white wooden fences.

Everything looks well kept. Almost perfectionistic.

At the same time, there is something old and nostalgic about the place, as if time moves a little more slowly out here.

## **The Main House**

Sophie now sits completely still, looking out the window.

When the main house finally appears between the trees, she reacts spontaneously.

“Wow.”

It does not look quite like a manor house, but close. A large, beautifully restored country property with several long stable buildings around it and wide gravel areas without a single weed.

In a paddock near the house, four or five large horses run around in the low afternoon light.

Harold also looks out over the grounds.

"Yes..." he says quietly. "We're definitely not on our home field here."

Sophie smiles without taking her eyes off the place.

"No," she says. "But it looks like they are."

Volter crunches over the gravel as they slowly approach the courtyard.

The closer they get to the buildings, the clearer it becomes how carefully maintained the place is. The white fences are freshly painted. The roofs of the stable buildings look newly restored, and even the gravel in front of the house lies smooth and raked without a single blade of grass sticking up.

"This is almost a whole little riding empire," Sophie murmurs.

Harold nods slightly without answering.

On the other side of the paddock, they can now hear the muted sound of hooves against the ground, and one of the horses lifts its head and looks briefly in their direction before continuing along the fence.

The Volvo rolls the last stretch toward the main house and stops with a small sigh from the engine.

Almost at the same moment, the front door opens.

A tall man in light riding breeches and a dark sweater comes out onto the steps with long, assured strides. A little behind him follows a boy.

Sophie automatically throws Harold a quick glance, as if they are both thinking the same thing: That must be Sebastian and Oliver.

Sebastian Ashcombe looks younger than Harold had imagined from the email. Not young, exactly, but upright and well kept in the way people often become when they have used their bodies all their lives without ever letting go of discipline.

There is something almost English about him. Something elegant and controlled.

The boy beside him surprises Harold more.

Oliver is small. Not just young, but almost delicate. At first glance, he could pass for a boy of eight or nine, even though they know he is twelve.

But at the same time, he stands with a straightness that clearly reveals many hours on horseback.

“He looks even smaller in real life,” Sophie murmurs softly.

Harold nods almost imperceptibly.

Sebastian is already on his way toward them before they have made it out of the car.

“Mr. and Mrs... no, sorry,” he says with a warm laugh as Harold steps out. “Harold and Sophie. I’m so glad you could come.”

His handshake is firm and hearty, and, surprisingly, he briefly places his other hand on Harold’s shoulder, almost as if they already know each other a little.

“It means a great deal to us that you made the trip out here.”

“Thank you,” Harold says calmly. “You live in a remarkable place.”

Sebastian smiles proudly and casts a quick glance over the property.

“Yes... we’re very fond of it.”

Then he turns toward the boy.

“And this is Oliver.”

Oliver gives them a slightly cautious nod.

“Hello.”

“Hello,” Sophie says kindly. “These are beautiful surroundings to train in.”

Oliver smiles briefly, almost shyly.

“Yeah...”

Sebastian immediately takes over the conversation again, though not in a harsh way.

“Oliver works very seriously at it,” he says. “He has both the talent and the discipline. Not everyone has both.”

Oliver looks down for a brief moment.

“But come inside,” Sebastian continues quickly, making an inviting gesture toward the house. “Claire has coffee ready, and I think Lucy is in there somewhere too.”

They follow Sebastian up the broad granite steps in front of the house.

The steps are worn in the middle from many years of use, but still carefully maintained. Harold notices things like that without quite knowing why. Maybe because places where people have lived for a long time always say something about them.

### **The Ashcombe Family**

Inside, it is warm.

Not showily warm, but homey. The scent of coffee and something freshly baked still hangs in the air, and the floors creak softly beneath their shoes as Sebastian leads them through the entryway.

"This house has been in the family for a long time," he says almost apologetically, as if he feels the need to explain the surroundings. "My great-grandfather started with the horses out here. Back then it was mostly thoroughbreds and a couple of Arabians he imported."

He smiles a little at the thought.

"And then I suppose the rest of the family simply caught the fever."

Sophie lets her gaze move around the living room as they enter.

On the walls hang framed photographs of horses and riders from different eras. In several places, silver cups and smaller trophies stand in glass cases or on dark wooden shelves.

In one photograph, a younger Sebastian stands beside a large dark horse with his arm around its neck. In another, a much younger Oliver sits on the back of what they both guess must be Silver Wake.

But there are ordinary family photographs too. Summer pictures. Birth days. A picture of all four of them in front of the house.

It makes the place feel less formal.

A door to the kitchen opens, and a woman in an apron comes in with a warm smile.

"So, you found your way out here," she says.

"Claire," Sebastian says, making a small gesture of introduction. "My wife."

Claire shakes Harold's hand first, then Sophie's.

"We're truly glad you were willing to come," she says sincerely. "Sebastian has told us quite a bit about your little business."

Sophie smiles a little.

"I'm not entirely sure how little he imagines it is."

Claire laughs softly.

"Well, he made it sound promising, at least."

The atmosphere lightens around them almost immediately.

"But come and sit down," Claire continues. "The coffee is getting cold."

In the middle of the living room stands a table set with coffee cups, homemade cake, and small plates. Harold notices almost automatically that there is still one empty chair.

Claire sets down the coffee pot and looks toward the door leading into the hallway.

"Lucy?" she calls. "Coffee."

A moment passes.

Then a girl comes in from the other side of the house.

She does not look much like Oliver. In fact, not at all.

Where Oliver seems small and almost elegantly slight, Lucy has a more solid and calm presence. She is wearing a large wool sweater and worn jeans, and her hair is gathered a little carelessly at the nape of her neck, as if she has been out in the stable until only a few minutes ago.

She stops for a moment when she sees the guests.

"This is our daughter Lucy," Claire says.

Lucy smiles a little cautiously.

"Hi."

"Hi," Sophie says kindly.

Harold notices something almost immediately: Lucy does not look like someone trying to impress anyone.

And yet she may be the most natural person in the entire house.

The mood around the table becomes surprisingly relaxed very quickly.

Coffee is passed around, plates are shifted back and forth, and Claire pours with the calm assurance people acquire when they have done the same thing a thousand times before.

Harold has already commented on the cake twice.

"This is really dangerous," he says seriously as he cuts another small piece. "You keep convincing yourself you're only having one more."

Claire begins to laugh.

"Sebastian says that too."

"Yes, but he probably rides it off," Harold says dryly.

Sebastian smiles.

"I did, at least once."

Sophie sits with the coffee cup between her hands and looks around the living room once more.

"It actually wasn't hard to find you," she says. "You've made it very clear with that big sign out by the road."

Claire smiles a little helplessly.

"Yes... there are horses everywhere here."

She casts a quick glance around the room at the pictures and trophies.

"That tends to happen automatically."

"It must be hard to hide," Harold says.

"It would also be strange to try," Sebastian says, leaning back slightly in his chair. "It is our whole life."

There is no boasting in his voice, only a statement of fact.

"Horses have always taken up a lot of space here," he continues. "Not only for me."

He nods toward Oliver.

"Oliver has practically been sitting on a horse since he could walk."

Oliver smiles a little down at the table without saying anything.

"And Lucy," Sebastian continues, turning toward his daughter. "She spends half her life out in the stables."

Lucy shrugs lightly with a small smile.

"That's probably about right."

"In fact, we'd never be able to keep the whole thing running without her," Sebastian says.

This time Lucy says nothing, but Harold notices Claire sending her daughter a quick look across the table. Not dramatic. More like a quiet confirmation.

"So it isn't just father and son, then?" Sophie asks.

"No, no," Claire says. "Lucy is just as interested in the horses."

"Just not quite the same part of it," Lucy says calmly.

Sebastian leans back slightly in his chair with his coffee cup in his hand, as if he is now finally arriving at the part of the conversation that matters to him.

"But the reason I wrote to you," he begins, "is mainly about the racing."

He casts a glance toward Oliver.

"That is probably where Oliver is truly following in my footsteps."

Oliver looks down a little while Sebastian continues.

"And I must admit, with a certain amount of shame..." He is now clearly smiling with pride. "...that the boy probably has at least as much talent as his father."

Claire shakes her head lightly with a small smile, as if she has heard the phrasing before.

## **Silver Wake**

"And that certainly doesn't make the situation worse," Sebastian continues, "that we've also got a horse like Silver Wake."

The name alone changes the mood around the table a little.

"He really has something special," he says, more quietly now. "And together, those two could have a very big future."

Sophie looks over at Oliver.

"What does it actually take to become a good jockey?" she asks. "Is it mostly physical? I can see Oliver doesn't weigh very much."

"No, no," Sebastian says at once, leaning forward again. "It's much more than that."

Now he speaks almost like a man giving a lesson.

"It's an elite sport. It takes mental toughness. Focus. Timing. And perhaps most of all, discipline."

He briefly places his hand on Oliver's shoulder again.

"And he has that, the boy. You should see how much he trains."

Oliver smiles a little tensely.

"He takes it very seriously," Sebastian continues. "Maybe more seriously than I did at his age."

"All right, all right, easy now, Sebastian," Claire cuts in with a warm smile.

Sebastian stops mid-sentence and looks over at her.

Claire turns to Harold and Sophie.

"Every once in a while," she says almost confidentially, "we do try to remind ourselves that Oliver is just a boy in sixth grade."

A small laugh passes around the table.

Oliver looks down into his coffee cup with a slightly shy smile, while Sebastian breathes out through his nose and leans back again.

"Yes, yes," he says mildly. "Of course, that's true too."

"Horses mean a lot to you too, don't they, Oliver?" Sebastian asks, turning toward his son.

Everyone around the table automatically looks at him.

Oliver straightens a little in his chair.

"Yes," he says quietly. "They do."

He shrugs slightly.

"I like it. Especially when it goes fast."

"Yes," Sebastian takes over quickly with a satisfied nod. "And you're very good at it too."

Oliver looks down again while Sebastian continues.

"We just have this little problem at the moment that we need to get past."

He says it with an almost professional calm, as if challenges are simply something one naturally deals with along the way.

“And that’s perfectly normal,” he continues. “When you work seriously at something, different challenges appear along the way. If you want to reach the top, you have to be able to perform on every parameter.”

Claire takes a small sip of coffee without saying anything.

“And right now,” Sebastian says, “we have one little thing we need to look at.”

He leans slightly toward Harold and Sophie.

“As I wrote to you, Silver Wake sometimes stops right in the middle of everything.”

Harold nods quietly.

“Oliver has trouble getting him going again. Or getting him to perform properly.”

### **Something Between Them**

Sebastian shakes his head slightly.

“And the strange thing is that it mostly happens when we’re away. Training somewhere else, or at the small races we’ve been to.”

He looks over at Oliver again.

“Here at home, it almost always works.”

Oliver still sits quietly without interrupting.

“It really is rather strange,” Sebastian continues. “Because Oliver, as far as I can see, does everything right.”

There is genuine puzzlement in his voice.

Once again, he sends his son a proud look.

“He follows instructions. He trains seriously. He works hard. So I have a hard time understanding what’s actually going wrong.”

“But you do suggest yourself in your message to us,” Sophie says carefully, “that it might have something to do with the relationship between you and Oliver. That the two of you may have become a little too close around it.”

Sebastian nods slowly and looks down at the table for a moment before answering.

"Yes," he says thoughtfully. "You're right."

He takes a deep breath.

"I've thought about that several times. You do see it sometimes when fathers train their own children. Or when a close family member becomes both coach and... well, all sorts of other things at the same time."

He smiles a little crookedly.

"Something can slip in that you become blind to yourself."

Claire sits quietly and listens while Sebastian continues.

"And I've certainly considered that it could be part of this."

He looks quickly at Oliver.

"It's not because we don't get along," he adds quickly. "Quite the opposite. We actually have a lot of fun together."

Oliver nods a little awkwardly.

"But yes," Sebastian says more calmly. "It's certainly possible that it plays a role too."

## **Lucy**

A brief silence settles around the table.

Then Harold turns his gaze toward Lucy.

"But Lucy... you like horses too, don't you?"

Lucy looks up, almost surprised by the question.

"Yes," she says at once. "I love horses."

A warmth enters her voice that has not been there before.

"They actually mean everything to me."

She smiles a little and lifts her shoulders.

"I love them more than anything on earth."

Sophie cannot help smiling.

"But" Lucy continues, "I'm not competitive like those two."

She casts a laughing glance toward Sebastian and Oliver.

"I don't really care about winning anything."

Claire smiles quietly to herself.

"I like the everyday life out in the stable best," Lucy continues. "That's really what matters to me."

"So, you're a real horse girl," Sophie says with a slightly humorous smile. Lucy accepts the label with a small shrug and a smile in return.

"I suppose you could say that."

"You'll see soon enough," Claire says warmly. "When she shows you around."

Harold nods calmly.

"Yes... we know we're not exactly horse experts."

Sebastian begins to smile a little.

"And we're not sports psychologists either," Harold continues. "But our work is mostly about observing what happens between people and animals."

He takes a small sip of coffee.

"And that is something we've usually been able to help with."

Claire looks over at Sebastian with a small nod.

### **The Best Part of the Place**

As the conversation slowly ebbs away and the coffee cups around the table are gradually emptied, Sebastian is the first to stand.

"Well," he says, rubbing his hands lightly together, "Oliver and I will go over and get Silver Wake ready."

Oliver rises almost at the same time as his father, as if he is used to the rhythm of it.

"Okay," Lucy says calmly. "Then I can show them the stables in the meantime."

Sebastian nods with satisfaction.

"Perfect."

He briefly places his hand on Oliver's shoulder.

"We'll meet at the riding arena in a little while."

Oliver throws a quick glance toward Lucy before following his father out of the room.

Claire remains seated for another moment, her hands around her coffee cup.

"Well, then I suppose we'd better go see the famous stables," she says with a small smile and pushes back her chair.

Lucy gets up too.

Harold rises slowly and automatically carries his coffee cup toward the kitchen before Claire stops him with a gesture of her hand.

"No, no, just leave that. You're guests."

"I'm not very good at remembering that," Harold murmurs.

Claire laughs softly.

They all walk together through the hallway and on toward the back door. Even before Lucy opens it, they can feel the cooler air and the faint smell of hay and animals drifting slowly into the house.

Lucy pulls the door open.

"So..." she says, glancing briefly back at them. "Welcome to the best part of the place."

Sophie and Harold are both surprised the moment they step into the stable.

They have probably both imagined something quite different. Something darker. Messier. The classic idea of a stable with straw on the floor, a damp smell, old tools in the corners, and cobwebs up beneath the rafters.

But here it is bright.

Almost surprisingly bright.

The large windows along the roof let the afternoon sun fall in long stripes across the floor, and everywhere there is an almost meticulous order. The floors are swept. The stalls are clean and brushed. Even the metal around the doors and fittings shines as if someone has just polished it.

The air smells of hay, leather, and animals, but in a mild, warm way.

"Okay," Sophie murmurs, looking around. "This is almost... cozy."

Lucy smiles a little.

"Yes. Dad can't stand it when things are messy."

“I can actually understand that” Harold says, letting his gaze move through the stable.

Outside each stall hangs a small dark nameplate with elegant lettering.

Lucy moves among them with ease, and even before she reaches the first stall, several of the horses begin reacting to her. A muzzle pushes forward between the bars, and farther down there is a low whinny.

Lucy automatically pats the nearest horse on the neck, almost without thinking about it.

“This is Hollow Crown,” she says. “He looks very proud, but he’s actually the biggest coward in the entire stable.”

The large dark horse breathes warmly through his nostrils.

“He doesn’t like plastic bags.”

Sophie begins to smile.

Lucy moves on to the next stall.

“And this is Briar Vale. She gets nervous if people shout.”

“Can horses really sense that kind of thing?” Sophie asks.

Lucy looks almost surprised at her.

“Yes, of course.”

She does not say it arrogantly. Just as something completely natural.

At the next stall, a light-colored horse quickly sticks his head out and immediately tries to grab the zipper on Sophie’s jacket.

“Foxmere,” Lucy says with resignation. “He steals everything.”

Sophie pulls back, startled.

“Okay, I actually like him.”

Lucy laughs quietly for the first time.

They continue farther down the stable.

“Midnight Thread,” Lucy says at the next stall. “She gets grumpy if she doesn’t get her food on time.”

“So do I,” Harold jokes.

Lucy smiles.

The farther they walk, the clearer it becomes that Lucy knows every single horse as an individual. Not just their names, but their temperaments, their little habits and peculiarities.

### **Horse Girl**

She does not talk about them as performances. She talks about them as personalities.

And as she walks there between the stalls, her hands gliding lightly across the woodwork and the warm flanks of the animals, she seems more at home than anywhere else Harold has yet seen her.

Sophie stands quietly for a moment in the middle of the stable, looking around at the horses moving calmly inside the stalls around them.

Then she suddenly laughs a little to herself.

"This really is your family."

Lucy starts laughing too.

"Yeah," she says. "The family is probably a little bigger than people imagine when they're sitting around the coffee table inside."

Sophie smiles and looks farther down the row of stalls.

### **The Empty Stall**

"And where does Silver Wake stay?"

Lucy points toward the first stall closer to the door.

"There."

The nameplate hangs on the dark wood:

SILVER WAKE

"He's mostly Oliver's horse," Lucy says, walking over toward the stall, which is empty at the moment.

She places a hand against the wood.

"But..." She smiles a little crookedly. "I'm probably the one who knows him best."

Sophie looks at her questioningly.

“Oliver doesn’t exactly spend his time mucking out stalls,” Lucy continues. “And that’s completely fine. We all have our own interests and responsibilities.”

She says it without bitterness. Just matter-of-factly.

“But Silver Wake is part of my family out here too.”

### **What Horses Feel**

“When we talk about him,” she continues more quietly, “he’s probably one of the most sensitive horses we have.”

Harold listens attentively.

“He pays attention to all of us. All the time, actually.”

She glances briefly toward Harold.

“That’s probably part of his talent too.”

Sophie nods slowly.

“But it also makes him more vulnerable,” Lucy continues. “And maybe a little harder for Oliver to handle.”

“Does he have a particular temperament?” Harold asks.

Lucy thinks for a moment.

“Yeah... I guess you could say that.”

“He has the speed and energy of a racing horse. But he also has another side to him.”

She pauses briefly.

“He really doesn’t like people watching him.”

Sophie looks surprised.

“What do you mean?”

Lucy shrugs slightly.

“He reacts very clearly to moods. And like my dad says... especially when they’re at competitions or training somewhere else.”

“So it’s almost like he doesn’t completely feel safe.”

Harold nods thoughtfully without saying anything right away.

In the distance, Sebastian’s voice echoes from out on the yard.

“Lucy!”

She turns her head slightly.

“We’re coming!”

Then she quietly pulls the stall door closed again and starts walking toward the stable exit.

For a moment, Harold almost has the feeling that she is closing the door to her own world behind her.

Then they all head out together toward the riding arenas.

Sophie almost automatically starts walking directly toward the arena the moment they step out of the stable.

In the distance, they can already see Sebastian standing by the fence with Oliver and Silver Wake.

But Harold slows his pace slightly.

Lucy ends up walking beside him without really thinking about it.

A few seconds pass before Sophie notices that the others are not following at the same speed. She turns around, pauses briefly, and then quietly falls back into step with them again.

They walk slowly across the gravel between the stables and the riding arenas. Not the direct route, but diagonally through the property, as if none of them are in a hurry.

The air is cooler out here, and from the paddocks come muffled hoofbeats and the occasional whinny.

Harold walks for a while with his hands in his pockets before looking over at Lucy.

### **“Do You Think He Hates Me?”**

“You already notice a great deal.”

Lucy glances briefly up at him.

A small, almost shy smile appears at the recognition.

“You were already touching on it earlier,” Harold continues calmly. “But what do you actually think is happening between Silver Wake and Oliver?”

Lucy does not answer immediately.

She stops completely for a moment, lightly kicks a small stone on the gravel path, and tugs a little at the sleeve of her oversized sweater.

It is obvious she is thinking carefully.

Not because she doesn't know anything. But because she does not want to be disloyal.

Finally, she says quietly:

"There's something between them."

She quickly looks up again.

"It's not because Oliver is doing anything wrong," she adds immediately.

"He really does have talent. He does."

She says it completely sincerely.

"He could absolutely go far."

A brief silence settles again as they begin walking forward.

"But..." Lucy says slowly. "When Oliver gets nervous, Silver Wake gets nervous too."

Sophie quickly looks over at her.

"It's like it spreads," Lucy continues. "Like the horse feels everything."

She thinks for a moment.

"Dad is always focused on the training. The technique. How to ride properly and all that."

She shrugs slightly.

"But I don't think he sees the other part."

Harold listens without interrupting.

"I don't think he feels it," Lucy says quietly. "Maybe the two of them are too much alike."

Silence settles between them again.

Then Harold looks calmly at her.

"But you can already see it."

Lucy nods slightly.

"Yeah," she says thoughtfully. "I think I've always been able to."

She smiles a little uncertainly.

"I just never thought it mattered that much."

They walk a few more steps.

"Do you think you could teach him that?" Harold asks.

Lucy looks surprised and almost starts laughing.

"I've never thought about it like that."

Then she becomes more serious again.

"But Oliver actually came out to the stable one evening," she says. "And he never does that."

Harold looks at her attentively.

"He just stood there quietly while I was brushing Silver Wake."

She takes a slightly deeper breath.

"And then suddenly he asked me..."

She hesitates for a moment.

"Do you think he hates me?"

Sophie immediately looks over at her.

"And that really affected me," Lucy continues quietly. "Because he sounded genuinely sad."

She looks down at the gravel in front of her.

"So of course I told him no. But I also told him that maybe Silver Wake doesn't really know him yet."

Harold nods slowly.

"I told him that maybe he needed to do something so the horse could really get to know him."

Sophie walks silently beside them for a moment before asking:

"But do you really think he would listen to you? I mean Oliver."

Lucy tilts her head slightly from side to side.

"Yeah..." she says slowly. "I actually think he would."

She smiles faintly.

"He usually listens when I say something."

Then the smile fades a little again.

"He just doesn't always do it when my dad is there."

## Home Turf

Sebastian turns toward them as soon as they reach the riding arena.

“Good,” he says with an expectant smile. “Did you get to see the horses?”

“Yes,” Sophie answers immediately. “It was incredible.”

She casts a quick glance toward Lucy.

“And your daughter knows them unbelievably well.”

Sebastian smiles warmly.

“Yes,” he says without hesitation. “We’d never manage without her.”

But almost in the same moment, his attention shifts again.

“But now look at this,” he says, turning toward the arena.

Now the pride becomes unmistakable in his voice.

Oliver is already sitting on Silver Wake out in the middle of the arena, and Harold immediately gets the same impression as before: the boy looks very small on top of the large dark horse.

For a brief moment, he almost has a flashback to his own childhood and the feeling of sitting far too high up on the old horse out in the field.

Sebastian lifts a hand lightly toward Oliver.

“All right.”

Oliver nods almost imperceptibly.

He presses his heel very lightly against Silver Wake’s flank, and the horse calmly starts moving.

They begin riding a wide circle around the arena.

Sophie follows them with her eyes.

“That really looks fantastic.”

She says it almost spontaneously.

“It’s incredible how perfectly they follow each other’s rhythm.”

Sebastian lights up.

“Yes,” he says proudly. “He has it in him.”

He almost smiles even wider now.

“He’s a true Ashcombe.”

Silver Wake moves elegantly across the arena, and Oliver sits surprisingly calmly in the saddle despite his size.

"It comes naturally to him," Sebastian continues. "You can't teach that to everyone."

Oliver guides the horse back toward them again, and Silver Wake stops precisely at his signal.

Sebastian nods with satisfaction.

"Try a little faster."

Oliver sets the horse moving again.

First at a walk. Then a little faster.

### **An Unexpected Suggestion**

Sebastian raises his voice.

"And gallop!"

Oliver touches the horse ever so lightly with the whip. Not hard. Almost just as a signal.

Silver Wake immediately breaks into a gallop.

Now it looks even more impressive.

The horse moves powerfully and fluidly across the arena while Oliver follows the rhythm with a concentration that almost makes them look like one single movement.

"Yes," Sebastian says quietly, sounding almost frustrated now. "I simply don't understand it."

He shakes his head slightly.

"There are never any problems here."

Oliver continues riding a few more laps farther out on the arena while the adults stand by the fence.

Harold keeps his eyes on the horse.

"But Sebastian..." he says calmly. "Here he's on home turf too."

Sebastian falls silent for a moment.

"Yes," he says slowly. "That's true, of course."

"It's obvious," Harold continues, "that there's nothing wrong with the horse."

He glances briefly toward Oliver.

"And Oliver isn't doing anything wrong either."

Sebastian nods slowly.

"They're almost connected."

He says it almost proudly.

"But there must be something between them," Harold says quietly.

A brief silence follows.

Then Sophie says carefully:

"Or maybe between the three of you."

Sebastian turns his head toward her with a slightly surprised look.

"What do you mean?"

Sophie hesitates for a moment.

"Could Lucy maybe help him?"

The question sounds so simple and unpretentious that at first Sebastian looks as though he is not entirely sure whether to take it seriously.

He looks over at Lucy.

"Lucy?"

Lucy immediately shrugs slightly.

"Dad, I know," she says quickly. "I don't know anything about horse racing."

"No, exactly," Sebastian replies almost automatically.

Harold stands there with his hands in his pockets, looking out across the arena where Oliver is still riding calm circles on Silver Wake.

Then he turns back toward Sebastian.

"You actually mentioned yourself earlier," he says calmly, "that it can be difficult for young athletes to be trained by their own fathers."

Sebastian nods slowly.

"Yes... there's definitely something to that."

He glances briefly out toward Oliver.

"But I still think I have a lot to teach him."

There is no arrogance in his voice. More a natural conviction.

“And Oliver still has a lot to learn too,” he continues. “At some point he’ll probably need other influences and other trainers. But up until now, I honestly think it’s been going really well.”

Harold nods.

“Yes,” he says thoughtfully. “On the technical side, it certainly seems to be going well.”

He pauses briefly.

“But if the problem is really about the relationship between Oliver and the horse...”

Sebastian looks at him attentively now.

“... then it might be that he would benefit from a different kind of help.”

Sebastian remains standing still, taking in the words without rejecting them.

A short silence settles between them while Silver Wake continues around the arena in the background.

Then Harold says quietly:

*“Let Lucy train him.”*

The sentence almost hangs in the air for a moment.

Sebastian first looks at Harold. Then over at Lucy.

Lucy herself looks just as surprised.

Sophie can almost feel a small laugh pressing forward at the situation, but she holds it back.

“Okay...” Sebastian says slowly. “Let me hear this.”

Harold nods calmly.

“It’s not really about technique,” he says. “Not first and foremost.”

He gestures lightly out toward Silver Wake.

“It’s about the relationship between Oliver and the horse.”

Sebastian is listening with complete concentration now.

“And forgive me,” Harold continues with a small crooked smile, “but you already have a specialist walking around out here.”

He nods toward Lucy.

Sebastian looks at his daughter again, this time differently than before. More thoughtfully.

“She knows the horses,” Harold continues. “She already understands that Silver Wake is extra sensitive. She notices what’s happening around him.”

Lucy stands completely still without saying anything.

“And it also seems,” Harold goes on, “that Oliver actually listens to her.”

Oliver has now slowed Silver Wake back down to a walk farther out on the arena and is riding calmly along the fence.

“The two siblings obviously have a good relationship,” Harold says. “So maybe Lucy could teach him something about the actual connection to the horse. About trust. About feeling safe.”

Sebastian slowly begins to nod.

“And afterward,” Harold continues, “you can always come back in with the more technical side.”

He looks questioningly at Sebastian.

“Does that make sense?”

Sebastian does not answer immediately.

He remains standing there quietly, his gaze lifted slightly into the air, as though something is slowly falling into place inside him.

Then he looks out toward the arena.

Oliver is still riding Silver Wake in calm circles, focused and upright in the saddle.

After that, Sebastian’s gaze drifts toward Lucy.

And then back to Harold.

Suddenly he exhales through his nose in near astonishment and begins to smile.

“My God...” he says quietly. “Of course.”

He shakes his head slightly at himself.

“I didn’t see it at all.”

Now the idea is clearly beginning to grow inside him.

“But that solution is actually completely obvious.”

He turns toward Lucy.

“What do you think?”

Lucy shrugs slightly, though she seems surprisingly calm.

“I can try.”

Harold follows her gaze.

It automatically drifts out toward Oliver and Silver Wake again, almost as if her answer is already more about them than about herself.

Sebastian is still standing there smiling more and more to himself.

Then he laughs softly.

“Well of course,” he says again. “That way it stays in the family too.”

### **The Ashcombe Dynasty**

The Volvo slowly rolls away from the courtyard.

It has grown later in the day now, and the light has changed. A warm golden glow stretches across the fields and riding arenas, where the fine dust still hangs lightly in the air after training.

Volter coughs softly as Harold shifts gears.

This time he takes it almost extra slowly, as if the pace automatically adjusts itself to the mood of the place.

Sophie turns slightly in her seat and looks back toward the arena through the rear window.

Oliver is still riding Silver Wake in calm circles.

But now it is Lucy standing by the fence.

Sebastian is already walking back toward the house alone.

Sophie notices it immediately, and a small smile appears on her face.

As they leave the gravel road and turn back onto the country road, she leans back in her seat and says, half teasing, half impressed:

“So you did it again, Harold.”

He starts laughing a little and shakes his head.

“Oh no.”

“Yes,” Sophie says. “Where do you even get this stuff from?”

Harold shrugs slightly.

“Well... I honestly don’t really know.”

He smiles a little awkwardly.

“But it went pretty well.”

“Yes,” Sophie says, looking out through the windshield. “Even though you said you were completely out of your element when it came to horse racing.”

“I was.”

“Yes,” she says, turning slightly toward him again. “But when it comes to what happens between people... you really are on home turf.”

Harold smiles quietly and accepts the compliment without making much of it.

They drive on for a while in silence.

The landscape slowly drifts by outside. In some fields farther ahead, other horses walk behind low fences, but after the hours spent with the Ashcombes, they almost seem ordinary now.

Sophie sits for a long time staring ahead through the windshield before finally breaking the silence again.

“Do you think they’ll make it?”

Harold thinks for a moment before answering.

“Yes,” he says slowly. “I actually think they will.”

He keeps his eyes on the road.

“And not because our solution is especially brilliant.”

Sophie smiles slightly.

“But because it’s obvious,” Harold continues. “It’s easy for them to accept.”

He shifts gears calmly.

“Sebastian doesn’t feel threatened by it. If anything, it really grows naturally out of something he was already thinking himself.”

He smiles faintly to himself.

“And it matters that Lucy is actually willing to take on some responsibility.”

Sophie sits quietly for a moment, looking out across the fields while Volter continues his calm rumbling down the country road.

Then she nods slowly to herself.

"So the Ashcombe dynasty survives after all."

Harold smiles slightly.

"Yes," he says calmly. "With teamwork, you can get a long way."

He throws her a brief glance.

"That applies to us too, actually."

Sophie looks at him questioningly.

"You and me..."

He pats the dashboard lightly with the flat of his hand.

"...and Volter."

Almost at the same moment, the Volvo gives another small cough.

Sophie bursts out laughing.

"Yes," she says. "He really wants to be part of the company."

"He is," Harold says seriously. "He's just not very good with customer relations."

They both laugh as the Volvo continues through the golden early evening light and slowly disappears farther down the country road on the way back toward town.



# A Final Note

If you came this far, thank you!

Thank you for spending time with Harold, Sophie, and all the people and animals who passed quietly through these pages. I hope some of the stories made you smile a little, reflect a little, or perhaps recognize something familiar in the strange and often complicated ways people and animals live together.

The world of *The Pet Therapist* was never meant to be only about pets. From the very beginning, the idea behind the series has been to explore the small emotional mysteries hidden inside ordinary everyday life — the tensions people carry, the loneliness they hide, the habits they repeat, and the ways animals sometimes become part of all of it.

Somewhere between cozy storytelling, quiet humor, psychological observation, and small philosophical twists, these stories slowly found their own tone. Not quite traditional mysteries. Not quite literary fiction. Perhaps simply stories about people trying to understand themselves a little better through the lives they share with animals.

That balance is something I continue exploring throughout the larger *Pet Therapist* universe and in many of my other books as well.

So if you enjoyed the atmosphere, the characters, and the mixture of warmth, undercurrents, and everyday humanity in these stories, you are very welcome to continue further into the series. There are more cases,

more conversations, more strange situations, and more quiet mysteries waiting.

I have also written other books that explore many of the same themes in different ways — friendship, identity, loneliness, personal change, humor, meaning, and the hidden emotional structures beneath ordinary life.

And if you enjoy classic mysteries with a quieter and more atmospheric tone, you may also want to explore my Sherlock Holmes novels, written under the pseudonym Alistair Croft. In those stories, I try to combine the spirit of traditional Holmes adventures with a slightly more reflective and psychological atmosphere.

Most of my books are available as eBooks, paperbacks, and audiobooks through the places where books are normally sold.

And once again:

Thank you for reading.

— Henrik Kruse