

The Pet Therapist

Thoughtful and Heartwarming Stories for Pet Lovers

Henrik Kruse



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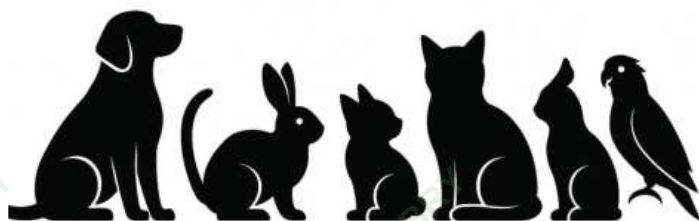
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Prologue

I've wanted to write this book for a very long time. Since childhood, I've been fascinated by animals, and throughout my life, I've kept a wide variety of carnivores. During my years in Denmark, I bred rare parrots, but I also had snakes, wasps, horses, dogs, ducks, cats, and many kinds of fish and reptiles. Keeping animals has always fascinated me; it's like creating a little piece of paradise close to home. I've even traveled to the rainforests of South America in search of some of these animals, which was both exciting and demanding. However, there's a certain simplicity in having a daily routine that involves caring for animals and keeping them healthy.

My second passion is therapy. I have a degree as a family therapist, and for a number of years, I've had the privilege of conducting research on

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new methods for family therapy. Specifically, I've worked with families whose children were in risky or challenging situations due to their parents' circumstances. I've spent countless hours in family homes, and it's been a rewarding experience. I've always found it easy to connect with children, to tune in to their perspective, and to advocate for them during conversations. Later, I specialized in providing therapy for men in crisis.

The Pet Therapist has allowed me to combine my two passions—family therapy and my love for animals. Each story has its roots in reality, and I've added a touch of humor and creativity to them. I hope you enjoy reading and find yourself immersed in the lives of the families and animals.

Best wishes,

Henrik
Argentina 2025



The Job Interview

The small office was empty as Sophie sat there. The chair groaned under her weight, and she tucked some hair behind her ear with one hand while continuing to stare vacantly out the window. The parking lot was overgrown with dead grass, the gray concrete walls of the building did nothing

to inspire, and every so often a car zipped past. This was not what she had in mind when she went into business for herself.

“How did I end up here?” she murmured almost imperceptibly, her head moving slightly from side to side.

She knew she had potential in her business, The Pet Therapist. People obviously needed help with their animals—or rather, with their connection to their animals. But still, she felt like maybe, just maybe, it was a mistake. The beginning had been rough, to say the least. She hadn’t quite fathomed just how many things there would be to juggle: leases, accounting, marketing. She just needed to pay attention to the screen in front of her, that chatbot that always had an answer ready. She sighed and looked around the office, which wasn’t as elegant or cozy-looking as she’d hoped. It was a bit messy, of course—just a few papers littered her desk—but she had tried to keep things neat. Not a born leader, she confided silently to herself.

However, the scariest concept of all was the idea of having to pay somebody—an employee. She cringed at the thought. She needed help, not that she didn’t want it, but it meant giving up power, something she was uncharacteristically loath to part with. Sophie was a control freak. Sophie liked to have her hands in everything. This is my business, she stubbornly told herself. I built this. I can’t just give it to someone who doesn’t understand my wants.

At the same time, she realized she needed help. She couldn’t meet clients—she didn’t even have a car! She sighed, and that was why she had contacted Harold. An old therapist, hopefully one with experience (and more than a little... off). Most importantly, he had a car. Granted, a terrible car, but a running one. Or at least she hoped it was.

She glanced at the clock. Harold would be here in a few minutes. She took a deep breath and thought, If he even arrives. It would be the easy way out if he didn’t, but she knew she couldn’t do it alone. Even she had limits.

Then she heard it. It was quiet at first, a soft rumble in the distance that gained speed and strength, like an old freight train advancing through the countryside. It was Harold. Well, Harold's Volvo. The vehicle was audible from far away—a machine that was old and falling apart but somehow still holding on. The sound drew nearer, and Sophie clasped onto the lip of her desk. I can do this, she thought. This is my company. I'm the boss.

Fully awake now, Sophie got up from her chair and faced the door. For a moment, she hesitated. Was she actually about to do this? Was she honestly going to hire some strange man with shadowy motives to help her solve a mystery she could hardly understand herself?

"Yes," she answered herself. Because despite all her doubts, she knew she couldn't run this alone. She wanted someone, and that someone happened to be Harold.

The engine rumbled to a stop, and a car door slammed outside. Sophie straightened in her seat, took a deep breath, and pulled a you-can-do-this look out of her gut. Things are going to get interesting, she muttered aloud, expecting the door to open.

Feigning busyness, Sophie stood. She had a folder open in front of her, with some scribbles in it related to today's interview. There had been little competition. Well, there used to be one. And that was Harold.

And then Harold walked in, a big grin on his face. His wrinkled clothing and wild hair suggested he hadn't looked in the mirror much while getting ready.

He reached out a hand and said, "Hello, Sophie. Thanks for having me."

"Of course, Harold," Sophie replied, feigning professionalism. She motioned to the chair in front of her desk. "Have a seat. I've come out to read a bit for our gathering. And... I got Danish pastries."

Harold thanked her, shrugging while taking one and biting into it. "I've missed these for a long time."

Sophie nodded. "Uh, hell yeah. It's very important that we start having these kinds of meetings."

She flipped through the folder, but there wasn't much in it that was important. "You fought through quite a number of applicants, but you know what, I kinda like the cut of your jib. Let's hear a bit about you."

Harold nodded, still chewing his pastry. "Well... I've been a therapist for a long time. I'm trained in psychedelic work and have extensive experience in family therapy. I also did pet retail in college, so I know some stuff about animals."

Sophie raised an eyebrow and gave him a look, sitting at the table opposite him. "Psychedelic therapy, huh? Which is not specifically what we do here, right?"

Harold chuckled lightly. "No, that was another time. Now it's more about how animals' behavior influences families—or maybe the other way around."

Sophie nodded, placing the folder back down. "Yeah, that sounds relevant. But you've had a stressful leave as well, haven't you?"

Harold turned serious. "Yeah, that's true. I went through a tough patch, but believe me, I'm ready now. A part of me is still scared because it is work, but I can't wait to get back."

Sophie smiled tightly and nodded quickly. "Good to hear. We want to ensure that, during your trial period, we can ask the government for support. It's more valid for a startup like ours."

Harold nodded again, and Sophie breathed deeply. It was now or never.

"I have a few questions for you," Sophie said, and Harold looked interested. She shot a look at her brief list. "Come on... take the first one."

With a dramatic pause, she leaned back into her seat and asked, "What about conflicting situations surrounding pets?"

Harold leaned back, staring up at the ceiling. "That's a good question. I feel like a lot of the time, animals are manifestations of issues already present in families. So, rather than hammering on favorites, you need to focus on how the family interacts with a pet. I do interesting and different activities with them, like role-playing, where family members take on the role of the pet and transform their behavior."

Sophie's eyes widened. "Switch roles with the pet?"

"Yes," Harold said, smiling. "For example, pretend the dad is the dog and barks every time someone says something. It shows how much noise the dog actually makes."

Sophie blinked a few times. "That's... an interesting approach."

"Probably," said Harold, and Sophie couldn't be sure if he was joking.

Harold took that as approval, and Sophie nodded slowly as she jotted down some notes. "Interesting... very interesting."

She looked ahead to the next question. "How about when you take a pet that's been passed around like a hot potato because no one could agree on what to do with it?"

Harold shrugged and ate the rest of his pastry. "I think listening is important. People just want to be listened to. Most of the time, when everyone gets a voice, we can come to a solution that's acceptable for everyone—even the pet."

Sophie glanced up from her papers and nodded in understanding. He was almost reasonable, she realized, and this realization alone made a bit of her nervousness vanish. She saw an opportunity to lead the conversation, and so she did.

"All right," she said, nodding, leaning forward slightly, "what do you know about AI? Artificial intelligence?"

Harold stopped and gave her an odd look. "AI? No, I must confess, I haven't worked with that much. What exactly do you mean?"

"Of course," Sophie said, as if she'd known he would say that. "Well, in our business," she proudly declared, "we use AI extensively to enhance our approaches. I often refer to different situations on my chatbot." Crossing her arms, she smiled. "Once, I asked the bot what to do with a dog that wouldn't obey any commands, and it said, 'Speaking their language will create a better tool for them to listen.'"

Harold blinked a few times at her. "In its own language?"

“Yeah,” Sophie replied nonchalantly. “You know, bark or meow like the actual creature. It’s almost like trying to understand what a cat is feeling by pretending to meow.”

Harold almost laughed. Is she serious?, he thought. “And... does it work?”

Sophie blinked, ignoring his disbelief. “It’s more of a trial-and-error method, but I think you have to be open-minded. One of the chatbot directives suggested that a stressed bird could benefit from a few mindful moments—speak softly to it and imagine vast open lands.”

Harold stared at his coffee and bit his lips to keep from laughing. “Mindfulness... for birds. This is... pretty high-tech.”

“Right?” Sophie nodded eagerly. “Well, you have to do it to remain competitive. I use AI to figure out what people are thinking when their dog tries

to telepathically communicate with them. In fact, it can tell you quite a bit about how their human owners treat them!”

“Whoa... that’s something,” Harold said, raising an eyebrow. “I didn’t see that coming. Chatbots for pets... I have to say, it’s new to me.”

Sophie rushed on as if she hadn’t noticed his hesitation. “I honestly think AI is the future of our company. With science guiding us, we might even learn what a cat would do if you played different types of music for it. This chatbot once recommended classical music for an aggressive cat.”

Finally, Harold’s laughter got the better of him, and he coughed to cover it up. “Cats and Beethoven... is it possible to have a case with both?”

Sophie nodded firmly. “Exactly. I am convinced that AI will take pet psychology to an unimaginable level. It gives us a completely different perspective.”

She double-checked her list. “Uh... what would you say is your greatest weakness?”

Harold thought for a moment. “Sometimes I take my clients’ issues to heart. It can be hard. It’s a work in progress, but I’m learning to set boundaries.”

Sophie nodded, keeping an eye on the door. "Okay, last question. Our only permanent requirement: Can we use your car for clients?"

Harold chuckled. "Of course. If it survives the trip."

He laughed, brushing some flaky cream from his beard. "Yeah, you've heard it. It's not a Ferrari, but it works."

"Good," Sophie said, smiling slightly. "No transport, no house visits."

Harold nodded more solemnly this time. "Yeah, that's important. I'm willing to do whatever I can."

Sophie glanced at the notes in her hand and then back at Harold. She sat back in her chair, folded the paper, and leaned forward.

"Okay, Harold. I think we could have a pretty good working relationship. Let's start on Monday."

Harold grinned widely. "That sounds great. I'm looking forward to it."

Sophie nodded, though she wasn't entirely convinced yet. But this was progress, as far as she was concerned. Harold seemed happy with his pastry, and she hoped this would work out just fine.

A wave from the doorway, and Harold waddled off toward his ancient Volvo. He smiled at Sophie, but his mind was already on the car. Like a long-beloved extended family member, the Volvo was unpredictable and, on occasion, hard work, but he loved it just the same. As he would always say to himself anytime he got it running: It only takes a little love.

He got behind the wheel and tapped on the dashboard. "Come on, old friend. Not today, none of the funny business," he muttered as if the car could hear him. He turned the key. Nothing. Harold blinked a couple of times before trying again. And sure enough, although the engine spluttered for a moment, it soon died.

"Oh no, not now," he thought. He glanced over at Sophie, who was standing there, staring at him with a puzzled expression. This doesn't look good. Not good at all.

Struggling to his feet, he popped the hood of the old car and stood over the array of crooked wires and gears. "Come on... be good. Just this once."

Sophie walked over. "Is the car broken? Do tell," she inquired archly.

Harold laughed nervously. "Nah, it's just being obstinate—no biggie!" She acknowledged this with a quick grin and pointed at the engine. "It's something that has... um... character."

That got a raised eyebrow from Sophie as she stood with her arms crossed, looking at him skeptically. "Personality, huh?"

"Yeah," Harold said, nodding his head. "You just... you know... have to handle it carefully."

Sophie let out a slight shake of her head as she watched him lower himself beneath the car. "Need any help?"

"No, no," Harold said a little too quickly and wiggled himself under the car. He began to fumble with the wires, muttering to himself. You can do this. You've done it before. Just a little more love.

After a bit of fiddling, he emerged once more, with an extra layer of grime on him but a confident grin. "There! That should do it."

Sophie, not without some skepticism, watched but said nothing.

Harold lurched back into the car and turned the key. The engine sputtered with a small cough before roaring to life. He slapped the dashboard, laughing in victory. "What did I say? It's all about listening."

Sophie arched an eyebrow and smiled a little. "Yeah, I can see that."

Harold then drove off slowly. The car still clambered along like a survivor of some catastrophe, but it ran. Driving home, Harold shook his head, laughing to himself. I've got to find a mechanic, he thought. But then again... why tamper with success, at least part of the time?

His thoughts drifted back to Sophie. She seemed... a little shallow, he decided. Everything from the workout clothes to the artificial professionalism felt off. But something didn't compute for him.

She's trying to be a boss, but it doesn't look like she has it under control either. Thinking of the questions she asked during the interview, Harold frowned. He was more of a one-day-at-a-time, instinctual decision-maker. He never really believed that expecting people to act like machines would work out well.

And her love of AI? he thought, laughing. I wonder if she talks to her chatbot more than she talks to real people. He could already see her one day using it to deal with him. Like maybe, What do you do about an employee who talks to his car?

Smiling to himself, he wondered how well their partnership would work out. It appeared that all she cared about was money and the business side—not so much about the pets or the families.

Buddy, we'll see if we even get along at all, he mused as he traveled down the narrow lane. If she thinks she can set up shop and manage it like a business without any feelings, it's going to be tough.

He pushed the pedal a little more and let his thoughts drift. If the car makes funny noises next time, we'll have to discuss what to do about transportation. Or maybe I could persuade her to buy something a little... surer-footed... a bicycle?

He chuckled to himself from behind the wheel as he drove on toward home, thinking about both the car and his new boss. This partnership was going to be interesting, for sure.



Are You My Rabbit Family?

Sophie waited outside the state-of-the-art gym as Harold parked his old Volvo in front. She wore worn sweatpants, the fabric bearing the signs of years of use, her forehead glistening under the bright sunlight while

the nursery-rhyme rhythm of gym music pulsed through the speakers. She felt energized yet anxious, like her run had reinvigorated her, but her mind was on other things. Today was their first client meeting as “The Pet Therapist.” She sighed and decided it was time to leave.

The car is unreliable, and we need it to do the trip! she thought. She had doubts ever since she hired Harold, and now those doubts were resurfacing. The car seemed like it was about to stop at any moment, but Harold looked calm and collected, not sharing her concern.

Harold grinned as he opened the car door for her. “Ready... I like that.”

Sophie got in, wary, checking the car while breathing in the scent of stale leather and oil. “Yeah, I am so ready. This is a big day for us—our first client, Harold. I’m so excited!”

“Yeah, quite the introduction,” Harold said as he inserted the key into the ignition. The Volvo grumbled to life, the engine just as doubtful about the morning’s challenge as Sophie was.

Sophie began a long stretch of conversation that didn’t let up until they were out of the gym’s parking lot. “I’ve already talked to my chatbot about what type of pet might suit them—to ensure they adopt the right animal,” she explained, pulling out her phone. “The bot suggested a hamster or a rabbit, maybe even a parakeet... it’s great at breaking down family dynamics and what would work.”

Harold glanced at her briefly while keeping his eyes on the road. “Your chatbot? I thought we were meant to be speaking with the family, finding out what they wanted.”

Sophie chuckled, shaking her head. “That makes sense, but the chatbot already identified what they might need. It gives guidance, and we can save time by using that.”

“I don’t know if a chatbot could replace listening to real people,” Harold said, switching gears. “But we’ll see after we talk to the family.”

Sitting back in her seat, Sophie watched the scenery as it flew by. “I’m telling you, Harold, technology is the future. We have data that can predict

the family's needs. My chatbot has already read their emails and social media profiles. It's pretty smart."

Harold shot her a quick look. "You really love that chatbot, don't you? Feels like we're just texting people."

"Of course, we can do that too, but why not use technology?" Sophie replied with excitement. "Think about making them give an answer automatically—no waiting, no uncertainty."

There was a pause from Harold. "Yet, I still believe there's something special about human conversation. The question is whether all that data tells the full story."

Sophie didn't answer immediately, but she could not help but be excited. We'll see, she thought. She was all about efficiency and precision! She knew technology must be the way forward.

They rode in silence for quite some time until Harold finally spoke, an unsure smile on his face. "Is it okay to ask how much we're charging for a consultation like this?" he asked, glancing over at Sophie. "I mean, what should a family pay for something like this?"

Sophie stared out the window as if debating. "First of all, I priced the consultation at \$700."

Harold frowned, looking at her for a moment before turning back to the road. "\$700? That's a lot for some advice about pets."

Sophie shrugged. "Yes, but we have a unique service. We are signaling that this is special. This is no ordinary consultation... it involves pet psychology and family dynamics."

"\$700," Harold repeated in shock. "It makes it feel quite pressured. It's a high price, especially if people don't feel they're getting value for their money."

Sophie sat up, fixing him with a stern stare. "That's business, Harold. I realize you don't think that way, but we need a price for this to be viable. It's not charity."

"I'm just saying it might be a bit much for a family looking for honest guidance on what kind of pet to get," Harold replied gently. "And if they don't feel like they're getting value..."

Sophie interrupted irritably. "You can leave that part to me. I'm aware of the pricing concerns. You're here to handle the consultations. You take your salary; leave the rest to me."

Harold paused, looking out at the roadside, letting the silence settle. It seemed a high figure to him, but it wasn't his position to question it further.

"Fine," he said after a long pause. "I won't interfere. I just wanted to know."

Sophie smiled and nodded, thinking the conversation was back on track. "Good. We'll make it work. Just trust me."

Harold sighed and changed his tone as he continued driving. We'll see, he thought. I hope those families believe it's worth the money. We'll find out soon enough.

The Volvo pulled into the driveway of a cute suburban home. It was a classic house with an exquisite lawn. As soon as Harold saw it, he thought, This is proof you can become a millionaire. He parked and looked over to Sophie, who was already rummaging through her bag.

She pulled out a packet of red licorice, took some for herself, and offered the bag to Harold. "Want some?"

He eyed the licorice and shook his head. "No thanks, I'll pass. Hopefully, the family has cake," he said, chuckling.

Sophie shrugged and stuck the licorice in her mouth. "I'm watching my weight, but a couple of pieces of licorice don't count. Shall we go in?"

They got out of the car and walked to the door. Harold laughed and looked around, nodding to himself. It had an inviting, intimate quality to it. The door swung open, and a father, mother, and three giggling children greeted them with welcoming smiles.

“Welcome!” The father reached out his hand. “My name is Jason, and this is my wife, Louise, and our children Clara, Michael, and Emma.”

Harold felt good energy and greeted the family warmly. He looked the kids up and down; they stared back at him with wide eyes. “Hi there!” he said with a big smile. “Are you excited about getting a new pet?”

The oldest, Clara, nodded furiously.

Harold winked at the children. It felt like there was a sense of spaciousness and joy when they were all together, and he immediately felt comfortable with them.

Once they were indoors, they gathered in the dining area, surrounded by family photos and children’s drawings adorning the walls. It felt cozy, and Harold realized it was a welcoming space. He sat down and thanked the family with a nod. These guys seem solid. This is going to be an interesting consultation.

Sophie took a seat, letting her phone and notebook fall onto the table, and gave the family a brisk, professional smile. “Shall we begin?” she asked in a businesslike tone. “Let us help you find your new best friend.”

Jason and Louise both nodded politely, though Sophie’s approach felt a bit stiff. But Harold leaned forward, smiling broadly and quickly getting their attention.

“So, what are you thinking? What kinds of animals do you like?” he asked, looking straight at Clara, Michael, and Emma.

Michael, the middle child, gazed longingly at the table and whined, “I want a dog.”

Emma, the youngest, shook her head immediately. “No, I want a cat! They’re cuter.”

Clara, the eldest, shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe a rabbit?”

Harold smiled. “Looks like you all have different tastes!” He turned to the parents. “What about you two? What do you think?”

Jason smiled at his wife before looking at Harold. “We need something that we can all enjoy as a family.”

Harold considered this and spoke to the children about their preferences, while Sophie was busy typing on her cell phone, glancing at her chatbot.

"I reckon we can get technology to do some of the work for us," Sophie said, grabbing her phone excitedly. "My chatbot has already provided me with suggestions based on your family dynamics!"

Jason looked puzzled. "A chatbot?"

Sophie nodded eagerly. "Yes, it can analyze your needs and provide recommendations. It's very efficient."

The kids looked confused, and the look on Jason's face told Harold it was time to change the topic. "However, the main thing is that everyone feels comfortable with the pet you choose. This is very personal, and it depends on what feels right for you."

The kids nodded, and Harold knew he had them back on track. Smiling inwardly, he thought, Technology is helpful, but there's something about the human touch.

With the kids' attention regained, Harold turned to the parents. "I want to know a little more about how you all work together as a family. Choosing the right pet isn't just about an animal that looks cute; it's about finding one that fits your lifestyle."

Louise smiled. "Absolutely, that makes sense."

Harold looked at the kids out of the corner of his eye. "What else is important when you have a pet? Something you can all enjoy?"

Clara paused. "We need a pet that anyone can take care of, so the responsibility doesn't just fall on one person. I don't want it all to be on my shoulders."

Michael looked up and nodded. "Yeah, but I still really want a dog. They're so much fun."

Harold smiled and turned to Jason and Louise. "It sounds like there's a bit of a difference in preferences. So, what about you as parents? How do you feel a pet would fit into your daily routines?"

Jason took a deep breath and looked at Louise. "We want a pet that everyone can enjoy but also one that won't demand too much from us. We want something that's relatively easy to manage."

Louise nodded in agreement. "Yes, we both have work and the kids have school, so we need an animal that doesn't require too much time each day."

Harold nodded in understanding. "That makes sense. We want to make sure the pet doesn't become a source of stress, but rather a source of joy for everyone."

He looked back at the children. "Given that you all have different preferences, how do you usually settle disagreements like this? For example, what if Emma really wants a cat, but Michael insists on getting a dog?"

The children exchanged glances, and Clara spoke up first. "We usually argue about it until we find something everyone can live with. It's just hard when we all want different things."

Harold smiled. "That's completely normal. But sometimes, the best solution is to find a pet that serves multiple roles, or at least one that everyone can agree on."

Louise furrowed her brow. "What kind of pet could fit everyone's needs? Something fun but also calming?"

Harold thought for a moment. "You could consider getting a rabbit. They're calm, loving, and low maintenance, but they can also be quite playful once they start to trust you."

He looked at Michael, who appeared skeptical. "A rabbit? But aren't they boring?"

Harold smiled. "You'd be surprised. Rabbits can be very social, and if you spend time with them, they can be quite interactive. Plus, they require less attention than a dog, which might work better for your busy lifestyle."

Clara nodded hesitantly. "That might work..."

Emma's eyes lit up. "I love rabbits!"

Jason and Louise exchanged a glance and nodded. "That sounds like a good idea," Jason said.

Harold leaned back, satisfied. "The most important thing is to pick something that everyone can be part of so that no one feels overwhelmed. A pet should bring joy, not stress."

For a moment, Harold felt they were close to reaching a decision—the rabbit seemed like the perfect choice. But then Sophie, who had been mostly silent until now, leaned forward eagerly.

"I think a rabbit could be the answer," she said, "but just to be sure, we should test it with some science. I have some questions from my chatbot that can help us figure out if you're truly a 'rabbit family.'"

The family looked quizzical but nodded.

Sophie looked down at her phone, where the chatbot was open. "Okay, let's start with something simple." She turned to Jason. "Jason, do you prefer carrots or lettuce?"

Jason blinked, clearly confused by the question. "Uh... carrots, I guess?"

Sophie nodded, jotting down his answer. "Good! And Louise, would you rather tend a garden or relax in the sun?"

Louise hesitated, looking puzzled. "Relax in the sun, I suppose?"

Sophie wrote down her response, then turned to the children. "Clara, if you had to choose between climbing trees or digging a tunnel underground, which would you do?"

Clara glanced at her parents and giggled. "Climb trees, I think."

Sophie made a note and moved on. "Emma, do you prefer hay or apples?"

Emma laughed. "Apples, of course!"

Harold, unable to suppress a grin, watched as Sophie continued asking these strange questions, each one seeming more out of place than the last. The family grew visibly more confused with each question.

"All right, last one," Sophie said, looking at Michael. "Michael, would you rather live in a rabbit hole or in an open cage in the garden?"

Michael gave her a puzzled look. "Uh... neither?"

Sophie paused, looking at her phone with a frown. "Interesting... very interesting."

Harold could tell the conversation was spiraling out of control. He cleared his throat and leaned forward, capturing everyone's attention. "The main thing is that you all feel comfortable with the idea of having a rabbit. These questions are fun, but what really matters is how you feel about the pet fitting into your family."

Jason nodded, relieved. "Yeah, that makes more sense."

Sophie put her phone down, clearly a bit bewildered by how things had gone. "Maybe you're right, Harold. Data isn't everything."

Harold smiled. "Sometimes you just have to trust your instincts."

The children erupted in laughter at some of Sophie's questions, clearly enjoying the silliness. Clara leaned toward Sophie, her eyes bright with curiosity.

"Can we keep playing?" she asked. "That was fun. Can we ask more questions about rabbits?"

Emma nodded in agreement. "Yeah! What do rabbits like to eat? How much attention do they need?"

Sophie smiled, her previous bewilderment fading. "Sure, we can do that. Of course, rabbits love hay and vegetables, but we can also see what the chatbot says."

She pulled out her phone again, and the kids leaned in eagerly. "All right, let's start with food," Sophie said as she typed. "What do rabbits eat?"

After a moment, the chatbot responded: "Rabbits eat lots of hay, leafy greens like carrots and lettuce, and they also love sweet treats like fresh fruit—but not too much, as it can be quite sugary."

Michael looked thoughtful. "So we need to make sure they don't eat too much fruit. What about attention? Do they need a lot?"

Sophie typed the question, and the chatbot replied: "Rabbits are social animals that need regular attention. They enjoy playful interactions but also value some time alone. You should give them time to roam but also make sure they get attention."

Emma's eyes lit up. "So they like to play but also need time alone? That sounds just like me!"

Clara giggled. "Maybe we are a rabbit family after all."

Harold laughed, glancing at Sophie. "The chatbot seems to be doing all right after all."

"Yes," Sophie agreed, leaning back. "Actually, it explains things pretty well."

Jason and Louise seemed more at ease as the children asked logical questions. Clara spoke up again. "What can kids do to take care of a rabbit? What can we do that's special?"

Sophie typed in the question, and the chatbot replied: "Children can help by feeding the rabbit, making sure it has fresh water, and giving it exercise every day. They can also help clean its habitat and ensure it lives in a nice environment."

Michael nodded. "Okay, we can handle that. What about the adults? What should Mom and Dad do?"

Sophie typed quickly and read the reply: "Adults should check the rabbit's health, take it to the vet when needed, and feed it properly. They should also supervise the care to ensure the rabbit's needs are met."

Louise smiled at Jason. "It sounds like something we could manage together."

Harold chuckled. "It sounds like we're getting there. If everyone is willing to help care for the rabbit, it seems like the right choice for your family."

The children nodded eagerly, and a sense of light-heartedness filled the room. Harold was satisfied—they were on the right track.

On the drive back to the office, the mood was relaxed. Harold drove, and for once, nothing went wrong with the old Volvo. Beside him, Sophie checked her phone, a big smile on her face.

Excited, she held up her phone. "It just went through!"

Harold chuckled. "Well, that's a nice end to the day. The family seemed really nice, and I knew they would take good care of the rabbit."

“Mmhm,” Sophie said, looking out of the window, her voice thoughtful. “Better than I thought it would go. This could genuinely be big, Harold. It wasn’t just luck.”

Harold nodded. “They seemed happy with their decision, and that’s the most important thing.”

Sophie tilted her chair back, still holding her phone. “We could really blow this whole business up if we keep getting results like this. I mean, \$700 per consultation—it’s a great start.”

Harold nodded, grinning. “It is. And it’s important to build those relationships with families and their pets.”

“Yes, of course,” Sophie said, though her mind seemed elsewhere. “We could also spend a bit of money on updates. For example... the car. Eventually, we can’t keep driving this old Volvo.”

Harold laughed softly. “It ain’t much of a looker, but it does the trick.”

Sophie smirked. “And maybe a new pair of leather pants for you too, Harold. It would add some flair—something professional for the consultations.”

Harold laughed, surprised. “Leather pants? I don’t know about that. I think I’ll stick with my old jeans.”

Sophie sighed dramatically. “Oh, Harold, we have to be visionary! Once we start making more money, we can loosen things up a bit—especially in the style department.”

Harold found the thought humorous and laughed again. “We’ll see if we’re really making that much. But I doubt it’s going to

“But I doubt it’s going to involve leather pants,” Harold finished with a grin.

Sophie winked, eyes still on the road ahead. “Trust me, you’d look great.”

Harold chuckled, still amused by how fast Sophie was ready to spend money on material things. But he let it go and focused on what mattered most: they had a successful first consultation. The family seemed happy with their choice, and that was what counted.

Sophie looked out the window, her face growing more serious. "This could be something big, Harold. It's more than just about pets. It's about helping families in a meaningful way. We just need to keep moving forward and stay one step ahead of the competition."

Harold nodded, his gaze fixed on the road. "Everything will be fine as long as we keep our focus on what really matters—the connection between animals and their families."

"Agreed," Sophie said, her voice firm. "This is just the beginning."

The next morning, Sophie and Harold arrived at the small office, feeling a sense of optimism after the success of their first client visit. The office was still in the industrial part of town, and it was nothing glamorous, but it was theirs.

Harold walked in with two coffees in hand and placed one on Sophie's desk. "Got you your usual."

Sophie looked up from her computer screen, where she was already typing away. "Thanks, Harold," she said, taking a sip. "I've been thinking a lot about our approach and how we can expand this."

"Expand?" Harold asked, sitting down across from her.

"Yes," Sophie replied, nodding enthusiastically. "I think we can offer more than just consultations. Maybe workshops, events, even online courses. Imagine a series of classes where families learn how to strengthen their bond with their pets."

Harold raised an eyebrow. "Online courses? Like, on pet psychology?"

Sophie nodded. "Exactly. People love their pets, and they want to understand them better. We could do something like an introductory course on understanding pet behavior, or even something more advanced—like resolving behavioral issues."

Harold rubbed his chin, thinking. "That could work. A lot of people would probably love that—especially if they can't afford to pay for in-person consultations."

“Exactly,” Sophie said, her eyes lighting up. “It’s scalable. We could reach so many more people without having to physically be there. Plus, it’s another income stream.”

Harold nodded slowly. “I see your point. But you know I’m not much of a tech person. How would we even set this up?”

Sophie leaned forward, clearly excited by the idea. “That’s where technology comes in again. We could use our chatbot to create interactive modules, quizzes, and even automated support for people taking the courses. The chatbot could help guide them through the content.”

Harold chuckled. “You really love that chatbot, don’t you?”

Sophie grinned. “I do! It’s efficient, reliable, and doesn’t take coffee breaks. Besides, it can handle repetitive questions, so we can focus on the bigger issues.”

“Fair enough,” Harold conceded. “But we’d need to make sure the content is solid—people are paying for real value. It can’t just be generic advice.”

“Absolutely,” Sophie agreed. “I was thinking you could help create the content. You have so much experience with family dynamics and pets. We can translate that knowledge into lessons that people can easily understand.”

Harold leaned back, a thoughtful look on his face. “I suppose that could work. I just need to be sure it’s done right. I want to be proud of what we put out there.”

Sophie nodded. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

There was a brief silence as they both sipped their coffee, considering the possibilities. Sophie broke the silence, her voice softer. “You know, yesterday was a good day. Seeing the kids’ faces light up when we figured out the rabbit was the right pet—it reminded me why we’re doing this.”

Harold smiled. “Yeah, it was a good moment. I think we’re onto something here.”

Sophie looked at Harold, her expression earnest. “I know I can come across as all business sometimes, but I do care about this. I care about making a difference.”

Harold nodded, appreciating her honesty. “I know. You’ve got a vision, Sophie, and it’s a good one. We just need to keep things balanced—make sure we’re not losing sight of the people and pets behind all the plans.”

Sophie smiled, her eyes softening. “I think we make a good team, Harold. You keep me grounded.”

Harold chuckled. “And you keep me moving forward.”

Sophie raised her coffee cup. “To the future of ‘The Pet Therapist.’”

Harold raised his cup as well, smiling. “To helping families and their pets—one rabbit at a time.”

They clinked their cups together, the sound echoing softly in the small office. It was just the beginning, but they both knew they were on the right path. Together, they could make a difference in the lives of people and their beloved animals, one consultation, one course, and one step at a time.



“Euthanasia is My Best Idea”

Harold’s phone buzzed on the table beside him, honoring him with a notification. He looked at the screen, seeing Sophie’s name pop up. He answered, and her voice came through immediately, filled with excitement.

“Harold!” Her voice was practically electric with excitement. “Oh, we already have our next job!”

“Okay, how does it work this time?” Harold asked, intrigued.

“It’s a woman who left a message on my phone. She needs help taking care of her dog while she is away. She doesn’t know for how long, and she has no idea what to do.”

Harold sat back in his chair. “So, does she need someone to look after her dog while she’s gone or something?”

“Yes, exactly. I called her back to find out more, but it still wasn’t clear. She didn’t sound very sure. But she did acknowledge that she would spend the \$700 for the consultation.”

Harold chuckled lightly. “So we’re giving our opinions on how to handle her dog while she isn’t home. Okay, sounds simple enough.”

Sophie responded confidently, “Yeah, it should be easy. We will rendezvous at half-past ten, outside of her flat. Actually, I’m going to ride my bike over, so you don’t need to pick me up.”

“Okay, bye,” Harold replied with an affected tone before hanging up the phone. He smiled and shook his head slightly. Interesting... he thought.

Harold pulled up in front of the apartment building and saw Sophie already scrolling on her phone near the bike rack. She waved excitedly when she saw him, and he parked.

“Ready?” she remarked with her usual perky tone.

“Okay, but first things first,” Harold nodded, following her up the stairs.

Finally, they came to the door, and Sophie knocked lightly. A second later, an elderly woman opened it, and a tiny poodle leaped straight for their legs, yapping merrily. The old woman beamed and greeted them by laying her hand on each of their heads one after another as Harold knelt to pat the dog.

“Welcome,” the woman said in a soft but warm and noticeably tired voice. “I’m so glad you could come.”

Harold and Sophie stepped inside the snug apartment. The living room was decorated with pictures of family and friends, including one of the little curly white poodle that now tagged along, wagging its tail.

The woman sighed while sinking into her lounge chair. "She's been my loyal sidekick for years."

It soon became obvious that this was more than an ordinary dog-sitting gig. By the time Harold and Sophie were seated, the elderly woman let out a sigh and peered down at Bella, who sat silently below her.

The woman spoke quietly, "I'm ill... well, it's cancer. I need to go to the hospital for treatment, but I have no idea how long I'll be there. And if anything, it might get worse in the days to come. I may have to be admitted."

Harold gazed deeply at her, and Sophie nodded solemnly. "I see," Sophie said. "And what about Bella while you're gone?"

The woman nodded. "Yes. She's all I have left, but if I'm admitted, how will she be looked after? I don't have any family that can help, and I can't leave her."

For a moment, the room went still and quiet as Harold and Sophie processed this information. It was unmistakably not a routine consultation. Harold leaned forward, speaking calmly.

"We can brainstorm with you to help find a solution so that Bella can be looked after while you're in the hospital. We can also discuss other options. Most of all, you get to focus on getting the treatment you need without worrying about her."

The mood started to lift slightly in the small, comfortable living room. Harold noticed a cake and coffee set on the table and sat back with a grin.

"How delightful," Harold said cheerily. "Cake and coffee—just what we need."

The woman smiled wryly as she poured the coffee. "Well, I guess we can have a little snack while we chat."

Harold smiled in anticipation, serving himself a piece of cake. Moments later, the atmosphere became friendly, cozy, and inviting, like visiting an old friend.

Sophie, always in hustle mode, glanced down at her phone after a few bites and suddenly said, "I have an idea. I could ask the chatbot what the best solution is for Bella."

Harold frowned. "Is that really necessary, Sophie? We can handle this on our own."

The elderly woman had a puzzled expression on her face. "Chatbot? What's that?"

"I can help you," Harold leaned forward. "It's just technology that gives advice sometimes. But it's not required for this."

Already clicking away on her phone and ignoring his protest, Sophie said, "When it comes to technology, I tend to stick with the best support. I think this is an ideal use-case for it. We'll know the answer with certainty—and very quickly."

Sophie was on pins and needles as they waited for the chatbot's response. "Here it comes!" she announced, her eyes sparkling. The chatbot's response appeared: "I would seriously suggest... euthanasia."

The old lady gasped, her mouth open, looking at Sophie in horror. "Euthanasia? So, that means they should euthanize me?" Her voice began to shake, and her hands trembled.

Harold quickly moved closer, placing a comforting hand on her arm. "No, no, that is not what it means at all. It's simply a bad choice of words by the chatbot. This is NOT about euthanasia."

The old woman still appeared terrified, as though the word itself evoked a primal dread. Harold knew it wasn't just leaving Bella behind; it was also the fear of dying soon.

Shooting Sophie a hard look, Harold saw she was still staring at her phone, seemingly unaware of the drama she had caused. He turned back to the elderly woman with a gentle smile. "Trust me on this one," he said softly.

The elderly woman sat quietly, tears gliding down her cheeks. Harold remained silent, holding her hand, knowing that sometimes words weren't necessary—just being present was enough.

For a few moments, she stared up at the ceiling of her home. "I nearly died in this place," she whispered, her voice still trembling. "Everything... it reminds me of all the people I've lost. Most of them are gone now."

She gestured toward the photos of family and friends on the walls, her gaze distant. "Pretty much everyone I knew is already gone," she murmured. "And... truthfully, I want to die. But I'm afraid. I've always been afraid of death. I think it's because I lost my mother so young."

Harold held her hand, feeling the intensity of her emotions.

"This is why I always try to persevere," she continued, quickly brushing away her tears. "But talking about it helps. I'm old now, and I see the future on the horizon. But... no one I know is here to relate to it."

She turned to Harold with a slight smile, tears still streaming from her eyes. "That's another reason I'm glad you came. It's already helping."

Meeting her gaze, Harold whispered, "We're here for you. It's okay to feel this way."

Even Sophie, who usually rushed to a hard and fast approach, found herself without words. For perhaps the first time, she seemed to grasp the gravity of the situation.

Harold took a deep breath and spoke gently to the woman. "Dealing with something like this, something that takes everything out of you, it's so important not to feel alone," he began. "Knowing that Bella will be in excellent hands during your recovery is something we can help with."

The woman wiped her eyes and nodded slightly. Harold continued, "We have a few options we could explore. You might start by paying for a service that takes Bella to a dog kennel—that would be a 24/7 solution."

Sophie nodded, reaching for her phone, but Harold kept his focus on the elderly woman. "Another option could be having someone come in once a day to feed her and take her for a walk. Bella would be happier here, where she's comfortable."

The elderly woman raised her head slightly. "Every day?" she asked softly.

Harold nodded. "Yes, someone could come by daily to check on her. That way, Bella could still feel like she's home with you, even if you need to stay in the hospital. She won't feel abandoned, and you'll know she's being taken care of."

The woman smiled weakly and exhaled. "That would be wonderful. I want her here with me."

"Absolutely. We'll work something out," Harold said with a smile. "That way, you can still have her here with you, even if you can't look after her for now."

Sophie had put away her phone and nodded in agreement. "That sounds like a good plan."

Once they were back on the street, Harold could tell Sophie was visibly affected. Her usual confident, business-like demeanor was cracking, replaced with a more contemplative tone.

"That was... rough," she murmured softly, staring at her hands. "I didn't sign up for this part of the job."

Harold nodded, allowing her the time to process everything. But soon enough, Sophie seemed to snap back into her usual self. She shook her head and let out a long exhale.

"But practically speaking," she said, looking at Harold, "this is going to be difficult to make work financially. We definitely bit off more than we can chew here."

Harold smiled gently. "Harold smiled gently. "Yeah, it was a tough one, but that's part of the job. We have to take on some of this responsibility, especially when it involves people in situations like hers."

Sophie sighed, her gaze unfocused. "I get that, but we can't always provide this level of support. It's just not sustainable."

Harold nodded. "It's part of the package, but I might have a way to make it a little more manageable." He paused, waiting for Sophie to look at him.

"I have a daughter who might be interested in earning some extra money. I could ask her if she'd be willing to help take care of Bella for a while."

Sophie perked up at this idea. "Really? You think she'd be up for it?"

Harold smiled. "She loves dogs, and I'm sure she could use the extra cash for her own projects. It would be good for her, too."

Sophie watched him for a moment, then nodded in relief. "That would be a huge help. We could make sure the woman gets the support she needs without overextending ourselves financially."

Harold put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "It'll be okay, Sophie. We'll find the right balance. Sometimes it just takes a bit of creativity."

Sophie took a deep breath and nodded. "You're right. This is just new to me—I'm used to more predictable situations."

"It'll get easier over time," Harold said with a comforting smile. They started walking down the street, and for a while, they both stayed silent.

Sophie sat back in her office, replaying the day in her mind. Her eyes landed on her chatbot, which was still open on her phone. For the first time, she hesitated. Was technology always the answer? It had given her confidence, but today it had let her down. She put the phone face down on her desk and looked out the window.

Harold was right; sometimes it wasn't about efficiency or quick answers. It was about listening—really listening—and being there for someone, even if it wasn't easy or comfortable. She sighed and leaned back in her chair, feeling a strange sense of both exhaustion and growth.

Harold arrived home, his mind filled with the day's events. He parked his old Volvo, gave the dashboard a quick pat, and muttered, "Thanks for getting me through today, old friend."

He went inside, where his daughter, Susan, was at the kitchen table, working on something. She looked up as he entered, her face lighting up. "Hey, Dad. How was work?"

Harold smiled at her, the day's tension fading a little. "It was... intense. Actually, I might have something for you. Would you be interested in

helping take care of a dog for a while? It's for an elderly lady who really needs some help."

Susan's eyes widened with interest. "Really? I'd love that. What kind of dog is it?"

Harold chuckled. "A little poodle named Bella. She's very sweet. The lady is going to be in the hospital for a bit, and we need someone to make sure Bella is okay. I thought maybe you could help out."

Susan nodded enthusiastically. "Absolutely. I'd love to do that."

Harold smiled warmly. "That's great, Susan. I think it would really mean a lot to her—and to me."

Susan grinned. "No problem, Dad. I'm happy to help."

Harold sat down at the table, feeling a sense of peace. It had been a long day, but knowing that his daughter was ready to help made all the difference. He was proud of her, and more than that, he was hopeful. Maybe, just maybe, they could make a real difference—not just for the animals but for the people, too.

The next morning, Sophie arrived at the office, her face set with determination. Harold was already there, sipping coffee and reading something on his tablet. She sat down across from him and folded her hands.

"Harold," she began, "I've been thinking about yesterday. You were right—sometimes we have to go beyond what we planned. The chatbot... well, I don't think it will always have the answer. I think I learned that the hard way."

Harold looked up, a soft smile crossing his face. "It takes time to figure these things out, Sophie. It's all a learning process. You're doing fine."

Sophie nodded slowly. "I guess. I just don't like feeling out of control. I like having all the answers, you know?"

Harold chuckled. "Trust me, I know. But the beauty of this kind of work is that it's never predictable. People need us, and animals do too, but sometimes it's messy and complicated. That's what makes it important."

Sophie looked at him, seeing for the first time the depth of experience he had. She realized that maybe, just maybe, she could learn something from

Harold—not just about animals, but about people, and about how to be okay with not always having control.

She took a deep breath. “Okay, then. Let’s keep moving forward. We’ll take care of Bella, and we’ll figure this out together. We’ll make sure we’re there for both the animals and their people.”

Harold nodded, raising his coffee cup in a small toast. “Here’s to figuring it out as we go.”

Sophie smiled and clinked her mug against his. “To figuring it out.”

And in that small, quiet office, amid all the uncertainties, they began to lay the groundwork for a partnership that might just work. One built not on having all the answers, but on finding them—together.



**Freedom Isn't
(Always) All It's
Cracked Up to Be!**

The sun filtered mutedly through the shades, creating an almost surreal ambiance that seemed to disconnect the room from the rest of the world. Harold entered slowly, looking around, while Sophie sat behind the desk, exuding her usual professionalism.

“A performance review?” Harold raised an eyebrow, clearly taken aback. A week felt like a rather premature moment for such a meeting.

Sophie sat up in her chair, nodding emphatically. “It sounds like the ideal thing to do. As I said earlier... it’s early, but we need to set everything straight from the beginning.”

Harold took a seat, smiling with a forgiving expression. “I get what you’re saying. We need to create a positive atmosphere for our work.”

Sophie nodded. “Exactly. It’s equally important that we establish what we need and don’t want right from the start to avoid misunderstandings later. I thought it would be a good idea to outline this meeting now.”

Harold’s voice was raspy, a sign of sleepless nights, as he leaned forward in his chair, taking a deep breath, as if to say, at some point, things had to improve. “I must admit I was a little apprehensive in the beginning, particularly about how we’d get along. But after the two consultations we had, I think it went quite well.”

Sophie seemed pleased, nodding her head as if this was exactly what she had hoped to hear.

“Let me also say there is a professional development budget, so you can start anticipating a course,” Sophie said.

Harold stared at her in surprise. “A course?”

Sophie nodded enthusiastically. “Yes. We want to ensure continuous learning. It’s important that we step up our knowledge game and stay ahead with the best available information. That’s the mentality here.”

Harold leaned back in his chair, skeptical. “Alright, what do you suggest?”

Sophie leafed quickly through a file. “After the first week, you earned about \$25, which will be deducted and put into an account for classes and

training. Of course, it's not enough for any major courses, but I found an online course that can be done in your free time."

"An online course?" Harold repeated.

Sophie nodded, smiling with pride. "Yes, a course to improve your understanding of AI in daily life. It will help you use AI more effectively and enhance our consultations. I think it's something that will benefit everyone."

Harold raised an eyebrow and smiled slightly. "AI in daily life, huh? And I'm supposed to do it in my spare time?"

Sophie was still grinning eagerly. "Oh, for sure. It'll be good for the future, Harold. You'll see how useful it is in our work."

Harold regarded Sophie silently for a moment before replying. Her suggestion had surprised him a bit. He wrinkled his forehead, thinking of the best way to respond. He reached into his bag and set it on the table between them.

"Sophie," he said slowly, looking her in the eye, "I will confess, I haven't been impressed by what AI and machine learning have offered me so far. It's been... well, I'm not entirely convinced."

Sophie opened her mouth to respond, but Harold raised a hand.

"However, I'm not completely averse to it," he added. "I know technology is becoming a bigger part of our lives, and I understand its value. But there's no way I'm spending my free time on this course."

Sophie looked surprised, and Harold continued in a casual tone, "If I'm going to do this course online, it will have to be during working hours. I don't think I should need to use my personal time for it."

Sophie winced, giving him a long look before nodding. "Right," she said, "I get your point. We can arrange for you to take the course during work hours."

Harold smiled a little. "Good. I might as well try it if we can find a balance."

Later that day, Harold was off to his next consulting appointment after the review. Sophie had mentioned that she struggled with administration, and there were some forms that needed to be submitted for his pay to be processed through the municipality. She figured it was appropriate that Harold handle this one alone. It was probably for the best.

Sophie had prepared a detailed transcript for him to read in advance. As Harold looked through the document, he quickly caught sight of the headline: Symptoms of ADHD. He detached himself for a moment, sifting through the material. Sophie clearly wanted to be thorough—a little too thorough, he thought.

This was where Harold found satisfaction; he knew that setting clear boundaries was crucial. He had learned this through his own personal therapy and past experiences. While he wasn't always great at it, he understood its importance.

He was glad to have successfully established these boundaries during their earlier conversation. Now, he felt better able to navigate his responsibilities without stretching himself too thin.

The work ran several pages long, and Harold realized he would need to familiarize himself thoroughly. En route to his next assignment, he stopped for a cup of coffee and a pastry at a gas station. He parked the car, went inside, and got in line for his coffee, again looking over Sophie's transcript as he scanned the pages. He smiled slightly at the detailed section on diagnosing ADHD.

Buried in the technical jargon, Harold found a paragraph that detailed the actual job. Sophie had briefly mentioned it before, but the information provided now wasn't clear enough. He decided to ask her about it later.

A woman wanted to know if her family dog might have ADHD. She had some experience with the disorder, but it involved her son, not animals.

Harold sipped his coffee. "Interesting. A dog with ADHD? That's a first." He folded the paper carefully, grabbed his pastry, and returned to his car. "This should be interesting."

He started the car and set off, feeling both curiosity and trepidation about what lay ahead.

Harold finally arrived, turning off the engine of his old Volvo. Barely had he removed the key when a big dog came bounding into the driveway. It was a Boxer, barking loudly and jumping up on the car, its claws scratching against the paint.

Normally, Harold wasn't afraid of dogs, but this one gave him pause. He couldn't come off as scared—not as a pet therapist. He opened the door slowly, determined to keep his composure.

The Boxer became even more excited, wagging its tail vigorously as Harold stepped out. It leaped up, trying to get closer. Harold struggled a bit to push the dog back gently as he shut the car door. Just then, a friendly voice called out from nearby.

“Edward, come here!”

The dog completely ignored its owner's command. Instead, it attempted to climb into the driver's seat, which made it difficult for Harold to get out.

Harold frowned but tried to remain calm. “Alright, buddy, go on now,” he said, nudging the dog out of the car.

The moment Harold shut the door, Edward began barking again and jumping around excitedly. As Harold made his way toward the yard, the woman who had called out to the dog smiled broadly.

“Oh, look at that!” she shouted cheerfully. “Another playmate! He loves other dogs!”

Harold took a breath, then approached her with Edward still bounding around him. This was clearly a dog with a lot of energy and little regard for commands.

The woman nodded to Harold in greeting. “Hello,” she said, but her attention was still focused entirely on Edward. “You're a good dog,” she cooed, patting the dog affectionately.

Edward, however, was more interested in Harold. He jumped up on him, excited as if greeting an old friend.

The woman looked at Harold with a smile. "Yes, as you can see, he has a lot of energy. He's big, and he doesn't always listen. That's why I called you. I wanted to know if there's something serious going on or if we can do something to help him."

Harold nodded, observing the dog. He thought to himself, There's clearly something wrong in the dynamic between her and Edward. He doesn't listen to her at all.

Just as Harold was about to respond, a boy's voice rang out from inside the house. "MOM! Can I have another soda?"

The woman quickly glanced back toward the house, her attention shifting away from both Harold and Edward. "Coming, darling!" she called before disappearing inside.

Edward continued jumping and barking, seemingly unaware of anything else. A few moments later, the woman returned, sighing. "That's my son, Jonas," she explained. "He needs me, even when I'm tired or angry or feeling off. I have to look after him."

She paused and then added, "Do you mind if we take a walk while we talk? Jonas is watching a show on his iPad, and he hates being disturbed. It'd be easier if we just walked around the block with Edward."

There was a brief pause before Harold nodded. Something about the situation seemed off, and he couldn't help but wonder if there was more going on with her son. But he decided against pressing the matter. "Works for me," he said. "Let's go for a walk."

The woman looked relieved. She picked up a leash, but instead of using it, she allowed Edward to run freely ahead of them.

Harold might have expected the woman to use the leash for Edward, especially given his behavior, but she didn't. Edward thundered up ahead at full speed, completely oblivious to the boundaries of sidewalks or pathways. He dashed through people's yards and ran wherever he pleased, much to Harold's surprise.

As they walked, they passed another pedestrian. Sure enough, Edward lunged at the person, startling them. His owner didn't seem too concerned, smiling apologetically, but clearly not willing or able to control her dog.

At least with Edward running ahead, Harold was able to talk with the woman a bit more. Though, her eyes constantly drifted back to the dog.

"Well," she started, "the whole family wanted a dog for years. When we finally got Edward, everyone was thrilled. But now, I'm the one who takes care of him. The kids have lost interest, and my husband doesn't have time."

She briefly looked over at Edward, who was still darting ahead. "I want him to be happy, so I give him the best food, never put him on a leash, let him run freely, and sleep indoors. But it's weird; even though I give him so much freedom, he still doesn't listen."

Harold nodded as she spoke. He could see the issue clearly—Edward needed more structure. But for now, he simply listened.

At one point, they walked past a house where a woman stood on her porch, the door open behind her. It was clear that the two women knew each other. Edward's owner waved cheerfully.

"Hi!" she called warmly. But Edward had already bolted past her and straight into the woman's house, without a moment of hesitation.

The homeowner seemed unhappy as she rushed after Edward. Moments later, Edward returned, running outside with something in his mouth, which he promptly dropped on the lawn. Before anyone could say anything, he dashed back inside and emerged seconds later with another object.

Edward's owner, now standing beside Harold, grinned ear-to-ear. "Look at how comfortable he is here! He loves exploring and playing with things. He really values his freedom," she said with a proud smile.

Harold nodded slightly but said nothing. This dog doesn't need more freedom. He needs boundaries, he thought.

They finally headed back home, Edward trotting along, still holding a small toy duck he'd found. Harold knew it was time to have a serious conversation with Edward's owner.

He paused, then asked a question that had been at the top of his mind, "Have you ever noticed that your son Jonas and your dog Edward have a lot in common?"

She seemed taken aback, the question hanging in the air for a moment before she quietly nodded. "Yes, actually, I have. I'm not sure which one copied the other, but there is definitely something similar about them."

Harold pressed on. "How so?"

She thought for a moment before replying, "Neither of them likes being told what to do. They both value their independence."

Harold nodded, feeling that he was on the right track. He was starting to understand the dynamic at play. The similarities between Jonas and Edward were more than just coincidental—they were reflective of something deeper, perhaps even about the woman herself.

Harold knew that he wouldn't get much further with the conversation today. Her attention was divided between her son and the dog, and there were too many distractions. But he had seen enough. He could see how her interactions with Jonas and Edward mirrored each other. The lack of boundaries was affecting both of them.

He decided to thank her for today. "I think I'll go home and think about this more, then write you an email with my thoughts and suggestions."

She nodded, somewhat distracted as she chased after Edward, trying to get him to come back. "Okay," she said.

"If you're interested, we could meet again, maybe in a quieter setting. Somewhere where we can focus without interruptions," Harold suggested. "It could be a café or a park. Whatever works for you."

She mumbled a reply, more of a nod than anything else, before bidding him farewell. Harold left, knowing he had a lot to say in his email.

Harold decided to head to the office to write his follow-up. He could also take the opportunity to hint to Sophie that he needed an official workspace

if she expected him to continue working and conducting meetings. He pulled up to the office after a thirty-minute drive. As he entered, he found Sophie sitting at her desk, wearing a red tracksuit, with a laundry bag on the floor and her computer screen on. It sounded as though she was just surfing the net.

“Hey!” she called out, looking up. “You’re back quick.”

Harold walked in and began telling her about the family he had visited. Then he said, “I need a place to write this email.”

Sophie shrugged apologetically. “Oh, right. We need to set up a proper workspace for you. But for now, feel free to use my desk. I was just about to head to the gym anyway.”

Harold nodded and pulled over a metal chair. It wasn’t anything fancy—just functional, like him.

Email:

Dear ...

Thank you again for meeting with me. It was insightful and informative to see you, Edward, and to hear about Jonas, even though I didn’t get a chance to meet him. You mentioned diagnoses like ADHD and autism, and while I’m not an expert in these areas, I did observe some aspects of your relationship with Edward that may be worth exploring further. There are several changes you could make that would help manage Edward more effectively, and I believe they could also be beneficial for your neighbors.

You mentioned that Jonas and Edward are quite similar, and I think some of the strategies I suggest for Edward could be useful for Jonas as well. Both their behaviors could be seen as a way for them to understand and interact with the world around them.

When you spoke about both Jonas and Edward, you used the word “freedom” multiple times. I agree with you that they both seem to value their independence. It made me wonder if perhaps your own experiences

have made freedom particularly important to you. Perhaps something in your past made you feel that freedom is essential not just for yourself but also for your son and your dog.

However, I want to emphasize that freedom, while important, isn't always what animals (or people) need to feel fulfilled. A dog like Edward needs rules and structure. Without clear boundaries, the world can become overwhelming. Too many choices can create confusion, making it harder for him to be calm and obedient.

My advice would be to establish some boundaries for Edward. For instance, you could start by taking him on walks using a leash. I know it will be challenging at first since he's not used to it, but providing that regularity will help him feel calmer and more secure. You might also consider enrolling him in a training course so that you're better equipped to provide the structure he needs.

Additionally, you may want to restrict which areas of the house Edward is allowed in. It's worth deciding whether you're comfortable with him sleeping inside at night, or whether you'd prefer for him to have a kennel or a designated space outdoors. It's important that he knows the entire house isn't his territory—he has limits.

Another important boundary is jumping on people, as Edward did with me. Besides being annoying to others, it doesn't allow him to understand where he fits within the family hierarchy. Once these boundaries are established, he'll have a clearer sense of his role, and everyone (especially Edward) will be happier. It might seem counterintuitive, but having strict roles and boundaries actually makes animals feel safer, which unrestricted freedom cannot.

I believe these changes could help Edward lead a more peaceful life. I also think some of these strategies could be useful for Jonas as well. Boundless freedom can sometimes be overwhelming—structure and boundaries can provide a kind of freedom that is more fulfilling than having no limitations at all.

If you'd like, we can meet again in a neutral location where we can discuss things without interruptions—a café or a park, perhaps. I'm flexible and happy to meet wherever and whenever is convenient for you.

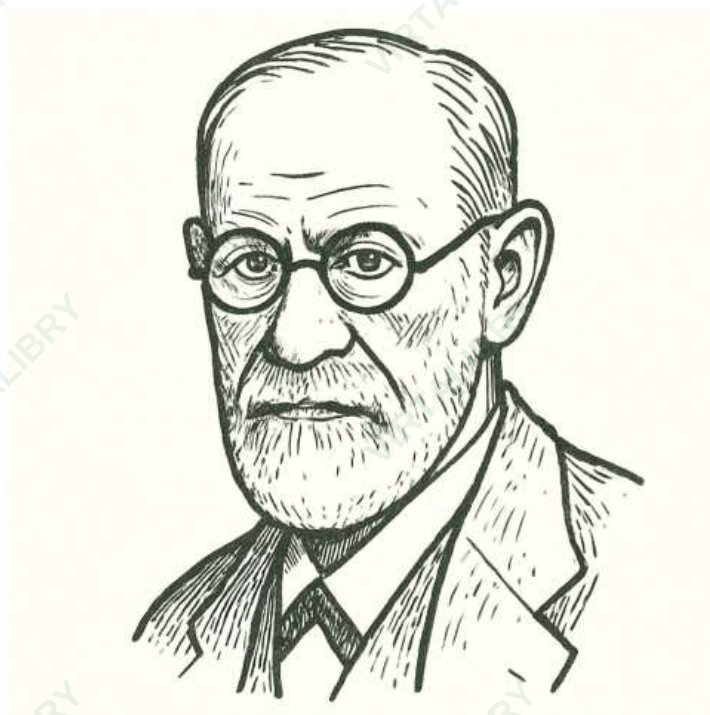
Please feel free to email me if you have any questions or need more information.

All the best, and I hope that life can bring a sense of peace and balance to you, Edward, and Jonas.

Sincerely,
Harold, Pet Therapist

A few days passed before a response finally arrived. The payment was deposited into the account, accompanied by a friendly yet brief message: "Thank you for visiting and for your time. I may take you up on the offer for a chat later. Right now, I'm too busy with my family. Kind regards."

Harold shook his head slightly as Sophie read the message aloud. Deep down, he felt a sense of relief. He knew there was still a long road ahead. The woman was not one to easily surrender her fight for the freedom of those she cared for.



Subconscious at Work

On Monday morning, as usual, Harold pulled into the office in the industrial district. He expected to find the same old mess of simple furnishings, but what greeted him was quite the opposite. A new desk, a comfortable

office chair, and an iPad were set up where his usual station had been. On top of the iPad was a gift envelope.

Harold blinked, standing awkwardly in the doorway. He had truly not anticipated such a change on a Monday morning.

Sophie then joined him at the door, and her face betrayed her excitement. A wide grin spread across her face as she saw his astonishment.

“Surprised? Are you calling me predictable?” she teased.

“Not surprising for you,” Harold muttered, still taken aback by the new setup.

Sophie walked over to the new desk arrangement and gestured at the table. “I figured you could use a bit more space—and maybe some tools to help with all that outdated tech. I want you to feel welcome here.” She pointed at the envelope on the iPad. “Of course... there’s a letter as well.”

Slowly, Harold made his way to the desk and picked up the gift envelope. Sophie gave an encouraging nod, and he opened it.

Harold eased himself into the new office chair and broke open the envelope. To his surprise, he found a gift card inside—a voucher for a hair salon. He looked back at Sophie, who was wearing a huge grin, waiting for his response.

“Uh... a hair salon?” Harold seemed a little shocked and spoke slowly.

Sophie’s smile grew even wider. “Yeah, isn’t it great?” she said excitedly. “You’ve been doing well, and I figured you deserved a reward.” She perched on the edge of the desk and leaned toward him. “My friend from training school just opened her salon, and I made a little deal with her.”

Harold raised an eyebrow. “A deal?”

Sophie elaborated, “She needs clients, and I thought you could use a little freshening up. I figured it would be nice for both of you!”

Harold looked at the gift card and paused. On the one hand, it was a gift, and who doesn’t like to be spoiled? On the other hand, there was something about it that felt off. It wasn’t just a haircut; it was the implication behind it. Sophie, now his boss, was indirectly telling him how he should present himself.

It was more than just a haircut; it was about control—something that had haunted Harold his whole life. He had always struggled with authority figures, especially when it came to people telling him what to do or how to look.

He forced a smile, though it hurt a little deep down. “Thanks, Sophie. That’s... yeah... that’s really thoughtful of you.”

“Well,” Sophie clapped her hands together as Harold hesitated. “Great! You can schedule an appointment for next week. It’ll be good for you.”

Sophie dashed off, eager to move on to their next assignment, while Harold sat at his new desk, staring at the salon gift card. The gesture nagged at him—it wasn’t just about the haircut.

Harold felt himself churning inside as they drove to their next job. It felt like an old, quiet rebellion he was familiar with—he had always had a problem with authority and people telling him what to do.

Harold suddenly remembered talking about this in therapy. That was where he had first heard about Freud’s theories of the unconscious—the id, ego, and superego. He now recognized that his ego was lashing out at Sophie’s attempts to impose her will, just as a defense mechanism. It was almost instinctive.

‘Heh,’ he chuckled to himself at the obviousness of his reaction. And yet, he couldn’t help but wonder if there was something more to it. Was he just repeating an old pattern of defiance, or was it something deeper?

But at the same time, he realized he didn’t really care all that much. It was a gift, after all, and maybe he didn’t need to be so dramatic about it.

Sophie broke the silence while chewing on a piece of licorice. “The next one is a bit of a weird case. It’s the family with the rabbits, isn’t it? The father doesn’t really know what’s going on, but he thinks they look strange. He said he wanted to talk to us before calling a vet.”

Harold raised an eyebrow. Rabbits with sores? That wasn’t something he dealt with routinely.

Undeterred, Sophie continued, “I, of course, asked the chatbot what it could be, and it listed different parasites that could cause sores like

that. It also mentioned some ointments, but honestly, it all seemed a bit far-fetched.”

She glanced at Harold, who sighed. “Well, I guess we’ll have to rely on your gut this time and figure out what’s really happening.”

Harold shook his head slightly, but a small part of him was curious about how he would handle the task. “Hmm, I’m not sure how much my intuition will help in this case, but let’s give it a shot.”

Soon, they were out in the family’s shed, standing by the rabbit hutch with the father, mother, and their son Danny. Sophie and Harold waited while the father gently caught one of the three rabbits, cradling it in his hands and pointing out the sores.

“See?” the father said, indicating a small sore on the rabbit’s skin. “That’s pretty strange, isn’t it?”

Harold leaned in for a closer look. The sores were small, almost as if the rabbits had been pricked by something—but what? It was very odd.

“They look like puncture marks,” Harold muttered, inspecting the small wounds.

Sophie frowned. “What could cause something like that?” she asked. “Fleas?” She glanced at Harold, who snorted.

“If it were fleas, it wouldn’t look like this,” Harold replied.

The father sighed nervously. “This just looks different from anything I’ve ever seen, and we’ve had rabbits for years!”

Harold didn’t speak, but he glanced down at the other rabbits in the hutch. Something was clearly wrong here, but he couldn’t put his finger on it.

Suddenly, Harold had a thought. A memory of his therapy sessions popped into his mind—Freud and the unconscious. Was there something more going on here with Danny? Something coming through subconsciously in how the rabbits were treated? Harold decided he needed to speak with the boy alone.

“Sophie,” he said quietly, touching her arm. “Maybe you could take some pictures of the rabbits and use the chatbot to see if it comes up with anything useful?”

“Of course,” Sophie replied, always eager to involve technology. “Good idea! Let’s see if the bot can help us.”

“Alright,” Harold said, a slight smile forming on his face. “Meanwhile, I’m going to have a little talk with Danny.”

Harold approached Danny, who had been standing off to the side, watching the rabbits. “Hey, Danny, want to go inside for a bit? I’d love to hear more about your thoughts on the rabbits.”

A few minutes later, Harold and Danny were sitting in the boy’s room. Harold turned to him, speaking softly. “Danny, how did you get into raising rabbits? Was it something you always wanted to do?”

Danny shrugged and looked away. Harold could tell the boy wasn’t very interested in the rabbits.

After a moment, Danny murmured, “It was just something my parents wanted. Not me.”

Harold nodded slowly. “So, it wasn’t your idea?”

Danny shook his head. “No. I wanted a dog.”

Harold frowned. “You wanted a puppy, but you got rabbits instead?”

Danny sighed. “Yeah. My dad said taking care of a dog was too much responsibility. He said I had to prove I could handle rabbits first, and maybe then I could get a dog.”

Harold nodded as he listened. “Did your dad say that if you took care of the rabbits, you’d get a dog later?”

“Yeah,” Danny replied. “But that never happened.”

Harold could feel the boy’s frustration. He could sense there was more going on—something about how the rabbits represented something else within the family dynamic.

“Alright, Danny. Let’s go talk to your parents,” Harold said gently.

Back in the kitchen, Harold and Danny rejoined Sophie and his parents. Harold set his cup down and addressed the group.

“Danny and I had a good talk,” Harold began. “And I think there’s more to this than just the rabbits.” He paused, looking at the parents. “Sometimes, the things we fight against the most—the things that get forced on us—end up getting buried deep down. Freud called it the subconscious, and sometimes it comes out in strange ways that we can not control.”

He looked directly at the father with an approving look. It was important that he was understanding what he was indirectly explaining. “There has been a lot of pressure on Danny to prove that he could handle the job of looking after animals. Maybe the pressure has been too intense...? Maybe there hasn’t been room for talking about it?”

Harold and the father had eye contact and Harold felt, that he could continue the delicate theme. “Our subconscious tries to balance the things we are aware of and the things we don’t know about ourselves. And the reactions can be very strange and unexpected.”

Again Harold made a short pause to be sure his message was understood. “It’s very important to know how to handle animals in the best way, and I think Danny has the skills for that. I would suggest that you try another strategy from now on, if you don’t want more animals or boys to be hurt. You could see how trust would work, I am sure it will work out much better.”

The parents exchanged glances, visibly affected by Harold’s words. The father looked at Danny, who was watching him with a mix of hope and disbelief.

“Maybe we should give it a shot,” the father said softly. “We can find a good home for the rabbits.”

Danny’s eyes lit up, a mix of hope and disbelief in his expression. It was as though, finally, things were shifting. The father nodded at him, a slight smile forming. “And maybe... maybe we can think about getting a dog.”

Danny’s face broke into a wide grin, and he threw his arms around his father. It was the beginning of something new—a step toward trust, toward a bond that hadn’t fully been there before.

Harold smiled at the family, feeling a warmth in his chest. He then looked over at Sophie, who gave him an approving nod. The family seemed ready to take a step forward, to make changes that might allow Danny to feel more trusted and seen.

Back at the car, Sophie beamed at Harold. "Harold, you were just spectacular in there," she assured him, her tone full of admiration. "Your talk with them really hit home, and I could see the parents were genuinely moved. I mean, who knew that we might actually see them buying a dog tomorrow morning?"

She nudged him playfully. "You really nailed it. Did you plan this all along?"

Harold chuckled lightly, shaking his head. "Honestly, it just kind of came to me. I just listened to what Danny was saying."

Sophie looked at him, still impressed. "Well, you've got a real knack for this. It's funny—you always act like you're skeptical about pet psychology, but you always seem to find exactly what's going on beneath the surface."

Harold smirked. "I guess I just go with my gut. Sometimes that's all you need."

Sophie settled back into her seat, her gaze still on Harold. "You know, maybe I was wrong about that gift card. It wasn't just about getting a haircut—it was about showing that I trust you to be the face of what we're doing here. You're good at this, Harold, and I want people to see that."

Harold was silent for a moment, letting her words sink in. Maybe it hadn't just been about control after all. Maybe there was more to it, something that came from a place of trust and recognition. He nodded, a smile finally spreading across his face.

"Thanks, Sophie. I appreciate that."

She nodded back, her eyes twinkling with excitement. "We're going to be great partners, Harold. I can feel it. We just need to keep trusting each other and making sure we listen to what's really going on—with the pets and with the people."

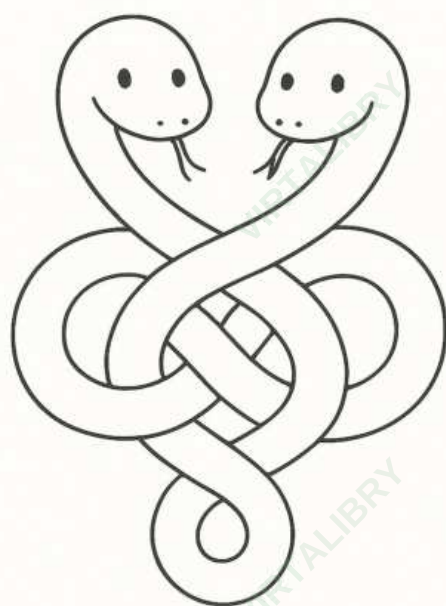
Harold grinned, feeling a sense of camaraderie that hadn't been there before. "Agreed. Let's make this work."

With that, Harold started the car, and the old Volvo rumbled to life. As they drove away, the road ahead felt a little brighter, and Harold felt a renewed sense of purpose. They might be an odd pair, but maybe, just maybe, they were on to something.

The rest of the day went by uneventfully, but Harold couldn't shake a feeling of satisfaction from their morning's success. As he settled into his new office chair, he found himself glancing at the gift card on his desk.

Maybe he'd give it a try. Maybe a new look wouldn't be so bad after all—especially if it meant embracing this new chapter, with Sophie by his side and their little pet therapy business beginning to find its stride.

He picked up the gift card, turning it over in his hands. He smiled, placing it in his pocket, then turned to his iPad, ready to tackle the next item on his list.



The Brotherhood of the Serpent

“Wait, did we hire a new guy at work?” Sophie smirked as Harold opened the door. She was clearly teasing. He had taken her up on her offer to visit the hairdresser, and the transformation was striking. His shoulder-length hair was neatly styled, his beard freshly trimmed, and the overall effect was that he looked much sharper than before.

As Harold reached his desk, Sophie approached him. “Over the weekend, we picked up two jobs,” she said, tapping her tablet. “Both of those clients have requested a visit today.”

She looked up at Harold, her eyes scanning his freshly groomed look. “You can pick which one you want to take. We can handle the other one together this afternoon.”

She gestured to her screen, tapping it quickly. “The first one is about some kind of snake situation. I hate snakes, so I’m hoping you’ll take that one this morning. We’ll work on the other case this afternoon—someone who’s sitting on the fence about whether or not they should adopt an animal from a shelter.”

“I thought you said I could choose,” Harold quipped, raising an eyebrow.

Sophie swung her bag of licorice at him, but Harold merely chuckled and accepted the slightly opened bag. The two of them were... less tense

with each other now. Completing a few assignments together had forged an understanding and mutual respect.

“Alright, cool,” Harold said cheerfully, stuffing a piece of licorice into his mouth. “The snake thing sounds interesting. Just get me the address, and I’ll take care of it.”

Sophie nodded and handed him a piece of paper with the address on it, still wearing that mischievous smile. “Good, I knew you’d take it. Good luck out there. And if you stumble into something... unpleasant, give me a call.”

Before Harold could leave, Sophie stopped him. “Oh, by the way, there’s something else we should discuss.”

Harold turned back, sitting down with a question fresh on his lips. Sophie looked serious, as though she was gearing up to address something important.

“About your daughter,” Sophie began, her voice taking on a more professional tone. “You mentioned the old lady with the dog. Did your daughter end up taking that job, looking after her dog?”

Harold nodded. “Yeah, it went fine. I haven’t heard anything for a few days, but I assume everything is going smoothly.”

Sophie leaned in, her voice dropping a little. “Harold, since we’re building a business here, I think we should keep things clean and clear. It’s best to draw lines early on. If your daughter is going to work for us, even informally, she should be officially hired. I’ve been considering this. If we’re growing, we could place ourselves in a stronger position in the market.”

She smiled, adding, “I was wondering if we should bring her in to help out around the office one day—maybe see if there are other things she can do too. What’s her name, by the way?”

“Susan,” Harold said, a little surprised by Sophie’s sudden excitement.

“Nice name,” Sophie said, her smile widening. “Do you mind sharing her number with me? Maybe I could call her while you’re out, see if she can come over.”

Harold hesitated, mulling it over for a moment before nodding. “Okay.”

"I'm Mary, and this is my husband, John, along with our two kids, Glenn and Cindy. We're here to help you." She gestured to her children and husband before turning back to Harold. "I had the kids stay home from school today, and I convinced my husband to take the day off work because I think this is something we all need to hear together—so we can fix this."

Looking directly at Harold, she smiled. "Thank the good Lord you got here so quickly, Harold. I contacted you over the weekend, and boom, first thing Monday morning, you're here."

From the outset, Harold had a sense that this was an extremely organized family. It was clear who ran this household, and it seemed like John, the husband, was accustomed to this dynamic. The children sat quietly at the table, their eyes cast down.

"And it's about a snake," Mary added before anyone else could speak. She briefly looked at her family before putting down the gardening shears she had been holding. "I need to know what these sneaky kids and that husband of mine have been doing down in the basement. It's almost a routine for them to go down there for half an hour to an hour after dinner or after school. And then, they have these secret conversations."

Mary sighed, shaking her head. "At first, I thought it might be about Christmas gifts, but then... oh God, a terrible feeling hit me. Apparently, there's some kind of terrarium down there—right under my nose while I sleep—filled with snakes. Yes, you heard that right, snakes."

The children exchanged mischievous smiles, while John sat completely still, staring straight ahead. Mary scrutinized them all carefully. "Yes, you were caught. And here's how."

She turned her gaze to Harold. "Look what I found in the freezer. You probably won't believe it, but I discovered a package filled with some of the grossest things ever—frozen baby mice."

Mary shook her head in disgust. "I pulled them out right away and showed them to my husband—'What are these?!' And that's when he had to come clean—they were baby mice for the snakes. After that, he led

me up to the workshop, and there it was, tucked away in the corner. A terrarium with two snakes in it.”

Mary looked at her family as though daring them to defend themselves, but they all remained silent. The room fell quiet—no one spoke.

Sensing the tension, Harold softened his tone and cracked a smile. “I’m no Indiana Jones, but that does sound kind of creepy.”

The children giggled, and even Mary’s stern demeanor softened. Though the situation was still serious, Harold’s attempt at humor helped lighten the mood.

Having had children himself, Harold knew that kids often loved to keep secrets—especially if it was something thrilling. He knew he’d need all his skills to get them to open up about their “snake club.” He squatted down to their level, smiling.

“Wow, you seem like someone who knows a lot about snakes,” he said, his voice gentle. “It looks like you have something special going on here. A secret, maybe?”

He could tell the children were hesitating, unsure of how much to reveal. Quickly, he added, “I’ve always thought secret clubs were really cool. Do you have some kind of club or order?”

The little girl lit up. “Yup! We have ‘The Brotherhood of the Serpent’ with Dad!” she said excitedly.

Harold nodded, his curiosity piqued. “That sounds exciting. What’s it all about?”

“The first thing you have to do is read a snake book,” the girl explained. “Or at least look at the pictures. Then you have to learn all about different snakes—like cobras, pythons, and regular snakes.”

The boy, who had been silent until now, spoke up. “After you pass that test, you have to be brave enough to hold the snake in your hands.”

Mary sat stiffly, her jaw clenched, her eyes fixed on Harold. He knew that whatever he said next was going to be difficult for her to hear, so he let the kids continue.

“And then...” the girl added, her eyes wide with excitement, “you have to kiss the snake!” She looked at her mother, who seemed even more uncomfortable.

“Kiss the snake?” Harold asked, both amused and puzzled.

“Yeah!” the girl exclaimed. “If you kiss the snake, you become the king of The Brotherhood!”

Mary’s face tightened at the concept, and Harold could tell she wasn’t amused.

Mary’s voice quivered as she turned to Harold. “Now you understand why I was so surprised—and still am. They’ve been sneaking around in the basement all this time. And I know my husband is behind it. I just know.”

She shook her head. “For starters, I don’t want snakes in my house. But most importantly, they kept this a secret from me. We’re not a family like that. We don’t lie to each other. I’ve always taught my children—no secrets.”

Harold looked at Mary, feeling a pang of sympathy for the kids—and for John. He remembered his own childhood. He had never kept snakes, but he did have his share of secret clubs and adventurous societies with his friends. There was something thrilling about a world without adults—a world full of secrets. He understood the kids, and even John, better than Mary realized.

Harold decided to try a new approach. He smiled at Mary, then looked at John. “Have you ever had a secret when you were a kid?”

“Never,” Mary replied instantly, her tone defensive. “I’ve never lied or hidden anything.” She turned to John, who looked a little sheepish, but before Mary could say anything more, the kids jumped in.

“But Mom, remember the cake?” the girl said, giggling.

“And when you hid from Grandpa because you didn’t want to go to school?” added the boy.

Mary looked genuinely surprised as if she had forgotten these little stories from her own childhood. Harold smiled.

“Sometimes we all need secrets,” he said, his voice softening. “Even the oldest and most innocent of secrets.” He turned back to Mary, meeting her gaze. “I think you’re the kind of person that it’s hard to keep secrets from, especially since you’re always so closely connected to your family. You see everything.”

The children nodded eagerly, chiming in almost in unison, “Yeah, it’s true! She’s always in our business, and if we do anything she doesn’t know about, she gets really mad!”

Mary’s lips twitched into a reluctant smile, and the tension seemed to ease slightly. Harold took the opportunity to continue.

“Secrets often come from a place of wanting a little space, a bit of breathing room. It’s natural for kids—and adults—to sometimes want to step out of the spotlight for a bit, away from the scrutiny. And I think, in a way, that’s what this secret club is all about.”

He glanced at John, who seemed to relax at Harold’s words. “I think maybe the kids wanted to do something special with their dad, and John wanted to share something unique with them. Fathers and children sometimes need that. It helps them bond over something different, something outside of the regular family routines.”

Mary sat quietly for a moment, taking it all in. Her stern demeanor softened as she looked at her family. A small smile tugged at her lips, and she sighed.

“I see,” she said at last. “I understand now... what you were all trying to do.”

She turned to her children, her expression warming. “Alright then, you can keep your ‘Brotherhood of the Serpent,’” she said, lifting an eyebrow playfully. “But you have to promise me one thing—no more snake food in my freezer. Deal?”

John and the kids all nodded eagerly, their relief palpable. They even shared a smile.

As Harold drove home, he found his thoughts drifting back to what Sophie had said earlier about his daughter. It bothered him in a way he couldn't quite articulate. His time with Mary and her family had sharpened his awareness of his own situation. And far from a comforting thought, Harold reluctantly faced the idea that he wasn't entirely sure if he wanted Susan working with him.

The truth was, his new job had become a kind of refuge—somewhere apart from his family, where he could be himself without the complications of his relationship with his ex-wife and daughter. He and Susan hadn't always gotten along, mostly due to his ex-wife's influence. The thought of his daughter stepping into this space—a space he wasn't sure he was ready to share—filled him with unease.

Sophie was in high spirits when Harold returned to the office. She had arranged an assortment of pastries on the table.

"How did it go with the family?" she asked, a bright smile on her face. "Did you really get them to agree?"

Harold smiled, nodding. "Yeah, it went well. They've even agreed to pay."

"Great!" Sophie said, her enthusiasm infectious. "Well, we have another appointment at two in the afternoon. But before that, I think we should get in touch with Susan—she's coming by at one. I thought she was ready, but maybe we should come up with a more concrete plan for her."

"Sophie, can we discuss this at our Friday review meeting?" Harold asked, a sheepish yet earnest smile tugging at his lips. "I'd like us to have regular check-ins, maybe weekly or something. I think it would help."

Sophie raised her eyebrows, slightly surprised, but nodded.

"Yes," Harold continued. "I'm not saying we need to rush into hiring Susan right now, but if we're planning to grow the team by 50% or more, I think it's worth having an official conversation about it. Bringing in new people will change the dynamic here."

Sophie smiled knowingly. “Not if you see it that way,” she said. “Let me give her a call and let her know we’re putting things on hold for now. We can always revisit the idea later.”

Harold nodded, a grateful smile on his face.



Raised by Dogs

Sophie rushed into the office, her face lit with delight. Harold glanced up from his computer and instantly knew something was up. He chuckled and raised an eyebrow.

“What’s going on? You’re usually the first one to support the wheel,” he said, half-joking.

“It’s even better than that!” Sophie exclaimed, practically skipping over to her desk. “I just left a meeting with my former classmates from the workshop school. We were studying how to run our own businesses.”

Harold chuckled. “Oh, so that’s where all this energy is coming from, huh?”

“Yes! And it was amazing. We had a great time, and one of my classmates made a game that we played.” Sophie was frantic with excitement and could not manage to sit still.

“A game?” Harold asked, intrigued. “What kind of game?”

“It’s called Your Other Animal—I know, terrible title, but it’s brilliant!” Sophie said, digging around in her bag for something. “It’s about discovering which animal you are and what that means. Are you a dog, a cat, or maybe even a turtle? It’s so much fun!”

Harold chuckled. “Okay, so what are you?”

Sophie sat up, her face full of pride. “I’m an eagle! Proud, dedicated, and results-oriented. I own it and play the long game.”

Harold laughed out loud. “An eagle, huh? You know, that kinda fits you. What about the others? Did they figure out their animals too?”

“Yeah, and we had a blast with it! But the best part is that I have a plan. We’re entrepreneurs, right? So I was thinking, why not use this game in our business?”

Harold gave her a questioning look. “A game in our business? How?”

“We could take the game with us when we visit families,” Sophie explained. “After helping them with their pets, we could offer the game as a family activity. It’s a fun bonding experience—and we could charge \$50 per game!”

Harold blinked in surprise, his face a mixture of incredulity and amusement. “You want people to pay fifty bucks just to find out if they’re a lion, a monkey, or... a fish?”

“Exactly! People love that stuff!” Sophie became even more animated. “It makes our consultations more interesting, and it would be a great source of extra income!”

Harold laughed so hard he almost choked. "So you think people will pay fifty bucks to find out they're a goldfish?"

"Yes! That's the fun of it!" Sophie said, her enthusiasm unbroken. "It will get them more invested in our sessions and also help them remember us. It could be a huge hit."

Harold grinned and shook his head. "Maybe we should run some consultations first and see if anyone would actually pay for Your Other Animal afterward."

Sophie laughed and shrugged. "Yeah, you're probably right. But I still think we should give it a shot. Who knows? It could be a trend!"

Harold shook his head again, but he couldn't help smiling. "You're always full of ideas, Sophie. You're so unpredictable. The things you come up with... I never know what to expect."

Sophie winked at him. "Just wait, Harold. This could be huge. And who knows? You might be... a bear."

Harold smiled, deciding it wasn't an unfair comparison.

Sophie laughed. "Yeah, you'd be Baloo from *The Jungle Book*. Laid back, floating down the river, taking naps, playing the flute. You're definitely a chill bear."

Harold shook his head with a chuckle. "Don't say that. Though... it's not the worst thing I've heard."

Sophie winked again, teasing, "Just give me a heads-up if you start singing about the bare necessities!"

Harold laughed. "Sophie, this was fun, but if you keep going with the Baloo thing, I might just take that nap."

Sophie laughed and brushed her hair away from her face. "Right, we've got work to do."

She frowned, as if trying to remember something. "Oh, that's right! We have a consultation today with a family with three large dogs."

She glanced at the clock. "I scheduled us to be there at 2 pm. Are you up for it?"

As they approached the house, they could already hear it: dogs barking, their deep voices echoing behind closed doors. The shadows of the big dogs could be seen through a frosted glass window, pacing back and forth as if eager to see who was at the door.

The door swung open, and the man of the house gave them a terse nod, stepping back to let them pass. "Come on in," he said, as if this chaos were a daily occurrence.

Once they walked in, three huge dogs ran around the living room, unable to settle down. They were jumping and barking, their ample bodies darting all over the room. Sophie pulled back a bit, while Harold tried to remain composed.

What gripped their hearts was the image of a tiny young child, not older than 12 months, sitting silently on the floor amongst the rampaging pack. It was as if she were at peace amid the chaos, as if this was normal for her. The dogs circled her, stopping to sniff at her every so often, but she remained still and calm.

Sophie and Harold exchanged a quick glance before focusing on the woman sitting in the corner of the kitchen. She was lying on the couch, curled into one of its corners, her hands clasped tightly in her lap, her eyes nervously following the dogs' every move.

"Jesus Christ... those are some big dogs you've got," Harold said, carefully trying to keep his voice calm despite feeling anxious.

The man nodded and shrugged as if the chaos was an everyday part of their lives. "Yeah, they get a little excited with new people."

Sophie took a deep breath and leaned toward the woman. "Maybe we should calm the dogs down a bit so we can talk?" she suggested softly, her eyes shifting between the dogs and the little girl sitting in their midst.

Harold and Sophie looked at each other, puzzled and worried. They couldn't determine which was more alarming: the excited dogs, the child calmly sitting among them, or the mother who seemed to be shrinking into the couch.

Something was terribly wrong here.

The man offered them a seat with a strangely casual air. Harold and Sophie sat down, following his gaze to the now-quieter dogs. The barking had stopped, and the three big dogs lay down around the little girl, as if guarding her. The little girl sat in the middle of the room, smiling widely and clapping her hands as if playing some game only she understood.

Sophie fidgeted in her seat, giving Harold a look that screamed discomfort. The air in the room was thick with tension, wrapping around each of them.

The father hesitated, then looked at Harold and Sophie pleadingly. "I'm the one who contacted you," he began, his voice tense. "I'm hoping you can help us. We are completely out of our depth here, as I'm sure you can see."

Harold and Sophie nodded as the man spoke. "Everything started out fine. We were so happy to welcome our daughter. Our dogs have been a huge part of our lives for years. But everything changed after she was born."

He took a deep breath, looking down at the floor. "The birth was hard... really hard. My wife suffered from postpartum depression and had to stay in the hospital for a long time. In the meantime, it was just me, the baby, and the dogs."

Sophie looked at the tense woman on the couch, then back at the man. Her heart broke for them.

The man paused before continuing. "I think that's when this strange dynamic between them began. My wife was gone, so I had to do everything. Our daughter has known the dogs from the very beginning, and now we can't seem to make things work. My wife is still struggling, as you can see, and it feels like everything has become more difficult than I ever imagined."

He hesitated again, glancing at his daughter, surrounded by the big dogs as if they were her protectors. Then he looked back at Harold and Sophie. "It sounds strange, but we have no idea how to fix it."

Sophie and Harold exchanged a glance, a silence hanging between them.

From the corner of the room, the mother suddenly spoke, her voice low and trembling. "She hates me," she whispered, her eyes staring blankly

at some distant point, away from both her child and her husband. “She doesn’t like me. She never has.”

Harold and Sophie were stunned by her words, but she continued, avoiding eye contact. “I don’t know how to be her mother. She doesn’t want me.”

The mother perched on the edge of the couch, her knuckles white as she clasped her hands tightly together, her tone weighted with grief and acceptance. “I don’t know how to be her mother.”

Harold looked at Sophie, unsure what to say. It was clear she didn’t know what to do either. But Harold had one of his moments of clarity—the kind that had helped them in sticky situations before. He sat up, looked around the room, and simply said, “You know, this family reminds me of something. It might sound strange, but it reminds me of *The Jungle Book*.”

There was silence in the room as everyone froze, staring at Harold. He casually continued, pointing at the little girl sitting amid the massive dogs on the floor. “This little girl here, she’s like Mowgli,” Harold said, a smile playing on his lips. “In *The Jungle Book*, Mowgli grows up among animals in the jungle. And you,” he turned to the father, “you’re like Baloo or Bagheera—the protector, the constant presence.”

At first, the father looked puzzled, but slowly his face lit up with a hint of understanding. “And the way the dogs are with her,” Harold continued, “it reminds me of how the wolves were with Mowgli. The dogs are loyal and strong, and they protect her, but it also means she isn’t being raised in the way you’d expect for a child. She’s not learning from people; she’s learning from the dogs.”

Harold looked down at the child, who was still smiling and playing. “She doesn’t look like she’s been hurt in any way. In fact, it seems like there’s a real bond between her and the dogs. But the problem isn’t her connection with the animals. It’s about the bond she has—or doesn’t have—with her mother.”

He glanced at the woman sitting tensely in the corner. "This isn't how it should be. She did what she had to do to survive, to feel secure. When you weren't able to be there for her, the dogs stepped in to fill that role. They did their best, but now it's time for her to learn something different."

The room was silent. The father looked down at his shoes, and the mother sat frozen, as if she didn't know how to respond.

Harold sighed and lowered himself to the floor beside the dogs, stroking each of them gently while the little girl watched him with a smile. He looked up at the parents. "But this can't go on forever. Just like in *The Jungle Book*, there comes a time when Mowgli has to leave the jungle and join the village. He's human, not a wolf. And your daughter, she's not a dog, even if she thinks she is right now."

The father almost smiled, and the mother couldn't help but allow a small smile to slip through her tension. "But," Harold continued, "she can't grow up with the dogs as her only companions. She needs to learn to be a part of a human family. She needs her parents, and she needs to know that she belongs with you."

He turned to the mother. "The most important thing for your daughter right now is to know that she has her mother. She needs to learn that she can rely on you. Now that you're here, she needs to feel that you're someone she can trust and turn to, just like she trusts the dogs."

The room seemed to shift slightly. Harold's words lingered in the air, settling in as if an obvious truth had finally been spoken.

The father looked at Harold, his face filled with a mix of hope and confusion. "But how do we do that?" he asked, his voice desperate. "I understand what you're saying, but it's been so long. I don't know if we can change things now."

Harold nodded sympathetically. "I understand that it feels overwhelming. It's true that changing something that's been happening for so long is going to take time. But the first step is recognizing that there's a problem. What matters now is that you take it slow and make small changes. Trying to change everything at once will only make it harder."

He looked at the mother, his voice softening. "It was a hard experience for you, but you're here now. That's what matters. It won't be perfect overnight, but if you and your husband can work together to create a supportive environment for your daughter, things will start to change."

Harold looked at both parents. "Do you remember how Mowgli didn't want to leave the jungle? He needed to be pushed to do it. The same is true for your daughter. She's spent her whole life with these dogs, and they're all she knows. Of course she doesn't want to give that up. But it's time for her to start spending more time with you, especially with her mom."

He turned to the mother again, his tone gentle. "It's going to take time for her to adjust. She's not going to be comfortable with it right away. She might cry, she might resist. But you need to keep trying. She needs you to be there for her, even if it's hard at first."

The mother stayed silent, her eyes wide with a mix of fear and hope. Something in Harold's words seemed to be reaching her, and she was starting to grasp what needed to be done.

The father nodded, looking at Harold and Sophie with determination. "We're going to need help with this, and we're willing to try. Thank you for helping us see what we need to do."

"Have you realized I didn't use my AI chatbot at all today?" Sophie said as they bumped along in the old Volvo on their way home. Harold smiled and glanced at her.

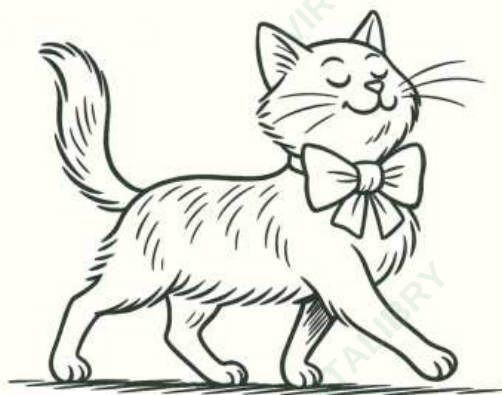
"Whoa, that was... intense," Sophie continued. "I knew it was going to be weird, but that was a lot."

She stared out the window, her face set in determination. "I think I'm going to re-read *The Jungle Book* tonight."

Harold laughed. "Good idea, Sophie. Maybe we'll get some more inspiration for our next consultation."

Sophie smirked. "Yeah, and maybe next time you can be Bagheera instead of Baloo."

Harold shook his head, still smiling. “We’ll see, Sophie. We’ll see.”



When Mercy Comes with a Catch

“A woman called asking whether she should get a cat. She’s torn—should she buy it from a breeder or adopt it from a shelter? She’s asking for our two cents,” Sophie said.

Sophie smiled to herself and chuckled, “I think it’s pretty straightforward. I’ve already told the chatbot six different comments, and it seems like that should do the job.”

Sophie chatted animatedly with her chatbot while Harold focused on her words. He nodded every now and then, offering an occasional hum of

acknowledgment to show he was listening. However, in his head, Harold had his own doubts. This wasn't the first time he had been assigned an apparently simple task, only for it to turn out to be far from easy.

Harold thought to himself, Wait a minute here. Why does she need our help with this? Adopting a cat from a shelter seems like an easy choice, but nope, there's got to be more to it.

He had learned that life was unpredictable and that even the simplest things could sometimes hide the most profound challenges. For instance, he once got a call to help with a dog that "couldn't stop barking." It turned out the entire family was at war with each other, and the poor dog was caught in the crossfire, barking out of sheer desperation.

The car sputtered, and Harold knew something was about to go wrong. Before he could even dwell on the upcoming visit, the engine started making an unusual noise. It felt like the old Volvo was voicing its doubts about what they were about to do that morning.

"Oh, great," Harold muttered as he reluctantly pulled the car over. The engine sounded like an old man trying to sprint after a long time out of action.

He sighed, obviously frustrated. "Hang tight, Sophie. I need to check this."

He got out of the familiar old Volvo. It had been used and abused so many times, yet it refused to die, just like a long-term marriage that had its fair share of arguments but always found a way forward.

Yawn, Harold thought as he lifted the hood and looked into the smoky abyss.

It took him fifteen minutes before he finally returned to the car. His arms were oiled up to the elbows, but he had somehow managed to revive the engine. Sophie barely noticed—she was too deep into her conversation with the chatbot, absorbed in her excitement.

"If this decision is purely based on cost, then honestly, a dog might be out of the question," she said with enthusiasm, her voice rising. "The price of some animals is just insane. Even buying a cat from a breeder might end

up costing a lot less than people expect. And shelter cats aren't exactly free either!"

The car started up again, and Harold sighed in relief. He pushed the old Volvo forward, its engine still grumbling in protest but compliant enough to keep moving. They hit the road once more, and Sophie resumed her excited price comparisons between buying versus adopting. Harold listened with only half an ear, his thoughts occupied by the task ahead.

"It could happen," he mumbled, staring out at the road ahead.

Harold had a feeling, an inkling in the back of his mind, as the car engine hummed beneath his feet. The situation seemed so simple. But if there was one thing Harold had learned through his years of therapy, two marriages, and living with an untrainable, feces-throwing cat, it was that sometimes the simplest things could be the trickiest.

They arrived at their destination, an old countryside house that seemed a bit too empty for its idyllic location. Harold climbed out of the car, looking at his hands, which were still smeared with grease. He smiled apologetically at the woman who had answered the door.

"Um, do you mind if I use a towel?" he asked, gesturing towards his hands.

The woman seemed to understand right away and waved a hand towards the kitchen. "Of course. Come in. There's a towel by the sink."

Harold followed her inside and headed for the kitchen, where he began scrubbing his hands clean. Sophie looked around the cozy but cluttered interior, smiling at the woman.

"Yeah, our car... it's not exactly up to today's standards," she said with a chuckle, giving Harold a sideways glance as he continued washing up. "But Harold and the car—they've got this relationship. You know, like an old marriage—good times, bad times, but they just can't bring themselves to split."

Harold smiled, drying his hands with the small kitchen towel. “Yeah, it’s like the car and I have an unspoken agreement: if it barely holds on, I’ll spend half my spare time keeping it alive.”

The woman looked slightly confused but smiled politely. She led them to the living room, where Harold and Sophie took in the scene. The room was bursting with plants, overflowing from the windowsills and spreading out into the space like a small jungle. She obviously took great pride in her greenery.

“Would either of you like a beer?” she offered out of nowhere, almost as if she were testing them.

Harold smiled, shaking his head. “We try not to drink on the job.”

The woman laughed, waving it off. “Of course, I was just kidding. How about some coffee or water then?”

Sophie smiled back politely. “Coffee sounds great, thank you.”

“Right, right, let’s get down to business,” the woman said with a small chuckle, as she settled into an armchair and folded her hands in her lap. “It’s about the cat, of course. I’ve been thinking a lot about it. Part of me just wants to go out and buy one—nice and simple. But then, I think of all the cats in shelters who really need a good home. I feel like maybe I should help one of them instead.”

She paused, her gaze shifting between Harold and Sophie, almost as if she were asking for their guidance.

Harold leaned forward and nodded. “I understand your dilemma. Buying a cat can be easier—you know where it’s coming from, and there’s usually more information about its history. On the other hand, adopting means you’re giving a cat that really needs it a second chance at life. There’s definitely something beautiful in that.”

“Exactly!” the woman said eagerly. “I don’t want to overlook those that need a loving home, but buying a cat seems so much easier.”

Sophie, ever practical, nodded. “Of course, there are pros and cons to both. The chatbot suggests that you consider what’s most important to

you. If ease is the priority, buying might be best. But if it's about giving a cat a better life, then adoption may be the right choice."

The woman nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah, you're probably right. I think I need more time to decide, but I feel more inclined to adopt. It just seems right."

Harold smiled warmly at her. "It always feels good to follow your instincts."

As they spoke, Harold's attention was drawn to a picture hanging on the wall over the couch. It showed a young girl, perhaps two or three years old, between two adults who seemed to be of another nationality. He couldn't help but ask.

"Who's that in the picture?" Harold asked gently.

The woman turned to look at the photo and smiled. "That's me," she said, her voice softening. "And those are my parents."

She paused before continuing, and Sophie and Harold both watched her closely.

"I was adopted as a baby," she said. "My parents were English, and I grew up with them. It's not something I talk about much."

She looked at the photo, a faraway look in her eyes, and added, "Maybe that's why I feel so strongly about adopting a cat. I know what it's like to get a second chance at life."

Harold nodded, her dilemma suddenly making perfect sense. "That really does explain a lot," he said quietly. "It makes sense why adoption resonates with you."

The woman chuckled softly, her gaze still fixed on the picture. "Yeah, maybe it's always been in me."

Harold leaned back in his chair, his voice kind but firm. "People must ask you all the time what it was like to be adopted. We hear so much about the adoptive parents, but we rarely hear the perspective of the person being adopted. Were you always happy about it? Or were there times when it was hard?"

The woman's smile faded slightly. She looked down at her hands as she considered her answer. After a moment, she spoke quietly, her voice tinged with emotion. "It wasn't always easy. People always told me I was lucky, but there was this lie I used to tell myself—that my parents didn't really want me, that it was all out of duty, not love. I always felt like I was a problem to be solved, not a child to be cherished."

There was a heavy silence in the room as her words hung in the air. Sophie and Harold both remained quiet, letting her speak.

"I know my adoptive parents did their best to give me a good life," she continued. "They loved me in the best way they knew how. But that feeling of not being wanted—it never really went away."

Harold nodded, his voice gentle. "I think I understand. Your connection to the idea of adopting a cat isn't just about giving it a home. It's about giving it the kind of love you wish you had felt more of when you were younger. It's about making that fresh start count."

The woman nodded, her eyes glistening a little as she looked back at the photograph. "Yeah, maybe that's it," she said softly, as if admitting it to herself for the first time. "I just want to make sure the cat feels wanted, feels like it belongs."

Sophie, who had initially wanted to wrap things up, seemed to have a change of heart. She nodded more slowly, a tender look in her eyes. "It sounds like adopting is something that really resonates with your heart," she said warmly. "It's more than just having a pet—it's a meaningful decision for you."

Not that Harold was entirely convinced. He could see the hesitation in the woman's eyes, the way her words didn't quite align with her true feelings. He leaned forward, his tone softer, even as Sophie looked ready to conclude.

"But let me ask you something," he said, holding her gaze. "If you were that cat, which would you prefer? To be chosen out of pity, or to be picked because you were someone's dream—because you were really wanted?"

The woman blinked, her eyes widening. She seemed to mull over his question, the words hanging in the air between them. After a moment, her expression changed. It was as though something inside her had clicked, and she looked at Harold with newfound understanding. "I think... I'd want to be someone's dream," she said slowly. "To be picked because I was wanted—really wanted—not because someone felt sorry for me."

Harold nodded, a small, knowing smile on his lips. "Exactly. So, when it comes to choosing a cat, think about what feels right to you. Don't just pick one out of obligation or because you feel like it's what you 'should' do. Pick one because you feel a connection to it. Because it's the cat you want in your life."

The woman sighed, a thoughtful look on her face. She seemed to be absorbing Harold's words, processing them. "You're right," she said after a long pause. "I need to think about this more. I want it to feel like a choice of the heart, not just something I'm doing because I feel like I have to."

Sophie, who had initially seemed eager to leave, softened even further. She nodded, her expression gentler now. "It's perfectly okay to take your time," she said. "Making a decision like this is about more than just logic—it's about what feels right to you."

Harold smiled as well. "The best choices are the ones we make with our hearts."

The woman nodded, getting up slowly and moving towards the kitchen. "Let me make some coffee," she said, her movements careful and deliberate. It was obvious that Harold had struck a chord with her. She brewed the coffee silently, almost meditatively, and then handed a cup to each of them.

Harold accepted his cup with a smile, taking a sip before speaking again. His voice was gentle, but it held a certain weight. He leaned forward, meeting her eyes as he spoke. "You know," he said, "the easiest thing for you might be to pick a cat out of pity. To do for the cat what you think your parents did for you—to give it a home because you feel it needs one. But what really matters here is how you feel about it."

He paused, letting his words sink in. "If you really value yourself, if you want to be true to your own heart, then don't make this decision out of sympathy. Make it because you genuinely want it. It might seem selfish, but it's actually a form of self-care—to take your own feelings seriously."

The woman sat still, her hands wrapped around her coffee cup. She seemed lost in thought, her gaze distant as she considered Harold's words. Slowly, she looked up at him, her expression more focused than before.

"You're right," she whispered, her voice filled with sincerity. "I want to pick a cat because it feels right. Not because it's what I think I should do, but because it's what I want."

Harold nodded, smiling at her. "That's the best reason to make a choice like this."

The woman returned his smile, a newfound determination in her eyes. "Thank you," she said softly. "I think I know what I want to do now."

Harold simply nodded again, taking another sip of his coffee. There was no need to say more—he knew she had found her answer.

The woman, Sophie, and Harold finished their coffee quietly, the atmosphere in the room lighter than it had been when they first arrived. There was a sense of resolution, as though something had shifted within the woman, allowing her to see things more clearly.

As they stood up to leave, Sophie gave the woman a warm smile. "Take your time with your decision. You'll know when it feels right."

The woman nodded, walking them to the door. "Thank you both," she said, her voice steady. "You've helped me more than you know."

Harold nodded, his smile genuine. "We're glad to have helped. Good luck with whatever you decide—you'll make the right choice."

The woman smiled back, her eyes filled with gratitude. "Thank you. I'll let you know how it goes."

As Harold and Sophie walked back to the car, the old Volvo still waiting patiently, Harold glanced at Sophie with a small smile. "You know," he said, "sometimes it's not about giving advice. It's just about helping people see what they already know deep down."

Sophie nodded thoughtfully as they got into the car. “Yeah, you’re right. It’s not always about having the answers—it’s about helping people find their own.”

Harold started the car, the engine grumbling but complying, and they drove off down the winding country road. There was a quiet understanding between them—a recognition of the power of listening, of guiding without forcing, and of the importance of letting people come to their own realizations.

As they drove, Sophie looked over at Harold, a small smile playing on her lips. “You know, Harold, you’re pretty good at this whole empathy thing.”

Harold chuckled, shaking his head. “Well, I’ve had a lot of practice. And sometimes, it’s just about being willing to sit with someone in their uncertainty.”

Sophie nodded, her expression softening. “I guess that’s what makes the difference, isn’t it?”

Harold smiled, his eyes on the road ahead. “Yeah, I think it is.”

And as they drove away, the countryside rolling by outside the windows, there was a sense of peace between them—a quiet recognition of the work they did, the people they helped, and the impact they had, even in the smallest of ways.



Bird Phobia

Early Friday morning, Harold was driving his third-hand rust bucket to work. The engine, as usual, rumbled along like it was on the brink of a breakdown, and Harold enjoyed the relative peace and quiet inside the car. Suddenly, the buzzing vell-ping-vell of a vibration interrupted it. His phone buzzed in the old cup holder on the dashboard, the light from the

screen briefly illuminating the deep cracks on the road. Harold glanced over at it while waiting for a red light to change.

It was an email from Sophie. “Dear Harold,” it began, “I’m sorry about this, but I will not be here for your performance review today. We’ll have to move it to next Friday... I’m sure you’ll survive. There’s this fantastic opportunity to meet the world-famous personal trainer at my gym, and you just HAVE to understand that I need this.”

Harold frowned but couldn’t help smiling. Typical Sophie. She had reminded him multiple times just how important her training was. To skip an entire workday for it? Sophie truly was one of a kind.

“Also, your daughter, Susan, won’t be coming in today. I was thinking about the office last night, and there’s just not enough room for three people here. So, I hope it doesn’t offend you if I tell you now that we don’t really need an extra employee working with us.”

Harold wasn’t surprised. He felt a little awkward when he initially told Susan she could work with his company. It seemed a bit premature.

“But I am also thrilled to tell you that I’ve dropped by the office this morning. Two surprises are waiting for you there—one is sweet, the other... not so much. Also... do you know anything about birds?”

Harold chuckled to himself. Sophie and her surprises. He couldn’t help but be curious about what she had in store this time.

When Harold reached the office, he was greeted by the sight of a basket filled with pastries. He grabbed one, starting to devour it as he looked around for Sophie’s other surprise. Beside the basket was a printed email. It seemed like Sophie had printed it out for him, and Harold frowned slightly as he began to read.

The email read, “Dear Pet Therapist, my name is Simone. I am a not-so-far-away neighbor of yours, and I’ve been trying for a long time to ignore a particular issue. It might not sound like a big problem to some, but it has become intolerable for me.”

Harold moved closer to the paper, sensing this was serious.

Simone went on: "I have a bird phobia, and it's become unbearable. There's a pair of ducks that have made my front yard their home, and it's driving me to my breaking point. My boyfriend lives with his family, and every morning, he has to come over at the crack of dawn because I live in a town full of ducks. My driveway has practically turned into duck central."

Harold couldn't help but smile slightly. Birds—especially ducks? He found it amusing, but he could sense Simone's frustration and continued reading.

"Sometimes, after my boyfriend leaves for work, the ducks return. When that happens, I end up being trapped in my own house. I can't go outside. I'm reaching out because no one else can help me. This is my cry for help."

Harold leaned back in his chair as the gravity of the situation sank in: a bird phobia—well, that was a new one. At the same time, he had this nagging feeling that Simone really was in crisis. Unchecked, this kind of fear could cripple a person's life.

He glanced down at the now empty pastry basket, then looked up thoughtfully. Helping Simone would definitely not be a walk in the park. He knew he would be treading a minefield and might need every trick in his therapeutic repertoire.

Harold thought for a moment. Sophie wasn't there, so maybe it was time to make use of the chatbot. He had completed three modules of the online course Sophie had recommended, and he had to admit, it was actually pretty cool. The chatbot wasn't a substitute for his expertise, but it could certainly be helpful for something this specific.

Harold opened the chatbot app and typed, "What is a phobia and its psychological treatment?"

A few seconds later, the chatbot responded:

"A phobia is a strong, persistent, and irrational fear of an object, situation, or action. People with phobias experience strong anxiety and often go to great lengths to avoid what they fear. There are three general categories

of phobias: specific phobias, social phobia, and agoraphobia. Bird phobia is classified as a specific phobia.”

Harold nodded. It confirmed what he already knew, but he let the chatbot continue.

“Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is typically the most effective way to treat phobias,” the chatbot maintained. “CBT helps individuals identify negative thought patterns, challenge those thoughts, and change behaviors that maintain the fear. Treatment often includes systematic desensitization, where the person is gradually exposed to the feared object or event in a controlled environment, with repeated exposure over time to decrease anxiety symptoms.”

Harold leaned back, thinking. This was exactly the kind of treatment he had been considering. He was familiar with exposure therapy, but the chatbot provided a more current perspective on managing phobias.

“Specific phobias such as bird phobia can be treated through systematic desensitization,” the chatbot added. “This involves gradually introducing the individual to birds in a safe, controlled environment to help them get used to it without experiencing high anxiety levels. Incorporating relaxation techniques and breathing exercises can also help.”

Harold smiled slightly. This was good advice. It could be useful if Simone was willing to go down the path of exposure therapy. While he still had some reservations about relying solely on technology, he admitted the chatbot had provided a good foundation.

After arriving at Simone’s address, Harold parked his car and took a moment to look around. He knew he was there to help with bird phobia—ducks, specifically. He scanned the yard, the bushes, and even the roof for any sign of birds. Just then, he heard a door creak open behind him.

“Hi! Come on in!” called a young woman as she stepped out of the house. Harold turned around to see Simone waving at him. She seemed

cheerful, but there was a subtle tension in her demeanor. She glanced briefly around the yard as if making sure there were no ducks lurking.

Harold walked toward her, and she opened the door wider. "Oh, good, you're here," she said with a smile. "Please, come in."

Simone led Harold down a narrow hallway into the living room. She gestured toward the couch. "Please, make yourself comfortable."

She took a seat across from Harold and smiled warmly. "I thought it would be a good idea to properly introduce myself. I'm Simone, as you know. I work at a clothing store for kids, and I recently got promoted to store manager." She stood a bit straighter, her face beaming as she spoke. "I can't wait to see it all come together. It's a lot, but I've worked hard to get here, and I'm ambitious, so I chase after what I want."

Harold nodded. He could tell she was determined and driven. "Sounds like an exciting challenge," he said. "How does it feel transitioning from an employee to a manager?"

Simone's enthusiasm was almost palpable. "It's a huge transition, but it's so much fun. There's something amazing about responsibility—watching things evolve and knowing I have a hand in making it happen."

Harold could sense that same drive, a deep determination. She wanted to take charge—not just at work but also with the challenges in her personal life.

He leaned forward slightly. "You mentioned a bird phobia in your email. It sounds like this has been affecting you deeply."

Simone hesitated, her eyes lowering, and then she sighed. "Yes," she said softly. "The last couple of years have been rough. I've never liked birds, but now it's become unbearable. I can hardly leave my house."

She went on, her voice trembling. "I used to be able to go to the park, as long as there weren't too many birds. But now I have to check for birds before even opening my front door. I feel trapped in my own home."

She fiddled with her fingers, her gaze fixed on the floor. "A week ago, I went to get the mail, and there was a pigeon on the mailbox. I completely panicked. I ran back inside, screaming like I was being attacked. I couldn't

even check to see if the bird had left; my boyfriend had to leave work to come home.”

She let out a small, shaky laugh, her eyes betraying her exhaustion. “I know it’s ridiculous, but... a few years ago, we went on a vacation to the Caribbean. We made it about 24 hours before I was holed up in the hotel room, unable to leave because of the seagulls. I left my boyfriend to eat alone every day. It was humiliating.”

Harold nodded empathetically. He understood how debilitating phobias like hers could be. They made life difficult to truly enjoy, but he also knew that humor could sometimes help lighten the burden of fear.

Simone seemed relieved by his understanding demeanor. Harold then asked gently, “Have you been informed about how phobias like yours are typically treated?”

Simone looked at him, her face a mix of curiosity and apprehension. “Not... really,” she admitted hesitantly.

Harold leaned forward, softening his voice to make her more comfortable. “The most common treatment is exposure therapy. It’s a form of therapy where, bit by bit, you expose yourself to the object of your fear in a controlled, safe way. For example, you’d start by watching birds from a safe distance, maybe through a window. Gradually, you’d get a bit closer each time, until one day, you might be able to stand near a bird without feeling that overwhelming fear. It’s all about taking baby steps, and it happens entirely at your pace.”

Simone’s face paled, and she clenched her hands tightly on her knees. “Getting closer to birds?” she repeated, her voice barely above a whisper.

Harold nodded gently. “Yes, but only when you’re ready. It’s meant to help you build tolerance slowly. We’d never jump straight into something you aren’t prepared for. The idea is to help you take control of that fear.”

Simone shook her head, her voice cracking. “The thought of being near them terrifies me. I don’t know if I can do it,” she said, her gaze dropping to the floor.

Harold could see the rising panic in her eyes, and he softened his approach. He needed to help her without overwhelming her. "You're not alone in feeling that way. It's natural to be scared of facing your fears head-on. If it's too much for you right now, we can start somewhere different—something less intimidating."

She looked at him, her breathing slowly beginning to calm, and nodded. "That would be better," she said quietly.

Harold gave her an encouraging smile. "We don't need to push anything. Instead of jumping into exposure therapy, maybe we could try to understand where this fear started. Understanding the root of your fear might make facing it a little easier."

Simone's eyes widened, and she hesitated before finally speaking. "I guess... I've never really thought about where it came from," she admitted, her fingers twisting together.

Harold tilted his head slightly. "Where are you originally from, if you don't mind me asking?"

Simone appeared taken aback by the question, but she smiled faintly. "It's kind of a long story," she said in a small voice. "I was adopted. I don't remember much of my early childhood, but I know I was abandoned at an orphanage in India when I was very young. My adoptive parents didn't know much either, and I've thought about it a lot as I've gotten older. There are just so many unanswered questions."

She paused, her eyes growing distant. "I remember feeling lost sometimes, like I didn't really know who I was or where I belonged. My parents were wonderful, but that sense of not knowing has always stayed with me."

Harold nodded thoughtfully. "That must have been incredibly difficult," he said kindly.

Simone gave a small, sad smile. "Yeah, it's something I've carried with me for a long time. I've learned to live with it, but it never really goes away."

She paused, then said, "I actually have a picture from the orphanage. It came with my adoption papers. Would you like to see it?"

Harold leaned forward, his curiosity piqued. "I'd love to see it," he said with a warm smile.

Simone nodded and got up from the couch, disappearing into another room. After a few minutes, she returned with a small framed photo, handing it to Harold.

The photograph was faded, with a slight sepia tone, framed simply but elegantly. It depicted several small children standing in front of a worn-down building that looked like an old barrack. The background was stark, and the building appeared humble, almost desolate.

"Is this the orphanage?" Harold asked gently.

Simone nodded, sitting back down beside him. "Yes. It doesn't look like much, does it? But that was my home before I was adopted."

They sat quietly for a moment, both staring at the photograph. "It must have been a difficult place to grow up," Harold said softly.

Simone looked at the picture, her eyes reflecting the distance of time. "I don't remember much of it. I was so young. But I've always kept this picture... it's the only real connection I have to that part of my life."

Harold got up from the couch, holding the photo up to the light. He examined it carefully, then turned back to Simone. "Have you ever noticed anything in this picture?" he asked, pointing to a corner.

Simone leaned closer, squinting at where he was pointing. Her eyes widened, and her breath caught. "I... I never noticed that before," she whispered.

Harold nodded. "Look closely," he said. "There, in the background—you see the birds?"

It was a small detail, easy to miss, but in the far corner of the photograph, there were several chickens, bustling around the yard.

Simone stared at the photo, her face going pale. "I never noticed them before," she repeated, her voice trembling. "Why didn't I see them until now?"

Harold watched her carefully, seeing the unease in her expression. "It's okay," he said softly. "It's just a picture. They're not here now."

But Simone couldn't seem to tear her eyes away from the birds in the photo. Her hands shook slightly as she held the frame. "I always thought I was in control of this fear," she said, her voice barely audible. "But seeing them there... it feels like it's always been with me."

Harold placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Sometimes our fears are deeper than we realize," he said gently. "But recognizing them is the first step toward understanding them."

Simone nodded slowly, still looking at the photo. The realization seemed to have shaken her deeply.

Harold sighed, sitting back down beside her. He knew he had touched a nerve, and he needed to be careful not to push her too far, too fast. "You know," he began, "when I was younger, I traveled through Asia as a backpacker. I spent some time in India, actually."

Simone looked at him, intrigued. Harold continued, "I remember hearing stories—tragic ones—about children who were terrified by the animals they grew up around. Whether it was rats or wild dogs, these children lived in fear, and it affected them deeply. It wasn't something people really talked about, but it left a mark."

He looked at Simone, his gaze steady. "I wonder if something like that might have happened to you when you were little. Maybe something happened that scared you deeply, and it stayed with you, even if you don't consciously remember it."

Simone's eyes widened, and her breathing quickened. She looked down at her lap, her hands clenching the fabric of her pants. "I... I don't know," she said, her voice shaking. "The thought of something happening that I can't remember—it terrifies me."

Harold nodded, his voice calm. "It's okay to be scared of the unknown. We don't have to explore this if you're not ready. It's just one possible explanation."

Simone looked up at him, her eyes filled with uncertainty. "I don't know if I'm ready for that," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "It's too much."

Harold leaned back, giving her space. "That's perfectly fine," he said gently. "We can take this at your pace. There's no rush."

Simone looked relieved, and she nodded slowly. "Let's keep things simple for now," she said, her voice trembling slightly.

"Of course," Harold agreed. "We'll take it one step at a time."

For a moment, there was silence between them. Harold still felt a pull to understand more about her fear, but he knew he needed to respect her boundaries. "Maybe we could try a different approach," he suggested softly. "There are other ways to work on phobias that don't involve direct exposure. We could try guided visualization, for instance. It's a way to gently explore your feelings without actually confronting the object of your fear."

Simone's face tightened, and her eyes widened. She shook her head vehemently. "No... I don't think I can do that," she said, her voice rising with panic. "I didn't come here to relive my past. I came here to deal with my fear of birds. This... this isn't what I need."

Harold held up his hands, trying to calm her. "Okay, okay. We won't do anything you're not comfortable with. I promise."

But Simone had already stood up, her face flushed with anger and fear. "I think you should go," she said, her voice trembling. "I thought this would help, but I don't want to do this anymore."

Harold stood as well, taken aback by her sudden outburst. He had only wanted to help, but it was clear that he had pushed too far. "I'm sorry, Simone," he said softly. "I didn't mean to make things worse."

Simone half-nodded, avoiding his gaze. She walked to the door and opened it, her hand shaking slightly. "Please, just go."

Harold hesitated for a moment, then nodded. "If that's what you want," he said quietly. "I truly wish you the best."

With a heavy heart, Harold stepped out onto the porch. The screen door slammed shut behind him, and he paused for a moment, taking a deep

breath. He knew he had failed Simone, and the weight of it settled heavily on his shoulders.

As Harold walked back to his car, his thoughts clouded with self-doubt. He couldn't shake the feeling that he had failed Simone in a significant way. He wanted to help her, but instead, it seemed like he had only made things worse. He replayed their conversation in his head, wondering if there had been a better way to handle it.

Once he got in the car, he sat for a moment, staring blankly at the dashboard. He felt drained. The drive back to the office was quiet, the usually comforting rumble of the Voom-Mobile doing little to ease his mind. It was rare for Harold to feel this defeated. He had always prided himself on his empathy and ability to connect with people, but today, he felt like he had missed the mark entirely.

When he pulled up to the office, he spotted Sophie arriving on her bicycle. She parked and locked it, glancing over at Harold as he approached. She immediately noticed the somber expression on his face and tilted her head, her eyes softening with concern.

"Hey, Harold," she called out as he walked up. "How did the session go today?"

Harold sighed, casting his eyes to the ground. He followed her inside, and they both sat down, Sophie behind her desk and Harold in the chair across from her.

"It didn't go well," he admitted, rubbing his forehead. "It was with Simone—the woman with the bird phobia. I think I pushed her too hard. I tried to get her to explore her past, and it just overwhelmed her. She asked me to leave."

Sophie leaned forward, her eyes focused on him, her usual upbeat demeanor replaced by genuine concern. "Oh, Harold, that sounds tough," she said softly. "But it's not your fault. You were trying to help."

Harold shook his head, his voice tinged with frustration. "I could tell she wasn't ready, but I pushed anyway. I should have known better. I wanted to help, but I ended up making her feel worse."

Sophie reached across the desk, her hand resting gently on his arm. “Listen, Harold, you’re an amazing therapist. I know you care deeply about helping people, and that’s what makes you so good at what you do. But not every session is going to end in success. We’re human—we make mistakes.”

Harold looked up at her, his eyes filled with doubt. “I just feel like I let her down,” he said quietly.

Sophie leaned back, a thoughtful expression crossing her face. “You know, sometimes we have to remember that we can’t control how people respond. We do our best, and that’s all we can do. Not everyone is going to be ready for what we have to offer, and that’s okay. It doesn’t mean you failed. It just means it wasn’t the right time for her.”

Harold nodded slowly, taking in her words. “I guess,” he said, though his voice still held a hint of uncertainty. “I just wish I could have done more.”

Sophie smiled gently. “You’ve done so much for so many people, Harold. Don’t let one setback make you forget that. You’re allowed to have bad days. We all are.”

She paused, then added, “And you know, maybe this is a lesson for both of you. For her, it’s learning what she’s ready for, and for you, it’s learning how to read those signals even better. It’s all part of growing.”

Harold let out a slow breath, feeling some of the weight lifting from his chest. “Thanks, Sophie,” he said. “It means a lot, hearing that from you.”

Sophie winked at him, her usual playful smile returning. “You know me, Harold—always here to provide wisdom in exchange for pastries.”

Harold chuckled, a small smile finally finding its way back to his face. “I owe you a big one,” he said.

Sophie laughed, leaning back in her chair. “You know it. But in all seriousness, Harold, you’re doing great work. Don’t let this one situation get you down. Keep going. You’ve got this.”

Harold stood, nodding as he pushed the chair back. “You’re right. I think I just let it get to me more than I should have.”

Sophie got up as well, walking around the desk and giving him a quick hug. “We all have those moments. Just don’t let it keep you down. You’re only human, after all.”

Harold smiled, feeling lighter than he had since leaving Simone’s house. “Thanks, Sophie. I needed that.”

“Anytime,” she said, giving him a playful nudge. “Now, why don’t we take a break and grab a coffee? My treat.”

Harold nodded, his smile growing. “That sounds perfect.”

As they walked out of the office together, Harold couldn’t help but feel grateful for Sophie. She always seemed to know how to put things in perspective. And maybe she was right—maybe this was just another part of his journey as a therapist. He wasn’t perfect, but he cared, and that had to count for something.



The Parrot Bites... Who Taught That?

Sophie was starting to get concerned about Harold after his recent visit with a client, which hadn't gone as planned. She had always seen him as the big, tough "Wolverine guy" who could handle anything thrown at him, but the events from a week ago had shaken her belief that everyone could endure everything indefinitely. It made her nervous, to be honest. She didn't know how to deal with seeing his vulnerabilities.

Now, as she sat across from him at the desk, it was time to introduce a new assignment that she believed might help Harold regain his confidence.

Her fingers hesitated over the keys, and then she slowly looked up from her screen, taking a deep breath. "Harold... I've got a new assignment for you, and I hope it excites you."

A faint smile played on Harold's lips. "Oh? What's the task this time?"

Sophie pushed a printed email across the desk. "Have you heard about the guy who got in touch with us? He's had a parrot for years—always a sweet little thing, like a pet puppy—but recently, it started acting out, squawking and even biting him. He says the bird's turned into something of a 'wolf in a bird's skin.' He's had enough, and now he's asking for our help."

Harold cocked an eyebrow and skimmed the email, finally nodding. "A parrot with a bad attitude, huh?" he said, a grin forming on his face. "Sounds pretty wild."

Sophie laughed, relaxing a bit. "Yeah, exactly! I wasn't sure if you'd find this challenging enough, but I figured you'd want to tackle it."

Harold looked her in the eye, his confidence locking back into place. "A diva parrot? Absolutely. Sounds like just the kind of case I need."

Sophie brightened. "Are you sure? I was a bit worried it might be too much. Birds—I mean, they aren't exactly like dogs or cats."

Harold shook his head, still smiling. "Nah. They are, in a way. Besides, it sounds educational. Maybe the parrot's just going through a midlife crisis. Who knows? Maybe we just need to have a heart-to-heart about inner peace."

Sophie burst out laughing. "Yeah, 'The Parrot's Guide to Serenity!' Maybe you can teach it some self-help mantras."

Harold laughed. "Right? 'Find your inner feathered zen.' Honestly, though, we've got this. The bird's probably just dealing with some unexpressed anger—maybe it feels lonely."

Sophie nodded, feeling a bit of the tension melt away. "Alright then, we'll sign you up for that one."

"Definitely," Harold agreed, straightening up a bit. "I'm ready to meet our feathered diva."

Sophie leaned back in her chair with an audible sigh of relief. "I'm glad you're up for it, Harold. Sounds like a good plan."

Harold smiled, more genuinely this time. "Let's go help a parrot. I bet I can stop all the biting and squawking."

Sophie gave him a wink. "You're our hero, Harold."

He felt better than he had in days—if not weeks or months. He could almost hear the parrot's screeching in his mind, and he found himself actually looking forward to what was waiting for him.

Sophie and Harold parked beside the rusty bike rack in front of the rundown public housing complex. As they got out, Sophie looked up at the steps that led up five flights to the door. She sighed dramatically. "Five floors... Are you kidding me?"

“Fifth floor?” Harold echoed, not exactly thrilled.

They started climbing the narrow stairs. Sophie groaned, struggling and gripping the railing to pull herself up. Harold followed a little behind her, carrying his bag without much complaint. “I guess I’ve been missing my stair workouts at the gym,” she panted. By the time they reached the fifth floor, Sophie was out of breath, and Harold arrived behind her, looking amused.

“Wasn’t that bad,” Harold said, glancing down the stairs.

“Wasn’t that bad?” Sophie turned to him, incredulous. “I’m practically dead here!”

Harold winked, gesturing towards an elevator down the hall. “You know, there’s an elevator right there.”

She looked over and groaned, leaning on the railing. “Of course, there’s an elevator.” She sighed again and turned towards the door in the middle, pressing the doorbell.

The door opened slowly, revealing a grumpy-looking man with tired eyes and wrinkled clothes, as if he hadn’t seen daylight in days. He greeted them without much enthusiasm, mumbling, “Come in.” He led them into a small, cluttered apartment, the kind of place where it was clear he lived alone. Empty coffee cups lay scattered around, and dust had settled over the furniture, giving the air a stale scent.

“Thanks,” Sophie said politely, giving him a brief smile.

They passed through the narrow hallway into the kitchen. The man gestured toward a small table with an old coffee pot and a tray of what looked like pastries that had seen better days.

“Sit down,” he grumbled, dragging a chair out for himself and collapsing into it.

Harold sat down and glanced at the stale pastries. “Thank you,” he said, managing a polite smile.

The man just grunted, pushing the plate closer to them. “Help yourselves. I’ve lost my taste for sweets.”

The parrot was perched in the corner, looking as miserable as its owner. Its feathers were dull and ruffled, its eyes heavy and lifeless. Harold squinted at the bird, something clicking in his mind—there was clearly something deeply wrong here.

“Doesn’t it look... kind of sad?” Harold said softly, moving closer to the parrot. He waved a finger at it, trying to coax a response.

The bird turned abruptly, snapping at his finger. Harold jerked his hand back just in time, almost losing his balance. “Whoa!” He rubbed his finger and added with a smile, “Looks like it’s taken a vow of silence, too.”

The man sighed and slumped back in his chair. “Not usually. God, no.” He cast a sad look at the bird. “It’s like it’s just given up.”

He sighed heavily, dropping his gaze to the table. “This started about five or six months ago. I noticed it wasn’t flying around like before, and then it got aggressive—like everything I did was wrong. I tried everything: hand-feeding it, playing music, even asking it for advice, but nothing worked.”

He shook his head, his eyes filled with a sadness that went beyond words. “It’s like it’s tired of life. No matter what I do, it doesn’t respond. It used to perch on my shoulder—now it just snaps at me. I feel like an enemy in my own home.”

Sophie frowned, glancing at Harold, who seemed to be trying to hide a smile while side-eyeing the parrot, almost like he was dealing with a rebellious teenager. “Maybe... it’s bored?” she suggested cautiously. “It seems like it’s lost its spark. Maybe it needs something new in its life.”

The man nodded slowly. “I’ve thought of that, too. I tried new toys, moved the cage around... nothing seems to help. It just gets more and more agitated.”

Harold nodded thoughtfully. “Maybe it needs more attention—more interaction?”

The man frowned, looking confused. “More attention? I spend all the time I can with it.”

Harold nodded. "I get that. But, just like us, animals need variety. We all get tired of doing the same thing day after day."

The man looked at the bird, which seemed even more dejected than when they had arrived. "Like what? Am I supposed to take it on vacation?" he asked sarcastically.

Harold laughed. "Maybe not that extreme, but, you know, mix things up a bit. It's not just the cage that might need a change—it's everything around it."

The man let out a breath, seeming to ponder Harold's words. "Maybe you're right. But who would have thought that a bird could get... depressed?"

"Birds are incredibly sensitive creatures," Sophie added, pulling her phone out of her pocket. She quickly tapped into her chatbot. "Let's see if we can get a bit of help here," she muttered, typing in: Parrot depression, animal behavior. "Okay, here we go. It says that parrots can experience something similar to depression. If they don't have socialization or stimulation, they become bored and start acting out."

She looked up, meeting the man's tired gaze. "Parrots are also known to mimic their surroundings—including humans."

Harold perked up at that, glancing at the parrot, still sitting miserably on its perch. "That's it. It's mimicking you."

The man looked from Harold to Sophie, bewildered. "What do you mean?"

Harold moved closer, lowering his voice. "If you've been down—feeling lonely or upset—your parrot might be picking up on that. It's like a mirror, reflecting what's happening around it. Could it be that you've been struggling lately?"

The man seemed taken aback. "You're saying... it's copying me?"

Harold nodded. "Very likely. Parrots are highly emotional and very sensitive to their environment. If you've been going through a tough time, it could be affecting your bird. They're mirrors for our emotions, especially when they've bonded with someone."

Sophie nodded, looking up from her phone. “Exactly. There are multiple documented instances of animals reflecting the emotional state of their owners. In a way, your bird has become a reflection of your sorrow, and it makes perfect sense.”

The man stared down at the table, his face etched with realization. “I used to think the bird was the problem—that it was affecting me. But now that I think about it, maybe I’m the one who’s affecting the bird. Or maybe it’s both of us, trapped in this cycle.”

He leaned back in his chair, his shoulders sagging with the weight of this newfound understanding. “I lost my wife about nine months ago,” he admitted, his voice barely above a whisper. “It’s been rough—rougher than I could have imagined. I guess I never realized how much it had gotten to me. I’ve just been existing, you know? No energy, no motivation. The bird’s just been here, watching me fall apart.”

He paused, his voice cracking slightly. “Sometimes I just sit here staring out the window, feeling like the world is moving without me. And the bird... it’s like it’s tired, too, just from watching me give up.”

Harold nodded sympathetically. “It sounds like you’ve both been going through this together. And just like you, the bird is struggling. It’s been responding to your pain.”

The man looked at Harold, a flicker of hope appearing in his eyes. “So... what do I do? How do I help it—how do I help myself?”

Harold smiled warmly. “The first step is understanding what’s happening, and you’ve already done that. The next step is taking action—bringing some life back into your routine. Do things that make you happy, even if it’s just small things. The bird will notice the change in you.”

The man nodded slowly, as if the weight on his shoulders had lightened just a little. “I think... I think I could do that. There are things my wife and I used to do together. Little rituals. After she passed, I stopped doing them because it felt wrong without her. But maybe... maybe it’s time to start again.”

Sophie smiled, leaning forward. "That sounds like a great plan. Not only will it help you heal, but your parrot will also pick up on that positive energy."

The man looked at Sophie, his eyes glistening slightly. "I think you're right. It's not just for the bird—it's for me, too. Maybe we both need this."

Harold clapped the man on the shoulder, his smile growing. "Exactly. Start small. Take care of yourself, and you'll be surprised at how much it helps the bird."

The man looked at the parrot, which seemed a little less droopy now, as if it had sensed the shift in the room. "It's time for both of us to start moving forward," he said softly, more to himself than to anyone else.

Sophie and Harold stood up, ready to leave. As they made their way to the door, Harold glanced back at the parrot. "You'll be alright, buddy," he said softly. The bird cocked its head slightly, a tiny glimmer of curiosity returning to its eyes.

The man led them out into the hallway, pausing at the door. "Thank you," he said, his voice filled with gratitude. "I didn't realize how much I needed this until now."

Harold smiled. "We're always here if you need us. And remember, you're not alone in this."

The man nodded, a small smile forming on his face. "Thank you. I think... I think we'll be okay now."

As Harold and Sophie made their way to the stairwell, Harold glanced at Sophie with a playful smirk. He coughed lightly and said, "So, this time we're taking the elevator, right?"

Sophie put her hand on his chest, giving him a sly grin. "No, no, no, we're taking the stairs. Come on, Harold. Let's see if that old Wolverine spirit can handle it."

Harold rolled his eyes, but he couldn't help smiling. "Alright, alright. Lead the way."

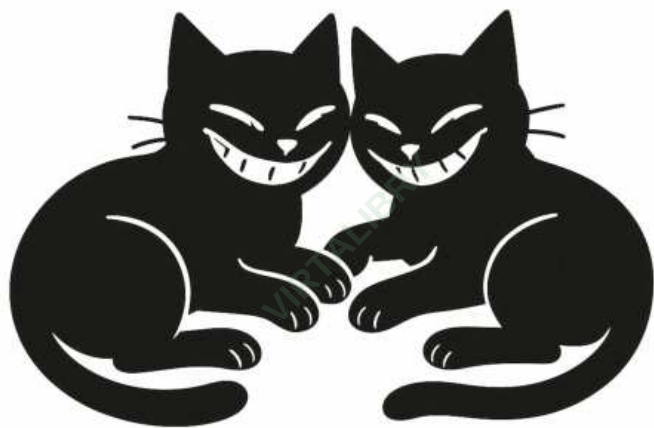
They started their descent, laughing together, ready to face whatever lay ahead. As they went down each flight, Harold couldn't help but feel that today, they hadn't just helped a client—they'd given a bit of hope back to someone who desperately needed it. And, in a way, Harold realized that this experience had rekindled something in him too. He felt lighter, a renewed sense of purpose.

"Hey, Sophie," he said as they reached the second floor. "You know, I think I needed this just as much as he did."

Sophie looked at him, a soft smile on her face. "I know, Harold. We all need a reminder sometimes that there's still light at the end of the tunnel. And I think you just gave that man a glimpse of it today."

Harold nodded, feeling a warmth spreading through him. "Yeah, maybe."

As they stepped out into the fresh air, Harold took a deep breath. Today had been a small victory, but it was enough. And that, he thought, was a good start.



Who Is Being Neutered First?

The smell of brewed coffee hit Harold the minute he stepped into the office. Sophie stood lazily by her desk, a wide grin on her face and her hands

firmly planted on her hips. A bowl of licorice and a row of cookies sat neatly arranged on a plate next to the coffee pot.

Sophie caught his eye and flashed a mischievous smile. “Good morning, Harold. Okay, I did something—just a little surprise for you.”

Harold raised an eyebrow and sat down at his desk. “Oh? What’s that?”

“Yeah, well,” she began, sliding a chair over to sit next to him. “I went to this workshop the other day—a team-building one. One of the people there built a chatbot with a Q&A game, designed to discover people’s personalities.” She laughed and pointed at the licorice. “I thought we could set the tone for our day this way.”

That made Harold smile. “Naturally, there is a chatbot.”

“Obviously,” Sophie laughed. “But hey, I figured it would be a great way to start the day! Plus, I made it cozy—coffee and pastries. What do you say?”

Harold glanced at the treats on display. “Hmm, I guess I can put up with that if it’s part of the deal,” he replied, smiling wryly.

“Perfect!” Sophie clapped her hands and whipped out her tablet. “Let’s get started!”

The game was on her tablet, already loaded, and she began typing. “Alright, let’s see what ChatGPT has in store for us,” she grinned.

The first question loaded, and Sophie quickly read it aloud: “Tell us about your family. Who are the top five people in your life?”

Harold sat back in his chair. “Well, certainly my daughters, Susan and Anna. They’re teenagers, and that comes with a whole set of issues to deal with. Me and their mother—my ex-wife—we have this weird back-and-forth jigsaw patchwork of a relationship, but we’re doing what we can for the girls.”

Sophie nodded. “I see,” she said quietly.

Next: “What was your last vacation accomplishment?”

The silence was warmer than before, more inviting. Sophie hesitated, clearing her throat. “Well... wow, I haven’t gone on vacation in over a year.

I'm pretty much always here at the office or at the gym, so... yeah, not a lot of stories there."

Harold looked surprised. "Not even a short trip?"

"Ummm... not really," she admitted. "I'm mostly just... here."

"Alright then, guess I'm up next!" Harold patted the tablet, and ChatGPT responded with: "Favorite thing to do on the weekend?"

"Not difficult," Harold said with a gleam in his eye. "Some of my best memories are of me taking my daughters to the woods. We go on hikes—sometimes with their dog, sometimes just the three of us. It's nice to escape and breathe in some fresh air, you know? And it's nice to chat with them... when they're in the mood." He smiled.

Sophie smiled politely, but there wasn't much she could add. She kept typing, and ChatGPT asked, "What would you consider the perfect weekend for yourself?"

She cleared her throat again. "Uh... I'd probably hit the gym, work out, maybe get some tasks done."

Harold chuckled a bit. "Not much time for fun, huh?"

"Eh, not really," she said with an awkward smile.

And so it went. For every question that ChatGPT asked, Harold had elaborate anecdotes about his daughters, his ex-wife, or happenings in his life. By comparison, Sophie could only manage a couple of sentences. It became clear how different their social lives were.

The next question: "What are you most afraid of?"

Harold didn't hesitate. "Losing my daughters. That's the worst thing I could imagine. They've been through a lot, and I love them always."

"Uh," said Sophie, looking away. "Losing my job, I think. Or... yeah... that's it."

Harold gave her a kind smile. "You work a lot—it seems like you don't have time for anything else. Maybe you should take some time off."

Sophie smiled back shyly. "Maybe. Okay, enough of the self-analysis. Let's get back to business for the day."

“Well, Harold, this one... this is an odd case,” she said, handing the tablet to him. “We’re going to visit a married couple who have two cats. They don’t know if they should neuter them or when the right time is.”

Harold shrugged, offering a half-smile in return. “You know, a fairly typical conundrum. Heck, that’s uncertain for a lot of people.”

“Yup,” Sophie agreed, popping a piece of licorice in her mouth. “But... I mean, why not just ask your vet? Well, that’s where we come in.” She beamed. “Of course, I’ve consulted ChatGPT and have a few tips! Early neutering has its own pros and cons, as does waiting. Naturally, early neutering can reduce some health risks but might hinder their growth.”

She continued, bursting with information, rolling through four or five possible pros and cons as Harold nodded, but his thoughts seemed elsewhere. Usually, he’d be the one to get involved in the situation and share his thoughts. But today, he was quiet. He looked pensive.

“What do you think, Harold?” Sophie looked up from her screen.

He sighed deeply, giving a small shake of his head. “I don’t know, Sophie. Maybe it’s just me, but I have this feeling that there’s more to it than meets the eye.”

She looked back at her screen. “Perhaps it’s just one of those days. We’ll show up, talk to them and their cats, and it’ll be fine. What could go wrong?”

Harold nodded weakly. Something felt off about the whole situation. Something was missing, as if there was a piece of the story they hadn’t seen yet.

Sophie nudged Harold with a chuckle as they walked to the car parked further down the street. Harold perked up and raised an eyebrow.

“What’s so funny?” he stuttered, fumbling with his car keys.

Sophie gave him a wicked grin and shook her head. “I was just thinking... you’re really good with your family. You speak so beautifully about your daughters. You’re the kind of guy I’d want if I ever got married.”

Harold stopped and turned toward her—not sure what to make of that at first, then laughing. “Seriously, Sophie? Someone like me?”

“Yup...” she kept smiling. “You’ve got this even, responsible energy. And the massive hair and beard don’t hurt, either. A bit rough around the edges, but dependable.”

Harold shook his head and held the car door open for her. “Man, it’s tricky,” he said with a laugh. “But I do what I can. Good to hear I’m not completely messing it all up.”

Sophie fastened her seatbelt, still smiling. “You’re doing a great job. You’re not some macho guy who refuses to take responsibility. You own up to your mistakes—that’s pretty rare.”

Harold smiled as he started the car. “Thanks, Sophie. That means a lot.”

Sophie and Harold entered the couple’s small home, and there was a palpable tension in the air. It wasn’t uncomfortable, but there was a silence hanging between the couple. A slightly chubby woman with a tight smile showed them into the living room, where two large cats sat in a cage, watching with cold, beady eyes.

“Come in,” the wife said, pointing to the couch where her husband sat with his arms crossed. He looked like a man who hadn’t moved from that spot in years.

Harold eyed the cats in the cage and raised an eyebrow. He tried to be sarcastic without offending. “They don’t seem... particularly calm.”

The woman nodded. “Yes, they’re very calm—especially when they’re in the cage. If they were out, all hell would break loose. It’s best they stay in there.”

The husband, sitting on the couch, glanced up at them and spoke in a low, gruff voice. “They go, or I go. I’ve had enough.”

Sophie pulled out her tablet to consult the chatbot, obviously relishing their back-and-forth. “So, is that why you’re considering neutering? To calm them down?”

The husband looked tired. "I don't know if neutering will actually calm them down, but I hope it changes something—anything," he said, nodding towards his wife.

Harold whispered to Sophie, "It looks like the man needs help almost as much as the cats do."

The wife glanced at Harold, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Are you sure it will work?"

Before Harold could respond, she motioned towards her husband. "I should have neutered him years ago."

The husband rolled his eyes as if to say, not this joke again. "Haha, very funny," he muttered tensely.

Harold fought back a grin, looking between them. "Hold on just a second," he said, holding up his hands. "Something tells me there's more going on here than just these cats acting up. Am I wrong?"

The wife gave her husband a look that could cut glass. The husband returned it with equal disdain.

Harold pushed away from the table, leaning back in his chair as tension built between the couple. Sophie, sitting beside him, tried to stifle a smile, sensing the situation's absurdity and how quickly it had spiraled out of control.

The wife, breaking the silence, spoke up with a mix of annoyance and frustration. "Now you understand why I made the neutering joke?" She locked eyes with Harold. "The reason is that he's been pottering around for years, disappearing who knows where during the nights or weekends, and I never got a straight answer about what he was up to. I had my suspicions, and meanwhile, I was just here, alone."

The husband groaned, his eyes rolling in exasperation. "Oh, come on, Hanne. That's not how it is anymore. I'm home now, aren't I?"

"Yes, you're home now," she snapped, "but that doesn't change what you did back then. I still don't know where you were, who you were with, or what you were doing."

Harold exchanged a glance with Sophie, who was barely containing her laughter behind her hand. What started as a conversation about neutering cats had swiftly turned into something entirely different.

The husband, turning to Harold, raised his voice. "And what about her?" He gestured towards his wife. "She keeps telling me I'm boring now that I'm always home, but she's no better. She sits with her friends all day at work or out at lunch, and I haven't had a say in anything."

There was a moment of silence, charged with tension between the two of them. Sophie shot Harold a pointed look, raising her eyebrows as if to say, Are you going to step in?

Harold sat back up, suddenly resolute. Sophie had just told him he was a reasonable, decent human being, and she knew that his patience and empathy were his most notable qualities. She expected him to do what he did best—calmly de-escalate the situation. But this time, Harold surprised her.

Harold rose to his full six-foot-five height, his presence suddenly commanding the room. His voice was firm, yet not unkind. "Enough!" He raised his voice slightly, enough to make both of them fall silent. "I've seen this far too many times—what are you two even doing here?"

Sophie's eyes widened. This was a side of Harold she hadn't seen before. He was no longer the quiet, patient one who would carefully sidestep conflict. Instead, he was taking charge, his voice resonating in the small living room.

Harold moved closer, leaning in towards the couple, his tone softening but staying authoritative. "You two have been tearing each other down for years. Sitting here, in your little house, picking at each other and using every perceived fault as ammunition."

The husband started to respond, but Harold held up his hand. "No—stop. Is this really how you want to live your lives?"

The wife opened her mouth to say something, but Harold's gaze silenced her. "I'm not going to listen to any more accusations or blame. If you want help with your cats, we'll do that."

For a moment, the room was utterly silent. Sophie sat, eyebrows raised in admiration. She hadn't expected this. Harold was standing there, his feet firmly planted, like someone who had finally had enough of the pettiness.

The husband looked down, silent for a few seconds before finally nodding. The wife followed suit, her hands resting in her lap. The dynamic in the room shifted; it felt like something had finally been acknowledged between them—something they both knew but had never said out loud.

Harold took a deep breath, regaining his composure. "Alright then. Do we start with the cats, or do either of you have something else you need to get off your chest first?"

The couple looked at each other, their expressions softening for the first time. The wife spoke first, her voice much quieter now. "Maybe... maybe we need to talk about us, too."

The husband nodded. "Yeah. I think we do."

Harold smiled slightly, relieved. "Good. That's a start."

A few days later, Sophie was sitting at her desk at the office, continuing her work. Suddenly, she looked up in surprise. "They paid! You've got to be kidding me—they actually paid!"

"What?" Harold looked up, surprised.

"Yeah, the couple with the cats—they paid! I honestly didn't think they would."

Harold leaned back in his chair, a pleased smile forming on his face. "I had a feeling they would. They got a good deal—some truth that they probably hadn't heard in years. Maybe that's exactly what they needed."

Sophie shook her head in disbelief. "Harold, I have to admit, I thought they were going to slam the door in our faces and refuse to pay the bill. I didn't see this coming."

Harold shrugged. "Sometimes, it's the harsh reality that opens people's eyes. Maybe no one had ever put it out there for them like that before."

Sophie looked at him thoughtfully, a small smile on her lips. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe that’s our job here—to offer people the truths they didn’t realize they were missing.”

Harold nodded, his gaze thoughtful. “It’s not always what people want to hear, but sometimes, it’s exactly what they need.”

Sophie leaned back in her chair, a look of respect in her eyes. “I guess that makes us more than just pet therapists, doesn’t it?”

Harold smiled. “Yeah. I guess it does.”

“But tell me, Harold, what made you so upset with the old couple? It seemed like it touched something deep inside you, a spot where you’ve hidden quite a lot of energy?” Sophie asked after a few moments.

Harold seemed amazed and had to think for a moment before answering. “To be honest, Sophie, I asked myself the same question when I got home. No, it’s not about their bad attitudes toward each other. It’s the whole theme of neutering—that’s a tough one for all men.”

Sophie stared at him, trying to figure out what was going on in his mind.

After a while, Harold continued with a small smile. “You already know I like Freud. He was a tough guy, saying that the deepest fear for all men is the fear of being neutered. You could say that neutering is the ultimate end of masculinity, the deep-down anxiety of destruction. It’s the same reason many men avoid therapy... it could be seen as the end of their masculine identity.”

“Wow,” Sophie reacted. “That’s serious business. So much at stake just because a couple of male cats need to be neutered.”

Harold smiled a little, looking somewhat embarrassed. “Yes, that’s how we are—anxious and vain.”

“But there’s more to it... a more amusing part,” Harold continued. “Many years ago, during my first marriage, we had two cats that also needed to be neutered. As the day approached, I felt worse and worse, and later on, when it was done, I felt terrible, like a traitor, burdened with guilt.”

Sophie broke in, clearly engaged. “You really went through with it, even when you felt so bad?”

“There’s more to the story... though it doesn’t put me in a favorable light,” Harold admitted. “A few years later, I met the veterinarian again—I don’t even remember the occasion—but I used the opportunity to talk to him about the cats and my lingering guilt. He asked me to sit down while he went to find a briefcase and started browsing through some papers. He asked for the month of the procedure, and then, to my surprise, he asked if both cats were black. I nodded, and then he looked at me intently and said, ‘If this can remain a secret between the two of us, I think I can help you.’ I nodded in amazement. ‘They got away!’ he said.”

Sophie said nothing but looked at Harold with wide eyes.

Harold continued, “The vet confided that he had always had mixed feelings about performing castrations, which he had done many times. To sort of cope with it, he made a few exceptions—sometimes for cats with extra-large testicles. He said, ‘They should have their chance to live out their urges on behalf of all cats.’ He seemed a little apologetic, and maybe relieved to clear his conscience. But I was just grateful.”

“What a crazy story,” Sophie managed to say.

“Yes, you’re right,” Harold replied. “We men—and tomcats—have to stand in solidarity.”



**The Animal You
Tamed Is Your
Responsibility for
Life**

Sophie scrolled through various quote websites, her eyes fixed on the computer screen as she worked to come up with the perfect slogan for the company. It had been an entire morning spent trying to craft something epic for the Pet Therapist—something that would embody what they truly did. She wanted a logo that would be suitable to hang on the wall in the reception area—something that would make people say, “This is why we come here!”

She glanced at Harold, who was in the middle of brewing coffee. She had prepared a list of favorite quotes to share with him.

“Okay, Harold, listen to this,” she said, her voice more animated than it had been all week. “I came across this quote from Mahatma Gandhi: ‘The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated.’ What do you think?”

Harold set his coffee mug down, looked up, and shrugged. “Yeah, it sounds good, but it’s sort of heavy, don’t you think? We’re not the UN.”

Sophie rolled her eyes and chuckled. “Yeah, yeah, but just imagine... it makes us feel like we belong to something big, something noble.”

“I guess we’re more in the small-time business then—helping people find out whether their hamster has ADHD or not,” he shot back with a grin.

Sophie took a deep breath and moved to the next quote. “Fine then, how about this: ‘Caring for animals is taking care of life.’”

Harold took a sip of his coffee. “It sounds like something you’d see written on a refrigerator magnet. You know, one of those ones you buy at a gas station.”

Sophie put her hand on her hip and gave him a dirty look. “Are you trying to be difficult?”

Harold laughed, shrugging. “Just being realistic. Alright, let’s hear the next one.”

Sophie squinted at her screen, readjusting her glasses. “Alright, try number three: ‘They give us everything, so we can give them our best.’”

Harold arched an eyebrow and smiled. “Now that one’s not bad.”

Sophie nodded triumphantly. "Right? We could put that on posters—make it our motto."

Harold kicked back in his chair, patting her shoulder. "This is gonna be big. We'll be the Dalai Lamas of pet care."

Sophie laughed. "And there's one more. It's not exactly a slogan, but it's pretty unique: 'You are responsible forever for what you have tamed.'"

Harold frowned, giving her a quizzical look. "Where's that from?"

Sophie glanced back at the screen. "Saint-Exupéry. He was a writer and poet from France."

Harold nodded slowly. "Saint-Exupéry... that sounds familiar. Tell me more."

Sophie scrolled a bit further and exclaimed, "Yeah, he was a pilot too. An aviation pioneer! Pretty exciting stuff."

Harold smiled lightly. "Isn't he the guy who wrote *The Little Prince*?"

"Exactly, Harold!" Sophie clapped her hands. "That's him. It's about a little boy who talks with a fox that explains the different stages of life to him."

Harold nodded, memories coming back. "Yeah, now I remember. And the fox teaches him about... responsibility?"

Sophie smiled. "Yes. The quote itself is actually longer, but this part stood out to me: 'You are responsible forever for what you have tamed.' It's really profound."

Harold nodded thoughtfully. "It definitely is."

Sophie continued, "I've been thinking, you know, Harold, maybe it's time for a new slogan. Something fresh. A story behind the quotes, but also something that reflects good business. If we do well, we could even move out of this factory district and rent a high-end spot downtown."

Harold sat back, his coffee halfway to his lips. "A nice place downtown?"

"Yes! Can you imagine?" Sophie said, excitement in her voice. "A place with lots of windows and natural light... maybe even a little café down the street where we could take clients for coffee after consultations. It would be so cozy! I can already picture it."

Harold remained quiet, staring off into the distance for a few moments. "It sounds awesome, but can we afford the rent?" he asked cautiously. "I mean, I don't know much about that, but I just finished paying off the Volvo repair bill. I'd be wary of getting into high fixed costs."

Sophie chuckled, amused by his cautiousness. "Harold, are you seriously being the financially responsible one here? That's usually my role! Imagine it—us, in this modern clinic downtown, with people walking by and looking in through the windows. 'That looks so professional!' they'd think."

Harold nodded, though he said nothing more.

Sophie dialed back her enthusiasm a little. "We've really made some strides, haven't we, Harold? The rabbits, the cats we saved from neutering, the parrot with depression—holy shit, we've done some amazing stuff."

She poured herself some coffee, and Harold nodded in agreement. "Yeah, it has been something, to be honest."

Sophie leaned back in her chair. "Anyway, we've got our next mission. We're going to visit an elderly couple in this episode. One of their dogs... I'll give you one guess about what happened."

Harold looked intrigued. "Hmm. Are they getting another dog? Or maybe the dogs have behavioral problems?"

Sophie grinned and shook her head. "No, their concern is that their dogs are too spoiled. Talk about a luxury problem!"

An elderly woman named Irene showed Sophie and Harold into her small, quaint garden near the charming little house she shared with her husband, William. The garden was alive with color from Irene's beloved flowers.

She gave them a sweet smile, gently petting the silky leaves of her plants as she pointed at them. "These are my roses. I've been caring for them for over ten years."

Sophie thanked her and asked Irene for tips on making the roses look so beautiful. Meanwhile, Harold was more interested in the large bushes that formed a natural hedge around the garden. He pointed to one of them,

curiosity in his eyes. "What kind of plant is that? It looks like it's thriving here."

Irene positively beamed. "That's a lilac bush. In the spring, it smells wonderful and brings in so many bees. It's my little nature corner."

Sophie smiled lightly, glancing at Harold. "You seem to be taking more of an interest in gardening than usual, Harold."

"You can always learn something new," he smiled, stepping closer to take a deep breath of the fresh garden air.

Irene's voice softened as she continued. "William and I love our garden—it keeps us both active and reminds us that we're still connected to nature."

She led them around the garden, her tone shifting. "But it wasn't the plants that made me call you here. It's about our dog... and, well, my husband William." Her voice grew more serious. "He has a particularly tight bond with the dogs, and now that the oldest one has fallen ill, we have to decide how long we should keep him. It's going to be so hard to say goodbye. And there's also the question of whether or not we should get another dog. For William, it would be a real culture shock without one. I just know the house would be too quiet."

She paused, her eyes searching for the right words. "One of the biggest differences between me and William in our relationship with animals is how we each connect to them. I find pets comforting; they bring joy to the house. But for William, it's deeper. He's connected with them in a way that I never could. Sometimes, I feel like he's more bonded to the animals than to people."

Irene looked off into the distance, a soft smile on her face. "It's not just the dogs. William also shares a special bond with our grandchildren, Sarah and John. They mean the world to him. He's an amazing grandfather. Whenever the children come here, he's like a different person. His face lights up. I see that same joy in him with the dogs. They give him something that no one else can."

Sophie nodded gently, her expression pensive. "It sounds like the dogs and the grandkids give him something... something that he needs."

"Yes, exactly," Irene said, her voice trembling a little. "It's like they fill a void for him."

They continued walking through the garden, heading toward the house. Irene spoke again, her voice more determined. "I wanted to give you an idea of what we're dealing with before we go inside. William's in the living room—or what we call the library. He loves his books."

Irene led them into the house. The hallway was cramped, the air filled with the scent of old books and polished wood. They entered the library, finding William seated in a large armchair, a book resting in his lap, his glasses perched halfway down his nose. The other dog lay loyally at his feet, looking up with a bright expression as they entered.

"There you are," Irene whispered.

William looked up and smiled warmly at the newcomers. "Hello, you two," he greeted them, his gaze softening as he looked at Irene. "Maybe you could make us all some coffee, dear?"

Irene smiled, nodded, and disappeared into the kitchen to make some coffee. William stroked the dog lying at his feet, giving it a gentle nudge. He looked down at the animal, his face clouded with sadness.

"Yeah, it's gonna be rough," he muttered, his eyes lingering on the dog. "Not much time left. It's tough. And then there's the question of getting another dog. Having a dog is work—we knew that from the start. But... they're my little companions. I just don't know how much longer I can do it. It's a battle of endurance at this point—who's going to give in first, me or the dog."

The room filled with a thick silence, and Harold looked over at Sophie. She glanced back at him, both of them moved by William's heartfelt words.

"And you feel the same way about your grandkids, I imagine," Harold said, gesturing towards some portraits displayed on a small table. He noticed a picture on the wall—two children smiling brightly.

William's face softened as he followed Harold's gaze. "Indeed," he replied, a smile spreading across his face. "They're my pride and joy. They mean everything to me." He looked fondly at the photos. "They're growing up so fast. I can barely keep up."

After a brief pause, William spoke again, his eyes never leaving the pictures. "The love I have for my grandkids... it's a lot like what I feel for my dogs. It's about care and responsibility. It's nowhere near the same, but there's a similarity, a sense of duty that runs through both."

Irene returned with the coffee, placing the cups on the table. She looked at William, her face wreathed in gentle seriousness. "Yes, it's been a double-edged sword," she said, her tone affectionate. "William has always had a natural affinity with children. They gravitate towards him, and it's been wonderful, truly. They can barely reach the front door before they're begging for his attention."

She gazed at William as he stroked the dog. "He's always been their golden grandpa," she said playfully, a gleam in her eye. "Sometimes, I even get a little jealous."

William looked up, meeting her gaze gently. "It's a blessing, really," he said softly. "The children and the dogs... it's like they know I'll always be there for them."

Sophie smiled warmly. "You must be every child's dream grandad."

William nodded, smiling, but there was a look of sadness in his eyes.

Sophie's attention drifted to the bookshelf to her right. Her face lit up when she spotted a familiar book—*The Little Prince*. She reached out and picked it up, holding it out for William to see.

William's eyes widened with delight. "Ah, *The Little Prince*," he said, his voice filled with nostalgia. "One of my all-time favorites. It touches on everything I believe in—responsibility and love. Once you've formed a bond, you are accountable for it."

He paused, then looked down at his hands. "I remember the first time I read those words: 'It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.' It struck me deeply."

He hesitated before adding, “It applies to my relationship with the grandkids... and with the dogs, too. It’s not about what you see. It’s about the emotional bonds that are invisible, yet very real. I’ve tried to always be emotionally present for them, even if I haven’t always been physically there.”

Harold nodded, leaning in a little. “It sounds like you’re truly connected to them—beyond just being family.”

William nodded. “I am. But it’s hard to imagine what it will be like when I’m no longer here. It never really goes away, even as time passes.”

They all sat in silence, the atmosphere relaxed yet contemplative. Sophie stole glances at Harold, admiring how he listened and navigated these delicate conversations. His ability to guide discussions when he sensed something meaningful on the horizon was impressive, but it also made her a little uncomfortable. Things were brewing beneath the surface—she could feel it.

Harold picked up *The Little Prince* again, looking directly at William. “Do you remember the other important quote from the fox? The one that says, ‘You become responsible forever for what you have tamed.’”

William looked at Harold, his gaze distant, as if he was seeing past everything in the room. He stayed immobile for a minute, the words evidently resonating with him. After a moment, he bowed his head and said somberly, “Yes... yes, I remember. I’ve often thought about that. I think it’s part of what’s been bothering me all along.”

The room fell silent. Irene looked at her husband with a mixture of empathy and understanding, her hand resting gently on his arm.

“I wonder about that often,” William added, his voice barely a whisper. “I don’t think the burden was ever too heavy. The time I’ve spent with the dogs and the grandkids—those were moments of joy. But I think I’ve used it as a shield, a way to avoid taking responsibility for other things in my life. Things that I did wrong or didn’t do.”

Irene eyed her husband thoughtfully, her hand still on his arm. "Being close to the animals and kids has always been easier than confronting the things that truly matter," she said softly. "Maybe it's time to face that."

Harold nodded. The silence in the room was heavy, yet it felt like a turning point—as if William was finally ready to embark on a journey he had put off for far too long.

It was a long time before anyone spoke again. William seemed lost in thought, traveling deep into his past. After what felt like an eternity, he spoke again. "That quote... it's good you brought it up, Harold. I think that's what it comes down to."

He trailed off, then turned to his wife, Irene. "Since the first time I read that quote, it has bothered me. I knew there was a truth there that I wasn't dealing with. But it's true—all relationships are like that. It's no wonder the children and animals love me. I mean, I've tried to be there for them, to do my best. But I've been hiding, too."

Irene squeezed his hand and leaned in closer.

"Maybe I've been hiding behind my love for them," William said, his voice deliberate. "Because it was easier than facing what I could have done differently. And now, I understand... my own responsibility—for the things that turned out the way they should have, and for those that didn't. I understand. I feel deeply embarrassed by the thought that others have had to sacrifice their freedom just to fulfill my need for closeness. The last thing I want is for my grandchildren to feel tamed or made dependent on me. Their freedom means everything—it is the most precious gift they have, and I want to honor that above all else."

Harold looked at him and nodded, the weight of realization thick in the room. William had painted a picture of himself he could no longer deny.

Quiet enveloped them until William finally said, "Yes, no more words, right? When the truth comes out, there's not much else to say. That quote... you've just made me remember all of this. This is a huge part of my story that no one knows about. I chose this path, and there has been a cost."

William finally relented, his head hanging as silence swallowed the room. His words lingered in the air, and the weight of what he had just shared settled over everyone.

Sophie and Harold were about to leave the house, walking once more through the garden with Irene. She thanked them, saying, "I think what you shared today was really important. If we do decide to get another dog, it will be for different reasons this time." She smiled warmly at them. "It has certainly made us think—especially William."

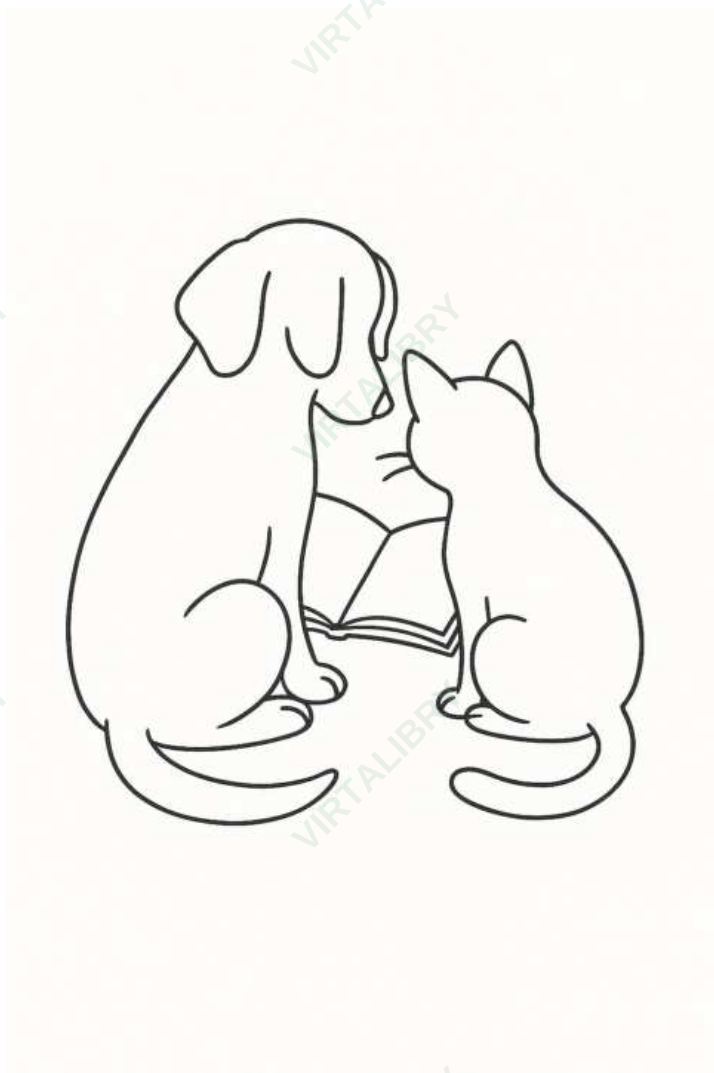
Sophie and Harold nodded, and Harold added, "I know you will make the right choice."

Irene smiled as she saw them off to their car. "Thank you for your time. It was kind of you to come," she said.

On their way back to the office, Sophie leaned back in her seat, exhaling deeply. "That was intense. I felt for William. He's done well in many ways, but I understand what you were saying too. The impact it had on him was obvious. It confirms my gut feeling that our small company is saving lives—not just for the animals but also for the people. And that might be the most important part."

Sophie turned to look at Harold, then gazed out the window, her expression pensive. "I was thinking... what if our slogan was: 'The Animal You Have Tamed Is Your Responsibility for Life'? It's the kind of slogan that makes people think. I believe it could start some really deep conversations. Maybe we don't need to move our office to the city after all. We can achieve our goals from right where we are."

She smiled, glancing back at Harold. "Thank you, Harold. We two are a really good team!"



Epilogue

Sophie sat cross-legged in the slightly worn office chair, smoothie in hand, staring blankly out the window. She had just transferred another payment to Harold for their latest consultation, and the spreadsheet glowed on her screen—color codes, names, numbers.

Harold walked in with muddy shoes and his usual calm smile.

“That was the last one for this week,” he said, sinking into his chair. “A golden retriever with separation anxiety and an owner with performance anxiety. Perfect match.”

Sophie snorted. “It’s always anxiety. Everything is anxiety. We should be the ones getting subsidies.”

“You mean, like being covered by public health insurance?” Harold asked with a crooked grin.

She looked at him. “No... I just mean—we’ve been through it all now. Dogs with trauma. Cats with jealousy. Owners with exes. You’ve held hands and assigned homework. I’ve... used AI.”

“And licorice,” Harold added.

“Yes, obviously. Licorice is essential.” She nodded with mock seriousness.

A small pause settled between them.

“Do you think we made a difference?” she asked, looking out the window again.

Harold didn’t answer right away. He got up and walked over to the bulletin board, where a drawing of a rabbit wearing sunglasses still hung—along with a message written in a child’s handwriting: “Thank you for finding us the right one.”

“I don’t know,” he said finally. “But we showed up. And we listened.”

Sophie nodded. “Maybe that’s more than most people ever do.”

She stood up and began packing her bag. On her way out, she tossed a bag of licorice toward him.

“See you Monday. And remember: just because it’s a dog doesn’t mean any of it has to make sense.”

“That goes for all of us,” Harold said quietly.

The door closed. The office fell silent. Somewhere outside, a dog barked in the distance.

Dear reader

I hope you enjoyed reading the book! If so, you can do me and future readers a huge favor by reviewing the book where you bought it. I would be very grateful for that.

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Best wishes

Henrik