

The Pet Therapist

Curious Cases

Henrik Kruse



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It Was Supposed to Be About Pets

There are people who dream of helping others. And then there are people who dream of turning that into a business. Sophie belongs mostly to the latter category.

She is thirty-four, goes to the gym the way other people go to the bakery, and has a rare ability to see “potential” in anything that can be wrapped up as a concept. She has no traditional education in psychology, and pets don’t mean much to her—but she has an idea: there must be a market for families who need help with their pets. Or rather: with what arises in families when an animal suddenly becomes the center of everything that never quite gets said out loud.

That’s how *The Pet Therapist* begins. Not with a calling, but with a project.

The only problem is that Sophie is missing one small thing: someone who actually likes animals—and who knows how to talk to people without turning it into a PowerPoint presentation.

And that’s where Harold comes in.

Harold is in his fifties, soft around the edges and sharp in his gaze. He’s the kind of person who notices when someone is breathing too fast, and who can calm a dog simply by sitting down. He has worked with people for many years, including therapy at the border between the psychological and the spiritual, and he carries an experience that doesn’t appear on any résumé: that what we call problems are often just secrets that can no longer stay hidden.

Sophie hires him because she wants professional credibility in her concept. Harold says yes because he needs a new beginning—and because there's something about Sophie's energy that both irritates and fascinates him. In many ways, they are opposites: she thinks in solutions, slogans, and quick decisions. He thinks in patterns, relationships, and the small shifts that make a person change direction.

Together, they start a small consultation practice that, in theory, is about pets—but in practice almost always ends up being about people.

Because every time a family calls and says, "It's the dog that's the problem," it turns out that the dog is often just the one telling the truth the loudest.

The three stories you're about to read form a small, unified mini narrative from the beginning of Sophie and Harold's collaboration. They show both their method and their collisions: Sophie's enthusiasm for "technology" (and her chatbot, which often comes up with strong but peculiar suggestions), Harold's quiet eye for what lies beneath the symptoms—and the way their own baggage constantly seeps into the work.

You'll meet a family where a boy is afraid that their dog is becoming depressed. You'll step into an apartment where fleas turn out to be both a practical problem and a problem of shame. And you'll see how a mess of unopened window envelopes can grow into something far bigger than administration.

These are not grand, dramatic adventures. They are small, crooked human stories—told with a humor that slips in just when you think things are about to become too serious.

And if, afterward, you begin to suspect that "pet therapy" isn't really about animals so much as about what we project onto them ...

... then you're already well on your way into *The Pet Therapist*.

When the Roosters Take Over

The Coffee-Machine Domain

“Have you ever heard of domain theory, Harold? It’s very well known in management, but I think it can be used in other contexts too.”

Sophie had lifted her gaze from the screen and was looking toward the corner, where Harold was down on all fours, busy connecting the power to a coffee machine. He had made do with Nescafé for a long time, but now it was time. On his way home yesterday, he had stopped by a thrift store and bought this little marvel: a capsule espresso machine.

Harold turned his head and replied a bit strained, “No, I don’t think I remember that one. What is it about?”

“In short,” Sophie began, “it says that very different rules apply in different contexts. It’s actually super interesting.”

Harold had stood up and placed a cup under the machine, ready to try out the new acquisition. “One moment, Sophie. I think I’m in another world right now—or domain, as you might say.”

Sophie smiled. “It’s probably best you get your coffee before we continue, if I’m supposed to expect you to engage.”

Harold had inserted the capsule and pressed the button marked for a small cup. Seconds later, a low humming sound filled the room, and the smell of strong coffee spread through the office.

“Congratulations, Harold. I hope that black stuff tastes good. Bring the cup over here—you can have a couple of licorice pieces too. The color matches.”

Harold sat down across from Sophie. He took a sip of the coffee, lifted his eyes, and signaled that he was ready to listen.

“So, if the two of us are just sitting here in the office, we can talk completely freely about the families we visit—also a bit bluntly and straight from the gut. But when we’re out there with them, different rules apply. Then we’re guests in their home, and we represent the company. That changes the entire setup.”

“I’m with you so far, Sophie,” Harold replied, nodding.

“It’s about what framework is in place, and what the starting point or purpose is. It’s important to be clear about that from the beginning, if you don’t want to run into confusion or misunderstandings later,” Sophie continued, with an expression that showed she meant it.

“Take the coffee machine, for example. You’ve joked about it several times and made no secret of the fact that you think something like that belongs in an office. But you still went out and bought one yourself, because you didn’t expect me to do it. But if the framework had been different—if it had been something you brought up at your job-interview or at a performance review—then the responsibility would have been mine. Different frameworks, different expectations.”

Harold smiled. He was actually pleasantly surprised by Sophie’s reflections. They made very good sense. He had to give her that. “Sophie, you’re really onto something here. Maybe even something we can use in our practice. But more than anything, it shows how important it is to align expectations.”

Sophie nodded. It was clear that she was pleased by Harold’s acknowledgment.

“Let’s talk more about it when we have time. But we’re a bit pressed,” Harold interrupted, finishing the last sip of his coffee. His satisfied expression showed that the machine was a success. As he stood up, he glanced at his watch and continued, “We actually need to be there in forty-five minutes, and I’d guess the drive will take about forty minutes, if all goes well.” The last part was an unspoken reference to the Volvo. They both knew there was a certain uncertainty factor attached to the old car.

Sophie nodded and stood up. She grabbed a stack of printouts from the printer and slipped them into her bag along with her notebook and phone. “I’m ready,” she said, heading for the door.

The Volvo Joins the Case

The Volvo was a chapter unto itself. One could argue that it was the third person in the company. It had its own temperament, and it was partly thanks to it that Harold had been hired. Sophie was well aware that home visits wouldn’t be possible without a car—and she didn’t even have a driver’s license.

But the Volvo was having one of its good days. After Harold had turned the key five or six times, the familiar coughing sound came, signaling that the car was about to start.

Harold smiled and patted the dashboard affectionately. He and the Volvo had had a long relationship. Love and hate, as they say. In its younger days, they had enjoyed speed together. Now, as retirement age was approaching—at least as some would put it—it had taken on the role of Harold’s teacher in loyalty and patience. He was well aware of that and grateful for it.

But everything in its own time. Or in its own context, as Sophie would have said. This was not the time to practice patience. Now it just had to drive without too much complaining. And as if it understood the context, it limited itself to a couple of coughs and then revved up fully.

Sophie let out a sigh of relief. She rolled down the window and enjoyed the wind catching in her hair. She loved speed—more than Harold did. When she biked, not many could keep up with her, neither uphill nor downhill. Even those on e-bikes shouldn’t count on getting ahead.

Too Many Roosters

“If I remember correctly, it had something to do with a chicken coop,” Harold began once they were out of the city.

Sophie glanced at the printout and nodded. “Yes, it says here in the email that it’s about too many roosters. Let me just check. It’s a retired couple living out their dream of a peaceful country life together with

animals. That sounds lovely. But the problem is that all their sweet chicks didn't just turn into hens—about half of them turned into roosters, who lay no eggs and wake the couple every morning before five. But that's not the problem, they write. The problem is that they can't bring themselves to slaughter the roosters."

Sophie paused and looked at Harold.

"Okay," Harold began, "maybe they should have thought about that a bit earlier. But it doesn't sound like they're from the countryside, and maybe they thought all chicks turn into hens." He smiled to himself and looked at Sophie.

"Well, I'm not from the countryside either," she replied. "I could easily have fallen into that trap myself. But what are we supposed to tell them?"

"They might have taken a course in rural living and animal husbandry, but it's a bit late for that now. Maybe we should do what we usually do: feel the atmosphere a bit and sense what the real problem is. We tend to have good luck with that, don't we, Sophie?" Harold smiled slightly. He knew perfectly well that their approaches were often different.

Sophie had pulled out her phone and was typing eagerly. "I'm a bit out of my depth here, Harold. So I'll stay a bit in the background and keep an eye on whether technology can help us."

Harold nodded, quite satisfied with Sophie's announcement. He preferred to get his fingers into the soil and feel what was actually at stake.

The Dream of Country Life

Ten minutes before the deadline, the Volvo turned into the gravel driveway of a small farmstead.

Even from a distance, it was clear that city people had taken over the property. Renovation was in full swing, with a tiled roof and new dormer windows on the main house. The yard had been regraded, and along the wall stood a row of decorative pots with various herbs. This was a place where people lived who had plenty of time and were about to live out their dreams in their third age.

Hardly had the engine stopped before the front door opened, and both husband and wife came out—a lively couple in their early seventies.

Harold and Sophie were warmly welcomed and invited inside. They were shown around and ended up in the garden, where coffee had been set out. From there, they had a good view of the chicken house, which was, after all, what the dilemma was about.

“Well, it’s a bit dreadful—and also embarrassing—that we’ve ended up in this unfortunate situation,” the wife began once the coffee had been poured and the cookies passed around.

The husband nodded. He wasn’t the one in the relationship who usually did the talking. Still, he elaborated on the dilemma his wife had hinted at. “It was absolutely wonderful when we saw the first batch of chicks hatch from the eggs. For us city people, it was a bit of a miracle. Because our rooster is red, and the three hens have different colors and sizes, the most beautiful, mottled chicks came out. Some were black with a few white spots and looked almost like little penguins. Others were white like tiny snowballs. And the rest had a wonderful mix of all colors. It was love at first sight. We were completely enchanted. We could sit for hours in the chicken run, just watching the little ones running around on their own and in and out under their mother hen. They are one of the miracles of the universe—we agreed on that.”

The husband paused and let his wife take over. “But they grew up. It was like with children—it happened far too fast. I have to admit that they’re cutest when they’re small. I think we ended up with almost forty chicks over a few months. And now, today, half a year later, they’ve turned into twenty-five hens that have just started laying eggs. And now we’re approaching the problem, because there were also fifteen roosters, whom we’ve had to move to a separate enclosure so the hens can get some peace. They walk around there now, thinking about the hens, I imagine. But what are we supposed to do with them? They’ve actually become a bit of a burden.”

The husband nodded repeatedly as his wife explained. It was clear they had talked about this a lot and that they were in agreement.

Harold had listened attentively, trying to sense how things fit together.

“Had you imagined that the roosters would be slaughtered?” he asked carefully.

The wife shook her head vigorously. “It may sound foolish, but I don’t think we ever imagined that we would end up with a problem at all. It probably has to do with the fact that we’re city people. We think chicks are cute, and it’s wonderful to be able to collect fresh eggs from the chicken run every day. But having to slaughter some of them—that’s not something either of us wants. I know we have a rather romantic image of country life, but that’s how it is. And I’m afraid that cracks will appear in that image if we also have to start killing the animals.”

“I can say it straight out—I would feel absolutely terrible having to chop their heads off, not to mention eating them afterward. That’s completely out of the question,” the husband added.

His wife nodded. She couldn’t imagine it either.

“So what do we do?” the man asked into the air. “I don’t expect you to solve the problem, but we still need to talk this through with someone other than ourselves. Should we try to become more traditional country people and grit our teeth and slaughter the roosters? That’s the natural way to keep chickens. The hens lay eggs, and the roosters are slaughtered and eaten. Or should we give them away? That’s another option. Then they’re out of our sight—the problem is no longer ours—but we also don’t know what will happen to them. That feels a bit cowardly, I think. Or should we keep them? That’s the third option. They don’t lay eggs, but they still produce manure. That’s also a possibility.”

“May we see the ones this is about?” Harold asked, emptying his coffee cup at the same time.

“Of course, of course,” the man replied, rising as well. “Come over to the chicken run, and afterward we can see the roosters. Their enclosure is on the other side of the trees.”

The Chicks and the Dangerous Hen

Everyone stood up and headed toward the chicken run. The husband and wife led the way; behind them came Harold, and last came Sophie, who had pulled out her phone.

“May I take pictures?” she asked the wife.

“Yes, of course. I think our chickens are beautiful. They’re not cute little chicks anymore, but they still have lovely colors, and you can tell they’re doing well. At least that’s what I think.”

Sophie nodded and began taking pictures of the many chickens inside the wire fencing. In the middle of the run lay a large pile of lettuce leaves, which the chickens were now eagerly scratching and pecking at.

“Chickens are amazing,” the man commented. “They’ll eat almost anything. We practically don’t have any organic waste that we throw out anymore. Everything comes out here to them and gets turned into the finest compost, which we use everywhere in the garden.”

“And you have to see something,” the wife said in a tone that made it sound as if she had a secret. “Come in here.” She opened the door to the chicken run and let Harold and Sophie step inside.

She walked over to something that looked like a shelf from a distance, but when they got closer, they could see it was the nesting boxes.

“Just look at them,” she said, smiling as she carefully nudged the red hen aside, revealing a handful of chicks.

“Oh—can I hold one?” Sophie asked, stepping forward and already reaching her hand down toward the little ones.

The answer didn’t come from the wife, but from the chicks’ mother, who resolutely and without hesitation made her opinion known by giving Sophie a solid peck on the hand.

Sophie jumped back—not from pain, but from being startled by the hen’s defense.

“That thing is dangerous,” she managed to say, staring at her hand to see if there was a wound. “Are they really that aggressive?”

Harold’s eyes met the man’s. They both tried to hide their smiles.

Sophie caught it out of the corner of her eye but chose to ignore it. Instead, she took a picture of her hand and started typing on her phone.

“I’m just going to ask, just to be safe, whether a vaccination is necessary.”

Now the man couldn’t hide his smile any longer. “We may be city people, but you really have never been out in the country before,” he said to Sophie. “The chickens have given us plenty of headaches, but

dangerous, they are not,” he continued, trying to make the situation a bit more serious.

“They can carry salmonella,” Sophie said, reading from the screen. “That’s not harmless at all—and actually serious for older people and pregnant women.”

Harold gave Sophie a friendly nudge. “Is there something you haven’t told me?” he asked, and now he couldn’t help laughing.

“No, you’re an idiot,” Sophie replied, clearly irritated, and nudged him back. “It’s not me I’m thinking about—it’s them,” she continued, nodding at the other two. “Yes, sorry, but am I allowed to call you older when you’re retired?”

The wife, who in the meantime had picked up a couple of the chicks in her hands and turned toward Sophie, shook her head and smiled. “No, they’re not dangerous and they’re not sick, but if you want to be sure to avoid salmonella, it’s a good idea not to eat the eggs raw.”

She held the chicks up toward Sophie—one golden, one almost black. “Do you want to hold them? They certainly won’t do anything.”

Sophie held out her hands, still a bit cautiously, until she felt their soft down. Then she thawed completely and forgot all about the aggressive hen.

Harold was given a chick too. He lifted it up to his cheek and made a little peeping sound that almost could have passed for one of its siblings.

“Would you like your payment in chicks?” the man asked with a smile and a wink to his wife. “I think we can afford to give you all five—and a couple of roosters on top of that.”

Harold answered with a loud laugh and handed the chick back to the wife. “There’s probably too little meat on them for that price,” he said. “But speaking of roosters, those are really the ones we’re supposed to be looking at.”

The Rooster Chorus

The chicks were placed back in the nesting box, and the little group left the chicken run. The man went first and pointed toward some tall trees.

“Their enclosure is over there behind the trees. Strange we haven’t heard them yet—they usually make themselves heard.”

Before he had finished the sentence, a piercing cock-a-doodle-doo rang out. Then another—and before they reached the enclosure... an entire chorus.

The singers turned out to be fifteen roosters, about twice the size of the hens. Three were red, seven were white with red combs, and the last five were a mix of all kinds of colors. A rather impressive sight.

Sophie hung a bit back. If a hen could peck that hard, what might an animal that big decide to do?

The man saw her reaction and tried to reassure her. “They look a bit intimidating, but they absolutely won’t do anything. They fight among themselves—you’ve probably heard of cockfights—but with us they’re completely harmless.”

Harold had stepped right up to the fence to study them closely. “So they’re out here completely without hens?” he asked the man.

“Yes. They’d go completely crazy if a hen came anywhere near—especially if she was broody,” the man replied, taking a step toward the gate.

“Broody—what’s that?” Sophie asked, her expression a bit suspicious.

“A hen that wants to sit on eggs,” Harold answered with a mischievous smile. “So if there’s anything to what you said earlier, you’d better be a little careful.”

The man laughed again, while the wife signaled that he should stop. “Oh, knock it off, you two. The girl will end up terrified of being out in the country.”

“Okay, Sophie, sorry—but it was just sitting right there,” Harold said with an apologetic look. “We’ll behave. And it was the roosters we were supposed to talk about. And I have to say, they’re beautiful and pretty impressive. I can understand why you don’t just get rid of them, just like that.”

“Yes, we’re very torn about it,” the man continued, turning his eyes toward his wife. “Neither of us likes the idea that they should be slaughtered—and especially not that we should do it. And we wouldn’t be able to eat them either.”

“No, that wasn’t the point of the chicks,” his wife added, “but they don’t stay small and cute—we found that out.”

“You can use them for cockfighting,” Sophie cut in. She was researching something online. “It says here that it’s a very popular sport in some countries, and that an aggressive rooster can easily be worth several hundred dollars. And your breed is pretty aggressive—I can personally attest to that.”

The other three exchanged glances, unsure whether to take her suggestion seriously.

Harold felt responsible for steering the conversation back to something more relevant. “Good, Sophie, thank you for the suggestion. That’s probably not very applicable here. Cockfighting is illegal in our countries. Try to find something better.”

Three Ways to See a Rooster

Turning to the couple, Harold continued: “Really, there are probably three options, which again have to do with your self-understanding and your idea of living out here in the country. There are three scenarios—or domains, as Sophie likes to call them. As I see it—and please correct me if I’m wrong—you can choose to look at the roosters the way you would if you’d lived in the country your whole life. In that domain, you think in everyday production, where different things have to be useful. The hens lay eggs and produce chicks, but roosters easily become surplus, because you only need one or two in the chicken run. The rest are naturally slaughtered. They end up in the pot, and you enjoy them on a festive occasion.”

Harold lifted his eyes to see if the others were with him. From the husband’s and wife’s expressions, he could tell this wasn’t the domain they saw themselves in. Sophie was absorbed in her phone.

“The next option is that you see the chickens purely as pets and egg producers. In that domain, the roosters also become surplus, but you don’t have to eat them. You could, for example, give them away. Then you don’t know what happens to them. It’s up to others to choose. And finally the third option, which we might call the lifestyle domain. Here

the chickens play an important role in your dreams and in your identity. In that domain, you can enjoy both the chicks and the eggs, and then you keep the roosters—mostly because they're part of the package, and you don't want to end up ruining your dream by having to kill them for fear of becoming cynical. Then you adjust the number of chicks to how many roosters you feel you can keep."

Harold paused and waited for their reaction.

The couple looked at each other and nodded cautiously, as if they knew the options well and perhaps even knew the answer, but still hadn't quite gotten it to land.

The Lifestyle Domain

The convincing argument, it turned out, came from an unexpected direction—from Sophie's phone.

"Listen to this," she cut in with her usual eagerness when she'd consulted ChatGPT. "We've overlooked something! Do you realize that a rooster poops double!"

She looked up at the other three, who all looked like question marks.

"Manure," she said, as if she were setting off a bomb. "The roosters produce twice as much manure as a hen. The finest compost, it says. And you care a lot about your garden and your organic cycle and all that. Here's your answer—for seven hundred dollars."

She smiled to herself at how neatly she'd tied the answer to the fee she and Harold were supposed to receive for the consultation.

The couple looked at each other, and a smile appeared on the wife's face. "You really can do something with that thing," she said, nodding toward Sophie's phone. "I have to say. And I'm thinking your answer is probably worth the seven hundred dollars. What do you say?" The question was directed at her husband.

"Yes, I probably wouldn't have thought of that, but it's probably true. And actually my biggest dream with the chickens was that they would produce manure. So that fits perfectly."

Sophie lit up. "And then you get a bonus on top—no extra charge. You have to give the roosters names!"

Neither of them said anything, but they looked like question marks again.

"If you're in the production domain, it's important that you don't get personally involved with the animals. They're going to be slaughtered, and you feel awful if you've formed a bond with them. But with you it's the opposite: you're in the lifestyle domain, and here it's precisely about creating relationships with everyone, so daily life with them has meaning."

She looked up again and noticed Harold nodding in approval. It warmed her from the inside.

"Then we'll say thank you very much," the man said as they walked over toward the Volvo. "And if you happen to come through here again, you're always welcome to stop in. By the way, I once had one of those," he added, nodding toward the Volvo. "It was a wonderful car... but that must be thirty or forty years ago by now."

Harold nodded. "Yes, they do say old love doesn't rust. She's an expensive lady when it comes to repairs and gas, but she belongs in my lifestyle domain."

Harold winked at Sophie, who didn't always understand his special relationship with the car. Maybe it needed to be explained this way.

The Volvo was still in a good mood, and the praise had only improved it further. It coughed once out of old habit and then roared to life. They waved goodbye and see-you-soon, and then they were quickly back out on the country road.

The Double-Bed Domain

Back at the office, the mood was relaxed after the success. Sophie had thrown her legs up on the desk and opened one of her favorite bags of licorice. She took a handful and tossed the bag over to Harold, who caught it neatly.

"Honestly, I thought they'd be more... country," she said with her mouth full. "There wasn't any smell at all. And there weren't any flies either."

Harold was at the coffee machine again, so he had his back to her. "Where were there flies?" he asked, clearly preoccupied with something else.

"In the country," Sophie repeated. "This was a light version of country."

"They were country at heart," Harold called back, now that he'd started the coffee. "Maybe they just didn't have it in their hands."

Sophie smiled. "It's not going to be easy to chop the heads off Christian and Søren—or whatever they decide to call the roosters. They'll probably give them their grandchildren's names."

Harold smiled again. "Yes, that bonus hit the mark. You were sharp today, all in all. I mean, aside from your fight with the hen... and your suggestion about cockfighting. That was close to going wrong."

Sophie tilted her head from side to side. "Sure, sure—but I tried. You can't hit every time. And I actually really liked the chicks... for the two minutes it lasted. But their mother... I still hate her."

"Yes, you've still got a little way to go before you become a farm girl," Harold went on.

Sophie nodded that she agreed. "But the domains were a hit! You picked that up fast. I bet you're going to use it against me, too. I can totally see that happening."

The smile at the corner of Harold's mouth suggested he already had a few comparisons ready.

"But..." Sophie continued, switching tracks. "Already tomorrow there's a new assignment, and... yes, it could also be about a domain... the bedroom—or more precisely: the double-bed domain."

She lifted her gaze and winked at Harold. "Do you think you're ready for that?"

At first Harold looked confused, then he caught the joke. "You really caught me off guard there. But you'll have to explain a little more if I'm not supposed to assume the worst."

"Life in the sheets"—that's another clue," Sophie said, with the same slightly secretive expression.

“What?” Harold exclaimed. “That’s a new side of my boss I’m seeing today.”

“Well, you can’t blow it all at once,” Sophie went on.

Harold furrowed his brow. *She’s really going for it today*, he thought. *I didn’t see that side coming.*

“Okay. But jokes aside, Harold, before you get completely dizzy from too many hormones. We’re visiting a family with both dogs and cats and... fleas. Yes, they’ve found fleas in the bed. That’s where the dog is buried!”

She delivered that last bit in the same joking tone.

“Now I understand,” Harold said, clearly relieved. “And by the way, that sounds disgusting! I’m not taking any of those animals home with me!”

“Well then you’ll have to stay away from the bed,” Sophie laughed. “From... the double-bed domain.”

Now Harold couldn’t hold it in anymore; he almost had a laughing fit—and even got coffee down the wrong pipe. When he could breathe again, he managed to choke out the words: “You’re brilliant today, Sophie!”

Sophie beamed and responded by shoving another handful of licorice into her mouth, which also made her both cough and laugh at the same time.

“Anyway—see you here at nine sharp,” she mumbled once she was herself again. “Then we’ll see if we can get something fun out of it.”

Harold nodded and stood up with his bag under his arm. “I’ll be here already at eight. There’s something I need to take care of that doesn’t work so well at home.”

“Sorry, but now I’m curious,” Sophie said. “What on earth can you do here and not at home? Does it have something to do with the coffee machine?”

Harold shook his head a little, as if he didn’t really want to go into it. “It’s some papers for the tax office and a few different bills I need to pay. It’s easier here, when it’s quiet.”

Sophie nodded approvingly. "Okay, I get it. Even you have to be administrative once in a while."

"Not by choice," Harold said, taking a few steps toward the door. "But it has to be done."

Sophie nodded and raised her hand in goodbye.

Fleas in the Bed

The Rain at the Office

Harold jolted when the door swung open and Sophie hurried in. She wrestled a bit to get the umbrella inside and shut the door quickly behind her, as if someone were chasing her.

Only now did Harold really notice how violent the rainstorm had become. It had been overcast when he arrived about an hour ago, but now the rain was pouring down.

“Ugh, what weather,” Sophie said as she battled the umbrella. “I think it’s going to thunder.”

“You’re early too—it’s only eight,” Harold said from behind the papers that covered the entire table.

“Fitness was closed. I forgot they were renovating and swapping out the machines.” She had won the fight with the umbrella and, for the first time, looked straight at Harold. “What is going on!” she burst out, her face pure astonishment. “Are you collecting stamps?”

Shame Has to Become Action

“N-no... no,” Harold managed. He looked out over the desk as if he might find an explanation there for what was obvious to anyone: piles of envelopes, most of them unopened. “No, it’s just... some administrative stuff I need to get under control,” he said, with little conviction in his voice.

“Well I’ll be damned!” Sophie exclaimed. She sounded genuinely surprised—if not outright skeptical. She took a couple of steps toward the

mess on the table and let her gaze slide from stack to stack and then onto Harold.

Then she smiled. "What is going on here? Have I uncovered my 'perfect' colleague with a mess in his paperwork?" Her smile shifted into something triumphant.

Harold looked slightly off to the side to avoid eye contact. There wasn't much to say—or apologize for. The windowed envelopes spoke their own language.

Before Harold could come up with a suitable defense, Sophie spotted the box behind him. It was a large moving box standing open, and from where she was, she couldn't see what was inside. Quickly she stepped around the desk toward it, but Harold—woken from his apathy—got up faster than she did and blocked her path.

"It's private!" he said, just before Sophie gave him a small shove, moved him aside, and now had a clear view into the box.

"More envelopes? Did you break into the National Archives, or rob a mail truck?"

Harold sank back into his chair, accepting that the battle was lost.

Sophie knelt by the box and picked up a stack of envelopes. She skimmed them: "The tax agency, the electric company, the bank..." She turned her head and looked at Harold. "Looks like you're behind on your bills, my friend!"

Harold stared ahead and nodded quietly, then confessed in a low voice, "You weren't supposed to see them. I was hoping to be finished before you got here."

"Finished?" Sophie said, bewildered. "You've barely even started, as far as I can see."

"No," Harold replied, with a little more strength in his voice. "Administration has never been my strong suit. It's... a dark chapter. I can't make myself do it. Look at all those envelopes. Just getting them opened is a huge hurdle for me. I've only opened two since I got here an hour ago, and I doubt there'll be any more."

Sophie had stood up and found her own office chair. Her expression had changed. She was no longer triumphant, as if she'd uncovered a serious secret. Now she looked thoughtful.

"We all have weak sides (wait until you find out about mine), and it's natural to close your eyes to them. And you—well, you've got a thing with authorities and public agencies, Harold. When I think about it, it makes perfect sense. You've just been good at hiding it," she smiled, "and it's not exactly a crime... unless you're trying to run away from debtor's prison." She smiled again, enjoying her own humor, then turned her gaze back to Harold and continued with a settled expression: "You have to fight, Harold. Find your inner strength and grab the problem instead of sinking into being a victim. You have to turn shame into action!" Sophie paused and tasted her newly coined phrase. It sounded good, so she repeated it with emphasis: "Shame has to be turned into action!"

Sophie looked at Harold. Was he even with her? She'd gotten caught up in her own monologue and had almost forgotten he was there.

Harold had gotten up and was making a cup of coffee. Maybe he was hiding a little by turning his back to her. Sophie let it be.

On his way back to the table and the envelope mess, coffee cup in hand—maybe that was what gave him strength—Harold managed to regain his balance. "Thank you, Sophie, for your concern. I'm sorry if I've disappointed you. I'll get this under control... myself."

"I doubt you will, Harold, but you've taken the first step in the fight against shame... and that's openness. Now I know your little secret and weakness too, so you don't have to use all your energy hiding it. You can use your strength for action. You can do something about it. Create change."

Sophie took a breath and lifted her eyes from the screen. Only then did Harold realize that the proclaiming words were ones she'd gotten from ChatGBT. She looked straight at him and said solemnly: "I will give you my full support. You have to go through it yourself, but I'd like to assist you with help and encouragement. And administration—what you call those envelopes—is actually one of my strengths."

For the first time, a genuine smile appeared on Harold's face. "Thank you, Sophie," he began in the same solemn tone. "All you need is an even fancier teleprompter, and you could become a politician—or at least a high-ranking civil servant."

Sophie smiled back. She was well aware that Harold also knew her little secret... her dependence on the chat, and that realization brought their balance sheet back into line.

She opened a drawer, found the bag of licorice, took a small handful, and tossed the bag in Harold's direction.

Parking-Attendant Paranoia

The Volvo was parked in a space with white markings outside the local supermarket. It was quiet. Maybe because of the rain, which now fell calmly but steadily. A single customer hurried out with a shopping cart. She avoided the worst puddles and reached shelter under the canopy by the carts.

"Is it here?" Sophie asked, fumbling for the umbrella in the backseat.

"Yes, there should be a stairwell behind the store, but it's easiest to park here... and it's free," he smiled.

"But you don't pay parking tickets anyway, do you?" Sophie joked, thinking of the cardboard box back at the office. She hadn't seen any late notices from parking companies, but she guessed they were in there.

Harold shot her a look with his eyes turned toward the ceiling and signaled that the scene had shifted.

They got out and ran toward the customer with the shopping cart and the shelter. It was a good pit stop on the way to the entrance.

That was when Harold spotted a small man in rain gear and rubber boots, fully dressed for the weather. He had a phone-like device in his hand and was headed straight for the Volvo.

"A parking attendant," flashed through Harold's mind, and he went on alert immediately. "One second," he said to Sophie, pointing at the man in the rain-uniform.

Harold braved the rain and ran back to the car. The man was already taking pictures. "Hey—wait!" Harold shouted.

The man turned and smiled. "You don't see one of those every day!" he said, nodding toward the Volvo.

"No, there aren't many left," Harold replied, already preparing himself to talk his way out of a ticket.

"I'm just going to take a couple pictures and note the license plate, if that's okay?"

"Yeah, but... aren't you not allowed to park here? I'm a visitor," Harold began.

"I think you can," the man said kindly. "I park over there myself," he added, pointing toward the other row of spaces across from them.

"But... aren't you an attendant?" Harold blurted out.

"No," the man said, smiling. "I used to be a proctor once—that's as close as I get. But classic cars are my passion."

Harold ran back and had to explain himself to Sophie.

"You've got parking-attendant paranoia too," she laughed. "But that probably falls under the same diagnosis."

By now Harold was soaked through and not in the mood for more jokes. He left the shelter and headed straight for the supermarket entrance, where the elevator was supposed to be. Sophie followed under the umbrella.

She pressed the button for the fifth floor and folded the umbrella down. She didn't comment on Harold's wet clothes.

The Apartment with Fleas

The nameplate by the door listed no fewer than seven names. The last one was Max, and Sophie guessed it was a dog. And sure enough: the door opened, and a small poodle burst out first, eager to greet the visitors. Behind the dog, inside the doorway, stood the mother, waving the consultants in eagerly, as if no one should see them.

Sophie stopped and pulled a pair of yellow rubber gloves from her bag. They turned out to be size XL, far too big for her slender hand.

The mother didn't offer her hand. But in the entryway, they were met by the man of the house, who held his hand out and was met by the

oversized rubber glove. Sophie apologized, citing the circumstances, and the man nodded both understandingly and not understanding at all.

In the living room, four children were piled together in front of the TV, and Max had found his favorite spot on top of the smallest of them.

Harold was offered an armchair, while Sophie made it clear that she preferred to stand... given the circumstances.

"Would you like to borrow something dry?" the mother asked Harold, who was still dripping. "My husband has a tracksuit—I think it would fit."

"Yes, please," Harold managed to say—until he caught Sophie's gestures and facial expression. "No, I think I'll be fine, thanks," he corrected himself.

"You've got lice and fleas," Sophie declared in a loud voice, almost drowning out the TV.

The mother shook her head and put a finger to her lips as she pointed at one of the children in the pile on the floor. In a faint voice she said, "The neighbor. She doesn't live here—next door."

Sophie understood that a household invasion wasn't something you talked about openly. That explains a lot, she thought.

"And we don't have lice... only fleas," the mother corrected her.

The man shook his head at that. "We don't really know, but we think it's only fleas... and only a few."

"You don't want to make it worse than it is," the wife chimed in, smiling for the first time.

Sophie smiled politely again before continuing. "And where are the parasites? Was it in the double bed?"

The man smiled awkwardly and turned his eyes to his wife. "Did you tell them that?"

She nodded. "Yes. When I wrote the email, I'd just found five hopping around, so I wrote it exactly as it was."

"Well, we don't want to make it worse than it is," the man repeated his wife's words from before. "The double bed... that sounds intense."

Both parents had lowered their voices to almost a whisper, and the sound from the TV threatened to take over.

“Where do they come from?” Sophie continued, deliberately turning up her volume. One of the children turned their head and made a face that clearly said the adults ought to keep it down.

“We don’t know,” the wife answered. “There are lots of possibilities: from school, the dog, my husband’s work, or the used couch.”

“Yes—the one we bought at a flea market,” the man added with a hidden smile.

“Sometimes you get what you pay for,” Sophie commented dryly. “But sure, there are plenty of possibilities we could explore further.” She was already holding her phone, ready to ask the chat.

“Do you want to see the double bed?” the man asked, a little helplessly.

“No thank you,” Harold said, giving him a calming pat on the arm. “We’re not pest control people, exactly. We’re trying to find the cause of the problem and find a path—or a method—forward that you can use.”

The man nodded, understanding. He was clearly tired of this circus and didn’t really know which leg to stand on.

Sophie was having trouble consulting the chat with the rubber gloves on. The touchscreen didn’t work through the coating. So she carefully pulled one glove off and, without thinking about the possible consequences, set it on the armrest of the couch.

She began reading aloud: “It says flea control is done with a fine-tooth comb and a special shampoo. In serious cases it may be necessary to burn upholstered furniture like couches and beds—and also rugs. And let me see... it’ll make the process easier if the hair is cut short.”

“I’m not shaving my head,” one of the children said—clearly having heard what the adults were talking about.

“Easy, easy,” the mother soothed her daughter. “No one here is getting shaved.”

The Secret Weapon of the Fleas

Harold, who until now had kept a low profile, turned to the father and asked if it was okay to turn off the TV.

The father nodded and looked around for the remote. It was on the dining table, and he reached for it. Sophie had followed his movement

and stopped his hand before it reached its target. "There," she whispered, pointing at the remote. "It's infected."

The father stepped closer and bent down to look.

The commotion had caught Max's attention, and before anyone could react, he sprang up and shoved the remote with his paws.

"It jumped!" Sophie cried, taking a step back.

"Yeah, sorry—he's not that well trained," the father apologized. "Max, will you calm down now."

"No... the flea!" Sophie burst out. "It jumped, and I'm almost sure it jumped onto you," she said to the mother, who had come closer. "In your hair."

"Where?" the mother exclaimed, dipping her head down toward her husband so he could look.

"Maybe there," he said, pointing.

Sophie—now wearing the rubber gloves again—bent down and guided one of the oversized gloves toward where the man was pointing.

"Yes, it's there. Bring some shampoo, if you have any," she said, intensely focused.

Several of the children had stood up and moved in close to watch. Sophie tried to keep them back with her other hand. With the yellow glove on, it looked quite intimidating.

"Now it flew!" the youngest cried, having wedged herself between Sophie and her mother. "Look, it's flying over there!" She pointed—and all anyone saw was a small fly.

There was a brief second of silence as everyone processed what had just happened. They'd all been swept up in the hysteria, which turned out to be a false alarm.

"But since we're all standing here, I'd like to say something." It was Harold, breaking the awkward silence.

"To me it sounds like you haven't really talked together about the little guys... I mean the fleas. What do you actually know about them? What kind of animals they are?"

"They itch," the youngest replied, demonstratively scratching at her hair. "And we're not allowed to tell anyone about them."

“And do you know why they itch?” Harold asked.

The girl looked as if she was thinking hard before answering. “I think it’s with their legs. They have a lot of them.”

“No,” the oldest said. “They bite.”

“You’re actually both right,” Harold said, smiling approvingly. “They irritate you when they move around, and they do bite—because they suck blood.”

“Like mosquitoes?” the youngest suggested.

“Yes, that’s actually a good comparison. They do the same thing as mosquitoes. But they can’t fly, so they crawl. And they’re good at hiding,” Harold went on. “They like warm places best—and warmth from people—so they often live in couches and beds.”

“They’re gross,” one of the other siblings said.

“Yes, we think so—and that’s actually their secret weapon. We think it’s gross and embarrassing, so we don’t talk about it. We pretend nothing’s happening, and they like that. Then they can really settle in and lay lots of eggs without being disturbed.” Harold paused and looked up.

“Yeah, we’re not allowed to tell anyone we have them... for Dad—and mostly Mom,” the youngest cut in again.

“For your own sake,” the mother cut in. “What do you think other people will do if they know you have something like that? Do you think they’ll invite you to a birthday party or have you over to play? I don’t think so. So we don’t talk about it.”

“And that’s exactly what the fleas like,” Harold put in. “They cheer and throw a party when they hear they can live in peace and quiet. I’m sorry,” he said to the children’s mother, “but they don’t go away because of that.”

“So what should we do?” the father’s slightly deep voice came from behind them. “I can understand that my wife is afraid the kids will be left out and maybe bullied.”

“And then you’ll also live with the little bloodsuckers taking over your double bed. Now they’re the ones having a cozy time, not you.” It was Sophie, trying to bring the problem into focus.

“No, no,” the man smiled a little sheepishly. “I’d like that to change.”

“Good,” Harold took over in a fairly firm tone. “Then you do something new today! You open the box with the secrets and all the disgusting stuff and dump it out on the floor. No more silence and shame. You’ve spent all your energy hiding it away and avoiding talking about it. Now it’s got to stop. You have to turn your shame into action!”

A snicker came from Sophie. The others didn’t understand what was funny. They thought it was very serious. But maybe she was a little strange.

Harold answered her with a blink and a small, crooked smile when no one else was looking. He’d seen the parallel to their talk that morning too. It was his way of showing he’d gotten the lesson without losing face.

“So what do we do?” the father asked—wanting to see a change, especially in the double bed.

“Listen,” Sophie said, looking down at her phone. “Point one: you tell everyone you know about the fleas. No more secrets and shame.”

“Everyone?” the youngest cut in again. “I’m not telling Ann in my class, because she never tells me her secrets.”

“Totally fine. Then just tell one or two. What matters is that the secret is dissolved and it loses its power,” Harold corrected.

“So who are you going to tell about the fleas?” Sophie asked the room. She’d shifted into action mode.

The youngest was first off the mark: “I’ll tell my teacher. Then she’ll probably tell the whole class... and maybe the parents.” The girl smiled, already looking forward to sharing the news. She searched her mother’s face for a reaction and was a little disappointed by her serious expression.

“I’m lucky—I’m outside this. I don’t have to say anything,” one of the girls said.

Sophie looked a little confused and glanced back and forth between the parents, trying to find the logic.

“Alice is our neighbor,” the father explained, “so that also guarantees a good spread in the building and... the supermarket.” The last remark was delivered with obvious irony.

“And you?” Sophie continued, looking at the mother. “Who are you going to tell?”

“My tapeworm,” the mother replied, attempting a smile.

“What—Mom, do you have worms too?” the youngest burst out, a little overwhelmed.

“No, sweetheart, that’s just something people say when they mean they need to think for a moment and maybe feel the task is too hard. Who do you think I should tell?”

“Your boss, obviously. I’m sure she likes animals—she always pets Max,” the youngest answered without hesitation.

“Hmmm... maybe,” the mother said. “I wonder if that wouldn’t help me get a work-from-home setup a few days a week.”

Sophie clapped her hands. “You’re doing great—and now you’re also starting to see what you gain by breaking the secret. Before the week is over, you’ll be popular and known as the family that won’t give their fleas a moment’s peace.”

Around the room, people nodded and smiled. So far, so good.

“But the fun doesn’t stop here. You still have to do the work. Every single flea has to be caught and evicted—with no chance of coming back.” Sophie looked up from her phone and asked for suggestions about what they could do.

“I’m not shaving my head,” one of the kids repeated.

“And burning the furniture sounds extreme,” the father added.

“Maybe you could train Max to track them down,” the neighbor girl suggested. “Some dogs can follow blood trails, and fleas are full of blood... if they’ve eaten, that is.”

The parents nodded politely. It was a well-thought-out idea, but still probably a bit far-fetched and... gross.

Chemical War

Harold had taken a time-out, but now he was ready again. “Excuse me. I can hear you want a solution that’s realistic—and my experience tells me there’s only one thing that works against fleas... poison!”

“I actually think you’re right,” Sophie backed him up. “Poison wipes them out!”

“But what about us?” the youngest voice asked, with a certain anxiety. “Do we get wiped out too?”

“Only if fleas live on you,” Sophie answered without compassion. “The idea is that their habitats get sprayed, so...”

The room fell a little quiet after that remark. The first point—making the secret known—had felt manageable. But now it all suddenly seemed pretty hopeless. How were they supposed to get rid of the animals without getting wiped out themselves?

The father broke the silence. “I’ve got it—at least part of it. Listen. This apartment needs to be sprayed with poison—everywhere: clothes, rugs, furniture, and yes, even our bed. But... we won’t be here while it happens. What do you say?” He looked at the two consultants to see if they would give a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down.

“Brilliant,” Sophie blurted out. “The whole apartment could sit there and seethe and bubble for a week, until there wasn’t the slightest chance of survival for even the tiniest little critter. Like in a sci-fi movie where toxic gas and lava or nuclear weapons have destroyed all life, and then the heroes come back and slowly build a new existence in the ruins.”

“Exactly, Sophie! That’s precisely what this family hopes will happen.” Harold couldn’t control his irritation at Sophie’s doomsday picture. “Look at their faces. They’ve lost all hope after your prophecy.”

“I actually thought her story was funny,” the youngest said, smiling.

“Me too,” the oldest chimed in. “It sounds pretty awesome. A chemical war against the bloodsuckers.”

Harold couldn’t help smiling and gave his partner an acknowledging nod. So she can do that, he thought.

“But while the chemical annihilation war is going on—where will you hide?” Harold continued, following Sophie’s track.

“On another planet, obviously,” the youngest replied, with a look that let Harold know he didn’t know anything at all.

“And if I translate planet into our time and language, it could mean a vacation spot,” the father suggested.

“Yes!” Sophie burst out again. “You’ve got it! Out comes the fine-tooth comb and shampoo, and maybe a trip to the sauna—and then it’s good-bye to the apartment for a week while the chemical war rages. Damn, you’re good. When can you get moving?”

“Next week. It’s winter break. So why not?” the father continued, carried along by Sophie’s high spirits.

“But the apartment...” the mother cut in. “Who’s going to take care of the fleas?”

“It sounds like you want someone to look after them while you’re away. You mean someone to exterminate them?” Sophie looked a little serious at the mother as she spoke.

“Of course,” the mother replied. “And I think I’ll leave my tapeworm here too.”

Harold gave a slightly forced laugh. It was important to support the mother in her rather fragile intention.

“Good!” Sophie concluded. “This week, the curse of the secret gets broken, and next week you go far away... without fleas, while this little hut gets cleaned of every last bug. Sounds good. And to head off the next question: here’s the number for a professional company in town that really knows flea extermination. I’ll send the contact info right now.”

“What about me?” the neighbor girl asked, a little lost. “I mean, when you go on vacation... can I come too?”

The parents looked at each other. They were used to having the girl half-living with them.

“On one condition,” the father said, “that you tell your friends you have fleas too.”

At first the girl looked confused. What just happened here? Then she understood and smiled... and nodded. “It’s a deal.”

Breaking the Flea Dynasty

Now that everything seemed to be falling into place and the fleas’ days were numbered, the mother slipped in a small remark. “Now that we have this plan, do we really have to tell anyone about the fleas? It doesn’t make any real difference when they’ll disappear anyway.”

“Yes, it absolutely does,” Sophie replied in a serious tone. “It’s the openness about your situation that breaks the power of the flea dynasty. Otherwise, they’ll leave you with a sense of shame that would make you more vulnerable in the future. When a new challenge shows up—and they do—you would naturally try to ignore the threat with silence and secrets. This is much bigger. It’s a pattern you’re breaking. So... go out and tell it!”

Harold couldn’t agree more, so he repeated the motto in a slightly new version: “When you break the power of the secret, you get your energy back to create change.”

“That’s it, Harold! You’re putting the trump card on the table with your own experience. That’s exactly what they need!” Sophie applauded.

“Don’t you think we’re just about at the finish line with this assignment?” Harold continued. “I could really use some dry clothes.”

“Yes, we are. So we’ll say thank you for your engagement with the assignment, and wish you a good vacation.” Sophie nodded to each of them in turn and headed for the entryway. “Can I put my gloves here on the dresser?” she asked on her way out.

“Yes, please,” the mother answered, following behind.

Sophie pulled off the XL gloves, set them down, and walked toward the door. Out of the gloves hopped a couple of black guys... without wings... but apparently no one saw it.

No More Tickets

The rain had stopped. It had left the parking lot covered in big puddles everywhere, so it was hard to make it across to the cars with dry shoes.

Harold gave it a try—hopping neatly from puddle to puddle—and suddenly found himself in front of a man in a yellow rain suit who was clearly about to take a picture of the Volvo’s license plate.

“Hey—no, stop!” Harold almost shouted at the parking attendant. “Can’t you see it’s a classic? It’s on display here!”

The attendant looked genuinely surprised and slipped his phone into his bag. “Well then, excuse me,” he replied. “It’s a really beautiful car, by the way.”

Harold nodded and smiled again. He signaled that he was in a hurry and hurried into the driver's seat.

The Volvo coughed and sputtered. Rainy weather wasn't its favorite.

Harold tried several times, but it didn't help. He rolled down the window and signaled to the attendant. "Could you give it a little push backward?"

The attendant nodded and hurried around to the front, putting all his strength into it. The Volvo rolled backward, and Harold tried again. Two coughs—and then it revved up.

Harold shouted thanks to the attendant and backed over to the opposite side, where Sophie had been watching the whole scene. She jumped in, and off they went.

"Respect!" was her comment to Harold once they were out on the main road and the attendant was no longer in sight. "What energy you've got. That parking attendant didn't stand a chance!"

Harold smiled with satisfaction. "No more tickets for the two of us," he said, patting the Volvo on the steering wheel. "Sorry, my friend," he continued, addressing his old companion, "now it's over—no more being ashamed of your little quirks. And no more parking tickets."

"That sounds good," Sophie agreed. "It's a new era!"

Harold nodded and pressed the horn.

"But before the party gets too wild," Sophie cut in, "we're missing one important thing."

"And that is?" Harold asked, giving her a curious look.

"You broke the curse of the secret that's hanging over your box of envelopes... more or less voluntarily," and it's obviously given you energy. But... how are you going to take the next step? The box is still there, and the envelopes don't open themselves."

Harold grew quieter and more inward. He'd forgotten that in the rush of success. After a pause he tried: "I could decide to open one or two now and then. That would at least be a start."

Sophie shook her head. "I don't believe in that strategy, and I'm not going to look at that box for the next several months."

She gave her partner a small, friendly nudge. "I've got a better suggestion."

"Yeah?" Harold answered impatiently.

"You give it a little extra in the families next week, and then you leave the envelopes to me. It's called division of labor. I actually like that kind of administrative cleanup. And I promise I'll keep quiet about what I find. It stays between the two of us. What do you say?"

Harold lifted his eyebrows and made a small head movement. He hadn't seen that coming.

"Isn't that kind of cheating? Shouldn't I do it myself?" he asked, keeping his eyes on the road.

"Maybe," Sophie replied thoughtfully, "but I'm afraid the envelopes, in your world, have become like the fleas in that family—and that there's a risk you'll go down with them when they get exterminated... you know, mentally."

Harold nodded calmly. She had a point. It would be unbearably hard for him to clean up that box—if it was even possible for him to do it and survive.

"It's a deal, Sophie. Next week. Imagine if it works. And thank you." Harold straightened a little. He could already feel the relief—and that new times were on the way.

What Is Worth Keeping

Under the car

There was only room for one arm.

Harold lay on his back under the Volvo with his left shoulder pressed against the cold asphalt. His right arm was wedged up between the oil pan and the exhaust pipe, his fingers trying to find the bolt that ought to give but still hadn't.

He blew air out through his nose.

"Most things can be taken apart," he muttered to himself.

The car wasn't pretty anymore. The paint had gone dull, and there were small scratches along the rear fender where branches had brushed against it over the years. But it started every morning. And it had never left him.

That was more than you could say about a lot of other things.

He turned his wrist slightly, and the bolt gave a small crack. Not much. But enough.

A bicycle braked sharply on the gravel.

"Are you in there, or did the car swallow you?"

Sophie's voice came before she did. She had already parked the bike and now stood with her hands on her hips, looking at the sight of two legs sticking out from under the blue Volvo.

"I'm here," said Harold. "It just has a little resistance."

"So do you," she replied dryly, bending down to look under the car. "We have to be at the Zoo at ten."

"I know."

He rolled halfway out so he could see her. She was wearing the red hoodie and holding a brochure.

"They wrote again," she said. "The director. They'd like us to start with a couple of specific cases. One with the monkeys. And then there's something about an elephant."

"An elephant?"

"Yeah. It sounds bigger."

She smiled in that way that meant she was already seeing the possibilities.

Harold sat up and wiped his hands on a rag. He glanced briefly at the car, as if it should hear it too.

"It's a big client," Sophie continued. "If this works, it could open up something completely different."

"Mm."

She handed him the brochure. On the front was an aerial photo of the grounds and a line about "the experience space of the future."

"They want documentation," she said. "Measurable improvements. Interaction, well-being, that kind of thing."

Harold nodded slowly.

"Measuring well-being," he said. "That sounds manageable."

"You know what I mean."

She straightened up and looked at the car.

"We can't keep showing up in that thing if we're moving up to that league."

He let his gaze follow hers out toward the paint that had lost its shine.

"It runs."

"It's not just about running," she said. "It's about signal value."

He smiled faintly.

"It signals that we're here."

"It signals something else too."

He didn't answer right away. Instead, he crawled back under the car and tightened the bolt the rest of the way.

"Most things can be repaired," he said.

She shook her head, half irritated, half amused.

"You can't repair everything."

"No," he said calmly. "But you can try."

There was a moment of silence. Just the sound of tools being put back in the box.

Sophie looked at the brochure again.

"They say the first case is less serious," she said. "Something about a zookeeper who feels the monkeys act differently when there's an audience."

"They probably do."

"Management doesn't take it that seriously. They think it's relational."

"It is," said Harold, rolling all the way out from under the car. "Most things are relational."

She looked at him.

"You already sound engaged."

"I like animals."

"It's not the animals who called."

"No."

He stood up and closed the hood with a soft click.

"But someone did."

She shrugged.

"I just think we need to be sharp. If we do this right, it could change things for us."

"For us?" he asked.

"For the company."

She adjusted her glasses and looked out over the industrial lot, quiet in the late-morning sun.

"We need to move forward," she said.

Harold looked at the car again.

It stood there. Not impressive. Not new. Just solid.

"It's carried me through most things," he said.

Sophie didn't answer. She picked up the bike and began locking it.

"Shall we?" she said.

He took the keys and opened the door. The seat creaked as he got in.

The engine started on the first try.

Sophie got in beside him and put the brochure in the glove compartment.

“The Zoo,” she said.

He nodded and put the car in gear.

They drove out of the parking lot, and in the side mirror the industrial building grew smaller.

The Volvo hummed steadily.

Sophie looked ahead.

Harold drove.

Neither of them said anything, but between them the question was already there:

What do you choose to repair—and what do you choose to replace?

The car kept going.

And up ahead, the monkeys were waiting.

In line

There was already a line.

A long, living, noisy line of jackets, backpacks, and high-pitched anticipation. A school class stood gathered like a colorful block in front of the ticket windows, and a teacher in a yellow vest was trying to count heads without losing patience.

Sophie stopped for a moment and assessed the situation.

“We don’t need to stand here,” she said calmly.

Harold looked at her. “No?”

“We’re not the audience.”

She straightened up, took a couple of steps forward, and headed straight for the entrance.

A ticket attendant in a blue jacket, scanner in hand, looked up as they approached.

“Excuse me,” Sophie said with a professional smile. “We’re from The Pet Therapist. We’re here as a new partner.”

The attendant blinked.

“As... what?”

"We have an appointment with management," she continued, a little more slowly. "We're meeting with the director."

The attendant looked down at her list.

"It's not on here."

Sophie held his gaze.

"It's new."

"That may be," the attendant said, "but you still need tickets. And the line starts back there."

She pointed behind them—straight at the school class.

Harold couldn't help a faint smile.

Sophie hesitated for a second. Just one.

"Of course," she said, a touch tighter.

They walked back.

The children had already noticed the Volvo in the parking lot and the fact that two adults without kids had tried to cut the line.

"Are you on a field trip too?" a boy in a blue beanie asked.

"We're going to talk to the monkeys," said Harold.

The boy lit up.

"They throw poop!"

"Oliver!" the teacher snapped.

"They do!" he insisted.

A girl next to him turned to Sophie.

"They can laugh at you," she said seriously. "My dad says they can tell if you're nervous."

Sophie raised an eyebrow.

"They can?"

"Yeah," the girl said. "Then they just make it worse."

Harold said nothing. He watched the children talking over each other:

"They jump around when there's a lot of people!"

"They just want attention!"

"They like it when you're loud!"

Sophie looked at him.

"Engagement," she said quietly.

"Energy," he replied.

A boy farther up the line suddenly shouted and made a face at his classmates. The others burst out laughing.

"Look! I'm a monkey!"

The laughter spread in waves.

Harold watched the boy for a moment, standing in the middle of it all, his face glowing.

"It's not the monkeys who called," Sophie said softly.

"No," he said. "But someone wants to be seen."

She turned her gaze back toward the entrance.

The line moved slowly.

Monkeys

The gate clicked shut behind them, and the sound of the city almost disappeared at once. In its place came a different rhythm: children's voices in uneven waves, a peacock screaming somewhere behind a fence, and the faint, sweet smell of damp hay mixed with popcorn.

The paths were wet from the night's rain. Gravel crunched under their shoes.

Sophie walked a step ahead, as if she already knew the way.

"We have ten minutes," she said, checking her phone. "The monkeys are fed at ten. I emailed them yesterday. They wanted us to get our own impression first."

"Mm," said Harold.

He walked a little slower. Read the signs. Stopped for a moment at an enclosure where two small deer stood perfectly still, chewing. A child stood next to him, staring in without saying a word. The child's mother tugged at him.

"Come on, we have to keep moving."

Sophie was already a few steps ahead.

"If this works," she said, "it's a whole different league. They're talking about cross-department collaboration. Communication. Behavior optimization."

She said the words in the same tone she used when talking about training programs: focused, structured, forward.

"This isn't just anyone," she continued. "This could become a reference case."

Harold looked at an old sign with faded text about the history of the grounds. A photo of an elephant from the 1970s was printed in black and white at the bottom.

"A reference to what?" he asked.

"To showing we can handle something bigger," she said. "This isn't a family in a suburb. It's an institution."

He nodded slowly.

A group of children ran past them, the teacher shouting something about staying together, and a couple of pigeons flew up from the path.

Sophie pointed ahead.

"There," she said. "The monkey area."

They could hear it from a distance. Not the monkeys at first. The children.

A shared, electric hum of anticipation.

When they turned the corner, the school class was standing in front of the glass again. Jackets in every color pressed together. Small hands against the window. Knocking.

The monkeys reacted instantly.

One leaped up onto a branch and beat its chest. Another hung upside down, staring straight into the crowd. A third pulled back its lips in an exaggerated grimace.

The children burst out laughing.

"Look! It's looking at me!"

"It's because you're jumping!"

"They like noise!"

The boy from the line stood in the middle of it all, throwing his arms wide.

"I'm their leader!" he shouted.

A monkey copied the movement.

The laughter exploded.

Sophie drew in a deep breath.

"It's completely electric," she said quietly. "Engagement at maximum."

Harold didn't say anything at first.

His gaze slid past the children to a man standing slightly off to the side. Arms crossed. Work clothes with a discreet logo. Face neutral, but eyes alert.

The zookeeper.

He wasn't looking at the monkeys.

He was looking at the children.

And for a moment—almost imperceptibly—he looked at his own reflection in the glass, where monkeys and audience blended together.

"This is where it happens," Sophie said.

"Yeah," said Harold.

But he meant something else.

Meeting Mike

He stood slightly to the side as the children began to drift away. One hand on his belt, the other resting loosely against the fence. Clothes practical before they were neat. A jacket worn at the sleeves.

"Are you the ones?" he asked, stepping forward.

Sophie was ready.

"Sophie," she said, offering her hand. "And this is Harold. We're from The Pet Therapist."

"Yeah, they mentioned that," he said. "I'm Mike."

His handshake was firm. Not aggressive. Just used to work.

"I've been here twelve years," he continued almost immediately. "Started as a temp. Then I stuck around."

He turned toward the enclosure.

"That's Maya," he said, pointing to a smaller female monkey sitting with her back turned. "She's the smartest one. And that one—that's Gus. He's the troublemaker."

"Gus," said Harold quietly.

"Yeah, everyone knows him," Mike said, laughing briefly. "He can tell when there's an audience. Then he ramps it up."

"They react quickly," Sophie said.

"They perform," Mike said, and there was a slight edge in his voice. He straightened up.

"But they're not like that all the time. When we're alone, it's different." He was talking faster now.

"I know them. I know when they're sleeping deep. I know who gets restless if there's too much noise. I can see it in their shoulders."

He made a small movement with his own shoulders.

A monkey copied him.

A couple of children who hadn't left yet snickered.

Mike's mouth tightened for a moment.

"They do that a lot," he said.

Sophie smiled professionally.

"It's pretty fascinating. That mirroring."

"Yeah," he said. "They're smart."

He looked at them again.

"I grew up with animals," he continued without transition. "My dad was a schoolteacher. He thought you should get a proper education. My older brother became a lawyer."

He shrugged lightly.

"I stayed here."

He tapped the fence lightly.

"I've always liked animals that react directly and honestly."

There was a moment of silence.

A monkey jumped down and sat right up against the glass. Staring out.

Mike stepped a little closer.

"They do it on purpose," he said quietly.

"Do what?" Harold asked.

"That."

He nodded toward the glass, where Gus was now making an exaggerated face at a girl who was laughing loudly.

"They choose the audience."

It came quickly. Too quickly.

Sophie said nothing.

Harold looked at him.

"How can you tell?" he asked.

Mike hesitated for a second.

"Because they don't do it when we're alone."

He looked at Maya again.

"I fed her by hand when she was sick. Slept in here when she had a fever. And then twenty kids and a teacher show up—and I'm just... background."

The last word hung in the air.

A monkey smacked the glass.

The children screamed and laughed.

Mike drew in a breath through his nose.

"I'm the one who stands here every day," he said. "Not them."

Harold nodded slowly.

"It's hard not to want to be the first choice," he said calmly.

Mike looked at him.

There was a moment when he could have brushed it off.

Instead, he laughed briefly.

"Yeah," he said. "It's not the first time."

He shook his head.

"I guess I've always had a hard time standing off to the side."

He looked at the monkeys again.

"It's me who's competing," he said quietly. "Not them."

Now there was a smile in it.

Sophie looked at him a little longer than before.

For the first time, she didn't say anything about engagement.

After the audience

The school class disappeared down the path in small, colorful clusters. Their voices faded gradually, and what remained was a steadier rhythm: leaves in the wind, a few scattered bird calls, and the monkeys slowly settling down.

Mike opened a smaller gate and stepped into the outer part of the enclosure. He spoke softly to the animals, not with words, but with the tone you use when you're already known.

"They're different now," he said without looking at them. "You can tell."

Harold stood a little back. Sophie was quieter now too.

"You said earlier they're not like that all the time," Harold said.

"No," said Mike. "When there's no audience, they settle down. Then they're just... together."

He discreetly pointed to two monkeys now sitting close, grooming each other.

"That's what I mean," he said. "That's what people should see."

"They can," Sophie said.

"No," he said quickly. "Because they're banging on the glass. They want a show."

He hesitated for a moment.

"I suggested we change the area," he continued. "More distance. Less glass. More quiet. Maybe fixed times without an audience."

"And?" Sophie asked.

He shrugged.

"They think it's impractical. Less attractive. 'We need the experience,' they say."

There was no bitterness in his voice. More fatigue.

"I don't think it's good for them," he said. "Having to react all the time."

He looked at Gus, who was now lying on his back, staring up into the treetops.

"It wears you down," he said.

There was silence.

"It might also be," Harold said calmly, "that it's wearing you down."

Mike laughed briefly.

"Yeah, maybe."

He looked down at the gravel.

"It's just... when they go over there," he said, nodding toward the glass, "then it's showtime, and what we have otherwise doesn't matter."

His voice was lower now.

"I know them. I know who gets nervous, who's stubborn. I know when Gus is just showing off."

He smiled faintly.

"And then twenty kids show up, and they set the mood."

"You want to protect them," Harold said.

"Yeah."

Pause.

"And maybe something else," he added.

Mike looked up.

"They don't choose," he said more thoughtfully. "They react."

Harold nodded.

"That's different."

Mike took a deep breath.

"Yeah," he said. "It is."

He laid his hand against the fence.

"It's just strange. When we're alone, it feels like we have something. And then someone comes and... takes over."

"The relationship doesn't disappear," Harold said calmly. "It's just not the center."

Mike stood for a moment, looking in at the animals.

Then came the small smile.

"Yeah, you can feel a little overlooked," he said.

Sophie looked at him. Then at the monkeys.

Then at the glass between them and the audience.

For the first time, she wasn't thinking about engagement.

Moving on

Mike stood there a little longer, even after the conversation had faded. He kept talking—about Gus once grabbing his keys and hiding them in the hay, about Maya figuring out how to open a latch if you weren't careful.

Harold listened.

Sophie checked her watch. She didn't say it out loud, but she moved a little closer to Harold and touched his sleeve lightly.

"We need to keep going," she said quietly.

Harold nodded.

"Thanks, Mike," he said. "It was good to hear."

"Yeah," Sophie said with her professional smile. "We'll be in touch."

"I hope so," Mike said quickly. "I mean... if you need more back-ground."

"I'm sure we will," she said.

They walked on.

The sound of the monkeys followed them for a while, then faded as they turned down the path toward the older part of the grounds.

They walked a few steps in silence.

"I forgot to mention something," Sophie said.

"Mm?"

"Management also wanted our evaluation of him."

"Of Mike?"

"Yeah."

She shrugged.

"They're a little... tired of him."

"Tired?"

"He takes up space. Has a lot of ideas. A lot of suggestions. They think he makes things more complicated than they need to be."

Harold didn't respond right away.

"They don't see it as an animal welfare issue?" he asked.

"They see it as an operational challenge," she said evenly. "And maybe a personal one."

He nodded slowly.

"And what do you see?"

She hesitated for a moment.

"I see an employee who wants to be chosen," she said. "And maybe isn't."

There was no irony in her voice.

"And now we've at least gotten an impression," she continued. "That was probably the point."

Ahead of them, the area opened up. The paths grew wider. The fences taller. A larger enclosure took shape behind the trees.

"We're meeting the department head over here first," Sophie said. "He wanted to brief us on the elephant case."

"Mm."

"It's a whole different scale."

Harold looked ahead.

"Yeah," he said. "It is."

Management

A man in a dark jacket with a discreet logo on the chest walked toward them. He was younger, well-dressed, and carried himself with the kind of calm that comes with responsibility.

"Welcome," the man said. "Nathan Reed. Department head."

He shook hands. His look was quick, assessing, but friendly enough.

"I hope you had a chance to see some of the grounds," he said. "We have big plans."

"You can tell," Sophie said.

He nodded, pleased.

"And you also met Mike?" he asked in passing.

Sophie and Harold exchanged a quick glance.

"Yeah," Sophie said. "We definitely met him."

Nathan Reed's mouth twitched into a small smile.

"He can be... engaged."

There was an undertone in the word.

Sophie smiled back professionally.

"He had a lot to say," she said. "He's clearly very invested in the animals."

"Yeah," the department head said. "He is."

A brief pause.

"We'd like to hear your assessment," he continued. "Of him too."

Sophie straightened slightly.

"I'll put it in a report," she said calmly. "So we can break it down professionally."

Nathan Reed nodded, satisfied.

"Good."

Harold didn't say anything.

Behind the department head, the older elephant keeper—Carl—stood waiting.

“The elephant case is more complex,” the department head said. “Shall we head over?”

They started walking.

Nathan Reed nodded, satisfied.

“The elephant area is the next step,” he said. “We want to modernize. Think new. But we’re facing a concrete challenge.”

“The older female?” Harold asked.

“Yeah. She takes up space. Physically and strategically.”

He smiled briefly, as if it were a practical phrasing.

“We’d like your assessment. Not just of her. But of how we handle the transition.”

“The transition?” Sophie repeated.

“You can’t keep building the future on the past,” he said. “At some point you have to move on.”

A few yards behind him, an older man in work clothes walked along. His arms hung loosely at his sides.

“That’s Carl,” the department head said. “He’s cared for her since she arrived.”

Carl gave a short nod.

Harold looked at him.

And then at the large enclosure behind them.

The tempo was already different here.

Different perspectives

Reed stood with a tablet in his hand, pointing toward one side of the enclosure.

He was younger than you first thought. Not much over forty. Hair cut short, almost too neat. Shoes clean, even here in the gravel.

“We want to open the area up,” he said. “More movement. More levels. The elephants should be visible from more angles.”

He spoke forward. Each sentence sat a yard ahead of the last.

Carl stood with his hands behind his back. His clothes carried years, not design. He didn’t speak until his boss paused.

"She came in a truck," Carl said.

No transition. Just a fact.

"It took three days. She stood the whole way."

His boss nodded briefly. Not disagreeing. Not interested.

"That was before my time," he said.

"Yeah," Carl said. "It was."

The elephant took a step. The ground gave slightly under the weight. Sophie could almost feel it in her feet.

"We have to think about the guest experience," Nathan Reed continued. "We're competing with a lot more today."

He talked about curves. Attendance numbers. Investments.

"This kind of enclosure..." —he looked out over the broad area—"isn't sustainable long-term."

The elephant lifted her trunk and let it glide along the top edge of the fence. The movement was slow, but not uncertain.

"She was the first," Carl said.

He pointed to an older building in the background.

"It started there."

The department head smiled politely.

"We need to move past what started."

"She taught the others to stand still," Carl said. "The young male always wanted to move forward."

The elephant took another step.

A colossus.

Nathan Reed shifted slightly backward, so subtly no one would notice but Sophie.

"It's not a question of feelings," he said. "It's a question of direction."

"She's never really been sick," Carl said. "Not really."

He tapped the fence lightly.

"She's just... slow."

There was no protest in his voice.

Sophie looked at him.

She looked at Carl.

They weren't arguing with each other. They were speaking from two different time zones.

The man from management spoke about what hadn't been built yet. Carl spoke about what had already stood.

The elephant stood between them. Thicker skin than you'd expect. A smaller eye than you'd imagine. Her trunk gathered another tuft of hay.

Sophie heard Nathan Reed's voice again: "At some point you have to dare to end something."

She heard Carl's voice: "She's never left us."

Weight and memory

The elephant had moved a little farther into the enclosure. Not far. Just one step. But it was a step that took time.

"She can live to sixty," Carl said.

"If she wants to," he added.

His boss raised his eyebrows.

"She's forty-seven."

"Yeah."

"So we're still talking about many years."

"Yeah," Carl said again.

There was no polemic in it. Just a fact.

The elephant lifted her trunk to her temple and scratched slowly. The movement was almost thoughtful.

"Elephants remember," Carl said. "That's not just something people say. She can remember voices."

He looked at Harold.

"She reacts differently to us. To who comes in first. To how you walk."

A younger elephant in the background moved restlessly, pacing in small circles.

The old one lifted her head slightly.

The younger one stopped.

Not instantly. Not dramatically. Just... settled.

Sophie noticed it.

"They calm down because she's here," Carl said.

"That's social structure," Nathan Reed said quickly. "It can be established again."

"It can," Carl said.

He said it without defiance.

"But not with her."

The department head drew in a breath.

"We have to be realistic," he said. "She takes up space. The enclosure was built around her."

He looked at the massive body.

"And that's exactly the problem."

The word hung for a moment.

Problem.

The elephant stood still.

"You can't just put her down," Nathan Reed said then, almost off-hand, but clearly enough.

He looked at Harold and Sophie.

"That's not how this works."

He was talking fast now.

"But we have to think about animal welfare. If she no longer fits... what do you do with that body?"

He gestured discreetly.

"You can't just move her."

"You can't move her," Carl said.

"No," the department head said. "And we can't just stay where we are."

There was a brief pause.

"The alternative," he continued, "is to pull her back. A smaller area. More behind the scenes. Not as exposed. Less central."

He said it the way you talk about a building.

"She could have peace there."

"She has peace here," Carl said.

His supervisor turned toward him.

"But she takes up space."

"She does, yeah," Carl said. "She's an elephant."

He rested his hand against the fence again.

"You can't hide her away. The others can still hear her."

The young elephant lifted its head, as if it sensed something.

"She's their memory," Carl said.

Nathan Reed looked out over the area.

"We can't build the future on memory."

"No," Carl said calmly. "But you can't build it without it either."

No raised voices.

Only two directions in time.

The elephant lowered her trunk again. Took another tuft of hay.

Sophie stood still. She looked at the skin. The folds. The slow movement.

She looked at the man representing management, talking about direction.

She looked at Carl, talking about beginnings.

And she looked at the body in the middle of it all. A colossus. Not just in the enclosure. But in the decision.

Nathan Reed turned back to them.

"We need your assessment," he said. "What do you do in a situation like this?"

It was the first time the question was asked directly.

There was a moment of silence.

The elephant moved again. Not away. Not forward. Just a small shift of weight from one leg to another.

Harold looked at her.

"How is she doing?" he asked.

Nathan Reed blinked.

"She's not sick," he said. "But she's... older."

"Is she limping?"

"No."

"Is she eating?"

"Yes."

"Does she respond?"

"Yes, of course."

Harold nodded.

"Then there's nothing that needs fixing," he said calmly.

The department head tilted his head slightly.

"It's not about illness."

"No," Harold said. "But if she's functioning, then maybe she isn't the problem."

The words were said without pressure.

Carl didn't say anything. He stood completely still now.

Nathan Reed drew in a breath.

"It's a strategic question," he said.

"Mm," Harold said.

He looked at the elephant again.

"Most things can be repaired," he said. "But this isn't something that's broken."

The sentence hung in the air.

The elephant gathered another tuft of hay. The trunk worked calmly.

Sophie stood beside him, looking at the eye again.

"We'll put together a full assessment," she said at last, professional, calm. "We'll get back to you with recommendations."

It was a sentence she could say without taking a position.

Nathan Reed nodded.

"Good."

He turned and started walking away.

Carl stayed a moment longer. He rested his hand against the fence again, almost as before.

"She's always stood here," he said quietly. "She's not the one who moved."

Harold didn't answer.

Sophie watched the director walk away, but her thoughts were somewhere else.

The elephant was still standing there. Big. Slow. Thick-skinned.

The Volvo

They said goodbye without many words.

The gate slid open, and the Volvo rolled out onto the road with the familiar, deep sound of the engine.

Neither of them spoke for the first few minutes.

The Zoo fell away in the rearview mirror. Trees stood close along the road, and the sun was lower now, so the light slanted in through the windshield and hit the dashboard in matte patches.

Harold drove the way he always did. Calmly. He rested his hand briefly on the steering wheel, as if he was just feeling it.

"That was good," he said quietly, not entirely clear whether he meant it for the car or for himself.

The Volvo answered with a small, almost insignificant squeak from the center console as they went over a bump.

Sophie looked down.

The dashboard was simple. Worn along the edge by the glove compartment. A small crack in the plastic she'd never noticed before. The scent of something that had lived in the seats for years—fabric, dust, sun.

She rolled the window down.

Air came in. Not violently. Just as a steady stream.

She stuck her arm out, let her hand glide through the wind for a moment, the way you do when you're not thinking about it.

The car kept humming.

She looked in the side mirror. At the paint that was no longer shiny, but still held its color clearly.

"It runs really well," she said quietly.

"Yeah," Harold said.

He tapped the dashboard with two fingers.

"You're doing fine," he said.

It wasn't ironic.

The Volvo took a curve without drama. The tires held the asphalt with a sound that felt more reassuring than exciting.

Sophie leaned back slightly in the seat. She felt something she hadn't expected. Just a kind of satisfaction that something could work without having to be new.

The road opened up.

The elephant was still somewhere in her mind.

It had just stood there too.

She looked ahead.

The engine held its pace.

"There's something about it," she said, almost to herself.

"Mm?" Harold said.

"Nothing," she said.

She slid her hand back in and rolled the window halfway up.

The Volvo kept going.

Just on its way.

Back at the office

The Volvo rolled into the familiar spot in front of the industrial building. The gray facade looked the way it always did. Not impressive. Not inspiring. Just there.

The engine shut off. It went quiet.

Harold stayed seated for a moment, the way he often did before getting out. He touched the steering wheel once, briefly, before opening the door.

"Well," he said.

Sophie didn't say anything. She got out and drew in a breath, as if the air here was easier to understand.

The bike was leaning against the wall. The red hoodie stood out against the dull building.

Inside the office, there was a faint smell of paper and coffee that had sat too long in the machine.

Harold went straight to the coffeemaker. Opened it. Dumped the filter. Filled it with water without saying anything.

"You want some?" he asked.

"Yeah," Sophie said, sitting down at her desk.

She pulled the drawer open and took out a bag of licorice. Gave it a small shake so the pieces settled at the bottom.

She opened it with a familiar motion.

Harold pressed the button. The machine began to hum. The familiar, uneven sound before the coffee found its rhythm.

Sophie leaned back in her chair and looked toward the window for a moment.

The Volvo was outside.

She took a piece of licorice and put it in her mouth. The bitter taste was the same as always.

"It was a long day," she said.

"Mm," Harold said.

The coffeemaker finished dripping slowly.

He poured two cups and set one in front of her.

No one talked about the elephant. No one talked about Mike. No one talked about replacing things. They just sat there.

The machine clicked when it was done.

Outside, the Volvo stood in the afternoon light.

Inside the office, the tempo dropped.

And for the first time that day, it didn't feel like anything had to keep moving.

Harold's night

Harold lay awake longer than he usually did.

Not because the elephant took up space. It did.

But it wasn't the elephant keeping him awake.

It was the sentence the department head had said:

"We can't build the future on memory."

He thought about Sophie; About the look in her eyes in the car. About her "It runs really well."

Was it the car?

Or the company?

He had said most things could be repaired.

He turned onto his side.

It wasn't his own reaction he doubted.

It was hers.

The report

Sophie was the one who was there first.

The bike was already leaning against the wall when the Volvo rolled in.

Harold saw it right away.

Inside the office, she was sitting at the desk. Not in a hoodie this time, but in a more neutral blouse. The screen glowed in front of her.

A cup of coffee sat next to the keyboard.

She looked up when he came in.

"Morning," she said.

"Mm," he said.

He hung his jacket up. Walked toward the coffeemaker. It was already filled with water.

"I wrote the draft," she said.

He stopped for a moment.

"For the elephant?"

"For both."

She turned the screen slightly so he could see the document.

The heading was plain: Preliminary assessment — Monkey Area and Elephant Area

She didn't read it with drama. Just professionally.

"Regarding employee Mike Turner," she began.

Harold felt something tighten, just a little.

"The employee demonstrates a high degree of relational understanding and concrete behavioral insight within the animal group. His observations regarding overstimulation during high audience activity are assessed as professionally relevant."

She paused briefly.

"An adjustment with scheduled periods without audience interaction can support natural social behavior and reduce stress responses."

Harold said nothing.

She continued.

"It is recommended that the employee be actively included in the development of the future concept rather than marginalized."

It went quiet.

He poured coffee without looking up from the cup.

"And the elephant?" he asked.

She drew in a breath.

"The elephant appears healthy, stable, and socially regulating within the herd. No behavioral conditions have been observed that indicate a need for acute intervention."

She looked at him now.

"A strategic transition should not be justified by the individual's existence, but by the framework around it."

She closed the document.

"That's my professional recommendation."

He stood still for a moment.

"That's a different report than I expected," he said.

"I know."

She leaned back.

"I often think in terms of upgrading," she said calmly. "But yesterday... it wasn't something that was broken."

He looked at her.

She didn't continue.

No apology. No explanation. Just a statement.

He nodded.

"Most things can be repaired," he said.

She looked out the window toward the Volvo.

"Yeah," she said.

A small pause.

"Some things cost more to lose than they do to keep."

The room went quiet.

Harold stood with the coffee cup in his hand. He felt the sentence in his gut before he understood it.

Not because he'd been waiting for it. But because he didn't have to wait for it anymore.

He walked to the window without saying anything.

The Volvo stood there in the slanted morning light. The paint wasn't shiny. A thin layer of dust from the day before lay along the edge of the hood. It didn't look like something that was moving on.

It looked like something that had found its place.

He pulled the curtain slightly to the side, as if he wanted to see it properly.

"It's still holding," he said quietly.

Sophie followed his gaze.

“Yeah,” she said.

He set the cup down and rested his hand briefly on the windowsill.

Relief moved through him, almost imperceptibly. Not joy. Not triumph. Just a loosening in his shoulders he hadn’t realized he’d been missing.

He didn’t have to defend anything; Not the car. Not the elephant. Not himself.

The Volvo was there. The office was there. Sophie was there at the desk.

And for the first time since they’d driven through the Zoo gates, it felt like direction wasn’t only forward anymore.

It was inward too.

The coffeemaker clicked in the background.

Outside, the car stood in the sun.

The Snake That Grew

A Dangerous Animal

The phone rang in the stillness of the late morning. Sophie looked up from her notes, as if she needed a moment to reorient herself in the room before reaching for the receiver. "The Pet Therapist," she said.

"Yes... hello. This is Victor. I'm the caretaker of a residential complex." Sophie straightened slightly in her chair. "Yes?"

"I'm not entirely sure this is something for you," he continued, "but it concerns animals. And... people have become unsettled."

"Go on," she said calmly.

"There are some rumors circulating out here," Victor said. "About animals. Possibly one dangerous animal, if you believe what's being said." He hesitated briefly. "And it's grown rather quickly. One story has led to another."

Sophie nodded to herself, though he could not see it. "So, it's not just one story."

"No. There are several versions."

A brief silence followed.

"But they all concern the same thing?" she asked.

"Yes. In one way or another, I would assume."

Sophie picked up a pencil and began jotting down a few words, not yet knowing what might prove important.

"Has anyone seen anything concrete?" she asked.

"Some claim they have," he said, drawing in a light breath. "And when I speak to the staff at the daycare and some of the older residents here in the buildings, several are actually quite shaken. That's why I'm calling."

She leaned back slightly. "And what would you like help with?"

"We'd like someone to look into it before it gets completely out of hand," he said calmly. "Someone to figure out what's really going on. And if a dangerous animal is hiding in the area, then it needs to be caught."

Sophie let the pencil rest for a moment. "I won't promise we can catch it, but we'd be happy to take a look and hopefully uncover some of the mystery."

"I would appreciate that."

She wrote down the address, the time, and a few keywords. "We'll stop by."

"Thank you. It's good to know someone is approaching this calmly."

"Good. We'll see you soon," Sophie said, and hung up.

She remained seated for a moment, the phone still in her hand, before setting it down.

Harold had not spoken during the call. He sat by the window, his gaze directed toward the street, as if he had heard everything without following it directly.

"A dangerous animal frightening the residents," Sophie said, glancing over at him.

He turned his head slightly. "Mm."

"It sounds strange."

He nodded slowly.

Sophie smiled faintly. "You don't seem surprised."

"No," he said calmly. "It wouldn't be the first time there was a significant difference between what is seen... and what is told."

She held his gaze for a moment. "No. That's true."

He gave a small shrug. "It tends to grow along the way."

She picked up her jacket. "Well, I'm curious."

He nodded. "So am I."

A brief silence settled between them before they moved toward the door.

They drove toward the city at an unhurried pace. Traffic flowed evenly around them—neither dense nor sparse, but without demanding much attention.

Sophie sat with her notebook in her lap, though she was no longer writing.

She turned toward Harold. “You don’t think it’s anything dangerous?”

He gave a slight shrug. “It sounds like someone has been afraid. And that’s reason enough for us to try to help. If we can.”

Sophie nodded slowly and then smiled. “That’s a new role for us. Now we’re pet detectives.”

Harold didn’t respond immediately. Instead, he rolled down the window with a short movement and let his hand drift briefly into the air.

“The only thing we’re missing,” he said with a crooked smile, glancing up toward the roof of the old Volvo, “is a blue light.”

Sophie looked at him. “What would we need that for?”

“So, we could drive a little faster. And look a bit more official. The Pet Patrol.”

She laughed softly. “I don’t think this car could carry that.”

“It can do more than you’d think,” he said, drawing his hand back inside.

They drove into the residential area and found a parking space near one of the buildings. The blocks stood in long rows, uniform in their gray concrete, yet with small differences in the balconies and in the things, residents had placed outside: bicycles, strollers, a couple of plastic chairs that had seen better days.

Victor was already waiting. His hands were in his pockets, and his expression was calm, as though he had all the time in the world, regardless of what they brought with them.

“That must be you,” he said as they stepped out of the car.

They greeted him, and he continued: "Thank you for coming so quickly. As I said, I'm not entirely sure this falls within your field of expertise... but I'm glad you're willing to give it a try."

Sophie nodded. "We'll take a look and do our best."

Victor let his gaze move over the area. "It's a rather... diverse place," he said with a small smile. "All kinds of people live here, and quite a bit can happen." He paused briefly before adding, "But it's also the kind of place where small things can quickly become big, if they're not addressed in time."

Harold nodded. "That can happen quickly."

Sophie looked at him. "What set it off?"

Victor shrugged lightly. "There isn't just one answer," he said. "But there are two who claim they've seen something." He raised two fingers, almost to mark it. "Eyewitnesses."

"And the others?" Sophie asked.

"They've heard something," he said. "Or seen something that might be the same." He looked from one to the other. "But the stories don't quite match."

Harold let his gaze drift across the buildings. "They rarely do."

Sophie took out her notebook again. "So, we start with the ones who have actually seen something?"

"Yes," Victor said. "That sounds reasonable."

He turned and began to walk. "One is a boy," he said over his shoulder. "Peter. He's usually by the basketball court after school."

They followed him between the buildings.

"And the other?" Sophie asked.

"An older woman. Mrs. Peterson." He smiled faintly. "She hasn't seen the same thing... but she has her own explanations."

The First Witness

They found Peter at the basketball court. He stood with three other boys, tossing a basketball back and forth, but stopped when Victor called his name.

“Peter! Could you come over here for a moment?”

The boy turned, hesitated briefly, then jogged over to them, still slightly out of breath.

“These are the ones I told you about,” Victor said. “Sophie and Harold. They’re from The Pet Therapist. They’re going to help us figure out what’s going on.”

Peter’s gaze moved quickly from one to the other. “Yeah,” he said. “I saw a snake.”

He said it almost matter-of-factly, without drama, as though it had simply been part of an otherwise ordinary day.

Sophie tilted her head slightly. “Can you tell us exactly what you saw?”

“It was just a snake,” he said. “It crawled like... along the ground.”

Victor studied him for a moment. “You seemed more frightened when you told us about it at home,” he said calmly.

Peter hesitated. Something in his expression shifted, as though he were briefly pulled back into the experience itself.

“Yeah...” he said slowly.

He looked down. “I’ve never seen a snake before,” he continued. “And it went like... shh... shh...” He made a small motion with his hand. “And it crawled right in front of me.”

His breathing quickened slightly. “I actually thought it was going to attack me.”

Sophie nodded. “I can understand why you were scared. I would have been terrified.”

She let a small pause fall before asking, “But where were you when you saw it?”

Peter looked up again. “I don’t remember,” he said quickly.

Sophie held his gaze. “You don’t remember?”

“A lot happened that day,” he said. “I can’t really remember where I was.”

Sophie had barely opened her mouth before they were interrupted. The other boys had come closer.

“He was scared to death!” one of them shouted.

They laughed.

"You were totally green in the face!" another said.

Peter straightened. "You would have been too," he said quickly, "if you'd seen a snake that was several meters long and as thick as a leg!"

The boys laughed again, though this time with a hint more respect than before.

Victor raised a hand. "All right, all right," he said. "Let's stick to what actually happened."

But Harold remained where he was, looking at Peter with a calm, observant gaze.

"It's clear that you saw it," he said. "I have no doubt about that."

Peter looked at him.

"And we may need to speak with you again," Harold continued. "Once we've looked into things a bit more. It might be easier to remember then."

Peter didn't answer immediately but gave a small shrug. "Yeah," he said at last.

They stood there for a moment while the boys returned to their game. The ball struck the pavement in a steady rhythm, as though the conversation had already begun to fade into the background.

Sophie watched Peter as he rejoined the others. "He knows more than he's saying," she said quietly.

Harold nodded. "Yes. And what he isn't saying... is probably the most important part."

They moved on from the basketball court at an unhurried pace.

"He was genuinely frightened," Harold said after a while.

Sophie nodded. "Yes. It wasn't something he made up from the start."

Victor gave a small shrug. "He does have quite an imagination, that boy. He always has."

"One does not exclude the other," Harold said calmly.

Victor cast him a brief glance but let the comment pass. "Let's go up to Mrs. Peterson," he said instead. "She's the other eyewitness."

"Have you spoken to her yourself?" Sophie asked.

"No," Victor said. "But that's how it's been told to me."

Sophie smiled faintly. "This will be interesting. If we can get two descriptions, we might get a little closer to what it is."

Mrs. Peterson's Theory

They reached the entrance and stepped inside. The elevator stood on the ground floor, and they entered as the doors closed behind them with a soft click. It was quiet as it moved upward.

"Fifth floor," Victor said.

The doors slid open, and they stepped out into a hallway where the light was dim, and the silence had a different quality than outside—more enclosed, more inward.

Victor walked to a door and knocked. It took a moment before it was opened.

Mrs. Peterson stood in the doorway, upright, with a kind but firm expression. "Yes?"

"It's me, the caretaker," he said. "And these are the two I mentioned on the phone. From The Pet Therapist."

She nodded and stepped aside. "Come in."

The apartment was neat and orderly. Everything was in its place, and there was a calm that seemed to have settled there over time.

"We would very much like to hear," Victor began, "what kind of animal you have seen."

Mrs. Peterson raised her hand at once. "No, no," she said. "I haven't seen anything."

Victor stopped mid-motion. "Oh... that's not what I was told—"

"No," she said again. "I haven't seen the animal, but what it has done."

She looked at them one by one. "I don't know what kind of predator it is. But that it is dangerous... there is no doubt about that."

Sophie leaned forward slightly. "What have you experienced?"

Mrs. Peterson folded her hands in her lap. "There is a small dog," she said. "Or rather, there was. It used to come by every day, down by the benches."

She glanced down briefly. "I always had a few biscuits for it."

A small, sorrowful smile passed across her face, then faded again.

"But then, from one moment to the next... it was gone."

She paused for a moment.

"From one day to the next," she continued. "Just gone."

Sophie nodded slowly. "And you think the two things are connected?"

Mrs. Peterson gave a small shrug. "One begins to wonder... when one hears what people are saying."

She looked at them again. "A snake could eat a dog, couldn't it?"

Sophie hesitated for a moment. "That would depend on its size."

"It wasn't very big," Mrs. Peterson said quickly. "The dog, I mean."

She paused briefly. "But it could be something else."

"Like what?" Harold asked calmly.

Mrs. Peterson looked toward the window, as though the answer might be out there somewhere. "One hears about people," she said slowly, "who keep... larger animals. Inside their apartments."

She turned back to them. "Predators."

The word lingered in the room for a moment.

"And if something like that gets loose..." she continued, shaking her head slightly, "then it isn't safe to go outside."

Sophie said nothing.

"I certainly don't go out in the evenings anymore," Mrs. Peterson said.

"Not until it has been caught."

A quiet weight settled over the room.

Harold nodded slowly. "I can understand that" he said.

Mrs. Peterson looked at him and nodded.

After a moment, they rose.

"Thank you for telling us," Sophie said.

"You're welcome," Mrs. Peterson replied. "Just make sure you find out what's going on."

They stepped back into the hallway, and the door closed quietly behind them.

Sophie let out a small breath. "It's growing quickly."

Harold nodded. "Yes. Once people start connecting things."

They stood for a moment in the stillness of the hallway.

"Next is the daycare," Victor said.

Trouble at the Daycare

They walked toward the daycare along the path between the buildings.

"The atmosphere may be a bit... heightened over there," Victor said. "When it involves children, emotions tend to follow quickly."

Sophie nodded. "That makes sense."

"There will probably be some parents there as well," he added. "They usually show up when something happens."

Even before they reached the fence, they could hear voices. Not loud, but strained.

Inside the playground, a couple of children ran toward them.

"Are you here to catch the snake?" one of them asked.

Sophie smiled briefly. "We're here to find out what's going on."

The children looked at one another, as if that wasn't quite the same thing.

They continued inside. Two daycare workers stood together with three parents on one side of the playground, and the conversation stopped as they approached.

"Here they are," Victor said. "They're going to try to help us."

One of the daycare workers stepped forward. "It's good that you're here. We've just been discussing how irresponsible this situation is."

One of the parents nodded quickly. "Yes. We can't have children running around here when there's a dangerous snake in the area."

"We don't know for certain what kind of animal it is," Sophie said calmly.

"No, maybe not," another parent said, "but we are not taking unnecessary risks when it comes to our children's safety."

The tension hung between them.

Harold stepped forward slightly. "We've heard that some rabbits have gone missing."

The daycare worker nodded. "Yes. Our rabbits are gone. Without a trace." She pointed toward the enclosure. "There was a gap in the netting. Not large, but... large enough."

Sophie followed her gaze. "Has anyone seen anything take them?"

"No," the daycare worker said. "We haven't."

A brief silence followed.

"But" one of the parents said, stepping forward, "someone has seen the snake."

Sophie looked at her. "Who?"

"Steve. One of the other parents."

Victor raised his eyebrows slightly. "I haven't heard that."

"He went for a walk last night," she continued. "He was skeptical and wanted to see for himself." She pointed toward the fence. "He walked over here, near the rabbit enclosure."

Sophie and Harold exchanged a quick glance.

"And that's where he saw it," she said.

"How?" Sophie asked.

"It was dark," she said. "But he could see the eyes." She made a small motion in front of her face. "They were glowing green. And the pupils... they were like slits. Horizontal."

She looked at them, as if that settled the matter.

"It stood perfectly still. Didn't move. He could only just make out the outline."

"Did he take a picture?" Sophie asked.

"Yes," she said quickly, pulling out her phone. "He sent it to me."

She held it out, and Sophie took it.

The image was dark and grainy. Most of it was shadow, but in the middle of it all were two small, glowing points. Eyes. And something that might have been an outline.

Sophie studied it for a moment before passing the phone on to Harold. He held it without saying anything.

"He checked it afterward," the parent continued. "On his phone. And it matches. Boa constrictors have that kind of pupil."

She looked at them firmly. "So, this is not something we're imagining. These are facts."

"That sounds serious," Harold said calmly.

"Yes," she said. "And something like that is dangerous."

Another parent stepped forward. "If something isn't done now, we're calling the police. We're not taking responsibility for anything happening to the children."

There was silence.

Sophie handed the phone back. "I understand that" she said.

She looked again toward the enclosure. "We would very much like to take a closer look at this."

Harold nodded faintly. "Yes. And hopefully find out what kind of animal you are actually dealing with."

The parents said nothing but stepped slightly aside.

They stood for a moment in the silence that followed.

Sophie looked again toward the rabbit enclosure. "I'm wondering..." she began slowly, "whether the rabbits may have been out before?"

The daycare worker hesitated but was interrupted by a male parent who had not previously joined the conversation.

"I think I've only seen them in their enclosure once," he said with a smile.

Another parent looked at him irritably. "You're not taking this seriously at all."

The man smiled again and answered without changing his tone. "The fact that the rabbits aren't in their enclosure is certainly not proof of anything."

Sophie looked toward the enclosure. "But this time is different?"

"Yes," the daycare worker said. "They usually stay nearby. In the bushes or behind the playhouse." She shook her head slightly. "They don't usually just disappear."

"But now they're gone," Sophie said.

"Yes," said the daycare worker.

"And if you need proof that this isn't just something we're imagining..." one of the other parents broke in, "...then you can talk to Peter."

Sophie looked at him. "Peter?"

"The boy from Building 38. He saw it. In broad daylight." She put emphasis on the words. "And he was terrified. There was no doubt about him."

Victor nodded slowly. "We've spoken to him."

"Then you also know it's true," the parent said.

Harold looked at him calmly. "We know he saw something, but also that children his age can have a vivid imagination."

There was silence again.

Sophie gathered the group with her gaze. "We'd like to speak with him again."

The parents said nothing but kept their worried expressions.

The daycare worker nodded faintly. "That sounds reasonable."

Sophie turned to Victor. "Let's go back."

They walked toward the exit. Behind them, the voices continued, low but uneasy.

Once they were outside the fence, Sophie drew a slightly deeper breath.

"The pressure is building," she said.

"Yes," Harold said. "It has clearly taken on a life of its own."

She looked at him. "And Peter is still the key."

He nodded. "Yes. He knows more than he has told us."

The Snake That Grew

They walked back toward the buildings.

Sophie was silent for a while.

"I have to admit," she said at last, "I'm beginning to have some doubts."

Harold looked at her. "About what?"

"About whether it's just rumors," she said. "We have Peter... and then there's a parent who saw the eyes. And the rabbits are gone." She gave a small shrug. "It's beginning to look like something."

"It is," Harold said calmly.

"So maybe there really is some truth behind it," she continued.

He nodded. "I think there is. The question is only how much has been added on top."

They reached the basketball court again. Peter was standing a little apart this time but looked up when Victor called.

"Peter! Can you come over here again?"

He came over, but more slowly than before.

"I told you," he said, "I don't know where I saw it."

"Come," Victor said calmly. "Let's sit over here."

They walked to a picnic table beneath some trees in front of the buildings. The shade from the leaves lay unevenly across the tabletop.

"We need to talk a little more seriously about this, Peter," Victor said.

Peter said nothing. He merely sat down and looked at the table.

There was a moment of silence.

Harold leaned forward slightly. "Peter," he said calmly, "I have no doubt that you saw that snake."

Peter lifted his gaze a little.

"I could see that in you," Harold continued. "You were frightened."

He let a brief pause fall.

"But you are not the only one who is frightened."

Peter looked at him now.

"You should have seen it over at the daycare," Harold continued. "And with Mrs. Peterson." He smiled faintly, without making light of it. "For every day this story is told that snake grows larger."

Peter blinked.

"Just as it did before," Harold said. "When you told your friends."

A small shift passed across Peter's face.

"In the end," Harold continued, "no one can remember what it actually began with."

He placed his hands calmly on the table.

"Then everyone simply becomes afraid. And the story grows and grows."

There was silence.

"And that is why," he continued, "we have to find out where it started."

He looked directly at Peter.

"And I think you are the most important person here. You are the first, and perhaps the only, eyewitness."

Peter looked away again.

"You are the one I believe most," Harold said.

A moment passed.

"I don't know why you don't want to tell us," he continued. "But... was it somewhere you perhaps weren't allowed to be?"

Peter sat completely still.

Then he nodded slowly.

Victor leaned forward slightly. "Was it here in the buildings?"

Peter nodded again.

Victor glanced up at the building. "Then I know where you've been."

He looked back at Peter. "You've been in the attic."

Peter nodded cautiously.

"It's true that you're not allowed up there," Victor said. "I've told you that before." He drew in a breath. "But the most important thing right now is that you can help us."

Peter lifted his gaze slightly.

"You just need to show us where it was," Victor continued. "That's all."

Sophie leaned forward. "You could actually become the hero in all this," she said.

Peter looked at her.

"The one who helps us find out what really happened," she continued. "Before it grows any bigger."

Peter looked around at them.

The mood was not angry. Not accusing. Just... waiting.

He nodded one last time. "Okay," he said quietly.

Harold rose. "Then let's go."

In the Attic

A little later, they stood before the door to the attic.

Victor opened it, and the hinges made a low, dry sound.

"Perhaps we should have brought a flashlight," he said.

"I have one," Sophie said, turning on her phone.

The light cut through the darkness as they stepped inside.

The air was heavier up here. Dust lay like a thin layer over everything, and cobwebs hung from the beams like fine threads.

Peter went first, moving carefully, as though he knew the way but was still uneasy about the situation.

Behind him followed Sophie, holding the light in front of her. Her hand was slightly unsteady, and the beam drifted gently from side to side.

The floorboards creaked beneath them.

A little farther in, there was a sudden fluttering. A pigeon rose from the floor and beat its wings.

Sophie drew in a sharp breath.

"It's just birds," Victor said quietly.

They continued.

"Over there," Peter said softly, pointing ahead.

A faint light could be seen from a small window in the gable.

"There they are," Victor said. "The pigeons."

They approached slowly. The light from the phone moved across old furniture, boxes, and things that had been standing there so long they had almost become part of the room.

Then came a sound—a dry, slight movement in front of them.

Sophie froze. "Wait," she whispered.

The light stopped. The silence drew tighter around them.

"There's something moving," she continued, fear in her voice.

Peter quickly took a few steps backward and was now standing behind Harold.

Again, there was a sound from the darkness beside the window. Not loud, but not quiet enough to ignore.

Then—

"Don't worry," a voice said.

It came from the darkness in front of them.

Sophie lifted the light quickly and let it sweep toward the window.

There, in the glow of the faint daylight and her phone light, the silhouette of someone crouching came into view.

"Anthony!" Victor exclaimed as they came closer. "What are you doing here?"

They all stopped.

"I've got her, don't worry," the young man in the darkness repeated, lifting his hands slightly.

And between them, something that looked like a snake could be made out. It was calm, lightly coiled, as though it were in no hurry at all.

A moment passed before anyone spoke.

Peter took a step forward, braver now. "See? What did I tell you?"

Sophie looked from him to Anthony. "Is it yours?"

Anthony nodded. "Yes. She got out a few days ago."

He glanced around briefly. "I thought she might be up here."

He nodded toward the window. "There's warmth. And darkness. And..." He gave a small shrug. "...birds."

Victor looked toward the pigeons' nests. "And eggs."

Anthony nodded. "That's the kind of thing they look for. Quiet places where there isn't much disturbance."

Sophie drew a deeper breath. "So she isn't... dangerous."

"No," Anthony said calmly. "She won't do anything to people."

Harold stepped forward. "So, this is where it started," he observed quietly.

He let his gaze move around the room. "And then the story grew from a snake three feet long into a ravenous monster that had eaten both dogs and rabbits."

Anthony looked at him as if he did not understand.

Sophie lowered the light a little. The room seemed smaller now. Less threatening.

"We'd better go back down," Victor said.

Anthony nodded. He was still holding the snake calmly. "Then I can get her back in place, too."

They turned toward the door.

Behind them, the pigeons settled again, and the attic fell back into silence.

They went back down the stairs. The sounds from the attic disappeared behind them, and the air grew lighter the farther down they came.

"May we see her enclosure?" Victor asked, in a tone that suggested Anthony did not have much choice.

Anthony hesitated a little, then answered, "You can come in and see."

Peter hesitated for a moment. "Are there more?"

Anthony nodded. "Yes. But don't worry. They're all in enclosures."

Peter looked at the others... and nodded.

They went to the door of his apartment. Anthony opened it and stepped aside.

Sophie was the first to stop. "Goodness," she said.

Along the walls stood terrariums of different sizes—some lit, others dim. Inside them, animals moved slowly or lay perfectly still in the warmth.

"It's..." she began.

"Quite thorough," Harold said.

Peter took one step farther in. "Is that one?" he asked, pointing to a small gecko.

"Yes," Anthony said. "A leopard gecko."

He carefully placed the snake back in her terrarium.

"And there are spiders, too," he said, pointing toward a corner. "And a small monitor lizard."

Victor stepped inside and looked around. He nodded appreciatively. "It's clear you know what you're doing. ...in here."

Anthony gave a slight shrug. "I try."

Peter was now completely absorbed. "Can that one bite?"

"Yes," Anthony said. "But it won't if you leave it alone."

Sophie looked around. "It's actually rather... peaceful."

"It is," Anthony said. "They just want warmth and quiet."

Victor nodded but became a little more serious. "You have to make sure this doesn't happen again. You can see what it set in motion," Victor continued. "The whole area is on the verge of panic."

He gestured briefly toward the door. "It won't be easy to explain to people that it was only your snake that started the whole thing."

Anthony drew in a small breath. "No. I can see that."

He looked down at the terrarium, where the snake now lay calmly again. "It won't happen again."

Victor nodded. "Good."

There was a moment of silence.

"So, the problem is actually solved," Harold said calmly. "But we may need you to help explain it." He held Anthony's gaze.

Anthony nodded. "I suppose I owe you that."

Harold turned to Peter. "And you'll need to come with us."

Peter looked up.

"Over to the daycare," Harold continued. "You're probably the one they believe most right now."

Peter hesitated. "What should I say?"

"You just need to say it as it is," Sophie said. "That you saw a snake. And that you have also seen that it has now been caught again."

Peter nodded slowly. "Okay."

They went back toward the daycare.

A Simple Explanation

Already at the fence, the children came running toward them.

"Here they come!" one of them shouted. "The snake hunters!"

"It was you!" another said, pointing at Peter. "You were the one who saw it!"

Peter stopped for a moment, looked at them, and said simply, "It's been caught."

The children stared at him.

"I saw it myself," he continued. "It's back in its enclosure."

For a split second, everything was quiet. Then they turned and ran across the playground.

"The snake has been caught!" they shouted. "The snake has been caught!"

The voices spread quickly through the daycare, and Sophie and the others followed them in. The parents and daycare workers were still gathered together, but the atmosphere was already beginning to change.

"Is it true?" one of the daycare workers asked.

Peter nodded. "Yes. It's been caught."

Several of the parents breathed with relief.

"So, there was only one?" said the parent who had earlier commented on the rabbits' disappearance. "I thought there were several, and that they had already eaten several dogs in the area."

"Idiot," another parent said. "Try to be serious for just one moment. The children were really frightened."

The first parent did not give up so easily. "I haven't actually seen any frightened children, only frightened parents."

What could easily have developed into an argument was interrupted by the daycare worker, who still did not seem entirely reassured. "But what about what Steve saw?" she said. "The eyes... and the pupils?"

Sophie took out her phone. "Look," she said, finding two pictures.

She held up the screen. "These are the eyes of a snake," she said. "And these... are the eyes of a black cat."

They leaned forward.

"That's..." one of them began.

"Almost impossible to tell apart," Sophie said.

Harold nodded faintly. "In the dark, people often see what they already believe they are looking for."

There was silence again.

One of the parents looked around at the others. "So... maybe it wasn't quite the way we thought."

"There was something," Harold said. "And then it grew into a little more along the way. That is probably what happened."

A couple of them smiled faintly, and the tension slowly began to loosen its grip. The children were still running around, repeating the news, but now with a completely different energy.

"The snake has been caught!" they shouted. "It isn't dangerous! He says so!"

Sophie looked at Peter. "Well said."

He gave a small shrug but smiled.

They walked with Victor toward the parking lot. The mood had settled completely now, and the sounds from the daycare lay behind them like an ordinary afternoon again—without the sharp edge that had been there before.

Victor stopped by the car and glanced back toward the buildings.

"That actually went rather well," he said.

"Yes," Sophie said. "It did."

He gave a small shrug. "It's strange how quickly something like that can spread and grow."

"Yes," Harold said. "It doesn't take much."

Victor nodded. "No. But it does take someone to stop it again."

He remained standing for a moment, looking thoughtful.

"I actually used to keep animals like that myself," he said then. "Terrariums. Snakes and lizards and a bit of everything."

Sophie looked at him in surprise. "Really?"

"Yes," he said, smiling a little. "It was actually a very good hobby."

He cast a brief glance up toward the building. "Maybe I should take it up again," he added.

Harold smiled faintly. "Well, you have the attic. Everything is there—peace, warmth, and food."

Victor laughed softly. "Yes, that would probably be a good start."

He made a small gesture with his hand toward the entrances. "I'll stop by Mrs. Peterson later," he said. "Explain to her how it all fits together."

"She'll probably appreciate that," Sophie said.

"Yes," he said. "She's had a bit to think about."

There was a moment of silence.

"Thank you for coming," Victor said.

"You're welcome," Sophie said.

Harold nodded.

They shook hands. Then Sophie and Harold got into the car, and the engine started. As they drove away, Victor stood for a moment watching them before turning and walking back.

The Pet Patrol

They drove out of the residential area at an unhurried pace. The buildings slowly slipped away in the rearview mirror, and the afternoon light lay low across the road.

There was a moment of silence.

Sophie leaned back slightly in her seat. "That was quite an assignment after all," she said.

Harold nodded. "Yes. Not so much the snake... as everything that was added on top of it. It grew larger and larger."

She smiled faintly. "It's almost as if we don't just work with animals anymore."

He cast her a brief glance. "No?"

"No," she said. "It's also stories. And people. And what they imagine."

He nodded slowly. "Those things are often connected."

There was silence again as the car rolled on.

"Do you think," she began, "that we may be moving a little in a new direction?"

Harold gave a small shrug. "It could look that way."

"Pet Detectives," she said, letting the words hang in the air for a moment.

He smiled slightly. "Mm."

She looked ahead. "There's actually something rather good in that."

"Yes," he said. "As long as we don't start believing all the stories ourselves."

She laughed softly. "That would be a problem."

He nodded. "A big one."

Another moment of silence.

Then Sophie leaned forward a little and looked up toward the ceiling of the car. "We're still missing the blue light."

Harold looked up at the same spot. "Yes."

"It would suit her."

He let his gaze drift over the dashboard and the worn steering wheel. "I don't know," he said calmly. "I think it would create false expectations."

"How so?"

"People would think we got there faster."

She smiled. "We don't."

"No."

She leaned back again. "But 'The Pet Patrol'... that doesn't sound entirely bad."

The car continued down the road at the unhurried pace it happened to have.

"We could start small," Sophie said.

"We already are," he replied.

She looked out the window, where the landscape drifted past in soft colors.

"Yes," she said quietly. "I suppose we are."

And without saying anything more, they drove on.

When Worry Finds a Dog

Morning Among the Envelopes

“It’s actually wildly exciting, all this,” was Sophie’s morning line when Harold stuck his head in at half past eight on Monday morning.

She didn’t even look up. She was completely absorbed in categorizing the many letters that had been hiding inside the windowed envelopes. The entire table was covered half of Harold’s too. She would stand up when she walked over to Harold’s desk and place a letter on a pile with a satisfied little gesture. She had made the system her own way: three Post-its in big letters—NOW, LATER, and NEVER. Under NEVER there was already something that looked like half his life. She flipped each letter over as if she were evaluating an avocado in the supermarket—a quick weight in the hand, a look, a small nod—and then down into the pile with a pleased little click.

For the first time she looked up. “Just go ahead and get yourself a cup of coffee, Harold. While I enjoy your repression box—or subconscious, or whatever it is. You’re not due at the family’s until 10:00, so there’s plenty of time. But don’t get too close to your desk, or you might get infected.” She said the last part with a small smile.

Harold took a step into the room, and it was as if his body automatically pulled toward one particular envelope—one that lay a little too neatly, a little too centrally, like a trap. He almost reached for it, but pulled his hand back again, as if the paper could give him a shock.

“Maybe I should just get a coffee at the gas station instead,” Harold tried. “Hopefully there aren’t fleas in the box too.”

“I don’t think so—though I did start itching like crazy at night after we visited the flea family. Maybe that was my subconscious playing along too.”

“I certainly hope so,” Harold replied with a crooked smile. “Your resistance is probably already lowered from working with my envelopes. I’m afraid the fleas would have free rein.”

“You’ve got a point. I need to be extra careful. So go on—get your coffee at a café for once. The company pays when it’s been necessary to take over your desk—I mean, your workplace.”

“Thank you—and good luck with the administrative...” He paused, then added, “Just don’t cultivate too much of the subconscious. I’d like to be able to recognize you again when I get back.”

Sophie looked up and nodded, smiling.

“You sent me the address, but is there anything else I should know about this case beforehand? Wasn’t it something about a boy who was worried about his dog?” Harold asked, with one leg already out the door.

“Just take it on intuition. You’re usually good at that. And if you run into any secrets, remember to break their power. You know—you get the farthest with openness and honesty,” she replied with a glint in her eye.

A Street from Another Life

Harold left the industrial area and headed toward one of the city’s café streets. He had spent a lot of time there in his youth, but far too little in recent years. Now he actually looked forward to seeing it again. Yes—would he even recognize the place? The mood would probably be completely different.

It was the same street—and still not. New signs, new windows; the old bakery had become something with sourdough and little tables. He caught a glimpse of himself in a window: a man who still liked the sound of an espresso machine, but who no longer believed coffee could solve everything. Only some things.

He himself had changed too. “For the better?” he asked himself. “Maybe.” He had, in any case, become more mature and more in balance with his different sides. And speaking of the subconscious: there was quieter in his inner house now. There were no longer domestic blowups, like in the old days—or rather, in his young days—when his superego and id were always at war. His moral compass hadn’t failed him, so his id, or his more boundary-seeking side, hadn’t been given much space. Just a small basement room, if he was going to stay with the image of personality as a house.

He felt better with himself now. More calm, more balance, and no major emotional swings. Yes—except for those envelopes. They were probably a remnant from the time when the superego’s voice made him feel ashamed.

He was actually glad he had met Sophie. They were as different as two people can be. But he felt good in her company. She had some of that immediacy and courage he sometimes missed in himself. And now, the thing with the windowed envelopes—which had been a big problem and a taboo—she took it in stride. He didn’t feel wrong or ashamed, at least not yet. He barely even knew what was in those envelopes himself. He might be surprised.

The café district no longer felt appealing. It had lost its magic, Harold realized as he wandered around his old neighborhood. He bought a takeaway coffee but didn’t even feel like sitting down. Time had passed.

The Family Beyond the City

The drive in the Volvo went a little outside the city, just a couple of kilometers, to a small village of maybe only twenty-five houses. People lived there who worked in town but wanted the country air. People who appreciated a local community different from city culture. And then, of course, also the group that wanted to keep a few animals and have plenty of space to grow vegetables.

It was the last category the family he was visiting belonged to. A couple in their sixties with their late child—a nine-year-old boy. His older siblings had moved out.

Aside from a few chickens and ducks and a couple of cats, they only had one Labrador—no other animals. And it was the Labrador, Wilson, who was the reason for their inquiry. At least the official reason.

Already in the driveway, Harold got a sense of what kind of family he was visiting. To put it mildly, it was messy. Apart from the passage to the car, every patch of ground was covered with something: old farm machinery and several car wrecks, thoroughly overgrown with knee-high grass. He could also make out a couple of small wooden boats. He thought it must have been at least twenty years since they'd been in the water.

Two outbuildings were in disrepair, with doors hanging from a single hinge and small panes shattered in rusty iron frames. The main house was in better shape, but needed paint, a few new roof tiles, and cleaning.

There were two possibilities: either the place was inhabited by a messy family of collectors, or there was another reason they had given up on maintenance. It could be illness.

Harold got the answer before he even got out of the car, because coming toward him was a man in a wheelchair, the right age. He signaled for Harold to park a bit farther forward and over to one side. Harold followed the direction and then got out to greet him.

"Edward," the man said, leaning forward in the wheelchair to shake hands.

"Harold," Harold greeted him back. "Well, my old Volvo has come to good company," he added, nodding toward a couple of the wrecks.

"Yes—they should have been sold a long time ago, back when they were worth something, but health hasn't allowed it," he replied, already giving something essential about himself and his family's situation. "I actually think one of them in the barn is—or was—a Volvo 544. Great car!"

Harold nodded. Maybe he'd get to see it later.

Wilson

Now the door opened, and first out came an energetic Labrador. It squeezed out between the boy and his mother, who had also heard

the car arrive. The dog ran toward Harold, tail wagging, while the boy tried—without success—to call it back: “Wilson, Wilson, come here!”

Harold crouched down to pet the dog and to get eye level with Edward in the wheelchair. He pulled a couple of treats from his pocket, which Wilson gulped down.

The mother and the boy reached them and greeted him politely. She introduced herself as “Elin,” and the boy’s name was Jonathan. “Yes, he was the youngest in the bunch—a little late one—so we named him Jonathan after the Bible story.”

Harold noticed that the boy wasn’t just standing there looking. He was watching. As if he were registering things: the car, the dog, strangers, his father’s breathing. A child with a little control chip in his chest.

Harold nodded and introduced himself again.

“Come inside—there’s coffee,” Elin said, nodding toward the house.

Cake and Silence

They followed, and it turned out that two rails had been fastened to the low steps, so Edward could roll up without any trouble or help.

Inside, it was clear this wasn’t Edward’s domain or responsibility. Everything was surprisingly neat and clean. And around the kitchen table—whose size revealed that the family could be large when everyone was home—coffee cups and soda had been set out. From the oven, Elin brought out a dish with a warm apple cake, the kind with crumble on top and that tastes best with a little cream.

Once the coffee had been poured and everyone had something on their plates, Elin formally took the floor. “Thank you, Harold. It was good you could come—and on such short notice.” She nodded appreciatively and smiled. “The challenge here probably isn’t something you’ve tried before, because we simply disagree about whether our dog Wilson is sick. Not physically, but mentally. My husband and I can’t see that anything is wrong, but Jonathan is convinced. He also thinks it’s getting worse, and it weighs on him so much that I can hear him crying when he’s alone.” She paused to see if it was okay to talk about in front of her son.

Jonathan nodded and looked thoroughly miserable. He reached down and stroked the dog, who had settled under the table by his feet. "Yeah. It's sad for him," he said quietly, looking down at the dog, who responded by wagging its tail furiously.

"That is an absolutely amazing cake," Harold commented, reaching for the bowl of cream.

"Please—have more," Elin replied.

"That sounds pretty serious, Jonathan," Harold continued with cake in his mouth. "It's obvious that you and Wilson are very close. So it makes good sense that you'd be the first to sense changes." Harold nodded appreciatively at the boy, who was now listening intently.

"What do you say, Jonathan, to showing me around afterward? Then we can bring Wilson, and you can explain to me what it is you're seeing that worries you."

The boy nodded, and Harold got confirming nods from the parents that it was okay.

"But it'll take a moment," Harold continued with a smile, "because it's been a long time since I've tasted such a good cake."

Elin smiled and slid the dish all the way over to Harold, even though it was actually already close. "Go ahead," she offered.

"Watch your cholesterol," came suddenly—and completely unexpectedly—from the boy.

A strange silence fell, the kind that arises in families where words can turn into symptoms. Elin smiled quickly, as if she were wrapping the silence in something nice. Edward looked down into his coffee. Jonathan stroked Wilson over the head again—as if it was the dog that needed protecting from the truth.

"Yes, sorry," the mother explained, "but because of my husband's diabetes we have to be a bit careful. So Jonathan has heard about cholesterol a few times."

Harold nodded, understanding, and took only one spoonful, even though he would have liked more.

Alone with Wilson

Jonathan seemed happy to be alone with Harold and Wilson. He showed him around the buildings and had explanations for many of the old, decaying things. Stories his father had told him.

In the barn he proudly showed off his air rifle. "I use it for rats," he said, aiming at something over by the door. "There aren't any right now, but in the fall, when it gets cold, they're swarming."

"Is it only you who shoots?" Harold wanted to know. They had sat down on some hay bales, and he had been given the rifle in his hands.

The dog didn't really settle. It sat down first, stood up again, took two steps and sat down again—as if it couldn't decide where it belonged. Then came a small, almost soundless sigh that was more like air slipping out of a crack.

"Only me and Wilson," the boy replied. "It's almost always just us two."

"But you must have some buddies at school?" Harold asked, continuing. He was mindful that it shouldn't feel like an interrogation, but so far Jonathan seemed happy to talk.

"It's a little hard with buddies," Jonathan began. "Wilson doesn't like them."

"Okay, then I understand," Harold said, nodding. "He bites them?"

"No," Jonathan replied, and couldn't help laughing. "He would never bite. And he loves to play when someone comes over."

"So what is it? I don't quite get it," Harold said, putting on a puzzled face.

"Yes, you do," the boy explained, a little know-it-all. "He gets sad when my buddies go home again."

"Because he misses them?" Harold asked carefully.

"Yeah, because it was so fun, and then it suddenly gets quiet, and there's nobody else except my mom and dad. And my dad just sleeps."

The Alarm Inside the House

"So he's bored?" Harold tried.

"Yeah, like crazy. And then he cries. Did you know dogs can cry?" The boy looked up and seemed less defeated.

Harold shook his head.

"Wilson cries a lot. Mostly in the evenings. But my parents don't hear it. He doesn't do it when they're there. Then he wags his tail like crazy and fools them," Jonathan went on, caught up in his story.

"And then you comfort him?"

Jonathan nodded and reached out to pet Wilson.

"Maybe your parents don't understand anything at all?" Harold tried again, gently.

Jonathan shook his head. "They actually talk about illness all the time. But only about my dad's," he said a little quietly.

"Is your dad very sick?" Harold wanted to know.

"Yes, really sick," the boy said. "He's at the hospital all the time, and sometimes the ambulance comes and gets him too... with the lights on."

"And you... and Wilson. Do you go along?"

"Wilson isn't allowed to come, and I hate hospitals, so I stay home and take care of him," Jonathan explained.

"So it's just you two here all alone while your mom and dad are at the hospital?" Harold signaled that it sounded too extreme.

"Yes, until Maria or David comes—my siblings who live in the city," Jonathan answered.

"That must be awful for you... and Wilson. You're left here alone."

"Yes, it's bad," the boy said, "but not the worst."

"What's the worst?" Harold asked.

"The worst is that you're always worried and scared about what's going to happen. You don't know when the ambulance will come, and whether my dad will even come home again." He petted Wilson again, soothingly. "He starts shaking when I talk about it."

The picture began to form for Harold: a boy who was always on alert, and a family that had put social life on pause... always ready in case something serious happened.

He looked at the boy and the dog, who were again wagging their tail wildly. And he felt sorry for Jonathan, who wasn't getting to live his boyhood because of his father's illness.

"You're mostly at home, Jonathan, I understand, to look after Wilson in case something happens?" Harold began again, very gently.

Jonathan nodded. "You never know!"

Harold nodded. He understood the boy, and he had heard enough. "Shall we go inside and see if there's more cake?" he asked, and laughed.

What the Dog Was Carrying

Inside, the couple were still sitting around the kitchen table. Only half an hour had probably passed. Harold sat down in the same place and reached for the thermos.

Elin discreetly slid the dish with the last piece of cake over toward him.

With cake in his mouth, Harold began to report from their walk. "I think I understand Jonathan better now. He's worried about what's going to happen with your illness," he nodded toward the father. "You could maybe say he's in a constant state of alarm, because anything can happen. That's his experience. And then he has to take care of Wilson."

"And when a child walks around with the alarm switched on," Harold went on, briefly looking at Jonathan, "it almost always finds a place to hang it. Sometimes it hangs on a dog."

Jonathan nodded and looked down at the dog, who had taken his usual place under the table.

Meanwhile Harold sent the parents a look that couldn't be misunderstood. It was crucial that they understood the dog's role in their son's story.

Elin gave a nod that showed she understood. She then looked at her husband as if to say, "I'll explain afterward."

Harold could continue. "What you can do is create a more normal everyday life. I know it's hard with an illness that can demand treatment at any time. But it's important that you keep it between the two of you. So Jonathan and Wilson get more time without worry, and so they also get opportunities to see friends—both here and at their houses. Maybe it could be arranged so that both Jonathan and Wilson get out and go, at least for a while. Wilson is really safest with Jonathan."

Elin nodded again, understanding—and now Edward did too.

"You may talk about the illness, so Jonathan doesn't feel left out, but limit it to a specific time once a week. That way he can have the rest of the time off."

There were nods again. And Jonathan was clearly listening very carefully.

The Volvo Full of Bullet Holes

Harold was afraid it might all become too serious. At the same time, he had a good sense that the message had been received, so he changed the subject. "We found the old Volvo 544 in the barn. It looked as if it had been in the war."

"What are you saying? As far as I know, it hasn't been in any war," Edward replied, puzzled.

"It's full of bullet holes," Harold continued, "as if someone fired a machine gun at it. Are you sure?"

Edward understood and let out a couple of chuckles. "Oh ... that war, yes. That's probably something Jonathan knows about."

Jonathan smiled. "It was me and my big brother David playing mafia war. The car was full of drugs, and then we stopped it."

"Okay, everything has an explanation," Harold laughed.

"And now thank you very much!" Elin broke in. "Because you're busy! Your boss sent me a message saying you should call when we're done. It sounded like an urgent task."

Harold smiled. "Yes, well ... I've learned not to let that stress me. We're quite different. If I let her temperament run my workday, I'd quickly need to borrow Wilson."

The adults exchanged knowing smiles. Jonathan didn't quite understand what was going on, but he enjoyed the relaxed, warm atmosphere.

Another quarter of an hour passed with small talk, after which Harold wrapped things up by offering to write the parents an email if there was anything they wanted clarified. They were more than welcome to do so—also over the coming weeks, when they would hopefully be changing their everyday life.

Jonathan received a warm handshake, and Wilson the last treats from the pocket.

The Cleared Desk

The Volvo started after a couple of tries, and the drive home began. Only as he was leaving the property did he notice the sign: Ambulance Route.

Harold pulled over to the side of the road and called Sophie. He was curious whether it really involved an extra assignment.

She laughed and switched to video as soon as the call connected. "Just look at this," she said triumphantly, turning the phone so Harold could see the cleared desks. "Done!" she said in the same enthusiastic tone.

Harold didn't understand. The box of envelopes would have taken him weeks to empty—if it had been possible at all. He doubted it.

"Bring cake home! So we can celebrate," she continued.

"I have to say, Sophie, you can do something I don't even begin to understand," Harold replied.

"Yep! This is one of my specialties. We could expand and offer financial and administrative crisis management. 'Bring your box of unopened window envelopes, and we'll take care of it while you're on vacation. A thousand dollars. Bam.' I even do before-and-after pictures," she went on. "You know. Trauma pile ... and then ... freedom pile. Very visual. It sells."

"Good idea, Sophie, but I'll probably stick to the animals and the families. If you get bored, go for it."

"Okay, Harold, we'll talk about it later. But do bring some cake."

Before Harold could answer and mention the four pieces of apple tart ... with cream and cholesterol, Sophie ended the call.

What was he supposed to do? Sophie wasn't normally into cake. She had been thinking of him. And he couldn't force down another piece. Good advice was expensive. He had to bring something.

He pulled into a gas station and explored the convenience store. The selection was large, but nothing that really suited Sophie. Still, to show his goodwill, he bought a large bag of licorice and a bouquet of pink

flowers. He wondered how she would take it. He also wrote a card: "Thank you for your invaluable help ... Harold."

On his way out, he thought that once again he was entering a domain he didn't understand: Sophie's gratitude. It had no rules. It could be a high-five—or an invoice.

The Last Envelope

The first thing Harold noticed when he opened the office door was that the smell had changed: from old paper to order.

Sophie sat in her chair like a general after a successful campaign. On the table were three stacks with small signs: PAID, CALL THEM, and NOT RELEVANT.

Harold remained standing in the doorway. He could feel his body protesting, as if it didn't quite trust that the envelopes were really gone. "You do know," he said, "that it's not just paper. There's something behind it—and something that needs to be done."

"And that's why I called around and paid what needed to be paid. I even negotiated good discounts by pretending to be your volunteer advisor. Last stop before applying for debt relief. We can deduct it from your salary. It wasn't that bad."

Harold nodded, both surprised and appreciative.

"But that one," she said, pointing to a single envelope on his desk, "that one you have to take yourself."

Harold looked at it. It was the same envelope as before. It wasn't bigger than the others. It even looked harmless. But that was exactly how it usually began.

"What's in it?" he asked.

Sophie shrugged. "You know better than I do. Take it on a day when you have the energy."

Harold grew curious and took a step toward the small envelope, which at once seemed completely ordinary and at the same time frightening. Thoughts flew through his head: extra tax, a court summons, a police report ...

He was tempted to follow his usual practice and just slip it into his pocket and hide it away later. But he could also take the bull by the horns ... and simply open it. After all, Sophie knew what it was.

He chose the latter and resolutely opened the envelope. Inside was a small card that read: "Dear Harold, congratulations on your new life of openness and freedom! With love, Sophie."

He turned around, only to see a broadly smiling Sophie holding a little flag. "You did it!" she almost shouted. "I knew you would! Congratulations!"

Harold smiled, embarrassed and a little proud. "Thank you," he managed to say.

Flowers and Licorice

"I also have something for you ... out in the car." He hurried out and came back with the bouquet and the pink card. "To a good boss with special care for her employee," he said, handing her the flowers and at the same time tossing the bag of licorice onto the table.

Sophie couldn't believe her eyes. She read the card and her eyes filled with tears. "Thank you, Harold. This is actually the first bouquet I've ever received ... apart from one on a really awkward date."

Harold gave a slightly clumsy nod, relieved that the flowers had been well received.

After a cup of coffee and half a bag of licorice, an ordinary calm settled over the office.

Harold thought of the visit to the family—and especially the conversation with Jonathan and Wilson in the barn. "It's incredible what we come up with in order to live with the unbearable. The things we don't really believe we can survive. Jonathan was willing to switch roles with his dog, and for years I've lived with a cardboard box I thought was explosive like a bomb. And then another person comes along—with different conditions and without the same projections—and in a single day the world is changed."

He looked at Sophie, who was deeply buried in her screen, and he couldn't help but smile.

She sat there, thinking she had just cleaned up.

Afterword

I hope you enjoyed spending time with Harold and Sophie — and perhaps found yourself thinking about what is worth keeping in your own life.

The world of *The Pet Therapist* grew out of a simple curiosity: how often the challenges we see in animals reflect something human beneath the surface. Again and again, the real question is not about behavior — but about value, attention, and what we choose to repair rather than replace.

If you enjoyed this story, there is more.

The full collection, *The Pet Therapist*, is available wherever books are sold — as an eBook, paperback, and audiobook. It contains additional case stories that explore relationships, projection, loyalty, and the quiet dilemmas we don't always speak about.

Thank you for reading.

Warmly,

Henrik Kruse