

# In the Company of Dogs

The Pet Therapist: New Cases

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# A Few Words Before We Begin

The Pet Therapist started with a question I've carried with me for years:  
*What if the problem isn't only the dog?*

Over time, that question grew into a larger universe of stories — about dogs, cats, birds, and the many animals who quietly become part of our families. In the Company of Dogs is one part of that world. These twelve stories focus on dogs, but the deeper thread running through them is the relationship between animals and the people who love them.

Before I began writing fiction, I worked as a family therapist. And long before that, I was simply a person who loved animals — sometimes the ordinary kind, sometimes the more exotic kind. I've shared my life with parrots, reptiles, fish, and more dogs than I can easily count. Right now, I live with three large dogs, a couple of cats, and a generous number of chickens. Animals have always been more than pets to me. They've been companions, mirrors, and occasionally very honest teachers.

I should also say this clearly: I'm not a licensed psychologist, and I'm not a veterinarian. The stories in this book aren't professional advice manuals. They're reflections — drawn from experience, observation, and imagination. If you recognize something of your own life in these pages, take it as an invitation to reflect, not a prescription.

What I've tried to bring into these stories is a blend of warmth and understated psychology — the small shifts, the quiet realizations, the conversations that happen after the official visit is over. I hope you'll enjoy getting to know Sophie and Harold, their small company, and the world they move through — from living rooms and gardens to late conversations in the car.

Most of all, I hope you enjoy spending time in their company.

Thank you for being here.□

— Henrik Kruse



# For The Show

## **The Pitch**

They arrived ten minutes early.

That suited Sophie well.

She had already moved the iPad slightly to the left, straightened the stack of papers, and discreetly slipped her protein bar down into her bag.

The office was as it usually was: restrained, bright, almost clinical. Through the window you could see the blue Volvo standing on the cracked asphalt, and Sophie's bicycle leaning against the side wall of the neighboring building, as if everything were exactly as it used to be.

But then there was also the red Tesla, like an unexpected and foreign guest.

The marketing woman walked in first. She was in her early forties, with precisely cut hair and a neutral blazer that signaled both seriousness and mobility.

Behind her came her colleague, a slightly younger man with a gentle face and a laptop under his arm. His notebook was filled with colored tabs.

They shook hands in a way that suggested they were taking this seriously. And they were.

“We’ve taken a close look at your material,” the woman began, as she sat down and placed her tablet on the table. “There’s something here. Families. Pets. And a sprinkle of psychology. It’s a strong niche.”

Sophie nodded. Harold leaned back slightly in his chair.

The colleague opened his computer, and three words appeared on the screen in bold letters:

RELATABLE – AUTHENTIC – SHAREABLE

“What you have,” the woman continued, “is credibility. And that’s no small thing. But credibility alone doesn’t move on social media. It needs a hook.”

The colleague clicked ahead.

“Hook number one,” he said, reading aloud: “You think you have a pet. In reality, you have a mirror.”

He looked up and waited a moment, as if the words needed to settle.

“We’re not talking about changing you,” the woman said calmly. “We’re talking about amplifying what already works.”

Harold noticed that she didn’t say “sell.” She said “work.”

“We’ve analyzed engagement in family-related content,” the colleague continued. “Short format. Clear conflict. Distinct dynamics between people. People scroll fast. You have three seconds to stop them.”

“We’d like to produce a video with both of you,” the woman said. “Your interplay is a strength. Contrast performs very well.”

“Contrast?” Harold asked.



“You’re calm, reflective,” she said kindly. “Sophie has edge. Precision. That’s strong. But on video, it can be an advantage if she becomes just a bit more visual.”

“Loosen things up a little,” the colleague added.

Sophie smiled, but her shoulders straightened slightly.

“Seriousness is fine,” the woman continued. “But the camera rewards movement, color, and energy. It’s not about turning you into something else—just about making it clearer.”

They clicked ahead.

The proposal was simple: A short case. A clear conflict. An unexpected animal. And a clear point.

“If we can add an element that creates curiosity, we’re well on our way,” the colleague said. “Something you don’t expect to see in this context.”

“Like what?” Harold asked.

The woman hesitated for a moment—not out of uncertainty, but out of consideration.

“A slightly unusual pet. Something that breaks the expectation.”

Harold smiled faintly.

“Just don’t bring snakes.”

They laughed. Genuinely.

“That’s actually not a bad idea,” the colleague said, half-closing the computer again.

Sophie laughed along, but her gaze was already on the next slide.

“Harold works especially well when he interacts physically with the animal,” the woman said. “When it becomes concrete. When he reacts spontaneously. That’s strong.”

“And Sophie,” the colleague continued, “you have a sharp presence. But maybe we could play a little with the visual. Nothing extreme. Just enough for people to stop.”

“Costume might be too strong a word,” the woman said mildly. “But visual differentiation helps.”

Sophie let her fingers glide along the edge of the table.

“If it works,” she said.

“It does,” the colleague replied without hesitation. “We measure it.”

They talked about reach, retention, target audiences. Curves moved upward on the screen. Words like “segmentation” and “optimization” entered the room without sounding threatening. They spoke about success as connection—but the graphs were clear.

“We’ll develop a concrete setup and get back to you this afternoon,” the woman said at last. “With props, text suggestions, maybe a couple of visual ideas. Then we can test it together.”

They stood. Handshakes again. A promise of momentum.

When the door closed, it grew quiet.

Sophie remained standing in the middle of the room.

“They’re right about one thing,” she said. “We need to grow.”

Harold looked at the chair where the marketing woman had been sitting.

“Yes,” he said calmly. “The only question is how.”

Outside, a truck drove past on the road behind the industrial district.

“Just no snakes,” he said.

Sophie smiled. But in her eyes there was already a glint of something else. Not fear. Something more like ambition.

### **Three Seconds**

The Volvo started on the third attempt.

“It does it on purpose,” Sophie said.

“It likes suspense,” Harold replied, pulling out of the parking lot.

Sophie already had her phone in hand.

“Families with children between six and twelve,” she said. “They’re the ones who engage most with pet content. Especially if there’s a clear conflict. It has to be recognizable, but with a twist.”

Harold nodded.

“That makes sense.”

She shot him a quick glance.

"You think so?"

"Of course. Families with kids and animals are an entire ecosystem. There's always something at stake."

She smiled faintly.

"You can, when you want to."

"I always want to," he said calmly.

She kept scrolling.

"They talked about hooks. Something that stops people in the first three seconds."

"Three seconds," he repeated. "That's about the time it takes a dog to decide whether you're interesting."

"Exactly," she said.

"So we need to be interesting."

"Yes."

He thought for a moment.

"I've never really had a problem with that."

Sophie laughed.

"No, but you've had a problem with showing off."

"That's not the same," he said gently. "Being interesting and making yourself interesting are two different crafts."

She set the phone down for a moment.

"You're always a little on guard when someone says something works."

"Yes," he said without hesitation. "I am."

"Because?"

"Because I've seen a lot of things work for a short time."

He shrugged.

"And that's fine. It can be necessary. I just like to know what it works for."

She studied him.

"You don't sound opposed to it."

"I'm not," he said. "I want us to grow. I just don't want us to grow away from what we can do."

"You mean...?"

"What we can do isn't speed. It's weight."

She leaned back.

"Weight doesn't always perform."

"Yes, it does," he said dryly. "Just more slowly."

She laughed again.

"You're impossible."

"I'm experienced."

"That's the same thing."

"Not at all."

It grew quiet for a moment as they passed through a traffic light.

"I actually like the idea of contrast," he said then. "You and me. There's something there."

"Of course there is," she said.

"You push. I brake. It's worked so far."

"You don't brake," she said. "You slow down."

"At my age, that's the same thing."

She shook her head.

"Imagine," she said again, growing more eager, "that we find a case where the animal does something unexpected. Something visually strong. It would be perfect."

"Yes," he said calmly. "If it's real."

"You always think someone's playing to the audience."

"No," he said. "I just think that we humans quickly start looking over our shoulder."

She looked at him.

"And we don't?"

"Yes," he said with a small smile. "Of course we do. The only question is whether we can still choose not to."

She considered that for a moment.

"You mean you should be able to do the same thing even if no one is watching."

"It's a good test," he said.

She placed the phone down on her thigh.

"You always make it a little more complicated."

"Or a little more durable," he said.

The Volvo turned onto a residential street.

## **The Skateboard**

The skateboard was already in the driveway.

It lay on its side, as if it were waiting.

Sophie saw it first and sent Harold a brief look that contained both "look" and "perfect."

Harold said nothing. He looked at the wheels. They were worn.

The door opened before they had a chance to ring.

It wasn't the woman who came out first. It was the dog.

An English bulldog moved across the tiles with a determination that didn't quite fit its body. It was broad across the chest, heavy in its steps, and carried that particular bulldog blend of dignity and clumsiness. Its head was large; its eyes dark and inquisitive. It breathed audibly, as if the world were slightly more demanding for it than for others.

It stopped two meters from them and sat down. Panted.

Then it rose again and covered the remaining distance.

"This is Molly," the woman behind her said. "And I'm Kate."

She stood in the doorway with one hand on the frame. Her voice was calm, almost apologetic.

"Molly," Sophie repeated, bending down slightly.

Molly ignored her at first and went straight to Harold. She sniffed at the leg of his pants, considered him, and then sat down heavily on his shoes.

"She doesn't usually do that," Kate said quickly. "She's normally a bit... reserved."

"She seems thoughtful," Harold said, letting his hand rest on Molly's head. "That's a good quality."

Molly closed her eyes for a moment as he scratched behind her ear. Then she drew a deep, heavy breath.

Thomas came out behind Kate. He wore a loose hoodie and carried another skateboard under his arm.

“She likes men with beards,” he said.

“She likes people who stand still,” Kate corrected gently.

There was a tone between them that was already familiar.

“Come inside,” she said.

The living room was tidy, almost carefully tidy. A throw blanket lay folded on the couch. A water bowl stood beside a heavy ceramic bowl filled with dog food. Nothing seemed accidental.

Molly moved into the room with a slight waddle. She didn’t jump. She didn’t run. She walked like someone who knew her body—and its limitations.

She sat down in the middle of the floor and looked from one to the other.

“I love her,” Kate said before they had even sat down. “You need to know that.”

There was nothing aggressive in it. Just firmness.

“She’s not built for much,” she continued, sitting down beside Molly. “She gets out of breath quickly. She can’t run far. She can’t handle heat. She can’t... well, she can’t do much.”

She placed her hand on the dog’s broad back.

“But she’s happy. And she feels safe.”

Sophie sat down in the armchair and observed Molly with an analytical gaze.

“It’s a very charming breed,” she said. “But they do have some physical challenges.”

“Exactly,” Kate said.

Molly suddenly got up and walked over to the skateboard leaning against the wall. She sniffed it. Gently nudged it with her paw. The wheels turned slightly.

Thomas smiled, almost proudly.

"She does it herself," Thomas said, nodding toward the skateboard.

Molly nudged it again with her paw. Not hard. More inquisitively. The wheels turned a quarter rotation and stopped.

Kate straightened her back.

"Yes," she said. "And now you can probably already see where we disagree."

She looked from Harold to Sophie, as if to make sure they were actually listening.

"That's why I contacted you. It may not seem like the biggest problem in the world. A dog and a skateboard. But to me it really matters."

She placed her hand on Molly's back again. Molly breathed heavily, but calmly.

"I'm afraid she'll be overstrained," Kate continued. "She struggles in the heat. She can't run far. She's not... built for speed."

Thomas drew in a breath but didn't say anything yet.

"Sometimes," Kate continued, briefly looking down at the floor, "in the worst moments I think it's animal cruelty. Or manipulation."

The words hung in the room for a moment.

"In other moments I just think she's being pushed more than she can handle. And I don't think Thomas takes it seriously enough. He gets so absorbed in it."

"I'm not ignoring it," Thomas said quickly.

"You're overlooking it," she replied. "That's not the same thing."

Harold looked at Molly again. Her ribcage rose and fell heavily. She sat in the middle of the room like a physical reminder of her own slightly peculiar construction.

"Tell me what happens," he said calmly.

Thomas straightened a little in his chair.

"The point is, it can be done," he said. "And she seems happy. She runs to the board on her own. She wags her tail. She jumps up."

"She doesn't jump," Kate said. "She stumbles up."

Sophie looked from one to the other.

"But if she seeks it out herself..." she began.

"She seeks you out," Kate interrupted.

It grew quiet.

Thomas's expression shifted slightly.

"She seeks you out," Kate repeated, more calmly now. "Not the skateboard. You."

Harold leaned forward a little.

"Thomas," he said, "what is it you want to do with her?"

Thomas didn't hesitate this time.

"I just want something that's ours," he said. "Something we do together. Something that isn't just... her lying there."

Molly was now actually lying in the middle of the floor, as if demonstrating the point. She panted, but her eyes were open.

"She's not just lying there," Kate said quietly. "She's herself. That's how she is."

Thomas's hands tightened briefly around his knees.

"She was your dog," he said. "From the beginning. I just had to accept it. I'm trying to find a way to be part of it."

Sophie slowly lowered her phone.

Harold let his gaze move between them and Molly.

"So the question," he said calmly, "isn't only whether Molly can skate."

He looked at Kate.

"It's whether she can handle it."

Then at Thomas.

"And whether you can carry it."

Molly lifted her head, as if she sensed that her name had been mentioned too often.

She nudged the skateboard again.

The wheels turned.

And stopped.

## On Display



“Try looking at this one,” Sophie said, leaning forward in her chair so that both Thomas and Harold could see the screen.

Molly lifted her head at the movement, then rested it again.

On the screen, a bulldog balanced on a skateboard rolling down a gentle slope. It stood firmly with its paws spread, and in the background, you could hear someone cheering.

Sophie laughed.

“That’s incredible. It looks completely calm.”

“It can push off by itself,” Thomas said eagerly. “Wait, I have one where it does that.”

He took out his own phone and began scrolling quickly.

“Here,” he said.

Now it was a beach. A bulldog on a surfboard, small waves, sun. The dog stood wide and heavy, but kept its balance.

Sophie laughed again.

“That almost can’t be real. Is it really true? Or is it edited?”

“It’s real,” Thomas said without hesitation. “I’ve seen one of them in real life. Not this one, but a similar one. It did it on its own. It ran up onto the board.”

Sophie shook her head slightly.

“That’s wild.”

She leaned closer toward Thomas, and their shoulders nearly touched over the phones.

“It’s about technique,” she said. “Center of gravity. Timing. If you start on flat ground...”

“Exactly,” Thomas said. “I don’t start on hills. I don’t push her. She jumps up by herself.”

Kate hadn’t moved.

She sat with her back straight and her hands folded around Molly’s broad neck.

“Can’t you see it?” she said suddenly.

Sophie only looked up when she heard the tone.

“See what?” she asked.

“That,” Kate said, nodding toward the screens. “Can’t you see what it is?”

Thomas straightened slightly.

“It’s a dog having fun.”

“No,” Kate said. “It’s a dog being put on display.”

Silence fell.

“They’re projects,” she continued, her voice growing firmer. “They’ve become projects for people who want to show themselves off. They want likes. They want attention. And then they take a breed that already struggles to breathe and put it on a board.”

She stroked Molly along her back.

“It’s not play. It’s performance.”

Thomas shook his head.

“That’s not how I see it.”

“But can’t you hear yourself?” she said. “You talk about technique. About timing. About progression. She’s not a student.”

“She’s not a porcelain figurine either,” he said.

“She’s a living being,” Kate replied. “And she can’t say no.”

Sophie opened her mouth to say something, then hesitated.

“She runs to the board on her own,” Thomas said.

“She runs to you,” Kate said.

The atmosphere had shifted.

Molly lifted her head again, as if she felt the pressure in the room.

“Can’t you see it?” Kate repeated, this time more quietly. “It’s not a proper way to treat animals. They become means. They become part of a show. And that’s exactly what I don’t like.”

The word lingered. *Show*.

Sophie slowly lowered her phone.

Thomas drew in a heavy breath.

Harold looked from one to the other. He had let it unfold, the way you let a dog sniff its way toward the truth.

“Let’s try something,” he said calmly.

He reached his hand toward Sophie’s phone.

“Can we put it away for a moment?”

Sophie blinked, as if only then realizing she had been leaning forward.

She placed the phone on the table.

Thomas hesitated for a second, but did the same.

Harold leaned slightly forward.

“Let’s talk about Molly,” he said. “Not about the videos.”

Molly exhaled.

And the room grew a little quieter.

### **The Bridge**

“I don’t want love to be conditional on performance,” Kate said.

There was no anger in her voice anymore. Just fatigue.

Thomas sat quietly for a moment. He looked down at his hands, as if considering whether they had actually done something wrong.

“You know that,” he said, more quietly now. “It was hard for me in the beginning.”

Kate looked at him.

“Molly was just something that came along,” he continued. “I really liked you. But I’d never had a dog. And then there she was. She took up space. She smelled. She snored. She took up room in the bed.”

Molly lifted her head at the word “snored” and looked briefly offended.

“I felt a little... forced,” Thomas said. “Not by you. Just by the situation. If I wanted to be with you, I had to be with her too.”

Kate swallowed once but did not object.

“I tried,” he continued. “I went on walks. I threw a ball. But it didn’t really work. And then one day I saw those videos.”

He drew in a breath.

“And I thought: That I can understand. Balance and timing. That’s something I know. And if she could be part of that... then we could have something together. Something that felt natural to me.”

He looked at Molly.

"It felt like a bridge."

Silence fell.

"And I actually think she seemed happy," he said. "She runs to the board on her own. She wags her tail. She gets eager."

Kate slowly shook her head.

"She gets eager because you're eager."

"Maybe," he said honestly. "But I didn't want to hurt her."

"I know," she said. "But you're ignoring what she is."

Harold had been listening without interrupting.

"It's interesting," he said calmly. "You're talking about two different things."

They looked at him.

"Kate is talking about Molly's body," he continued. "Thomas is talking about the relationship."

He leaned slightly forward.

"It can quickly turn into a discussion about principles. About animal cruelty or not. About performance or love."

He looked at Thomas.

"Why don't you try showing us what you do?"

Thomas blinked.

"Now?"

"Yes," Harold said. "It's easy to talk about big words. Let's look at it in the small. Then we can better decide what's actually happening."

Thomas didn't hesitate for long. He stood up and picked up the skateboard.

Molly immediately lifted her head.

The first thing Harold noticed was her breathing. It quickened before she had even moved.

Thomas placed the board on the floor.

"Come on, Molly," he said, lightly patting it.

Molly stood up. Hesitated for a second. Then she took a step forward and placed one paw on the board. It rolled slightly. She pulled her paw back again.

"See?" Thomas said. "She wants to."

He coaxed her again, this time with a small treat.

Molly placed both front paws on the board. The wheels rolled half a meter. She jumped down again and panted heavily.

Harold said nothing.

He watched her ribcage. The rhythm of her breathing. The pause she took before looking up at Thomas.

"One more time," Thomas said encouragingly.

Molly looked at him. Then at the board. Then she placed a paw on it again.

"Stop for a moment," Harold said gently.

Thomas froze.

"Can you try something?" Harold continued. "Leave the board. Do nothing."

Thomas pulled his hands back.

A few seconds passed.

Molly stood still.

She looked at Thomas.

Then she walked over to him—not to the board—and leaned her head against his leg.

She was still panting.

Harold gave a slight nod.

"And if you don't take it out at all?" he asked.

Thomas set the skateboard back against the wall.

Molly sat down. Then she lay down.

Her breathing gradually slowed.

"She doesn't go looking for it," Kate said quietly.

Thomas looked down at Molly.

"But she came when I took it out."

“Yes,” Harold said. “She did.”

He looked at them both.

“The question isn’t only whether she can. The question is what it costs her. And what it means for you.”

Molly closed her eyes.

The room was quiet again.

But this time it was a different kind of quiet.

### **A Middle Way**

Harold sat for a moment without saying anything.

Molly lay on the floor between them, heavy and content not to have to balance on anything at all.

“I actually think,” he said calmly, “honestly, that the best solution in your situation is to try to find a middle way.”

Thomas looked up. Kate straightened.

“Because it can be seen from both sides,” Harold continued. “You’re absolutely right, Kate, that this breed is easily overstrained. She’s not a dog built for long or demanding performances. She pants quickly. She uses a great deal of energy for relatively little.”

He looked at Molly.

“And you’re also right that she seeks human contact. We saw that just now. When the board disappeared, she didn’t go looking for it. She went to you, Thomas.”

Thomas nodded slowly.

“But,” Harold continued, “it’s also true that it’s important for all three of you that you have a good relationship. And if the skateboard has been a bridge for you, Thomas, then it’s not something that should simply be taken away from you.”

Thomas’s shoulders lowered slightly.

“The question isn’t whether it should be or not be,” Harold said. “The question is how it should be.”

He leaned forward.

“If this is going to work, it has to be with clear and natural limits.”

He spoke slowly, concretely.

“A maximum time per session. Not ten minutes. Maybe one minute. Maybe two. And then a break.”

Kate listened intently.

“No steep hills. No speed. No experiments with surfaces that might make her uncertain.”

Thomas nodded.

“And,” Harold continued, “you have to pay attention to her signals. When she starts panting heavily. When she hesitates. When she loses her balance. That’s not resistance. That’s information.”

He looked directly at Thomas.

“And when a minute has passed, you stop. Even if it’s going well.”

Thomas drew in a breath.

“I can do that.”

“Good,” Harold said.

Then he turned slightly toward Sophie, who had been sitting quietly for the past few minutes.

“And then there’s the other side.”

Sophie met his gaze.

“This must not become performance,” he said calmly. “It’s play. And there’s a big difference.”

He looked at both of them again.

“Play is something you do together. Show is something you do for someone.”

The word lingered in the room.

“When it becomes show,” he continued, “we move closer to something that can resemble manipulation. Not necessarily consciously. But gradually.”

Kate nodded slowly.

“So maybe you could agree,” Harold said, “that there’s no filming for social media. Not now. Not at this stage.”

Thomas opened his mouth, then closed it again.

"You can talk about that later," Harold continued. "But right now it's about figuring out whether this can be healthy play."

Silence fell.

"And I also think," he said, looking at Kate, "that it's important for you to loosen the leash a little."

She looked surprised.

"If Thomas constantly feels wrong," he continued gently, "the desire disappears. And then Molly may lose the relationship you actually want them to have."

Kate looked down at Molly.

"And Thomas," Harold said, "you have to show clearly that you see her needs. Not just what she can do. But what she is."

Thomas nodded slowly.

## **Only Play**

There was no applause.

No one stood up and embraced.

It wasn't that kind of moment.

Kate still sat with her hand on Molly's back. She moved it slowly back and forth, as if feeling whether the dog was calm.

"I can see," she said after a while, "that maybe I haven't thought about it that way."

She looked at Thomas.

"I've been so focused on protecting her that maybe I haven't thought enough about the fact that she also needs to have a relationship with you."

Thomas didn't say anything at first.

"And that matters too," Kate continued. "I can see that. She shouldn't be only mine."

Thomas nodded slowly.

"I don't want to take anything away from you either," he said. "That's not what this is about."



"No," she said quietly. "I know."

There was still a difference between them. It did not disappear.

"But I'm willing to accept this," Kate said. "As a trial period."

She looked at Harold.

"With the framework we've talked about."

"Only play," Harold said.

"Only play," she repeated.

Thomas straightened slightly in his chair.

"That's completely fine with me," he said. "That's been the most important thing all along. That we have fun."

He shrugged.

"I know we're different on this point."

Kate smiled faintly.

"I know that too."

"And I want to try," he continued, "to respect that you're trying to protect her. I can see that you're not just overreacting. You see something I don't always see."

Kate looked surprised at the phrasing.

"And I'll keep an eye on it," he said. "On her breathing. On the pauses. On all of it."

"And no hills," she said.

"And no hills," he confirmed.

Silence settled again.

Molly, who had been lying slightly on her side, rolled onto her stomach and pushed herself a few inches forward. She ended up in the middle between their feet.

Thomas let his hand slide down and rest on her neck.

Kate placed her hand on top of his.

Not dramatic.

"This isn't a verdict," he said. "It's an agreement."

"A contract," Sophie said, half joking.

"Yes," Harold said. "But one you can adjust."

Molly sighed.

That heavy, contented bulldog sigh that sounded as if the world did not need to be any bigger than it was right now.

And in that moment there was no skateboard.

Only a dog lying between two people who were still in disagreement—but who had decided to share her.

## **The Costume Test**

Now there was applause.

“There!” the marketing woman said, stepping into the office with an energy that filled the room before she did. “Now we’re going to play.”

Her colleague came in behind her with two large bags and a flat cardboard box under his arm.

“We’ve thought it through from every angle,” he said, beginning to unpack on the table.

Color appeared first. A jacket. A scarf. A pair of round glasses with thick frames.

Sophie looked at it.

“It’s not a costume,” the woman said quickly. “It’s visual differentiation.”

“Of course,” Sophie said.

“You have a strong, serious energy,” the woman continued. “That’s an advantage. But on video we can turn it up slightly. A little more color. A little more play.”

She held the jacket up in front of Sophie.

“Try it.”

Sophie took it. It was soft. And far too lively.

“It’s just for testing,” the colleague said. “The camera loves contrast.”

Meanwhile, he opened the cardboard box.

There was a small rustling sound.

Harold looked down.

Two tame rats sat in a transport cage. Small, pink paws. Intelligent eyes. Calm.

"It's unusual," the woman said enthusiastically. "People expect dogs and cats. Not this."

The colleague smiled.

"You're fantastic with animals, Harold. This will be unexpected and sympathetic."

Harold looked at the rats.

He had never been particularly fond of that type of animal. Not because they were dangerous. Just because they were... rats.

"They're tame," the colleague said quickly. "Very calm."

"Of course," Harold said.

He did not say no.

Sophie came out from the small back room wearing the jacket.

There was applause again.

"Yes!" the woman said. "Look at that!"

Sophie looked down at herself.

She looked like someone about to present chewing gum to a classroom.

"It's just color," the colleague said encouragingly. "It signals energy."

Harold was now holding one of the rats in his hands. It was warm and light. It moved cautiously up along his forearm.

"Fantastic," the woman said. "This will stop people."

Sophie looked at Harold.

He stood completely still.

But he did not look like himself.

"Okay," the colleague said, stepping back. "Imagine the opening. The camera starts on the rats. Then it pans up to Harold. Then we cut to Sophie—color, energy, punchline."

"Punchline?" Harold asked.

"You think you're in control of your pet," the woman said dramatically, "but who's really controlling whom?"

Sophie looked at herself in the dark window.

She turned slightly.

"I look like someone selling chewing gum," she said dryly.

"No," the colleague said quickly. "You look like someone people stop for."

"People will love this," the woman continued. "It's surprising. It's warm. It's shareable."

Harold said nothing. The rats moved calmly in his hands.

"Try saying something spontaneous," the colleague said. "Something playful."

Sophie opened her mouth.

Closed it again.

Something wasn't settling into place.

"It may well be," she said slowly, "that people would love that video."

She pulled the jacket slightly away from her body.

"But there's something about it that doesn't work."

Silence fell.

"What do you mean?" the woman asked, still smiling.

"It doesn't fit," Sophie said. "It doesn't fit me."

The colleague laughed lightly.

"That's the point. To break the expectation."

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I can feel that I can't do this."

She took off the jacket.

"The people who would laugh at this video—they're not the ones we're meant to help."

The smile faded slightly from the woman's face.

"You hired us to get results," she said more firmly. "Then you also have to trust that we know what works."

"I believe you do," Harold said calmly.

He gently placed the rat back into the cage.

"But I honestly don't think those are the kinds of results we need."

Sophie nodded.

"This becomes a show," she said. "And that's not what we do."

There was a short, almost professional silence.

"We can sleep on it," the colleague said, carefully closing the cage.

"Maybe we came on a bit strong."

"We may have been carried away by the mood," the woman said with a small, controlled smile.

They packed up again. The bags were closed. The cardboard box lifted.

There was no applause this time.

"We'll talk," the woman said.

The door closed.

The office was quiet again.

Sophie stood with the jacket in her hands.

Harold looked at her.

"It probably would have worked," he said.

"Yes," she said. "It probably would have."

She placed the jacket on the table.

"But it wasn't us."

He nodded.

Without rats. Without color. Without an audience. Just them.

### **The Fine Line**

The door closed behind the marketing people.

The sound of their footsteps faded down the hallway.

Silence settled over the office.

Sophie was still holding the jacket. She looked at it as if it belonged to someone else.

"I really thought," she said slowly, "that I could play along."

She looked up at Harold.

"I mean it."

She drew in a breath.

"And I'm actually surprised."

"About what?" Harold asked calmly.

"That I couldn't."

She placed the jacket on the table.

"I could feel it immediately. It was wrong. Not dangerous. Not immoral. Just... wrong."

Harold nodded slowly.

"It's a very fine line," he said.

She looked at him.

"Sometimes," he continued, "it's something you can only feel before you can explain it."

Sophie let the words sink in.

"Yes," she said quietly. "That was exactly it."

She sat down.

"I want success," she said. "I want it to work. I want us to be visible."

"So do I," Harold said.

"But not like that."

She shook her head slightly.

"That was a show."

He smiled faintly.

"Yes."

She looked at him again.

"Maybe we should establish some ground rules."

"Ground rules?" he repeated.

"For us," she said. "For the company. For the people we collaborate with."

He leaned back.

"That sounds adult."

"It is," she said dryly.

She thought for a moment.

"For example... efficiency must not cost us our dignity."

He raised his eyebrows slightly.

"That's a good start."

"We're not going to compromise who we are," she continued. "We're not going to sell ourselves out just to gain visibility."

“That’s not the same as being invisible,” he said.

“No,” she said. “But it is the same as being honest.”

He nodded.

“And maybe,” he said, “if something only works when someone is watching... then we should pay extra attention.”

She smiled.

“You and your three seconds.”

“I have a lifetime,” he said with a small smile.







# Pixel and Paws

## **Pixel**

The Volvo started on the third attempt.

First a dry click. Then a halfhearted cough. Finally a deep, rusty rumble, as if the car reluctantly accepted yet another workday. The steering wheel vibrated faintly under Harold's hands, and for a moment it sounded as if the engine was considering regretting the decision.

Then it settled into its uneven idle.

Sophie already had her seat belt on and her phone out.

"Okay," she said, setting the phone into the holder. "Are you ready?"

A small, semi-transparent dog appeared on the screen. It stood there in augmented reality, with a glossy coat and eyes that were slightly too large. It wagged its tail mechanically, but precisely. Perfectly symmetrical.

"His name is Pixel," Sophie said. "4.5 stars on the happiness index."

The Volvo rolled slowly away from the curb. The transmission gave a small, protesting jolt.

"I just gave him digital vitamin," she went on. "Look."

She tapped an icon. A little bowl blinked, and Pixel lowered his head and "ate," with a sound designed to be cute without being intrusive.

The phone vibrated lightly.

"He responds to consistency," Sophie said, delighted. "If I feed him regularly, his well-being goes up. If I ignore him, my care score goes down. He actually measures stability over time."

The engine rumbled heavily as they accelerated.

"The smart part," she continued, "is that he's not just a toy. He learns my habits. He adjusts his need level. If I'm inconsistent, he gets more demanding. If I'm stable, he gets calmer."

She smiled, satisfied.

"It's genius."

She leaned a little forward in the seat, as if she were already standing on a stage.

"Think about all the people who believe they're ready for a pet. They think it's only about love. But it's also about routine. About remembering and being consistent."

The Volvo hit a small hole in the asphalt. The dashboard rattled.

Sophie ignored it.

For a moment the Volvo's engine changed tone, as if it had a comment of its own.

Sophie continued, undisturbed.

"You learn how to take care of something."

The car hummed on through the morning traffic.

Pixel wagged.

Harold drove for a while in silence. Not demonstratively. Not skeptically. Just with that small smile he got when something both fascinated and challenged him.

He cast a quick glance at the tail-wagging hologram dog in the phone holder.

"It reminds me of a Tamagotchi," he said calmly. "You know, those little digital '90's pets you had to feed and press all the time so they could thrive."

Sophie laughed.

"Yeah, yeah, but this isn't a plastic egg on a keychain. This is adaptive. It analyzes user behavior."

"Tamagotchi did that too," Harold said gently. "It registered whether you pressed enough."

Sophie shook her head, but she smiled.

"You don't quite get it yet," she said. "This isn't just a toy. It has potential as a training tool."

She straightened up in the seat. You could almost hear her thoughts clicking into place.

"Imagine this as step one," she said. "Before you get a dog. Before you commit for ten or twelve years. You download Pixel."

She was talking faster now.

"See? This graph. Stability over time. That's exactly what people are missing. They think they're ready because they love the idea of a dog. But they've never tested their own consistency."

Harold nodded.

"So Pixel is like a driver's license for pets?"

"Exactly!" Sophie said with a crooked smile. "You got the point."

She looked out through the windshield, but it was clear she was already somewhere else.

"We could actually develop a whole program," she continued. "Intro for new pet owners. Step one: Digital care. Step two: Simulated challenges. Step three: Real-life readiness."

She turned to him.

“We could offer it as a supplement to our consultations.”

Harold laughed softly.

“I can already hear you’ve packaged it up and put a price on it.”

“Of course,” she said. “It’s about creating good habits.”

The Volvo shifted gears with a small jerk. The engine worked.

Harold leaned back a little in the seat.

“You may be right about that,” he said. “You can learn routines. You can practice responding.”

He paused briefly and looked at the road ahead.

“I’m just a little curious,” he continued in the same light tone, “how people will react the day they realize their dog actually smells.”

Sophie looked at him.

“Smells?”

“Yes,” he said, shrugging. “Like, really. Warm. Damp. With ears and breath and all the things you can’t turn off in an app.”

Pixel kept wagging on the screen.

“You can’t quite simulate that,” he said kindly. “But of course you can always make an update.”

Sophie rolled her eyes—but she was still smiling.

The Volvo rumbled on.

And somewhere ahead of them, two Great Dane puppies were waiting, still unaware that they had been compared to a hologram dog.

## **The White Room**

The apartment was on the third floor of a newly built building with a glass façade and an elevator that smelled of cleaning solution and fresh paint.

The door was opened before they had finished ringing.

A woman in beige knitwear and bare feet stood in the doorway. Behind her, you could make out a room so bright it almost seemed clinical. White walls. White curtains. White floor with a thick, cream-colored rug that looked as if it had never met a shoe.

“Thank you for coming so quickly,” she said with a strained smile.

Then they stepped inside.

And were hit.

The smell came first. Not malicious. Not dramatic. Just heavy. Warm. Organic. A mixture of wet fur, food, and something that had clearly not made it to a lawn in time.

Harold stopped half a step into the room.

Sophie took one step more—and froze.

In the middle of the white living room lay two beings already too large to be called small.

### **Thor and Odin.**

Great Dane puppies in giant format. Loose ears. Far too long legs. Paws like saucers. They moved with a mixture of majesty and total lack of coordination.

One of them stood up and nearly toppled over its own hind leg in the process. The other came galloping across the rug with an enthusiasm that made the entire room vibrate.

And there, like small dark commas in the cream-colored landscape, lay the traces of their latest activities.

A spot under the coffee table.

A half-dried accident near one of the designer chairs.

And a fresh, glistening one in the middle of the floor, which had not yet decided on its shape.

“We don’t understand it,” the man said, now stepping forward from the kitchen. He had his shirt sleeves rolled up and an expression that was trying to be rational. “We’re following the recommendations.”

One of the puppies sat down—heavily—in the middle of the rug.

The other lifted its tail.

Sophie instinctively drew in a breath.

Pixel vibrated in her pocket.

A small, insistent buzzing against her hip.

She ignored it.

Thor—or perhaps it was Odin—came over to her with a big, open dog face. His breath hit her hand, warm and milky.

He wagged so violently that his hindquarters swung into the coffee table.

A vase trembled.

Pixel vibrated again.

Sophie stiffened for a moment, caught between two kinds of need.

The digital reminder in her pocket.

The physical weight in front of her.

“They’re just babies,” the woman said quickly, almost apologetically.

“But we hadn’t imagined that... well...”

She looked down at the rug.

“This.”

Harold stepped forward. A puppy leaned against his thigh with its entire body weight, as if they already knew each other.

“It’s part of the package,” he said calmly.

The fresh spot spread slightly.

Pixel vibrated for the third time.

Sophie placed her hand against her pocket.

And for the first time since they had left home, her enthusiasm seemed just a little smaller.

## **Reality**

“We have read about the breed,” the man said quickly, almost defensively.

“We know they get big.”

“We actually visited two breeders,” the woman added. “And we’ve watched videos. And we follow an Instagram profile with a Great Dane who lives in an apartment in Berlin.”

As if on cue, one of the puppies sat down heavily—right in the middle of a still-damp spot—and began scratching itself with a hind paw so vigorously that droplets spread in a discreet radius.

Sophie took half a step back.

“We just don’t understand,” the woman continued. “They said they were almost house-trained when they came home. And we do take them out. Every other hour.”

“And we bought the right food,” the man said. “Premium. Grain-free. For large puppies.”

Thor—or Odin—caught sight of Sophie’s bag. The dark leather bag she had set down on the floor when she entered.

The puppy tilted his head.

Sniffed. Wagged. Sat down.

Pixel vibrated.

A short, sharp buzz.

Sophie ignored it and crouched down to maintain a professional demeanor.

“They’re still puppies,” she said, trying to sound analytical. “Their bladder control isn’t fully developed. We could map their output pattern over a few days. See if there’s a cycle.”

The phone vibrated again.

Longer this time.

Sophie pulled it out of her pocket for a quick glance.

A notification blinked:

Pixel is feeling neglected.

Care-score dropping.

She dismissed it.

At that very moment, Odin lifted his tail.

“Oh no,” the woman said.

Too late.

A warm, undecided reality hit the rug with a soft, convincing sound.

Harold calmly took a roll of paper towels from the kitchen counter, as if he had done this his entire life.

“It passes,” he said cheerfully.

“Does it?” the man asked.

“Yes,” Harold said. “But of course it takes time.”

Thor galloped past with a sock in his mouth, which he must have found somewhere no one could explain.

“We had imagined,” the woman began, “that they would be... well... calmer.”

“They’re so beautiful,” the man said. “So majestic.”

As if to illustrate the point, one puppy jumped onto the sofa—a sand-colored wool sofa—and slid halfway down again because its paws didn’t quite understand friction.

Pixel vibrated again.

This time longer.

More insistently.

Sophie looked down at the screen.

Happiness level unstable.

Immediate attention recommended.

She stood in the middle of a living room where two animals the size of small calves were learning about the world with their entire bodies.

One of them had now noticed her sneaker.

An expensive, white sneaker.

It was examined with a tongue.

And then—as a quiet, personal declaration—there came a small, warm addition on top.

Harold looked up.

“Sophie,” he said mildly, smiling. “Odin just delivered an analog notification.”

The family let out a collective sound of helplessness.

“We can’t live like this,” the woman said quietly. “This isn’t what we had imagined.”

Pixel vibrated again.

Sophie looked down at the screen.

The small hologram dog sat with its head lowered and blinked.

For a moment she stood completely still.

Then she pressed the side button.



The screen went black and the buzzing disappeared.

She put the phone back into her bag—the same bag that now had its own, physical story.

Thor came over and leaned his entire weight against her knee.

His ear was warm.

The room smelled.

Something toppled over in the kitchen.

And for the first time since they had stepped inside, Sophie stood without a screen between herself and reality.

### **In the Middle**

Thor had now settled heavily in the middle of the rug, as if everything had calmed down, at least for him. Odin stood chewing intently on a corner of the sofa that no one had asked him to investigate.

The woman stood with her arms folded tightly against her body.

“We just thought,” she said, “that it would be easier.”

Harold wiped his hands on a piece of paper towel and looked at them. Not at the stains. Not at the floor. At them.

“This,” he continued, nodding toward the room, “is not a sign that you’ve failed. It’s a sign that you’ve gotten two puppies.”

The man let out a tired laugh.

“It feels like an invasion.”

“It’s not,” Harold said calmly. “It’s immaturity with fur.”

Thor lifted his head, as if he sensed he was being discussed.

Harold crouched down so that he came to eye level with the dogs.

“Let’s keep it very simple,” he said.

He discreetly pointed toward the rug.

“First rule: Remove what you can’t afford to lose. Rugs. Loose pillows. All the white. It needs to go away for a few months.”

The woman almost looked relieved at the thought.

“Just pack it away,” Harold said. “It’s not a defeat. It’s about timing.”

He continued in the same tone, without drama.

“Set rhythm. Take them out after sleep, after play, after food. Not as punishment. As habit.”

The man nodded slowly.

“And praise,” Harold said. “When they get it right, praise them as if they’ve solved the climate crisis.”

A small, unexpected laughter spread through the room.

Odin came tumbling over and leaned against the woman’s leg. She hesitated for a moment—and then placed her hand on his head.

“They are sweet,” she said, almost apologetically.

“Very,” Harold said. “And they will become calmer. Not tomorrow. But gradually.”

He looked around again.

“But right now,” he said gently, “you have two giant babies. And babies don’t prioritize aesthetics.”

The man drew a deep breath.

“So it’s not... abnormal?”

“It would be abnormal if it didn’t look like this,” Harold said.

Sophie stood a little behind them. Hands free. Phone silent. She said nothing.

Harold continued: “If you want to survive this phase, divide it up. One has the morning responsibility. One has the evening. And agree in advance that no one is allowed to get angry about stains. They’re part of the package.”

He gave a crooked smile.

“And then you need to decide one thing.”

They looked at him.

“You can’t have both a showroom and puppies at the same time.”

Silence fell.

Thor rolled onto his back with a heavy sigh and exposed his belly.

The woman sat down beside him, still in beige knitwear, and began gently scratching him.

He closed his eyes.

"It smells," she said quietly.

"Yes," Harold said. "But that passes too."

He stood up.

"And until then," he added, "you can choose to see this as chaos. But you can also see it as development."

Sophie stood and observed the scene.

Two giant puppies.

A rug with a history.

A married couple who were still there.

And no vibration in her pocket.

### **Giant Babies**

Thor had settled on his back. Odin was now chewing on a piece of toy that had clearly not been intended for him.

Harold looked at the couple again.

"I have no doubt," he said calmly, "that you've read a lot."

The man nodded quickly.

"We've really studied it."

"You can tell," Harold said. "But what you can't read your way into is the feeling."

The woman looked at him questioningly.

"The feeling that you're losing control," he continued. "That the home suddenly doesn't look the way you thought it would. That you start to wonder whether you've bitten off more than you can chew."

She swallowed.

"Yes."

Harold nodded.

"It's a phase," he said. "And it's less dangerous than it feels."

He paused briefly.

"If something concrete comes up, write to us. Not when everything is on fire. But when you start to feel uncertain. Then we can take it one situation at a time."

They almost looked surprised.

“Really?” the man asked.

“Yes,” Harold said. “It doesn’t have to be dramatic. Sometimes it’s just reassuring to be told that it’s normal.”

He continued:

“There are also some good forums for new dog owners, where you can read about others’ experiences with exactly this phase. It helps to discover that you’re not the only one who has stood with a roll of paper towels at three in the morning.”

The woman laughed softly.

“So we’re not... unfit?”

“No,” Harold said. “You’re beginners.”

Thor thumped his tail.

“And they’re babies,” he added.

He looked around once more.

“Put the rugs away. Divide the responsibility. Celebrate the small victories. And give yourselves permission to think it’s hard.”

Silence settled in the room. Not heavy. Just calmer.

Sophie was still standing there, listening.

## **Analog Notification**

The Volvo started again with its familiar hesitation.

The engine sounded slightly louder, as if it had an opinion about the visit.

They drove for a while without saying anything.

Sophie sat with her bag in her lap. She had taken out wet wipes and was working intently on a dark area that had changed character since their arrival.

“That was... intense,” she said.

Harold nodded.

“You could say that.”

She kept wiping.

"Pixel at least doesn't require bleach."

There was a small defense in her tone. Not sharp. Just a remainder.

Harold smiled faintly.

"No. I had completely forgotten that."

She looked down at the bag.

"But I actually mean it," she said. "It could be good preparation. If you could build in more realistic elements. More unpredictable scenarios. Maybe some kind of... chaos simulation."

Harold shrugged lightly.

"A digital smell update?"

She exhaled through her nose.

"You know what I mean."

"Yes," he said. "I know what you mean."

Silence returned.

The Volvo drove through a roundabout. For a moment something creaked beneath the dashboard.

Sophie set the wet wipe aside.

She looked out the window.

Some time passed.

"They really were sweet," she said suddenly. Without irony.

"They really were incredible."

Harold did not answer. He just drove.

The engine hummed.

And somewhere behind them lay a white rug that was no longer entirely white.

## **Delete**

Sophie sat at the table with her laptop open. Her phone lay beside it.

Pixel sat on the screen and blinked discreetly. Attention needed.

An email came in.

She clicked.

It was from the Andersen family.

“Thank you for today. And thank you for taking it seriously, even though it looked chaotic. We can see now that we may not have fully understood what it meant to get two dogs that large. It was a bit overwhelming. But we just wanted to write that it already feels different here at home. A little calmer. And we’re laughing a little more than we expected. We’re still unsure whether we can handle it. But we’re not unsure that they’re staying. Thank you for the calm in the middle of it all.”

Sophie kept her gaze on the last lines.

Pixel let out a faint beep from the phone.

She picked it up.

The little dog looked up at her. Care-score low.

She held her finger over the app.

The screen reflected her face. There were still traces of the day in it.

She pictured the white rug. Felt the warm breath. The heavy weight against her leg.

A brief, almost astonished smile appeared.

She pressed.

On the screen it said, “Delete app?”

A moment’s hesitation.

Then: Delete.

The screen went blank.

Sophie set it down.

And remained sitting for a moment without touching anything.



# Still on Duty

## **Dispatch**

Sophie sat at her desk with her iPad slightly angled in front of her. The screen was split in two: at the top, the company's booking system; at the bottom, an open note field with the heading New inquiry. She adjusted her glasses, which she did not actually need, and pressed the green button.

"This is The Pet Therapist. You're speaking with Sophie."

The voice on the other end was dark and calm. Not nervous. Not angry. Just steady.

"Yes. My name is Hank. I'm calling regarding my dog."

She wrote down the name. Hank. Short, solid.

"What seems to be the issue, Hank?"

"He howls at night."

She wrote: Howls at night.

"Has he always done that?"

"No."

"When did it start?"

There was a small pause, as if he were leafing through his own archive.

"A couple of months ago."

Sophie nodded, even though he could not see it.

"And how old is he?"

"Ten. His name is Buster."

She wrote the name slowly. Buster.

"Breed?"

"Labrador mix. Former search-and-rescue dog."

She stopped writing for a moment.

"Search-and-rescue? In what capacity?"

"With the emergency services. Building collapses. Search operations. He was involved in several deployments."

Sophie straightened her back slightly. This was not an ordinary family dog.

"So he was trained to find missing people?"

"Yes, exactly."

Hank's answer came short and clear. Not like a man telling a story, but like someone confirming facts.

"Is he retired now?"

"Yes. Two years ago."

"How has the transition been?"



“Unproblematic.”

She added another point. No behavioral changes at retirement.

“And does he howl all night?”

“No. He starts around two o’clock. Scratches at my bedroom door.”

“So he’s not in the room with you?”

“No.”

“Have there been changes in routines? Food? Exercise? Health?”

“No.”

“Vet check?”

“Yes. Nothing to note.”

She checked off another point.

There was a moment of silence. You could almost hear the absence of the room on the other end.

Sophie glanced briefly up from the screen. Harold sat in his place with his hands folded. He was listening, as he always did when she handled the first calls.

“Are there other circumstances in the home we should know about?” she asked.

A second passed too long.

“No,” Hank said.

Then he corrected himself.

“Yes.”

She waited.

“I’ll be alone in the spring.”

Sophie stopped with the pen.

“Alone?” she repeated.

“Yes. When my wife died.”

There was no break in his voice. No drama. The sentence lay in line with the others, like an additional column in a spreadsheet.

Sophie did not write immediately. Then she noted: Spouse deceased – spring.

She said nothing further.

“That can, of course, affect dogs,” she said at last, in the same professional tone.

Hank said nothing more.

Sophie went through her notes mentally. The points stood neatly beneath one another. Age. History. Training. Retirement. Night behavior. Change in household.

“We’d like to come out and see Buster in his environment,” she said. “Are you home tomorrow afternoon?”

“Yes.”

She booked the time.

“We’ll see you tomorrow, Hank.”

“Yes.”

The connection was cut without further courtesies.

Sophie set the iPad aside for a moment and drew a calm breath.

“Former search-and-rescue dog,” she said.

Harold nodded slowly.

“And now he howls. Quite a shift.”

He did not say it as a conclusion. More as a beginning.

Sophie picked up the iPad again and searched “dog howls.”

“Separation-related, could it be that?” she said. “Possibly reinforced by changes in the environment.”

Harold looked at her.

“Yes,” he said quietly. “The wife’s death.”

There was a moment of silence between them before Sophie moved on to the next task.

## **Trained**

The Volvo rolled through a quiet residential neighborhood. The sky was low and gray, as if it had not quite decided whether to clear.

Sophie sat with the iPad in her lap, rereading the notes.

“Former operational search-and-rescue dog,” she said. “Building collapses. Search operations. Disaster zones.”

She looked out through the windshield.

"This isn't a nervous couch dog. This is a dog that has worked under pressure. Trained to focus. To ignore chaos."

Harold drove slowly, his hands resting loosely on the steering wheel.

"Yes."

"That's what puzzles me," she continued. "A dog like that should be robust. He's trained precisely not to be governed by emotions. To dampen them and concentrate on the task."

Harold nodded slightly.

"That's how I understood it too."

Sophie leaned back.

"So why is he howling? There's nothing physical. No changes in routine. He retired two years ago. This is new."

The Volvo's engine hummed softly.

Harold glanced briefly at her.

"The emotions are probably there somewhere," he said.

Sophie raised her eyebrows.

"Yes, but they're trained."

He shrugged lightly.

"You can train a dog to work in the middle of chaos. That doesn't mean he doesn't feel it."

Silence settled between them.

Sophie looked down at the notes again.

"I still lean toward separation-related behavior," she said. "Possibly reinforced by changes in the household."

Harold said nothing more.

Ahead of them, a small row house appeared with the number they had been given.

### **Uniforms**

The row house was smaller than Sophie had imagined. A narrow driveway. A hedge trimmed precisely, but without flowers.

Hank opened the door before they had time to ring.

He was tall and broad-shouldered. Gray hair. Straight back. Hands that had lifted weight for many years.

“Come in.”

The voice was the same as on the phone. Steady.

They stepped into a living room that bore the traces of a life of order.

On the walls hung framed photographs: Fire engines in backlight. Men in smoke-diving gear. A team photo in front of a collapsed building.

There were also pictures of a younger Buster in harness and rescue vest. One where he stood with his snout deep in rubble. One where Hank knelt beside him, holding him around the neck. There were also photos of Hank standing next to his wife. She seemed small beside the large man.

On a shelf stood medals. A plaque. A framed uniform hung beside them, carefully pressed.

Sophie registered it all in a quick glance.

Buster came calmly toward them.

You could see the age in his movement. Not stiff, but slower. The fur slightly gray around the muzzle.

He sniffed Harold first. Then Sophie.

A quick check.

Then he returned and lay down close to Hank’s legs. Not on top of him. Not intrusive.

Harold registered that.

Hank sat down in the armchair. Buster followed him with his eyes, as if every small shift in body weight mattered.

When Hank reached for a glass of water, the dog lifted his head immediately.

When he leaned forward, the dog’s body tightened briefly. Hyper-attentive.

Sophie sat at the dining table and took out her iPad.

“Let’s just go through the routines,” she said.

She spoke calmly and methodically.

“Food?”

“Twice daily.”

“Same type as always?”

“Yes.”

“Exercise?”

“Two walks. Morning and evening.”

“Duration?”

“Half an hour each.”

“Health?”

“Checked. Nothing to note.”

She checked it off.

“Sleep rhythm?”

“He lies in the hallway. Always has.”

“And it’s only around two o’clock that he begins to howl?”

“Yes.”

“Duration?”

“Twenty minutes. Sometimes more.”

Hank answered briefly and correctly. Without fluctuation.

While Sophie spoke, Harold let his gaze move through the room.

Then it settled on a closed door at the end of the hallway.

The paint was slightly worn around the handle.

And at the bottom of the door—clear scratch marks.

Not old.

The wood was light in the grooves.

Harold said nothing.

Buster followed his gaze.

### **Scratch Marks**

Harold stood up without saying anything and walked calmly down the hallway. He stopped at the door.

The scratch marks were clear in the muted light. The wood was pale where the varnish had been torn away. Not violent gouges. But persistent. Many repetitions in the same place.

He let his fingers glide lightly across the marks.

Hank followed.

"This is it," he said.

Harold nodded.

"Will you tell me what happens?"

Hank drew in a breath, as if delivering a report.

"I go to bed around ten-thirty. I say to him, 'Now I'm going in here, and you stay there.' I've always said that. 'You stay on your blanket, good.'"

He pointed toward the hallway.

"He lies down out there. He's done that for years."

"And then?" Harold asked.

"Then I go in and close the door."

Hank glanced briefly at the marks.

"Several hours pass. Then he starts howling."

"How does he howl?" Harold asked.

"Long. Drawn-out. Not aggressive."

"And then he scratches?"

"Yes."

"For how long?"

"Twenty minutes. Sometimes more."

There was no irritation in his voice. No anger. Just statement.

"I don't open," Hank continued. "I've always been consistent. That's important."

Harold nodded slowly.

Sophie had come over to them with the iPad in her hand.

"That could sound like separation-related behavior," she said while scrolling. "Or perhaps more likely a kind of retirement reaction."

Hank looked at her.

"Retirement reaction?"

“Yes,” she continued. “Search-and-rescue dogs often have had a very clearly defined role. They’ve been meaningful. Worked in intense situations. When that role disappears, some dogs can experience a kind of identity-related emptiness.”

She flipped through her notes.

“There’s actually research about it. About working dogs developing stress symptoms after retirement. In some cases even PTSD-like reactions.”

Hank nodded slowly.

“That makes sense,” he said. “I can feel myself... that it can be hard to leave your work. When you’ve had a function.”

He glanced briefly toward the uniform in the living room.

“You know what you’re supposed to do. Every day.”

Sophie nodded.

“Exactly. So it may be that he’s reacting to the loss of structure and purpose. He’s been used to responding to emergencies. Now it’s quiet.”

Hank drew in a breath through his nose.

“Yes.”

There was a moment of silence.

Harold was still standing with his hand on the doorframe.

“When did it begin?” he asked calmly.

Hank thought.

“It began... shortly after the funeral.”

The word hung in the hallway for a moment.

Harold looked at him.

“So in April?”

“Yes.”

Silence settled again.

Buster had stood up and was now a few steps behind them. He looked alternately at the door and at Hank.

Harold turned fully toward the man.

“Was he very attached to your wife?”

“No, you can’t say that,” Hank replied without hesitation. “He has always been my dog.”

Harold nodded in understanding. It made sense in light of Buster’s training.

“Yes.”

## **Two Pillows**

“Would it be possible for us to see the bedroom?” Harold asked.

Hank did not hesitate.

“Yes.”

He opened the door.

The room was simple. A double bed stood in the middle of the floor. It was neatly made—two pillows, two duvets laid parallel, as if someone still expected both sides to be used.

Light fell in from a small window. On the bedside table stood two glasses. One empty. The other with a small remainder of water.

A wardrobe stood half open.

Harold let his gaze drift there. Inside the closet hung clothes. A dark blue dress. A cardigan. A blouse with small flowers.

He turned calmly toward Hank.

“Is that your wife’s?”

Hank followed his gaze.

“Yes.”

He drew in a breath.

“It’s been hard for me to clear it out. But... I suppose there’ll come a day.”

Harold nodded.

“Yes. It’s hard.”

There was a brief silence.

“Had you known each other a long time?” Harold asked.

Hank looked down at the floor, then up again.

“We were married for forty-five years.”



The words changed the room.

"My wife always lay awake waiting when I came home. Even the late shifts. She never fully slept before I was home."

He placed his hand briefly on one side of the bed.

"We've always been two."

Harold stood still.

"Do you dream now?" he asked.

Hank shrugged slightly.

"I think so. But I always have. My wife said I talked in my sleep. Sometimes shouted. Especially after tough deployments."

He attempted a small smile.

"So maybe I still do."

Nothing was said.

But his face changed.

From the steady, almost expressionless one—to something softer. As if the skin was no longer stretched quite as tight across his cheekbones.

Harold let the silence work.

"Are there principled reasons why Buster stays outside the bedroom?" he asked at last.

Hank looked surprised.

"It's always been that way. My wife and I in here. The dog in the living room. That was our agreement."

He looked around the room.

"That's how it's been. Even at the summer house."

"But what about now?" Harold asked quietly.

Hank hesitated and slowly shook his head.

"No... there wouldn't be anything wrong with it."

There was no pride in the answer.

Harold nodded.

"What if, for a period of time, you move his basket in here? Just to see what happens."

Hank looked at him.

“As I hear it,” Harold continued, “he howls at night. And it may be that you shout in your sleep. He’s trained to respond to that sort of thing.”

A small, cautious smile crossed Harold’s face.

“Maybe it could help both of you. Who knows?”

Hank stood still. Then he shrugged lightly.

“Maybe,” he said.

He looked at the empty side of the bed.

“It might be worth trying.”

Buster stood in the doorway and looked at them. As if he already knew that something was about to shift.

### **Still on Duty**

The Volvo pulled calmly out from the parking space in front of the row house.

Half a minute passed without either of them saying anything.

Sophie stared out through the windshield.

“Sorry,” she said then. “What just happened back there?”

Harold smiled faintly without taking his eyes off the road.

“Was I just witnessing two Neanderthals talking about feelings?” she continued. “Or what was that?”

He laughed quietly.

“Yes,” he said. “I suppose it was a small study in the way a man reacts to grief.”

Sophie turned toward him.

“Did he even realize it himself?”

“Maybe,” Harold said. “Maybe not.”

He drew in a breath.

“But it was pretty clear. Before, he had his wife. She was there. Waiting. Giving him calm. Now she’s gone. And the body is still reacting.”

“But he said he was sleeping fine,” Sophie objected.

“Yes.”

“And there we are, implying that he’s shouting in his sleep.”

“He said himself that he used to,” Harold said calmly.

Sophie shook her head slightly.

“It was laid out in plain sight. He’s been used to coming home from chaos to safety. Now there’s no one there. Of course he reacts. Maybe he dreams about deployments. Maybe about her. Maybe both.”

Harold nodded.

“That’s often how it is. Things get mixed together. Grief doesn’t always know where it comes from. It just tries to find its way out.”

“So it uses whatever is available?” Sophie asked.

“Yes,” he said. “It takes the opportunities it can get.”

There was a moment of silence.

“Are you men really that complicated?” she asked then.

Harold shrugged lightly.

“It probably runs deep in us. At least in our generation. We weren’t exactly socially trained to handle emotions when we were children.”

He glanced briefly at her.

“And it doesn’t help that he’s had a job like that. Where you’re trained to hold them back.”

Sophie sat and looked at him for a moment.

“Sorry if I’m getting too close,” she said. “But did you recognize yourself in him?”

A second passed before he answered.

“Well,” he said. “I actually did.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“At least from earlier,” he continued. “Before I started working with therapy. Back then I would have had a very hard time knowing what to say. I probably would have said I was sleeping fine too.”

“But you didn’t tell him that.”

“No,” Harold said. “It’s delicate territory.”

“So did he even understand what you were saying?”

“Maybe he understood it. Maybe not,” Harold said. “But he accepted the solution.”

He turned the steering wheel calmly.

“And that’s often how it is. You don’t have to understand everything with your head. Sometimes you can feel that something isn’t a bad idea.”

“So maybe he was just thinking about the dog?”

“Maybe,” Harold said. “Maybe he also felt something about himself. I don’t know.”

He smiled faintly.

“But I think there’s a good chance it will help him.”

Sophie leaned back in her seat.

“Jesus, you are some strange creatures,” she said. “Why not just cry it out and then move on?”

Harold laughed softly.

“Yes,” he said. “That’s one of the differences between us.”

The Volvo continued through the quiet neighborhood.

Behind them lay a small row house with a closed door that might no longer be closed tonight.



# The Predators Couch

## **Optimism**

Sophie was already seated when Harold walked in.

The iPad lay open in front of her, and there were more tabs up than should have been possible on a screen of that size.

She looked up with the expression he knew. That look meant either catastrophe or opportunity.

“This really is about behavior training, Harold.”

He had barely set his bag down.

“Good morning to you too.”

“No, listen,” she said, turning the screen toward him. “The family we’re going to visit has two dogs who have always behaved exemplarily. Diploma from puppy training. And suddenly they’ve become afraid of them because they’re attacking other animals. This is classic. This is something we can work with.” She said it with that particular mix of astonishment and enthusiasm, as if the world had just revealed a new feature.

“I’ve been watching videos all morning. It’s incredible what you can teach dogs. Impulse control. Redirection. Alternative behavior. It’s just about structure and clarity. Not punishment. Never punishment. But lots of acknowledgment and reward.”

Harold pulled out his chair and sat down slowly.

“Reward,” he repeated.

“Yes!” She nodded eagerly, with a crooked smile. “Don’t play innocent, you who have mastered the secret of treats. You give them something when they choose the right behavior. They learn incredibly fast. It’s pure neurobiology. If they do A, they get B. Then they choose A again. It’s that simple.”

He leaned forward and looked at the screen, where an energetic American dog trainer was explaining something about clickers and pieces of chicken.

“It looks convincing,” he said.

“It is,” Sophie replied quickly. “I’m completely sure it’s something we need to use today. They probably haven’t had proper structure. Maybe it’s simply a matter of upbringing.”

She didn’t say it judgmentally. More hopefully.

Harold folded his hands on the table.

“You can get very far with behavior training,” he said calmly. “It’s actually impressive how far.”

Sophie smiled triumphantly.

“Exactly.”

"But," he added gently, "not everything can be wrapped in a treat. I'm speaking, as you know, from experience."

"That's usually a trick that works for you every single time."

He instinctively patted his jacket.

"It's strictly professional."

"You always have something in your pocket," she continued. "You're already practicing that method. Relationship and praise—and then a small snack."

He shrugged.

"It works."

"Precisely!" she said. "That's behavior training in practice."

Harold smiled crookedly.

"I'm actually thinking of expanding the repertoire today."

"And?" she said.

"I'm considering bringing some licorice in the other pocket."

"For the dogs?"

"No," he said dryly. "For my colleague."

Sophie laughed out loud.

"You really think you can shape me with sugar?"

"Licorice," he corrected.

She shook her head, still smiling.

"You underestimate the strength of the system, Harold. If you're clear enough, you can regulate most things."

He stood up and put on his jacket.

"It'll be interesting to test," he said.

The mood in the room was light.

The possibilities felt large.

This was one of those days when the world seemed like something you could understand—and improve. And Sophie was convinced that once you had found the right method, even the most surprising instinct could be brought into structure.

## The Idyll

The Volvo crunched softly over the gravel as it turned into the courtyard. Even before the engine was turned off, you could feel the difference.

Everything stood in rows.

The vegetable garden had been laid out with almost mathematical precision. Lettuce in green bands, carrots in straight tracks, beans supported by homemade stakes of untreated wood. A small sign next to the compost heap explained the difference between “green” and “brown,” and—remarkably—the heap did not smell.

To the left of the terrace stood an insect hotel. Not a random one, but one built with care. Small bamboo tubes, pinecones, pieces of firewood with drilled holes. A small hand-painted sign: “For the bees – from Alma and Oliver.”

“The grandchildren,” the woman said, when she saw Sophie’s glance. “They’re very into biodiversity.”

She smiled. A mild, calm smile. She wore linen pants and a light cardigan, as if she had stepped straight out of a magazine about sustainable senior living. The man beside her nodded in agreement. He wore work clothes, but clean. The boots had been brushed.

Everything signaled order and deliberate choices.

The chickens walked in an enclosure a little farther down. You could almost sense that they had names.

And on the terrace lay two light-colored female Labradors side by side. They lifted their heads when Harold and Sophie stepped out, but without agitation. One lazily wagged her tail.

“They don’t exactly look dangerous,” Sophie said quietly.

“No,” the woman replied softly. “They didn’t yesterday either.”

There was something in her voice that did not fit the surroundings.

They sat down at the garden table. There was water in a carafe with slices of lemon. Coasters under every glass.



"We simply don't understand it," the woman began. "They've always behaved exemplarily. They walk nicely. They listen. They've been to classes. They have a diploma."

She said the word diploma as if it ought to mean something indisputable.

The man looked down at the table for a moment before speaking.

"It happened so fast."

He spoke more slowly than she did. More concretely.

"We were sitting here. Right here. Drinking coffee. We don't know how she got out, but suddenly Miss Jensen came strutting up toward the terrace."

"Miss Jensen?" Sophie asked.

"The oldest hen," the woman said, swallowing. "She's always so curious."

The man continued.

"And then... in a split second..."

He snapped his fingers.

"... they were on her."

He looked up at Harold, as if he were still trying to understand the speed.

"It wasn't like play. It was... coordinated. They were so fast. I didn't even get up. They threw themselves at her, and then... then they even fought over her."

The woman closed her eyes for a moment.

"There were just feathers. Everywhere. Ten seconds. Maybe less."

Silence settled around the table. You could hear a bee buzzing by the insect hotel.

"It was like watching two wolves," she said suddenly.

The word hung in the air.

"They're our dogs," she continued. "They lie on the sofa. They sleep spooning. And then... that. It was brutal. Raw. I couldn't recognize them at all."

The man nodded.

“It was overwhelming to watch,” he said. “That force. That determination.”

The woman straightened in her chair.

“We were shocked. I was shocked. It felt as if... as if we had brought two murderers into our home.”

Sophie opened her mouth, but the woman continued.

“Imagine if it had been a child. Imagine if it had been one of our grandchildren running out there. If they can switch like that... in a second.”

She looked from one dog to the other.

“We don’t know what to do. We love them. But we can’t live with that uncertainty. Maybe we have to get rid of them.”

The man placed his hand on the table.

“It would be a great loss,” he said. “But if they’re uncontrollable... then we have to take responsibility.”

The two Labradors still lay on the terrace. One rolled onto her side and exposed her belly to the sun.

Everything in the garden was as it always had been.

That was precisely what made it so hard to understand.

## **The Method**

Sophie had been sitting there holding herself back, almost physically. You could see it in her. She leaned forward, drew in a breath, adjusted the zipper of her bag.

“Yes,” she said finally, a little faster than the mood really called for. “I actually think we can do a great deal here.”

She bent down and pulled out a stack of printed sheets from her bag. They were clipped together with a paperclip and color-coded with small Post-its.

“I printed these for clarity,” she said, placing them systematically on the table. “It’s a comprehensive overview of positive behavior training. The modern form. Not the old school of no, scolding, and dominance. This is about praise, reward, and consistent structure.”

She pushed the top sheet forward.

“Look here. Impulse control. Redirection. Alternative behavior. When a dog reacts to a stimulus—for example a hen—you can train her to choose something else. You teach her that the right choice triggers a reward.”

The woman looked cautiously at the pages.

“But we’ve gone to dog training,” she said. “For two years.”

“I don’t doubt that,” Sophie replied quickly. “But it probably hasn’t been the right kind of training.”

There was a brief silence.

“They’re quite obedient otherwise,” the man said.

“Yes,” Sophie said, nodding. “In everyday life. On command and in structured situations. But you saw how obedient they were in that moment.”

She did not say it harshly, but sharper than before.

The woman drew in a breath.

“It happened so fast.”

“Exactly,” Sophie said. “And that’s why we have to work on those situations before they arise. You can’t expect a dog to choose correctly in a moment of high arousal if she hasn’t practiced that alternative a thousand times first.”

She turned another page.

“Here’s a program for gradual exposure. First at a distance. Then with controlled stimulus. And always with reward for the right choice.”

“So you mean,” the man said slowly, “that we can teach them... not to do it again?”

“Yes,” Sophie said without hesitation. “I actually believe you can overcome this and still keep the dogs. But it will require training. Systematic training. From you.”

She looked at them directly.

“Behavior isn’t magic. It’s learning. And we underestimate how powerful that is.”

The woman looked down at the sheets again.

“But... it didn’t work yesterday.”

“Because it wasn’t trained in that situation,” Sophie replied quickly. “There’s a difference between being able to sit in the living room and handling an unexpected stimulus. This is about creating new neural connections.”

She placed her hands on the table.

“It’s not too late. They’re not monsters. They’re not broken. But you can’t just hope. You have to work.”

There was an energy in her now. An insistence.

“We’ve underestimated how far you can get with correct behavior training with consistent reward.”

The woman looked at the dogs, who were still lying on the terrace.

“So you don’t think we need to... get rid of them?”

“No,” Sophie said firmly. “Not if you’re willing to take the task on.”

Harold still said nothing.

He sat with his hands folded and let the wind turn one corner of the top chart.

Sophie gathered the pages into a neat stack and slid them toward the couple.

“You can keep these. There’s a step-by-step guide in the back.”

She smiled—not superior, but convinced.

For her, the problem was already beginning to turn into a method.

And methods were something you could work with.

## **The Fence**

Silence fell at the garden table.

Sophie gathered the charts into a neat stack and leaned back slightly, as if she had laid a solid foundation.

Harold let his hand rest on the edge of the table for a moment before looking up.

“Could we see the chicken run?”

It was said calmly. Without resistance. Without irony.

The couple exchanged a look.

"Of course," the man said, standing up.

Together they walked down toward the enclosure. The two female Labradors got up and padded along, wagging, curious, sniffing along the edge of the grass. One stuck her nose into a pile of straw and exhaled contentedly.

The chicken run was built of wood with fine-mesh wire. It was neat. Well kept. The hinges on the gate were shiny. There was a small hook that was supposed to secure the latch.

Harold didn't say anything at first.

He walked along the fence. Pressed lightly on it with his palm. Measured the height with his eye. Looked at the gate. Lifted the hook and let it drop into place again. Checked how close the terrace was to the enclosure.

He stepped back and looked at the whole thing.

"They can fly," he said.

"Excuse me?" the woman asked.

"The chickens. They've grown. They can easily get over this fence if they want to."

The man looked down at the edge.

"Maybe they have."

Harold nodded.

"And when a chicken suddenly is standing loose out here..."

He turned and looked back toward the terrace.

"... that's a very powerful stimulus."

Sophie stood a little behind them. She said nothing.

Harold straightened and looked at them.

"You know what," he said quietly. "I don't think you primarily have a behavior problem."

He paused.

"I think you have a fence problem."

The words weren't harsh. Just matter-of-fact.

The woman frowned.

“But they attacked her.”

“Yes,” Harold said. “And Sophie is right that a lot of behavior can be trained. Impulses can be dampened. Dogs can learn an incredible amount. It’s impressive what you can achieve with systematic training.”

He cast a brief glance at Sophie, who nodded almost imperceptibly.

“But,” he continued, “with Labradors like yours, you can’t remove the prey drive.”

The air went completely still around them.

“You can teach them impulse control. You can reduce the risk. You can prevent it from being triggered. But if it’s triggered in the way it happened here...”

He snapped his fingers.

“... it goes fast.”

The man looked down at his boots.

“We have to remember where the dog comes from,” Harold said. “It descends from the wolf. And a Labrador is additionally bred for hunting. It’s made to respond to movement. To grab. To retrieve prey.”

The woman looked at the two females, who were now standing and sniffing along the fence.

“So they... couldn’t help it?”

“If the instinct is awakened strongly enough,” Harold said calmly, “there’s a limit to what training can reach in time. There’s a biological floor.”

He laid his hand on the fence.

“When you choose to let predators and prey live side by side, it’s actually not the predators you should primarily try to train.”

He looked at both of them.

“It’s the prey animals you have to protect.”

The words landed heavier than before.

“That’s the core of it, as I see it,” he continued. “You’ve done a lot right when it comes to behavior. You can hear that. But this is more fundamen-

tal. You've created a situation where a strong prey drive can be activated in a few seconds."

He lightly kicked the bottom edge of the fence.

"This needs to be higher. Tighter. More secure. The gate needs to be able to close properly. The distance to the terrace needs to be thought through."

The woman breathed slowly.

"So... they're not monsters. And we don't need to be afraid they'll attack the grandchildren."

Harold shook his head.

"No," Harold said. "They're not monsters, they're dogs."

The Labradors now stood side by side and looked up at them with open, soft eyes.

Everything was quiet again.

It wasn't their nature that was the problem.

It was the framework.

### **The Wild Card**

The Volvo rolled calmly down the narrow country road. A few white feathers were still wedged into the crack by the windshield wiper. Harold noticed them, but left them there.

Some time passed before anyone said anything.

Sophie sat with her arms crossed and stared out over the fields.

"I actually thought it was about training," she said at last.

"It is," Harold replied. "Just not all the way."

She nodded slowly.

"It's so strange. They were lying there like two teddy bears. And then..."

She snapped her fingers.

"... wolves."

"That's why we call them man's best friend," Harold said. "We love it when they look like us."

Silence returned.

"We can react instinctively too," she said.

“Yes,” Harold said. “But afterward we can choose. They can’t in the same way. A dog can learn impulse control. It can’t choose to be a vegetarian.”

Sophie tugged slightly at the corner of a smile.

“So really it’s us who have to be the adults in this?”

“That’s how it has to work,” he said. “When you have predators on the couch and chickens in the yard, you’ve chosen complexity.”

She looked at him.

“And uncertainty.”

“Yes,” he said calmly. “Nature always has a wild card.”

A moment passed.

“So there’s a limit to what they can change, up against the forces of nature?” she asked.

“They can do a lot. They can change the fence.”

She laughed quietly.

“And the licorice?”

Harold fished the bag out of his pocket and held it up in the air between them.

“Yes,” he said. “I think I’ll hold onto those a bit. When it comes to you, I actually think you can get pretty far with behavior training.”

He kept his eyes on the road.

But before he could react, Sophie snatched the bag out of his hand, tore it open, and popped a piece of licorice into her mouth.

She chewed demonstratively.

“You’ve underestimated my instincts, Harold,” she said, laughing.

She handed the bag back to him.

The Volvo continued down the road.

The feathers were still stuck by the wiper.

And inside the car, the main smell now was licorice.





# The Real Rescue

## Rainy Weather

The rain isn't falling hard. It's falling steadily. A quiet, insistent rain that settles like a thin film across the windshield of the old Volvo. The wipers work at a slow pace, as if they're not in any great hurry to get them forward.

Harold turns off the engine and sits for a moment.

The house in front of them looks like all the others on the street—brick, hedge, a carport that's a little too small. But the windows tell a different story. Small stickers in the corners: Adopt – don't shop. Rescue is my favorite breed. On the mailbox there's a paw-print decal with the text 'Save the Animals — Together.'

Sophie leans forward and studies it.

“He’s built something,” she says quietly.

Harold nods. “Yes. The only question is what.”

They don’t even get a chance to ring. The door opens from the inside, as if he has been standing ready.

Rya stands in the doorway with Hope in his arms. He’s mid-forties, around there. A T-shirt with a discreet logo from an animal welfare organization. He smiles broadly, almost relieved.

“Harold and Sophie? It’s fantastic that you wanted to come!” he says, stepping back so they can come in. “I was really happy when you wrote. I thought: Finally someone who wants to talk about what actually matters.”

Hope rests safely against his chest. A small brown mixed-breed with soft ears and alert eyes. She lifts her head and looks at the guests curiously.

Inside, the living room is bright and orderly. On the wall hangs a framed still image from a TV program. Ryan in a rain jacket, Hope wrapped in a towel. The headline at the bottom of the screen: “Everyday Heroes.”

“It all started that night,” Ryan says, already in motion. “I was on my way home. It was pouring. And then I see her sitting there by the rest stop. All alone. Soaked through. She was shaking.”

He looks down at Hope with a tenderness that feels real.

“No one was looking for her. No posts. It just felt... like I was the only one who could do anything.”

Sophie nods encouragingly. She has placed her iPad on the coffee table, but it’s closed. Not an interview. Not yet.

## **Everyday Heroes**

“What was it like for you afterward?” she asks.

Ryan laughs briefly, almost embarrassed.

“Honestly? It changed everything. Before that... yeah, I didn’t really have anything steady. A few projects. A bit here and there. But with Hope... suddenly there was direction. People started writing. Donating. They said I inspired them and that I was brave.”

He points toward the kitchen, where a bulletin board hangs full of printed messages from social media.

"We've raised over seventy thousand for animal welfare. And the TV program... that wasn't something I went looking for. They found me. They said people needed stories of hope."

He straightens a little. Not arrogant. Just proud.

Harold notices the way Ryan says "we."

We've raised.

We were found.

We inspire.

Hope slides down from his arms and lands on the floor. She takes a few steps toward the door, stops, listens—as if a sound outside has caught her attention—and then returns to Ryan.

He pets her automatically.

"She's my little shadow," he says. "We're a good team."

Harold smiles gently.

"She looks like she feels safe."

"She does," Ryan replies quickly. "She's been given a purpose. And she's given me one."

It grows quiet for a moment. The rain drums softly against the window. Sophie leans back on the couch.

"What is it like," she asks calmly, "to be called a hero?"

Ryan hesitates. For the first time since they came in.

"It feels... big," he says thoughtfully. "But also right. Like I've finally landed in the place I'm supposed to be."

He looks around the room—at the TV still, at the bulletin board, at Hope.

"I think sometimes you find what you're missing when you rescue something else."

Harold nods slowly. His gaze rests for a moment on Hope, who has turned her head toward the door again, as if the world outside is still calling faintly.

“Yes,” he says quietly. “It can feel that way.”

The rain continues.

Inside the living room it’s warm.

And Ryan keeps talking—open, engaged, full of the story he has told so many times that it now almost carries him.

Harold and Sophie listen.

They still haven’t said why they’ve actually come.

Ryan has made coffee. Hope lies by his feet. The rain outside has eased, but the light is still gray, as if the day is holding its breath.

He talks about upcoming plans. A small association. Maybe a collaboration with a larger organization. A talk at the local library.

“It’s not only about Hope,” he says. “It’s about showing that ordinary people can make a difference.”

Sophie listens. She nods. She lets him finish.

Then she sets her cup down.

## **Microchip**

“Before we go any further,” she says calmly, almost apologetically, “we probably need to tell you our actual purpose in coming.”

There’s no drama in her voice. No accusation. Just a shift in direction.

Ryan is still smiling.

“Yes?”

She folds her hands in her lap.

“There’s a family who also saw the program.”

A small pause.

“They recognized Hope.”

It’s as if the air changes in the room. Not heavy. Just different.

Ryan blinks.

“Recognized?”

“Yes,” Sophie says. “They live about ten kilometers from here. Hope disappeared during a severe thunderstorm. They put up notices. Con-

tacted shelters. They have documentation. And she's registered with a microchip."

Silence.

Hope lifts her head, as if she can feel the change in the tone.

Ryan doesn't say anything. He looks first at Sophie. Then at Harold. Then down at the dog.

"A microchip?" he repeats.

"Yes," Sophie says gently. "It's registered in the national dog registry"

### **Shock**

The words don't land like accusations. They land like facts. Dry, almost technical.

Ryan swallows.

"That... I didn't know."

No protest. No anger.

Just shock.

He leans back on the couch, as if his body has suddenly lost its tension.

"I thought..." he begins, then stops.

A few seconds pass.

"That night. She was sitting there. Completely wet. Completely still. There was no one around. No cars. No people. It... it didn't look like a dog that had run away from a loving home."

He speaks slowly now.

"I have thought about it. What her story was. But in the state she was in... it seemed most likely that she'd been on the street a long time. And if she'd had someone before... then they certainly hadn't taken care of her."

He looks up.

"It was... it was the only right thing. I couldn't leave her there."

Sophie nods.

"I understand that."

And she means it.

Ryan runs a hand through his hair.

“So... what are they saying?”

His voice isn't aggressive. It's uncertain.

“Do they want to see her? Or did they ask you to come to get her back, or what?”

He's the one asking the question.

Sophie takes her time before she answers.

“They want her home,” she says quietly. “It's a family with children. Two kids. They've missed her a lot.”

A moment passes where no one says anything.

Ryan looks down at Hope again. She's lying undisturbed, sleeping now, her head on her paws.

“It's a shock,” he says almost in a whisper.

He repeats it, as if trying to understand the words.

“It's really a shock.”

He doesn't sit up. He doesn't defend himself either. He just looks... hit.

“I don't even know how to handle this,” he says. “Hope has become a big part of my life.”

He draws a deep breath.

“Since I found her... it's taken on a life of its own in a way I never imagined. Fundraisers. Talks. Partnerships. I'm involved in all kinds of animal welfare work now. People write to me every day.”

He looks at them.

“It's not just a dog. It's... everything I am today.”

There's no self-righteousness in his voice. Maybe a little confusion.

“I don't know what I'm supposed to do with that.”

Harold still doesn't say anything.

He sits with his hands folded and looks at Ryan—not at Hope, not at Sophie—but at the man who has just had his foundation shifted.

The rain has stopped completely now.

The room feels bigger. Colder.

And in the silence there isn't a verdict.

Only a truth that has just become visible.

**Borrowed Feathers**

A moment passes where the silence almost becomes too tight.

Ryan sits hunched forward, hands clasped between his knees. Hope breathes calmly on the floor. It's as if her world is still simple, even though the adults' has just become complicated.

Harold leans a little forward.

"In a certain sense you also did the only right thing, Ryan," he says quietly.

Ryan looks up.

"No one knows what would have happened if you hadn't come by that night. It could very well be that your intuition was right. That she needed help. That you did what was right, and what could be done in the situation."

Ryan breathes a little freer.

"I think so too," he says softly.

"And there's no doubt either," Harold continues, "that you've done something good. The attention you've created around animal welfare—that's real. The money that's been raised—it makes a difference. No one can take that from you."

The words don't land as comfort. They land as recognition.

Ryan nods. There's almost gratitude in his gaze.

Harold pauses briefly.

"This is where the story could have ended," he says calmly. "With a man who rescues a dog and finds himself along the way."

He looks down at Hope.

"But it just isn't quite over there."

The room grows quiet again.

"Whether it's happy for Hope, or it isn't, that can be hard to decide," he continues. "We don't know for sure. But the story is at least more complex than it first looked."

The words aren't harsh. They're matter-of-fact.

## The Rabbit

Sophie straightens a little on the couch.

“We brought something from the family,” she says carefully.

Ryan lifts his eyes again. He doesn’t get the chance to answer.

Sophie has already opened her bag.

She takes something out—a small, worn stuffed toy. A yellow rabbit with one eye hanging a little crooked. The fabric is thin on the ears, as if it has been carried around many times.

She doesn’t hold it out dramatically. She simply extends it calmly into the room.

Hope lifts her head.

She sniffs.

At first it’s just ordinary curiosity. A dog registering a new object.

Then something changes.

She stands up. Walks over. Sniffs again—longer this time. Her tail moves.

Not wildly. But with purpose.

She takes the rabbit in her mouth.

Not playfully. Not testing.

But very decisively.

And without looking at any of them, she walks to a corner of the living room and lies down. She holds the stuffed rabbit between her paws and begins to gnaw gently on one ear, exactly as if it’s an old habit.

There’s something in her movement that can’t be learned in six months.

It’s recognition.

Ryan sees it.

He doesn’t say anything.

His face doesn’t change dramatically. There’s no tear. No outburst.

Just a quiet understanding that slowly finds its way in.

“She... hasn’t played like that before,” he says almost inaudibly.

Harold doesn’t answer.

Neither does Sophie.



Hope lies in the corner with her worn toy. Her tail taps lightly against the floor. Not frantic. Just content.

It's not proof.

It's just one more layer of the story.

### **A Quiet Recognition**

Ryan leans back on the couch and lets his hands fall down at his sides.

"This is going to be hard for me," he says after a while. "I have to be honest about that."

He looks at Harold. Then at Sophie.

"But... that's how it is."

He swallows once.

"There are other people in this story than me."

It isn't said bitterly. It's said with a kind of sobriety, as if he's only just heard the words himself.

Harold nods quietly. Sophie rests her hand for a moment on the armrest near Ryan—not to comfort, but to signal presence.

The next step has already begun to take shape.

### **The Handover**

It takes place in the parking lot by Harold and Sophie's office.

Neutral ground. None of them owns the place. No one has home field advantage.

The weather is clear that day. The rain from the week before feels far away.

Harold and Sophie stand a little off to the side. They arranged the meeting, but they don't step into the middle.

The family stands together next to a gray station wagon. Two children—a boy and a girl—hold hands. The parents stand behind them, tense but controlled.

Ryan holds Hope on the leash.

There's no drama. No raised voices. No cameras.

For a moment everyone just stands there looking at each other.  
Then Ryan loosens his grip.  
Hope doesn't hesitate.  
She runs.  
Not uncertain. Not tentative.  
Straight toward the children.

## **Molly**

The little girl almost drops to her knees as she throws her arms around the dog's neck.

"Molly!" she whispers, her voice breaking in the middle of the word.

The boy laughs and cries at the same time.

Hope is wagging violently now, licking hands, jumping up, yipping. It's not politeness. It's recognition.

Ryan stands still.

He's still holding the leash in his hand, even though it's slack.

Something sinks into him—not like a blow, but like a quiet weight.

It isn't a question of where she could have had it good.

It's clear that this is where she belongs.

There are other people in the story than him.

Harold and Sophie stand a little behind. They don't interfere. They let the moment find its own form.

After a few minutes the parents step forward.

The father holds out his hand to Ryan.

"Thank you," he says. "For taking care of her."

The mother nods.

"We know this isn't easy for you."

There's no blame in their voices. Only relief.

"In our eyes, you're a hero," she says quietly. "Not just because you took care of her... but because you chose to do this without drama."

Ryan hesitates for a second before taking the hand.

"I just did what I thought was right," he says.

“You did,” the father replies. “And you’re doing it now too.”

Molly has already lain down between the children on the asphalt, as if she had never been gone.

Ryan looks at her one last time.

Then he nods—more to himself than to the others.

Harold notices that he straightens his back slightly before turning away.

There’s no applause.

No cameras.

Only a man walking back toward his car—lighter and heavier at the same time.

### **Aftermath**

The office feels smaller when they get back.

Maybe because there’s no longer anyone who has to make a decision.

Only something that has to settle into place.

Sophie hangs her jacket over the chair and sits down without turning on the computer. She stares for a moment out the window toward the gray back courtyard.

“I can understand him now,” she says quietly.

Harold pours coffee without answering right away.

“I actually felt sorry for him out there,” she continues. “When we met him the first time in his house—before we revealed ourselves—he was a man with a straight back. With a clear mission.”

She turns to Harold.

“He felt like he’d found his place. That he was doing something good. I can relate to that.”

Harold sits down across from her.

“I’d feel good about that too,” she says. “That thing where you throw yourself into a project and put everything into it. Becoming the one who makes a difference. Feeling that people see you.”

She smiles faintly.

“I can understand him, at least. And I don’t envy him his situation.”

Silence falls for a moment.

"I hope," she says thoughtfully, "that once he gets past this, he can connect inside himself to the good he's actually done. That he can keep fighting for animal welfare. He has that platform. I hope he can use it—even without Hope."

Harold nods slowly.

"I hope so too."

He takes a sip of coffee.

"But?"

Sophie knows him well enough to hear what isn't said.

## **The Real Rescue**

Harold breathes calmly.

"There was something else in it too," he says. "Something... self-confirming."

He searches for the words.

"He enjoyed it. The attention. The story. And the hero role."

Sophie looks at him.

"He did."

"Yes," Harold says. "And that's human."

He leans back.

"But I don't think he was completely unaware of what Hope meant for his identity. I think he knew—somewhere—that she gave him a lift."

Not condemning. Just stating.

"It was a bit of borrowed feathers," he says quietly.

Sophie raises her eyebrows slightly, but doesn't protest.

Harold continues:

"There are many ways to build success. You can do it on talent. On work. On timing. On luck."

He looks out the window for a moment.

"But it rarely holds when it's with borrowed feathers."

A calm settles over the room.

Sophie nods slowly.

“Then he’ll have to find his own,” she says.

Harold smiles faintly.

“Yes,” he answers. “That would be the real rescue.”





# The Genetic Lottery

## Dust Motes

Morning sunlight fell at an angle through the slightly grimy office window and made the dust motes visible in the air. They hung there like small, determined particles above the stack of dog magazines on the coffee table. The coffee machine was already huffing in the kitchen corner, as if it were protesting yet another workday.

Harold came in through the door with the scent of cold morning air in his jacket and that particular smell of old car seats in his nose. He only made it two steps into the room before Sophie stopped him.

## The One

“Harold... can I ask you a slightly personal question?”

She looked up from her iPad. Not teasing. Not ironic. There was actual seriousness in her eyes.

Harold paused mid-motion and hung his jacket half on the hook, half in the air. “That usually means I need coffee first,” he said dryly. “But shoot.”

“Do you believe in the one and only?” she asked.

He blinked once. Then twice. “That’s a strong start to the day.”

“I mean it,” she said, setting the iPad aside as if the question required both hands. “Do you think there’s one person who fits better than everyone else? Or is it just romantic noise?”

Harold walked over to the coffee machine and let the black liquid fill his worn mug with the peeling logo. He sat down heavily across from her and studied her over the rim of the cup.

“Are we back on dating sites again?” he asked. “Did you find an algorithm that can calculate love?”

Sophie smiled faintly but shook her head.

“No. Or yes. In a way. I’m sitting there sorting. Height. Education. Lifestyle. Values. You actually can choose pretty precisely today. You couldn’t thirty years ago. Technology gives us the option to opt into quality. Why wouldn’t you do that?”

She leaned forward. There was an almost eager energy in her now.

“We can filter. We can compare. We can optimize. Why would you leave something as important as love to chance? If you can choose better—why not choose the best?”

Harold looked at her for a moment without answering. He clearly hadn’t expected the morning to start there.

“So, you mean,” he said slowly, “that love is a question of finding the most optimal combination?”



“No,” Sophie said quickly. “I mean we don’t have to take the first and the best anymore. We can actually choose. We can deselect what doesn’t fit. We can minimize risk.”

“Minimize risk,” Harold repeated quietly.

“Yes. If you can avoid a bad choice, why wouldn’t you? Why romanticize the imperfect? Honestly, that sounds like an excuse from back when you didn’t have alternatives.”

She looked at him, almost challenging, but there was still real curiosity in her gaze.

“You have experience,” she said more softly. “You’ve lived with someone. You’ve chosen. Or maybe not chosen. What do you actually think?”

He leaned back and let the coffee cup rest between his hands. For a brief moment he didn’t look at her, but out toward the window, where the sun had found a crack in the curtain.

“There’s an old saying,” he said at last. “It goes: if you can’t have the one you love, you have to learn to love the one you get.”

Sophie frowned. “That sounds like resignation.”

“It can be,” he replied calmly. “But it can also be the beginning of something else.”

“Like what?”

“Like discovering that love isn’t a choice you make once,” he said. “But something you build. Something that grows when you stop looking for an ideal and start looking at the person who’s actually standing in front of you.”

Sophie let the words hang between them.

“So, you mean you should just take whatever shows up?”

“No,” Harold said with a crooked smile. “I mean you can choose as much as you want in the beginning. But sooner or later you’re standing there with another human being—with flaws, habits, and strange impulses—and then the work begins.”

She looked down at her iPad. The screen was black.

“That’s what scares me,” she said quietly.

Harold stood up and took his jacket.

"It is," he said. "But that's also where real life starts."

He walked toward the door and turned.

"Come on," he said. "We've got a family trying to decide whether they want a purebred with a warranty certificate—or a mutt they can't predict. It's basically the same question."

Sophie tucked the iPad under her arm and followed him out into the morning sun.

## **Rust**

The Volvo coughed once before the engine settled into its familiar, uneven rhythm. Harold let his hand rest for a moment on the steering wheel, as if checking whether it was in the mood for today's trip. Then he put it in gear, and they rolled out of the parking lot.

Morning light lay low over the country road. Dew glinted in the ditch, and the fields were still empty of people. Only a tractor in the distance broke the quiet.

Sophie sat with the iPad in her lap, but the screen stayed dark. She looked at the dashboard, which vibrated faintly, as if the whole car were breathing with effort.

"You could have replaced this a long time ago," she said. "Logically, it makes no sense. It rusts. It uses too much gas. It's loud."

Harold shrugged and adjusted the mirror with a small movement.

"It runs."

"Yes, but that's not the same as it being the best," she said quickly. "If you could get something more reliable, more comfortable, less risky—why wouldn't you choose it?"

He didn't answer right away. The road ahead curved gently left, and he followed it with a steady hand.

"It's the same with people," Sophie went on. "We've actually been given the chance to choose more precisely. Back then you met someone in the town you lived in and maybe ended up married to the first person who

smiled at you. Now you have access to thousands, and you can avoid what doesn't fit."

"Avoid," Harold repeated.

"Yes. Avoid bad choices."

The Volvo hit an uneven patch in the asphalt, and the whole cabin shuddered. Sophie instinctively grabbed the handle above the door.

"See?" she said with a crooked smile. "That—you could have avoided."

Harold chuckled softly. "That's called a country road."

"That's called unnecessary wear and tear," she replied.

Silence fell for a moment. Only the engine's hum and the soft hiss of tires on asphalt filled the space.

"There's another saying," Harold said at last. "Old love doesn't rust."

Sophie snorted. "That thing does."

"Yes," he said calmly. "It does. But what has held has also been through something."

She turned toward him. "But what if you could avoid having to go through so much? What if you could choose right from the start?"

He thought.

"You can choose based on what you know," he said. "But you never know everything."

She fell silent.

### **The Picture**

The gravel crunched beneath the Volvo's tires as they turned into the driveway. The house was well kept. The hedge trimmed with precision. A trampoline stood in the yard, and a pair of soccer cleats lay neatly beside the patio door.

The door opened before they had a chance to ring.

"Thank you for coming so quickly," the mother said, leading them into the living room. "We're... well, we're really unsure."

The living room was bright and tidy. On the coffee table lay a smartphone. The screen was lit.

On it was a picture of a small, scruffy puppy. Crooked ears. Soft paws. Eyes too big for its head.

"His name is Lucky," the youngest boy said proudly.

"For now," the father added.

Sophie sat down calmly on the sofa and leaned forward to look more closely at the picture. She took out her iPad, like a doctor preparing to make a diagnosis.

"Tell me," she said. "What do you know about the parents?"

"The mother is a mix," the mother said. "Some hunting dog. Some herding dog. The father... no one knows."

The father exhaled heavily. "That's exactly the problem."

Sophie nodded slowly.

"It's not a small problem," she said. "When you choose a dog, you choose everyday life. Energy level. Temperament. Needs. It's not just a pet—it's twelve to fifteen years of partnership."

## **Warranty**

She tapped her iPad, and an overview of breeds and characteristics appeared.

"If you choose a purebred," she continued, "you can predict much more accurately what you're getting. Hunting dog—requires exercise. Companion dog—lower activity level. Herding dog—high intelligence, needs tasks."

She looked around at the family.

"It's actually a gift that today we have so many options. We can choose. We can adapt. We can minimize the risk of mismatch."

The father nodded, almost relieved. "Exactly."

The teenage daughter, who was sitting with her arms crossed, said, "I just don't want a huge, ugly dog."

The youngest boy looked outraged. "He's not ugly!"

Sophie smiled professionally.

"That's precisely the point. When you choose a breed, you also choose appearance. Size. Coat. You know how it will develop."

The mother hesitated. "But... we had actually thought it was kind of beautiful not to know."

"Beautiful," the father repeated. "Or irresponsible."

Sophie tilted her head slightly.

"This isn't about romance," she said. "It's about awareness. You can choose what fits your life. You don't have to take a chance."

She changed the slide.

"And then there's genetics. Closed bloodlines can lead to hereditary diseases. That's true. But you can test. You can choose responsible breeders. Still, statistically, a crossbreed is healthier."

She paused.

"The question isn't whether you should have a dog. The question is how much uncertainty you're willing to accept."

Silence settled in the room.

The youngest boy looked at the picture again.

"But he looks cute," he said quietly.

Sophie looked at him.

"Most puppies do."

## **The Mirror**

Harold, who until now had been standing a little back, observing the family's reactions, took a step forward.

He didn't sit down. He just leaned lightly against the bookshelf.

"I have a question," he said calmly.

The family looked at him.

"Who are you?"

The father frowned. "Excuse me?"

"Who are you as a family?" Harold repeated. "Are you the type who feels best being able to plan most things? Or are you people who enjoy when something develops along the way?"

The teenage daughter shrugged. "We plan everything."

The mother smiled faintly. "Not everything."

"I get up at six every day," the father said. "I can't have a dog that requires four hours of running."

"But we could learn something new," the mother said gently.

Harold nodded.

"This isn't a question of right or wrong," he said. "A purebred isn't better. A mutt isn't better. But they represent two different ways of entering into something."

He looked at the picture of Lucky.

"One is a contract. The other is more... open."

"Open," the father said skeptically.

"Yes. Open to surprises. To sides of yourselves you don't know yet. The question isn't what the dog will become. The question is whether you're prepared to become something different with him."

The room grew completely quiet.

The youngest boy placed his hand flat on the table.

"I like his crooked ear," he said.

No one answered immediately.

The mother looked at her husband. Not challenging. Just questioning.

"We've actually been so busy evaluating him," she said slowly, "that we haven't talked about ourselves."

Harold nodded, without triumph.

"That's often where the choice lies," he said.

## **Impatience**

The silence in the living room stretched a little longer.

The youngest boy sat right at the edge of the sofa, staring at the picture of Lucky. He looked from his mother to his father and back to the screen.

"Can't we just choose him?" he said suddenly. "I don't care about contracts and all that. I just want that dog."

The teenage daughter sighed. "You just want a dog now."

“Yes!” he said. “And he’s cute. And he has a crooked ear.”

The father raised his hand slightly, not strict, but firm.

“Easy,” he said. “This isn’t about getting a dog quickly. We’ll get a dog.”

He looked at Sophie and Harold, as if to underline that they were reasonable people.

“It’s about getting the right one. It’s almost like having a little brother or sister. You don’t just choose based on a picture.”

The boy sank back a little but didn’t say more.

The father leaned back in his chair.

“And as we just heard,” he continued, “we actually have a lot of options. We can find something that fits us perfectly. That’s not a bad thing.”

Sophie nodded faintly, professionally.

The mother looked down at the picture again. She lightly brushed her finger across the screen, as if smoothing the puppy’s fur.

“But we’ve also learned something today,” she said slowly. “We’ve been so busy evaluating him that we haven’t talked about ourselves.”

She looked at Harold for a moment and then at Sophie.

“About whether we’re actually the kind of family who can handle... well, a little scruffy surprise. Or whether we feel best knowing how it all turns out.”

The father took a deep breath but didn’t object.

There was no longer the same restlessness in the room. Not because the decision had been made—but because the question had shifted.

“We have to say thank you, at least,” the mother said, standing up. “You’ve given us more to think about than we expected.”

Harold stood up calmly. “That’s the idea,” he said without smiling.

Sophie gathered her iPad.

“The most important thing,” she said, “is that you choose consciously.”

The youngest boy looked once more at Lucky.

“I hope it’s him,” he muttered.

No one answered.

But no one said no either.

## Back Roads

The Volvo coughed to life on the second try. Harold placed his hand on the gearshift as if giving the car a quiet pat, and they rolled out of the driveway.

The gravel road was uneven, and small stones hit the undercarriage.

Sophie didn't say anything for the first few minutes. She looked out the window while the house disappeared behind them.

"They were sweet," she said at last.

"Mhm."

"And pretty typical."

"In what way?" Harold asked.

"They want the perfect thing," she said. "They want to feel that they chose right. They want to minimize risk."

She shrugged lightly.

"I can actually understand that."

"So can I," Harold said.

Silence again.

"But I liked what you said," she continued. "About who they are as a family."

Harold smiled faintly without looking at her. "It wasn't to sound clever."

"It didn't."

She turned toward him.

"If that's the right way to ask it... then who am I?"

He tilted his head slightly.

"It's not always that easy to see yourself," she went on. "But what do I actually need?"

Harold laughed softly.

"Now you sound impatient," he said. "A bit like the boy."

Sophie smiled.

"Maybe I am," she admitted. "It's probably about time."

"About time for what?"



"To find a boyfriend," she said directly.

She looked at him.

"You've tried it," she continued. "The choosing. What have you learned?"

He drew a breath through his nose and let it out slowly.

"I can tell you," he said, "that it hasn't exactly been easy."

He paused.

"It took a few attempts before I figured out who I was together with someone else. Before that it was mostly a question of what I thought sounded right."

Sophie listened without interrupting.

"When you ask that directly," he continued, "you might want to think less about who looks best on paper... and more about what kind of movement you want in your life."

"Movement?"

"Yes. Do you want harmony or friction?"

She raised her eyebrows.

"Do you want someone who puts turbo on your own way of being?" he said. "Someone who confirms you and runs in the same direction. Or do you want a complement? A challenge. Someone who might make your life a little more... different."

The Volvo hit another bump, and the car vibrated briefly.

"It's a bit like this," he said, patting the steering wheel. "Do you want speed and stability, quick through the curves and straight onto the highway? Or do you want time for a little humming and bumping along the back roads?"

Sophie laughed.

"That doesn't sound very marketable."

"It isn't," he said. "But it's honest."

He pointed ahead at the road.

"And then there's the navigation."

"Oh no," she said.

“Oh yes,” he replied. “Do you want full GPS guidance the whole way? Or do you dare to drive without it and take a wrong turn once in a while?”

She leaned her head back and looked at the ceiling.

“I’m probably newer in this area than I’d like to admit,” she said. “But I definitely don’t want to be cynical. I don’t want to sit there reducing people to parameters.”

### **The Great Love**

She looked out at the landscape.

“And I don’t want to write off the great love.”

Harold nodded slowly.

“I think that might be the most important thing,” he said.

“As in?”

“That you haven’t decided in advance that it doesn’t exist.”

The Volvo drove on in its uneven but steady rhythm.

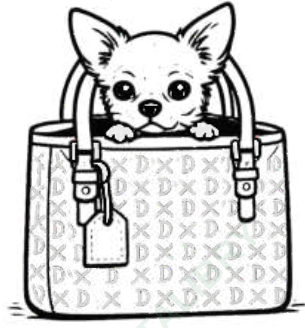
Sophie sat quietly for a moment.

“Do you think it exists?” she asked.

Harold smiled.

“I think,” he said, “that it exists—and that it usually surprises you.”

The engine hummed softly as they continued toward the city.



# On Her Terms

## Cold Coffee

The office in the industrial district was quiet that afternoon. Sophie sat with her legs tucked up on the chair, a half cup of cold coffee beside her iPad. The screen cast a cool, almost clinical glow across her face.

Harold stood by the window, looking out over the parking lot where their blue Volvo sat like a faithful, slightly tired workhorse.

"I've been thinking about something," he said without turning around.

Sophie didn't answer. She kept scrolling.

"If you hadn't become... this..., what would you have been?"

She looked up.

"This?"

“Yes. Company owner. Strategist. CEO in yoga pants.”

She gave a crooked smile.

“Entrepreneur,” she said. “Someone who builds something from scratch.”

“Before that,” he said calmly.

A moment passed.

She leaned back.

“I actually did a year in nursing school.”

He turned around now.

“I can see that.”

“Can you?” She raised an eyebrow.

“White uniform. Efficient and a little tightly upholstered.”

“And then I’d smother the patients with care?” she said dryly.

“I didn’t say that.”

“No, but you thought it.”

He shrugged.

“I think you would have been ambitious. You would have done your best. I don’t doubt that.”

She waited.

“But I also think you would have had a hard time letting them do anything themselves.”

She laughed briefly.

“It’s funny you say that. I actually quit pretty quickly.”

“Why?”

She looked down at the iPad, but she wasn’t scrolling anymore.

“I liked the pace. The team. The drive on a ward. But it was hard to help people.”

“How hard?”

She hesitated.

“They come when they’re already broken. Or when they’ve been torn out of their everyday lives. So they lie there. You treat them. And when they get better, they say goodbye, and you never see them again.”

"We don't see our families again either," Harold said. "We don't see them after."

"It's different," she said quickly. "They're in the middle of their lives. In their everyday routines. We adjust something. We don't take their clothes and put them in a uniform."

He smiled faintly.

"I was hospitalized once for quite a while."

She looked up.

"When I handed over my clothes and put on patient clothes... it felt like I handed over myself."

She said nothing.

"No one asked who I was. What I was good at. What I could still do. I got a package. Standard."

"You should try standing on the other side," she said quietly. "There's no time. It's busy, and you do your best."

"I don't doubt that" he said.

Silence.

"But care," he continued, "can also be a way of taking power away from someone."

She looked at him.

"That's a dangerous sentence."

"Yes."

She leaned forward again.

"I just think... I had a hard time watching people lie there and not control anything. I couldn't stand that helplessness."

He nodded.

"So, you'd rather build something where you could control the outcome."

She smiled.

"Exactly."

## High-End

A notification sounded from her iPad.

She looked at the screen, and her face changed.

“Okay. Now this is interesting.”

Harold stopped at the door.

“And?”

She tilted the screen slightly, as if he could see from a distance.

“High-end client. First one who transferred the money before we even said hello.”

“That’s a rare species,” he said.

“Private vet. Luxury apartment. Top floor. Water view.”

She scrolled.

“And she suspects her dog has an anxiety diagnosis.”

Harold tilted his head slightly.

“Anxiety?”

“She barks at anyone who comes near her bag.”

Silence for a moment.

“She’s considering calming mediKateon,” Sophie continued. “She’ll do anything.”

“Does she also only eat handpicked quinoa?” he asked.

Sophie’s mouth curved.

“Only salmon pâté.”

He nodded gravely.

“That sounds monotonous.”

The Volvo coughed itself to life as usual. Harold drove out of the industrial district and toward the city, while Sophie opened the iPad in her lap again.

“Her name is Claire,” Sophie said. “Built several companies. Sold them. Started new ones. No children.”

“Husband?” Harold asked.

“Several. None now.”

He nodded.

"And the dog?"

"Coco. A Chihuahua."

"Of course."

"She writes that Coco is loving, devoted, loyal. But as soon as someone approaches her bag, she explodes."

"Explodes how?"

"Barking. Snapping. Territorial. And it's gotten worse."

Harold turned onto the main road.

"When did it start?"

Sophie skimmed the text.

"Around one year old. It doesn't say why."

"There's always a why," he said calmly.

Sophie ignored the comment.

"She has a private vet who mentioned it could be a form of anxiety reaction. Claire wants our assessment before moving forward with medication."

"That's decent of her."

"She'll do anything," Sophie repeated.

"Most people will," he said.

She looked up from the screen.

"I actually like her already."

"Because she paid?"

"Because she takes responsibility."

"Okay, but it doesn't sound like she's missing anything," Harold commented dryly.

"We don't know that yet."

"No."

He looked ahead at the road.

"But if a small dog only eats salmon pâté and guards a bag like it's her territory... then maybe there's more in the bag than in the dog."

Sophie closed the iPad.

“You really do love being cryptic.”

“It’s cheaper than medication,” he said.

The Volvo continued toward the city’s gleaming facades.

Sophie leaned back.

“If it’s anxiety, then a change of environment should regulate her.”

“And if it’s not?”

“Then we find out what it is.”

He nodded.

“Let’s hope it’s just the salmon pâté.”

She laughed briefly.

But behind the smile lay the small tension she always felt before they stepped into a new home.

A new story.

A new version of the same question:

Who is really taking care of whom?

## **The Bag**

The building rose in glass and steel against the afternoon sky. The Volvo seemed almost modest among the dark electric cars in the driveway.

The elevator was silent.

When the door opened, Claire was already waiting. Slender and well dressed.

The apartment was exactly as Sophie had imagined:

White surfaces. Light oak. Large windows. No clutter. No coincidences.

In the middle of the room stood the bag on the coffee table.

In its opening sat Coco.

The little Chihuahua had already registered them.

“She can be a bit... attentive,” Claire said.

Sophie smiled and sat down calmly.

“May I try?” she asked, gently extending her hand.

Claire nodded.

Sophie stood and reached toward the bag.



It took less than a second.

Coco sprang up in the opening, body tense, bark sharp and precise.

Not hysterical but decisive.

Sophie pulled her hand back.

Coco fell silent immediately.

"Do you hear it?" Claire said. "It's anxiety. It's gotten worse."

Harold said nothing yet.

"When did it begin?" he asked calmly.

"Around one year," Claire answered.

"What happened then?"

A pause.

"There were... some things," she said. "I was busy with business, and... a new relationship."

She looked down at Coco.

"She's the only one who never leaves me."

Silence.

### **Always Here**

"My vet mentioned anxiety," she continued. "Maybe a kind of insecurity. If medication is necessary, we'll do it. I'll do anything."

"Does she have other symptoms?" Sophie asked professionally.

"She eats fine."

"What does she eat?"

"Salmon pâté," Claire said without irony. "She won't have anything else."

Harold nodded faintly.

"And what happens," he asked, "when the bag isn't here?"

Claire looked at him, surprised.

"It's always here."

"Always?"

"Yes."

A small pause.

Sophie glanced quickly from one to the other.

“Would it make sense,” she said, “for us to try seeing her in a different environment? Just as an experiment?”

Claire hesitated.

“Without the bag?”

“Just to observe,” Sophie said. “No conclusions. No mediKateon. Just observation.”

Claire looked down at Coco. Her hand rested automatically on the edge of the bag.

“There’s a small off-leash dog park ten minutes from here,” she said after a moment. “I can drive in front.”

“Let’s do it,” Sophie said.

Claire lifted the bag.

Coco immediately settled again.

In the elevator they stood side by side.

The bag in the middle.

Claire drove ahead. The black car slid almost silently through the narrow residential streets and into the parking lot by the small, wooded dog area. The Volvo followed at a respectful distance.

## **The Woods**

The woods were quiet. A narrow path in between the trees, damp earth, muted light.

Sophie took the lead, almost naturally.

“Should we try setting her down here?” she said.

Claire hesitated for a moment before opening the bag and lifting Coco out. The small body was tense, but calm. She set her gently down on the path.

Coco stood.

Completely still.

Head lifted. Eyes directed forward. No sniffing. No movement.

Claire folded her arms lightly across her chest.

"There you go," she said. "She likes structure best. She likes her familiar surroundings best. This doesn't do much for her."

Sophie looked at Harold but didn't say anything.

Coco still stood like a tiny statue in the forest floor.

### **Without the Bag**

Harold stepped a little closer.

"Shall we try something?" he said calmly.

Claire looked at him.

"Can we put the bag in the car?"

A small jolt went through her.

"Why?"

"Just to see."

She looked down at the bag, then at Coco, then toward the parking lot.

"Okay," she said at last.

She walked back and put the bag in the car. Closed the door. Stood there for a moment.

Coco hadn't moved.

She looked toward the car.

Then it grew quiet again.

A minute passed.

Then Coco moved her head slightly. Sniffed the air. Took one step. Then another. Slowly. Carefully. She began tracing small arcs along the forest floor. Sniffed at leaves. Stopped. Moved again. Not far away. But away from the spot where she had been fixed in place.

Claire's breathing quickened.

"Is she coming back?" she asked.

"She isn't gone," Harold said. "She's just moving."

Coco broke into a little run. Not panicked. Not wild.

Claire looked almost startled.

"What happened to her? I don't even recognize her."

Harold let his gaze follow the little dog.

"I think," he said quietly, "that what was holding her in place is sitting in the car."

Claire frowned.

"What do you mean?"

"You've done a lot for her," he said. "Maybe she's wanted to give something back."

Claire didn't say anything.

"She's seen that the bag means something to you," he continued. "So, she's made it her task to guard it."

Silence.

## **A Job**

"She's been given a job."

Claire looked out toward Coco, who was now sniffing intently at a tree stump.

"If that's true," she said slowly, "then that little hide has had far too much to think about."

"Yes," Harold said. "That happens sometimes. When we're trying to do as well as we can... we end up doing a little too much."

Coco came running back toward them. Not straight. In an arc.

Claire crouched down.

The movement was instinctive. She opened her arms slightly, the way she always did.

Harold lifted his hand faintly.

"Try holding your hand back a little," he said calmly. "Let her come. And otherwise let her be."

Claire stopped the movement halfway through. She extended her hand. Open. Not grabbing.

Coco approached. Sniffed the fingertips. Stood completely still for a moment. Then—as if she had checked that everything was in order—she turned and ran off again.

Claire stayed crouched.

“She usually always stays.”

Harold looked at her.

“She knows you’re here.”

A brief pause.

“That’s what she needs.”

The woods were quiet again.

Coco ran in small arcs between the trees.

Not gone. Just free.

### **Volvo Silence**

Claire disappeared ahead of them in her dark car, elegant and silent.

The Volvo followed behind with its familiar hum. The engine worked. Not discreet. Not perfect. But steady.

Silence settled between them. It was Volvo silence. The kind of silence that doesn’t demand an explanation. Just road and movement.

Sophie looked out through the window. Houses slid past. A carport missing its roof. A sign standing a little crooked.

“That was actually a little hard to watch,” she said.

The Volvo rolled over an uneven spot in the asphalt. A small jolt.

“Yes,” Harold said. “It can be hard to give real freedom.”

The engine found its rhythm again.

“But it really was genuine care at the end,” she continued. “When she just held her hand out.”

“Yes,” he said.

“It was on the dog’s terms.”

The Volvo drifted slightly left in a curve. Harold corrected calmly.

“That’s part of what I meant,” he said after a while, “when I told you about the time, I was a patient.”

The windshield wipers swept once across the glass. A few drops had appeared.

“That it’s a difficult balance when you have your life in someone else’s hands.”

Sophie followed a lawn tractor with her eyes.

"I saw it more as a limitation," she said. "That I wasn't allowed to do enough."

The engine rumbled faintly.

"You want so badly to give," Harold said.

Pause.

The Volvo entered a longer straightaway. The trees stood like rhythmic pillars along the road.

"And it's incredibly hard to find the right balance," he continued, "where what we give is actually what's been asked for."

A moment passed.

"And not something that binds the other person tighter to us," he said quietly.

"But something that sets them free."

Sophie rested her head lightly against the seat.

The Volvo's cabin wasn't silent. It had its own echo. A small vibration in the steering wheel. A faint crackle from the dashboard.

It made room.

"She thought she was taking care of Coco," Sophie said.

"She was," he said.

"She just had to learn to take care less."

"Yes."

They didn't say more.

The Volvo kept moving forward with the calm that comes from having been on the road long enough to know that silence is part of the conversation too.

Outside, the oncoming cars slid past. Inside, the words were allowed to settle into place.

When they returned to the industrial district, the light had flattened. The parking lot was nearly empty. The Volvo stopped with its usual little sigh.

Inside the office, Sophie turned on the desk light. The cold lamp was in contrast to the woods' soft shadows.

She sat down without opening the iPad.

She always did.

Harold hung his jacket on the hook and walked over to the window.

Silence for a moment.

### **Less**

"Do you think," Sophie said, "that I've gotten better at this job?"

He didn't turn right away.

"Better than what?"

"Than I would have been... back then."

She looked down at the tabletop.

"I think I had a hard time tolerating not being able to do enough. Today..." She drew a slow breath in. "Today we actually did less."

He nodded faintly.

"And it worked."

She smiled.

"It feels strange. Like I didn't work hard enough."

"You did," he said. "You held back."

She laughed softly.

"That's not my strongest discipline."

"No," he said gently. "But it's an important one."

She looked up at him.

"Do you think you can learn it?"

"Yes," he said. "But it doesn't come by itself."

He walked over and sat on the edge of the desk.

"It helps to talk about it. To open up your story a little."

Sophie leaned back in the chair.

"So, you don't have to hold onto it all the time?"

“Yes,” he said. “When you say out loud what you’re afraid of losing... it gets easier to make room.”

She thought about that.

“You mean that’s why she could let go a little?”

“I think,” he said calmly, “that trust grows when you dare to show what matters.”

He pulled a chair closer.

“And when there’s trust... you don’t have to hold so tightly.”

Sophie looked out the window. Evening light fell over asphalt and warehouse buildings.

“It builds a kind of freedom,” she said quietly.

“Yes.”

Pause.

“And freedom,” he said, “is rarely something you give the other person. It’s something you dare yourself.”

Sophie nodded and opened the iPad again, but this time not to write notes. Just to close it again.

“I think,” she said, “I like this job.”

“I hope so,” he said. “Otherwise, it’s going to be a long drive.”

She smiled.

Outside, the Volvo was still standing in its spot. Not beautiful. Not impressive. But faithful. Like a chance to find the balance again.





# The Cost of Keeping

## The Pitch

Harold had barely gotten the key into the door before it was opened from the inside.

A young woman in a dark navy blazer and sharp black pants stepped out with her phone in hand and her bag over her shoulder. She had that look

you get when you're already on your way to the next meeting before the current one has ended.

"Oh—hi," she said, holding out her hand in a motion that matched her decorated nails perfectly. "Nice to meet you."

"Harold," he said, taking her hand.

She smiled the kind of smile you practice in front of a mirror. Professional. Not unfriendly. But not personal either.

"Great space," she said, nodding toward the office behind her, as if she had already measured it in conversion potential.

Then she was past him, out on the steps, and the phone was back up to her ear again before the door closed.

Sophie stood in the doorway and waved, a little longer than necessary.

"Perfect," she half-called. "Just send me the proposal."

The door closed.

She turned to Harold with the same energy, as if there were still projector lights on her.

"This, Harold—this is exactly what we've been missing."

"Mhm," he said, hanging up his jacket. "What was it I just saw?"

"Professionalism," Sophie said with a teasing smile.

"I saw heels that definitely haven't walked on gravel before."

She laughed.

"Her name is Emily Carter. Online marketing specialist. She works with targeted advertising for small businesses... like ours."

"Mhm."

He walked in and sat down at his desk. The coffee machine was still silent. So was the rest of the room.

"You'll have to explain," he said. "What is it she can do that we can't?"

Sophie pulled out a chair and sat sideways on it so she could look at him directly.

"She can find the families who already buy pet products. She can target ads directly to them. She can reach people who look like the ones who have already shown interest."

“Look like?”

“Lookalike audiences,” she said, raising a finger. “It’s pretty brilliant.”

“Mhm.”

She leaned forward.

“It’s more precise. Not broad, and not random. We can reach the right people.”

Harold poured water into the coffee machine and set a capsule in place.

“And what kind of right people are those?” he asked, with his usual skepticism toward people with smart ideas.

“Families with animals. People who have already invested in their pets. The ones who take it seriously... and know that it also costs.”

She smiled.

“We can become visible where it makes sense.”

He pressed the button. The machine began to hum.

“That sounds expensive.”

She hesitated for a second. Only one.

“It’s an investment.”

“Mhm.”

## **Tighten Up**

She drew a deep breath.

“Our numbers don’t look good, Harold.”

The machine’s hum filled the room for a moment.

“We haven’t had a single family this past week.”

He didn’t comment.

“That’s why I contacted her,” Sophie continued. “If we really want to move, everything points to this being the right direction.”

He poured the coffee.

“And what does that direction cost?”

She sat down across from him now and placed a bag of licorice on the table, as if it were a peace offering.

“It’s not free,” she said. “But it’s realistic.”

She kept her eyes on him.

“And we’re going to have to tighten up.”

He set the cup down in front of her.

“Tighten up how?”

She took a piece of licorice and put it in her mouth.

“The wage subsidy for your employment is expiring now.”

He nodded slowly.

“I can’t pay you a full salary, the way it looks right now.”

The words were said calmly. Not apologetic, and not harsh either. Just stating.

“It has nothing to do with your effort,” she added quickly. “Not at all.”

He lifted the cup but didn’t drink.

“So, what are you thinking?” he asked.

For a moment she looked down at the table.

“There are some options.”

She spoke almost the same as before, but her voice was a little lower.

“We can look into whether we can get the subsidy extended. There are programs. If we document that the ramp-up has taken longer than expected.”

She looked up at him.

“It’s not cheating. It’s... interpretation.”

He said nothing.

“Or” she continued, “you can cut your hours temporarily. Half pay for a period. Flexible work. Until the marketing side starts to work.”

“Mhm.”

“I hope you’re not thinking we should shut down,” she said quickly. “I really hope not.”

He looked at her.

“No,” he said.

Silence held between them for a moment.

She smiled faintly.

"You can think about it. We can talk about it when we get back from the visit."

He stood up.

"Yes."

He took his jacket.

"It's about a dog that can't figure out where it's supposed to live," he said, shifting the scene.

Sophie nodded.

Then he walked out first.

And back in the room, the coffee machine stayed behind, dripping its last drops.

## **Two Homes**

The drive in the Volvo had been quiet.

Sophie had sat with her phone in her hand, her thumb in constant motion across the screen. A couple of times she had said, "Mm," almost to herself. Once she had smiled.

Harold had driven.

He had not asked what she was writing.

The villa lay at the end of a closed street with freshly trimmed hedges and trampolines in several yards. A bicycle lay tipped over in the driveway, and a soccer ball had found its place against the garage door.

Before they had a chance to ring, the door opened.

"Is it you? You are certainly punctual," said a woman in her late thirties with an open voice and one hand on the doorframe. "Come in."

There was warmth in the entryway. Not just in the temperature.

"Mom, is it them?" a voice called from deeper inside the house.

"Yes," the woman answered.

And then the dog came. It did not come cautiously. It came as if it already knew the house. Not like a guest, but like someone with a right to be there. It slipped past the woman's legs and moved toward Harold with a low, expectant sound in its throat.

A medium-sized dog. Golden fur that carried traces of both yard and couch. Eyes clear, movements quick without being nervous. It stopped in front of Harold, looked up at him, weighed the situation—and sat. Not to impress. But because it had learned that it often led to something.

Harold bent down and placed his hand on its head. The dog leaned into the pressure with its whole body.

“That’s Freja,” the woman said.

“She’s here all the time,” said a girl of about twelve who had come into the entryway. “Almost.”

“She only goes home to sleep,” added a younger boy.

“Or when they call,” the girl said.

She said “they” without anger. Just stating it.

“She can open the garden gate herself,” the boy said proudly.

“Yes, she’s not stupid,” the mother said, and smiled.

Freja had already moved on. She had sniffed Harold’s pant leg, Sophie’s shoes, the bag. Then she turned and went straight into the living room, as if she expected them to follow.

“See,” said the girl. “She knows it’s here.”

Sophie smiled.

“It’s clear she feels at home.”

“She does,” said the boy.

“It’s almost like she’s our dog,” the girl said quickly—and then she looked up at her mother, as if she had said something that might have been too much.

There was a moment of silence.

Freja had found her place in the middle of the floor. Not on the couch. Not by the door.

In the middle of the room.

Where she could keep an eye on all of them.

She did not lie like someone who was visiting.

She lay like someone who knew there were several possibilities.

She lifted her head when something was said in the kitchen.

The ears moved first, then the body followed.

Not dramatically, but attentively.

"She goes where something is happening," the mother said.

"Yes," Harold said calmly. "They do."

Freja stood up and walked toward the kitchen. Halfway. Then she stopped and looked back toward Harold.

Sophie noticed that.

### **The Owners**

The garden gate clicked.

Freja lifted her head immediately.

She did not stand up. But her ears were fully raised.

"Yes, we're here."

The voice came matter of fact, almost dry.

A man in his early forties stepped into the yard with firm strides. A woman followed. Their clothes were neat, but not decorative. Practical. They did not look angry. More tense.

Now Freja stood up.

She walked a few steps toward them, as if to register who it was. She stopped halfway. Then she looked back toward the living room, toward Harold, and then again toward the garden gate.

"Freja," the man said.

The dog walked the last steps toward him.

She sat down.

"She is our dog," he said without introduction.

There was no aggression in his voice. More a kind of firmness.

"That's what we need to get straight."

Sophie stepped forward.

"That's why we're here."

The woman looked at the children.

"We know she's here a lot," she said. "But that doesn't mean..."

She let the sentence hang.

“She’s here all the time,” the girl said quickly.

“She comes on her own,” said the boy.

“It’s not like we’re taking her,” said the mother from the children’s family. “She just walks in.”

Freja had lain down again. This time a little closer to the man by the gate.

But she was not entirely next to him.

She lay in the area where she could see both families.

The man placed his hand on her head.

The movement was correct and clearly familiar.

“She needs to be at home,” he said. “This other thing doesn’t work.”

The words “doesn’t work” settled heavier than the rest.

“We don’t like that she’s being fed here,” the woman said. “Or that she’s forming habits.”

Freja lifted her head again.

She did not react to the words, but to the tone.

“She just needs to be told to go home,” the man said. “You can teach a dog that.”

Harold stood slightly to the side and observed.

Freja stood up again.

She took two steps toward the children. Stopped. Turned her head toward the man. And then took half a step back before sitting down in the middle of the yard. Not by the gate. Nor by the children. But in the middle of everything, as if she were waiting for someone to make a decision, she could not make herself.

## **The Choice**

Sophie took a step forward.

“Let me just start by saying,” she began in the calm voice she used when opening a consultation, “that this type of situation is actually something we work with quite often.”

She looked around at them.



"It's not always a dog between two yards," she added with a small smile. "But it's often relationships crossing into one another."

The man by the gate nodded briefly, as if he accepted that it was at least being taken seriously.

"A dog," Sophie continued, "doesn't have concepts like ownership. It has relationships. So, we could try seeing what she chooses."

"Chooses?" the woman repeated.

"Yes," Sophie said. "We could do a very simple exercise."

She looked at the families.

"Stand at each end of the yard. Call her. Let her walk toward the place where she feels most at home."

The children straightened immediately.

"Yes!" said the boy.

The man looked skeptical, but he took a few steps backward toward the garden gate. The woman followed.

The children's family gathered by the patio door.

Freja stood in the middle of the yard.

She looked from one side to the other.

"Freja," the girl called softly.

"Freja, come," the man said, more firmly.

The dog took one step.

Then another.

She began walking toward the children.

"See!" whispered the boy.

But before she reached them, she stopped.

### **Most Available**

Harold had moved slightly away from the group. Not demonstratively. Just a step to the side.

He stood with his hands in his pockets.

Freja turned her head toward him. Then she walked in his direction.

"Hey," Sophie said quietly.

Freja sat down in front of Harold and looked up.

He did not bend down.

He just looked at her.

“That wasn’t the point,” the man said.

“Try again,” Sophie said quickly, a little tighter.

They lined up again.

Called.

This time Freja walked halfway toward the garden gate.

But then she stopped.

Harold took a couple of steps toward the terrace.

Freja turned and followed him again.

Now Sophie noticed.

“Have you...?” she began.

Harold pulled his hand out of his pocket.

There were three small treats in his palm.

The children laughed.

“That’s cheating!”

“No,” Harold said calmly. “But it’s very clear.”

He held the treat low so Freja could see it but not reach it.

“She isn’t choosing a ‘home,’” he said. “She’s choosing what is most available.”

Freja wagged her tail, expectantly.

“She goes where it makes sense for her right now.”

He put the treat away again.

Freja looked at him for a moment. Then she took two steps toward the children.

“She can’t make that decision,” Harold said calmly. “That’s yours.”

Silence fell in the yard.

Sophie stood for a moment looking at him.

She knew what he had done.

And she also knew that he was right.

Freja still sat in the middle of the yard.

The man by the gate drew in a breath.

"It's actually very simple," he said. "You just stop feeding her."

He looked directly at the children's family.

"Stop petting her. Stop giving her attention."

"But she comes on her own," the boy said.

"She knocks," the girl said. "She stands there."

"Then you tell her 'go home,'" the woman at his side said. "You can teach a dog that."

The children looked at Freja, who was now standing in front of them, their expressions hoping she might save the situation.

"We can't just ignore her," the girl said quietly. "She stands there."

"She has to learn," the man said.

There was something in his voice that wasn't harsh, but tired.

"There has to be order."

Freja sat down again. Her tail moved slowly across the grass. She looked from one to the other. Very attentively.

"It's not her who chose this," Harold said calmly. "It's you."

Silence.

"She can't help reacting to what's available," he continued. "That's what dogs do. If there's an opportunity for attention, she tries it."

"Then we have to make it less available," the woman said quickly.

"Yes," the man said. "It's not that difficult."

The girl stood completely still now.

"Yes, it is," she said quietly.

No one answered her.

Freja lay down.

### **Third Option**

Harold looked around at all of them.

"If you can't agree," he said, "then we have to find a third solution."

The mood shifted.

"A third?" Sophie repeated quietly.

“Yes.”

He kept his eyes on the grass for a moment before looking up.

“If it’s this hard to get her to live in one place without seeking the other... then maybe she shouldn’t live with any of you.”

No one spoke.

“A shelter,” he continued calmly. “Or a completely new owner. A place where there aren’t two homes. Then the problem is solved.”

The children looked down.

The man by the gate stood very still.

The woman folded her arms, but without the earlier firmness.

Freja lifted her head again. She did not understand the words, but she sensed the silence.

No one was calling her now. No one reaching out a hand.

She laid her head down on the grass, as if waiting for someone to make a decision she could not make herself.

No one looked at each other. Several looked down, as if the grass had suddenly become very interesting.

## **Responsibility**

The girl had been standing with her arms hanging by her sides.

She said nothing for several seconds.

Freja lifted her head again, as if she felt the change in the air.

“Then... then let them keep her,” the girl said.

She did not look at anyone when she said it. Not at her parents. Not at the owner.

She looked at the dog.

“I’ll stop calling her,” she continued. “I’ll stop giving her food.”

Her voice was not loud. But it was clear that she meant it.

“But—” said her brother.

“It’s their dog,” she said, drawing in a breath. “That’s right.”

Silence again. A different kind of silence now.

Freja stood up.

She walked slowly toward the girl. Stopped a meter from her. Then she sat down. As if she sensed that something had changed. And that it was the girl who had caused it.

The man by the gate turned his gaze toward the girl.

Something in his face softened slightly.

"That wasn't how it was meant," he said, more quietly than before.

The woman beside him let her arms drop.

"You're allowed to talk to her," she said.

The girl looked up.

"She's yours," she said again.

Harold said nothing.

Sophie said nothing.

They waited.

The man drew in a deep breath.

"Maybe we can find an arrangement," he said. "As long as we're clear about where she belongs."

The woman nodded.

"So, it's our responsibility," she said.

The word hung in the air.

Responsibility.

Freja lay down again.

This time closer to the gate.

The girl wiped a hand across her eyes without saying anything.

Harold looked at her.

He did not say "you did the right thing."

But he nodded.

They said goodbye without making it big.

The children's family remained standing in the driveway. The girl had sat down on the step, and Freja lay somewhere between the gate and the terrace, as if she had accepted that the agreement had made her world a little more complicated.

## It Worked

The Volvo started on the first turn of the key.

Sophie exhaled, as if she had been holding her breath for a long time.

"That worked," she said.

Harold nodded.

"Mhm."

She leaned back in her seat.

"It could have been worse."

"Yes."

She looked out the window for a moment.

"It was actually quite beautiful," she said. "The way she... let go."

Harold drove.

He did not answer immediately.

"Yes," he said then.

There was no disagreement in his voice. But no relief either.

Sophie picked up her phone, looked at the screen, put it down again.

"I actually think they'll find a solution," she said. "Now that they've said it out loud."

"I think so too," Harold replied.

The Volvo turned onto the main road.

Silence again.

Sophie looked at her partner.

"You were tough," she said.

"Maybe."

"A shelter."

"Yes."

She smiled faintly.

"It worked."

He looked ahead and nodded.

The office came into view at the end of the industrial road.

The Volvo rolled into its usual spot.

They went inside.

### **The Cost**

Inside, there was the same smell of coffee and paper. The same desks. The same bag of licorice.

Sophie sat down and slipped off her shoes with a small movement that meant she felt at home.

"I'm actually a little proud of us," she said.

Harold hung up his jacket. He did not turn toward her right away.

"I am too," he said.

There was a small pause.

"But?"

He pulled out the chair and sat down.

"The choice had it's cost," he said calmly. "And it was strong to see that she was the one who took it."

She looked at him.

"Yes. She took responsibility. That was big."

Harold now looked directly at Sophie.

"You have to do that too."

The words rested quietly in the room.

Sophie placed her hand flat on the table. She knew what he meant.

The confrontation had not begun yet. But it was standing in the doorway.

### **Integrity**

They stood for a moment in the silence.

Sophie reached for the licorice but let her hand remain on the table.

Harold looked at her.

"You asked me to choose this morning," he said.

She lifted her gaze.

"Yes."

His voice was not raised. Not harsh. Just clear.

“You asked me to choose between my salary and my integrity.”

She sat up straighter.

“That wasn’t what I—”

“Yes,” he interrupted calmly. “You said I could find a way to get the subsidy extended. Or cut my hours.”

He looked at her.

“The same day you enter into an expensive contract with a marketing agency.”

The words hung there. Not like an accusation. More like a statement.

“That’s not the same,” she said quickly. “The marketing is an investment. It’s forward-looking.”

“And I am what?” he asked.

She did not answer.

“A temporary expense?” he continued.

“It has nothing to do with your value,” she said. “It’s about making the company survive.”

“They said almost the same thing out there,” he said quietly.

She understood immediately what he meant.

“Order in things,” he continued. “It was their dog. It was about principles more than anything else.”

He paused.

“Until it cost something.”

Sophie drew in a breath.

“You think I’m manipulating?” she asked.

“I think you’re asking me to carry the responsibility for a decision you’ve already and single-handedly made.”

He did not sound angry, but perhaps a little tired.

She looked down at the table.

The bag of licorice lay between them.

A few seconds passed.

Then she leaned back.

“Okay,” she said, without drama.



"Then I'll take it."

He said nothing.

"I'll cut my own salary for a period," she continued. "Half. I can live with that."

She looked at him.

"I believe in the marketing. I do. I don't want to give it up."

She hesitated.

"But you're right. It shouldn't be at your expense."

Silence.

He looked at her for a moment.

Not to test her, but to truly understand her.

"It wasn't to make you give something up," he said calmly.

"I know," she said.

"I don't want to be the one holding you back."

She smiled faintly.

"You're not."

He nodded.

"So you carry the risk," he said.

"Yes."

He leaned back.

"That sounds like a fair decision."

There was no victory in it. Perhaps more a growing respect.

### **Direction**

A couple of weeks passed.

First one inquiry. Then two. Then more.

"It's working," Sophie said, turning the screen toward him.

He looked at the numbers.

"It looks that way."

There was no reluctance in his voice.

"You were right," he said.

She shook her head.

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“We made a decision.”

He smiled faintly.

“And you carried it.”

She nodded.

“Yes.”

There was no victory in the room..



# Queen of the Park

## Yellow

The park lay like an extension of their garden. Not officially, but in practice. The hedge behind the house was low enough that you could see the treetops and the first stretch of the gravel path that wound between the playground and the small pond. In spring it smelled of damp earth and freshly cut grass, in winter of wet bark and smoke from the surrounding houses. For the Holm family, the park was not an outing. It was part of everyday life.

The mother and the children went there every day. Sometimes with packed lunches, other times just to pass the time between afternoon and

dinner. The father was rarely there. He worked long hours and mostly saw the park as something green he passed in the car.

And then there was the dog.

It was the youngest who said it first.

“She’s all yellow,” he had said one day and pointed. “We can call her Yellow.”

The name stuck. It fit. Her coat was not uniform, but sun-bleached and dusty, as if she had gathered the park’s colors into herself. She was not small, not large. A mix of something indeterminate. Her ears stood half up, half down, and she carried her tail low, but without cowering.

Every day, when they came through the gate in the hedge, the children automatically looked toward the large bush at the edge of the playground. Often, she lay there. Not in the middle of everything but not hidden either. She kept a distance that was just far enough that you could not touch her—and just close enough that she was part of what was happening.

“There she is,” the children almost always said.

Yellow lifted her head. Her eyes followed them. She did not necessarily get up, but she shifted her position slightly, as if she registered their arrival. When they sat down on the bench, she lay down again. When the children ran toward the swings, she turned her head after them.

The mother had noticed it. The way the dog did not flee. The way she also did not come all the way over. As if she had decided on a boundary and kept it.

Sometimes the children brought something. A crust from a packed lunch. Half a meatball. They tossed it in an arc so it landed a little distance from them. Yellow always waited a moment. Then she walked calmly forward, took it, and withdrew again. No growling. No hurry. Just a quiet acceptance.

She did not look ragged. Her coat was thick. You could only see her ribs if you looked closely. She did not limp. She did not shiver. She did not seem like a dog who lacked someone.

She seemed like a dog who had chosen the park. It was her home.

She knew it's rhythm. The regular morning walkers. The families with children in the afternoons. The teenagers by the pond in the evenings. She knew where something edible might fall. She knew when it was best to withdraw.

For the Holm family, she had become a kind of quiet acquaintance. Not their dog. Not a task. Just Yellow. The park's familiar figure.

And every day, when they stepped out through the hedge, they looked for her first. And every day she looked back.

### **Puppies**

They had never really talked about getting a dog themselves.

It was not because they were against the idea. It had just never presented itself as necessary. There was enough to manage. School, work, extracurricular activities, vacations, plans. A dog was something that required structure, time, and a kind of binding they had not missed.

Maybe because they already had something that resembled it. They had Yellow. Not as owners. Not as responsibility. But as a regular presence. A quiet joy. A familiarity. A relationship without obligation. It suited them well.

Until one afternoon the mother stopped on the path and looked a little longer than usual.

Yellow rose from her place by the bush. She stretched, and in the movement it became clear. Her belly hung heavier. Her sides rounder. A different weight in her gait.

The mother did not say anything at first.

But the oldest did.

"Mom... has she gotten fatter?"

The youngest squinted.

"She's going to have puppies."

The word hung in the air between them.

They stood and watched her. Yellow walked a few steps, sat down again, and began licking her paw, as if the world were unchanged.

“Do you think so?” the mother asked quietly.

“Yes,” the children said almost in unison. “You can see it.”

### **The Question**

That day they talked about it more than usual. Not only about Yellow, but about puppies. How many there might be. What they would look like. Whether they would resemble her.

And then came the question.

“Mom... where is she going to give birth?”

The mother looked toward the bush. Toward the bare earth beneath the branches.

She had no ready sentence.

“I don’t know,” she said honestly.

That evening it was passed along at the dinner table.

“Dad, Yellow is going to have puppies!”

The father looked up from his plate.

“Are you sure about that?”

“Yes!” the children said. “You can clearly see it. And there could be a lot. Maybe ten!”

The father shrugged.

“Then she’ll have to manage.”

“She can’t just give birth under a bush,” the oldest said, looking indignant.

“Why not?” the father said calmly. “She’s managed for years.”

The mother did not say anything at first. She had been thinking all afternoon. Not dramatically. Just practically. Imagining scenarios without saying them aloud.

“I’ve actually been thinking about something,” she said at last.

The children turned toward her.

“If she could come into the garden... just quietly. We could put up a small shelter. Then she could give birth there. Out of the rain. We could feed her.”

There was a moment of silence.

The father set down his fork.

"Have we talked about getting a dog?"

"That's not what this is," she said quickly. "It's just temporary. Until the puppies are old enough."

The children were already imagining a basket in the garden. Small puppies tumbling around in the grass. A secret world just on the other side of the hedge.

The mother felt it too. How the thought had slipped in without her quite deciding it. Not as a desire to own. More as a desire to protect.

She looked out toward the darkness beyond the window. Toward the park she could not see but knew was there.

Yellow was out there somewhere.

And now it was no longer just a cozy relationship.

Now something was on its way.

## **The Doghouse**

It became the weekend, and the sun stood low over the hedge toward the park. The father had put on his work clothes, not because he was convinced, but because it was easier to do something than to discuss it again.

There were some old boards in the shed. Leftovers from a patio project that had never quite been finished. Now they were pulled out.

"It doesn't have to be big," the father said, measuring with the tape measure.

"Just so she can lie dry."

The children were already carrying. They talked over one another about straw and blankets and small puppies that would lie close together.

The mother came out with packed lunches and a thermos of coffee. She sat down on the step and watched them work. It was hard not to be swept up in it. There was something concrete about it. A small house, built with their hands.

“Do you think she’ll use it?” the youngest asked.

“I don’t know,” the mother said. “That’s up to her.”

She heard her own sentence. It sounded more measured than she had intended.

By late afternoon it stood finished. A small, slanted roof. An opening facing away from the wind. They carried it down to the corner of the garden, close to the hedge toward the park.

It almost looked as if it had been there a long time.

The children went to the hedge and called softly.

“Yellow...”

She lay by the bush as usual. Lifted her head. Saw them.

They opened the gate.

She did not hesitate long. She came in. Calmly, with the same measured gait she had always had. She sniffed at the grass, at the posts, at the difference in the air.

The children stood still, as if they were near something fragile.

“See,” whispered the oldest. “She likes it.”

Yellow walked over to the doghouse. Stuck her head inside. Sniffed. Took one step back. Then one step forward again.

She did not go in.

She turned around, walked to the hedge, and looked through the gap toward the park.

A few seconds passed.

Then she slipped out.

The children remained standing.

“She’ll probably come back,” the mother said.

But she already knew it was not that simple.

## **Not simple**

Harold and Sophie came Saturday morning. The old Volvo stood in front of the house, and Sophie stepped out first, as she usually did, with a folder under her arm, even though she had not brought anything particular.



The father showed them around the garden.

The doghouse stood in the corner by the hedge. New wood against old fence boards. A solution that looked like a decision—but was not yet one.

“She’s been in here a couple of times,” the mother said.

“But she doesn’t stay.”

Harold walked over and crouched in front of the house. He put his hand inside and felt the bottom, as if assessing the craftsmanship.

“It’s solid,” he said. “But the question is not whether the house is ready.”

Sophie turned toward the parents.

“Tell me what you’re imagining,” she said.

The mother explained. About the belly. About the puppies. About the wish to give her a safe place to give birth. About the thought that it could just be temporary.

The father stood with his arms crossed.

“We just want to do the right thing,” the mother said at last.

Sophie nodded slowly.

“Then let’s talk about what the right thing actually entails.”

She spoke calmly, almost neutrally.

“You can’t just take over a dog, even if she’s been living in the park for a long time. If she begins staying here permanently, and especially if she gives birth on your property, then she is your responsibility. Both legally and practically.”

The father looked relieved that someone said it clearly.

The mother listened without interrupting.

“That means a vet, registration, vaccinations. And puppies. Many puppies, potentially. Who need to be socialized and rehoused. This is not a weekend project.”

There was a moment of silence.

### **Three Options**

Then Sophie continued:

“As I see it, you have three options.”

She held up three fingers.

“One: You contact the shelter now.

Two: You take full responsibility and bring her in before she gives birth.

Three: You keep your distance entirely and do not get involved.”

She lowered her hand.

“There is no middle ground.”

The mother shook her head almost immediately.

“The third option doesn’t exist anymore,” she said. “Not after we know this. Not after the children...”

She looked toward the hedge, where the children’s voices could be heard from the park.

“We can’t pretend nothing is happening.”

Harold nodded quietly.

“I understand that.”

He sat down on the bench by the hedge and looked out toward the bush where Yellow lay.

Then he turned toward them.

“If she were not pregnant,” he said, “would you have wanted a dog?”

The question was not accusatory. Just curious.

The father answered without hesitation.

“No.”

The mother hesitated.

She looked down at the grass. Then up toward the park’s trees.

“We’ve never talked about it,” she said at last. “And I don’t think... no. Not really.”

Harold nodded again.

“So, what you’re reacting to is the situation. Not necessarily a wish for a dog.”

The words settled heavier than they sounded.

Behind the hedge, Yellow stood up and took a few steps, as if she had heard her name in the air.

She did not look like a dog waiting to be rescued.

She looked like a dog waiting to see what they would do.

The mother drew in a breath.

"The way you lay it out," she said slowly, "it becomes clear what the right thing is."

She was not speaking to anyone in particular. The words were almost addressed to herself.

"I can feel that it's been hard to see clearly. It came little by little. First it was just cozy. Then just a bit of food. Then a doghouse. You want to do the right thing. For yourself. For the children. And of course, also for the dog."

She looked down at the grass in front of her.

"But when you outline it so clearly... then I think there is only one solution."

Silence.

"And it won't be easy," she continued. "It will be especially hard for the children. But as a family we are not prepared to take that responsibility."

She turned toward her husband.

He nodded, without hesitation this time. Put his arm around her shoulders, not as victory, but as support.

"We're not," she said again, as if she needed to hear it aloud herself. "We have to contact the shelter. And the sooner, the better."

The words hung in the air for a moment. They were not harsh. Just clear.

"Then we'll have to figure out what we tell the children."

Harold stepped forward.

"Yes," he said calmly. "I actually think you can tell them."

The mother looked at him questioningly.

"Children can understand responsibility," he continued. "Especially when it's explained honestly. You can say that you have considered it thoroughly. That helping does not always mean owning. That there are people better equipped to take care of her now."

He paused briefly.

“And maybe you can make an arrangement with the shelter. Ask if you may come by and see her. Maybe also the puppies. It depends on what they decide. But it can be a way to bring it to a close.”

Sophie nodded.

“It’s a mature decision,” she said. “And you can stand by it in front of your children.”

The mother straightened slightly.

She looked toward the park. Yellow had stood up and stood for a moment completely still, as if simply registering the world around her.

“Yes,” the mother said quietly. “I can.”

The doghouse still stood in the corner.

But the decision had moved inside them.

And it stood firm.

### **On Its Terms**

The Volvo pulled slowly away from the residential street. The park slid past in the rearview mirror, green and undisturbed, as if nothing had happened.

Sophie did not say anything at first. She sat with her hands folded in her lap and looked at the trees passing by.

“I understand her,” she said at last. “It takes something to change direction once you’re emotionally engaged.”

Harold nodded and shifted gears. The engine responded with its familiar hum.

“She wanted to do the right thing,” Sophie continued. “But she also wanted to be able to live with it afterward. That’s not the same thing.”

There was a moment of silence.

“I respect that choice,” she said more quietly.

Harold glanced briefly at her, then back at the road.

“That’s one of the difficult things about our world,” he said. “We’ve organized it with orderly conditions for animals. Shelters. Rules. Systems. And that’s good.”

He hesitated.

"But when nature shows up in the middle of it all—on its own terms—we rarely know what to do."

Sophie shrugged faintly.

"The best solution might have been that she could simply give birth to her puppies and take care of herself."

"Yes," Harold said. "But our world isn't built for that anymore."

The Volvo drove past a traffic light. For a moment they stood still.

"We want nature," he continued. "But preferably one that fits in. One that doesn't require us to change our lives."

Sophie smiled faintly.

"As soon as it does, it becomes a problem."

Harold looked ahead.

"Remember our slogan for the company, Sophie: 'The animal you tame, you are responsible for life.' That applies even if you only tamed it a little."

The traffic light turned green.

The Volvo rolled on.

Behind them lay the park.

Ahead of them lay the road.

And a choice that had been made.





# What Newer Grew

## Glaze

A thin layer of glaze lay on the Danish pastry as Sophie, with an almost ceremonial movement, cut it in half. She had bought it from the bakery on the corner—not the cheap plastic-wrapped one from the supermarket, but the one with butter and real almond filling. The coffee machine had worked harder than usual, and the office smelled heavily of both coffee and sugar.

Harold noticed it immediately.

“Well, that’s quite a surprise,” he said, lifting his cup. “What’s the occasion?”

Sophie shrugged, but the smile was not accidental.

"I've been thinking about our partnership," she said. "And I actually wanted to acknowledge you."

Harold raised his eyebrows.

"That sounds serious."

"Maybe it is," she said, sitting down across from him. "We're quite different, you and I."

"I've noticed."

"In a slightly caricatured way," she continued, "I'm the ambitious businesswoman who wants to move forward. I measure, adjust, optimize. I like speed. You... you just stand there."

"Just?" Harold said, smiling.

"Yes. You stand there. Solid. Unaffected. As if the world is welcome to come at you. And sometimes I feel both envious and irritated by that."

He nodded slowly.

"That's probably accurate," he said. "Is it a problem for you?"

"No." She shook her head. "It's a challenge. But a good one. I actually think you hold me in place when I would otherwise run."

She took a sip of coffee and was quiet for a moment.

## **Panic Age**

"I just have... a lot I need to get done," she said. "I have my whole life ahead of me. I have no family. No driver's license. No stable foundation. I'm on my way, but I'm not there. And sometimes, when I'm sitting on the exercise bike at the gym, I can feel it physically. As if I need to catch up. As if someone is ahead of me."

"Is there something called the panic age for women in their thirties?" she suddenly asked.

Harold laughed softly.

"You might want to save that excuse for a little while."

She gave him a crooked smile.

"I'm ambitious in the good way. And sometimes in the bad way. Haven't you ever felt like that?"



Harold looked down into his cup. The glaze on the plate had begun to melt.

"Yes," he said. "But maybe in a different way. I haven't been so focused on getting ahead. More focused on not losing."

"Losing what?"

## **Possibilities**

He hesitated. Not long. But long enough.

"Possibilities," he said. "... that might have become something."

Sophie leaned forward.

"Is there something you didn't do?"

He drew a deep breath, as if checking whether the story still hurt.

"I was once in a relationship," he began. "I was around forty. She had a boy. Five or six when we met."

"Were you together long?"

"Ten years," he said, smiling slightly. "It feels long. And short."

He paused, and Sophie instinctively stood up.

"I'll get more coffee," she said.

He nodded. She cut another piece of pastry and placed it in front of him without saying anything.

## **Ten Years**

"It seemed obvious that it should work out," he continued when she sat down again. "The boy and I could play. We could be out in nature. We understood each other in an immediate way. I thought... this could become real."

"But it didn't?"

He shook his head.

"There were too many threads. His mother. His father. Loyalties I couldn't compete with. I thought I was supposed to be the stable one. The extra father. I would have given one hundred percent."

Sophie looked at him.

“Did you?”

“Yes,” he said quietly. “And no. Because I also got irritated. When he withdrew. When he rejected me. When he chose his father, even when it was clear his father wasn’t stable.”

“Was it his fault?” she asked carefully.

“Fault?” He shook his head. “No. He was a child. He was caught in the middle. I just couldn’t bear being the one who wasn’t chosen.”

Silence settled.

“I started getting duties,” he continued. “Responsibilities. Practical things. But not what I had hoped for. Not the closeness or trust.”

“And then?”

“Then it slowly fell apart. The relationship. The boy. The whole possibility.”

## **Never Lived**

He leaned back.

“What hurt most wasn’t the breakup. It was the thought of the life that was never lived. The trips we never took. The conversations we never had. The father I never became.”

Sophie was quiet for a long time.

“Is that why you stand so firmly?” she asked. “Because you’ve felt what didn’t happen?”

Harold smiled faintly.

“You don’t become strong from getting everything,” he said. “You become strong from living with what you didn’t get.”

She sat looking at him.

“I’m afraid of running past my own life,” she said softly.

“You only do that,” he replied, “if you’re always running toward something else.”

She laughed briefly.

“That was very philosophical for a man with glaze on his shirt.”

He looked down.

"That's why I like being here," he said. "We're not trying to save the world. We're just trying to see it."

Sophie nodded.

"The life that never was," she said. "That's what we're really afraid of."

"Yes," Harold said. "And that's often what people grieve. Not what they lost. But what they never became."

They sat for a moment without saying anything.

The coffee machine clicked softly in the background.

## Occult

The Volvo hummed softly, as it usually did when it had accepted that the trip would not be too long. Sophie sat with her legs lightly drawn up and her phone in her hand, but she was not looking at it.

"It's actually interesting talking to you," she said suddenly.

Harold glanced briefly at her.

"Is that a rare experience?"

"No," she said dryly. "But it was different today."

He nodded.

"We'll have to keep talking about it," she continued. "When we have time. That thing about the life that never was... it's sitting with me."

"That's good," he said. "Then maybe it hasn't been wasted."

She smiled.

"But this case," she said, straightening up, "could also be interesting. She writes directly that she's being haunted by her dead dog."

"That's a word people use," Harold said calmly.

"Yes, but what if it's something... occult?" She shrugged. "I have a bit of knowledge about astrology. But the other stuff? I'm not exactly strong there."

"I'm not either," Harold said. "Fortunately."

"So, you don't think we're going out to perform an exorcism?"

"People tend to sharpen things a bit when they contact us," he said. "It feels stronger when you write it down. Let's see. But let's also stay open."

He winked at her.

"I'm with you on that," she said and leaned back.

They drove the last stretch in silence.

### **The Basket**

The apartment was on the third floor of an older building. The stairwell smelled faintly of cleaning solution and old wood varnish.

The woman opened the door almost soundlessly.

She was not dramatic. Not disheveled. Not hysterical. She was quiet.

"Thank you for coming," she said.

The apartment was orderly. Not sterile, but tidy. In the corner of the living room stood a wicker dog basket. It was empty. Beside it stood a water bowl, as if someone might still need it.

They sat down.

She spoke calmly. Almost meditatively.

"It's been half a year," she said. "But it doesn't stop."

"Stop what?" Sophie asked gently.

"The sounds." She looked down at the floor. "I hear creaking from the basket. Like when it turned over. Small clicks of claws against the parquet."

She looked up again.

"Sometimes I'm sure I see shadows. Not clearly. Just at the edge of my vision."

Sophie glanced discreetly around the room.

"And when I sit alone," the woman continued, "I can feel it's presence. As if it's here. Very close."

"That must be comforting?" Sophie asked.

The woman shook her head.

"No," she said quietly. "It's not. It's not a comforting feeling."

"Wasn't it a good dog?" Harold asked.

"Yes," she said quickly. "There was nothing wrong with it."

She said it in a way that sounded like an assessment. Not like a memory.

## **Relief**

Harold leaned slightly forward.

“Were you relieved,” he asked calmly, “when it died?”

The question hung in the air.

Sophie looked at him in surprise.

The woman went completely still. She blinked a few times.

“Relieved?” she repeated.

She sat with her hands folded in her lap.

“Now that you say it...” she said slowly. “I actually was relieved.”

A few seconds passed.

“And that’s a feeling I absolutely don’t like,” she continued. “I’ve hated myself ever since.”

The silence in the room shifted. It was not a spirit that was present. It was something else.

The woman drew a deep breath, as if she had decided to go one step further.

“It must be hard to understand,” she said, looking from one to the other, “when I also say that it was a lovely dog.”

Neither of them interrupted her.

“But you need to hear some of the story.”

She straightened slightly in her chair.

## **Backdrop**

“I never really asked to have a dog. It was him.” She smiled faintly. “He loved the idea. Long walks. Nature. A shared project. He said it would bind us together.”

She paused.

“And maybe it did. In the beginning.”

Sophie leaned forward.

“Was it a complicated relationship?” she asked carefully.

The woman considered.

"I don't know what to say to that," she said. "It probably always is, when you break up. But... it could have been good. It really could have been good."

She looked toward the window.

"We actually suited each other very well. I've thought a lot about what went wrong. I still don't quite know. While it worked, it was the best relationship I've been in."

There was no bitterness in her voice. Only a tired clarity.

"I think we could have been happy together," she said quietly.

She let her hands slide toward each other in her lap.

"But when we broke up, the dog stayed with me."

She looked toward the wicker basket.

"It became the only thing left."

A moment passed.

"And maybe," she continued slowly, "it became a symbol. Of what didn't work. Of what never became anything."

Harold still said nothing.

"I had trouble fully taking it in," she admitted. "Every time I saw it, I was reminded of him. Of what we could have had."

She smiled faintly—almost apologetically.

"It's awful to say. Because it didn't do anything wrong. It was loyal. It just wanted me. It wanted to be close."

Her voice grew softer.

"But I had a hard time receiving what it actually wanted to give me."

A heavy silence formed.

"So, when I hear it at night now," she said, "I don't know whether it's the dog... or whether it's the life I never got."

Sophie sat completely still now.

Harold let his gaze drift toward the basket and back again.

"It can be hard," he said calmly, "to receive love when it reminds us of something we lost."

The woman nodded.

"Yes," she said. "And maybe even harder when it reminds us of something we never got."

There was no longer anything occult in the room.

Only an empty space where something might have grown.

Harold sat for a moment and let her words settle.

"So, it became the dog's role," he said quietly, "to remind you of what never came to be."

She nodded.

"That was an unpleasant role to be given."

She breathed a little deeper.

"Yes," she said. "I can see that."

There was no defense in her voice anymore. Only recognition.

### **Let Go**

"Maybe it could help," Harold continued calmly, "if you don't have to feel guilty about the dog. It's not forbidden to feel relief. Relief does not mean you're a bad person."

She looked at him. There was a cautious relief in her gaze.

"But I should have loved it more," she said.

"Should," he repeated gently. "That's a heavy word."

He leaned forward slightly.

"Maybe instead you can say thank you. Not for the fact that it died. But for what it showed you."

She looked at him, puzzled.

"It showed you," he said, "that you can't live inside something that's only a backdrop. That you can't love on a substitute's terms."

Silence.

"And maybe you can also say you're sorry," he continued, "because you placed a role on it that it was never meant to carry."

Her gaze drifted back toward the basket.

"It wasn't you who was supposed to carry that," she whispered—as if she were speaking to something unseen.

Sophie broke in, her voice a little quicker.

“And of course you have to move on,” she said. “We all have something ahead of us. Something unknown. Something exciting.”

The woman shrugged lightly.

“Maybe,” she said.

She was not quite there yet.

Harold looked at her.

“You don’t move on before you understand where you were standing,” he said calmly. “Otherwise, you just bring the same thing with you.”

Sophie fell quiet.

Harold continued:

“You’re not grieving the dog. You’re grieving a possibility. And possibilities don’t die on their own. They just turn into experience.”

The woman sat completely still now.

“So, I’m allowed to let go?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said. “But not by pushing it away. By taking it in.”

She nodded slowly.

“I think,” she said, “it might lighten me to change how I see it. That it’s not haunting me... but reminding me.”

Something in the room settled.

Harold stood up.

“You’re not the one who was abandoned,” he said gently. “You’re the one who learned.”

It was not dramatic. It was not triumphant. It was simply another way of seeing it.

The woman walked them to the door.

When they left, the dog basket still stood in the corner.

But it seemed less heavy.

## **Double Shot**

The Volvo rolled out of the small side street.

Sophie sat for a long time without saying anything.



"Wow," she said finally. "That was two. That was a double shot. First your story—and then this one."

Harold nodded.

"Yes," he said calmly. "It can be hard to digest."

He smiled lightly.

"But you've got your whole life ahead of you, Sophie. You can listen to the rest of us old ones and learn."

She laughed faintly but didn't quite finish the laugh.

"Yes," she said. "But I've lived too. I have things with me."

He glanced briefly at her.

"I know."

She hesitated a moment.

## Quiet

"I don't know if I've ever told you," she began. "My parents got divorced when I was little. Like most other kids in my generation, so there's nothing to cry about."

"No," he said quietly. "But?"

She looked out through the windshield.

"But I actually felt like the world stopped back then. Like it came to a halt."

She drew in a breath.

"There were so many things that were just taken for granted. Everyday life. The mood. Knowing where you belonged. And suddenly everything was something that had to be organized."

She gave a short laugh without humor.

"Schedules. Changeover days. Discussions about who did it best. Who could perform the most for my sake. It probably started naturally. But for me it became... quiet."

"Quiet?" Harold asked.

“Yes. As if everything became extraordinary. There was never anything that was just normal. Everything had to function. Everything had to succeed.”

Silence filled the car.

Harold looked at her—with a warmth he did not make a big display of.

“No,” he said. “You’ve never told me that.”

“It was a long time ago,” she said. “And I don’t go digging in it. But it came up.”

## Turning

“That’s good enough,” he said. “Those things need to be turned over once in a while.”

She nodded.

“It hurt,” she said quietly. “I think... I think that’s where I get this feeling that something always has to be happening. That I have to move forward. That I have to perform.”

She looked at him.

“I think I got scared that the world had stopped. And then I had to do my part to keep it turning.”

Harold nodded slowly.

“That makes sense,” he said. “A lot of sense.”

“It’s not to excuse the person I am,” she said quickly.

“No, no,” he replied calmly. “It’s to understand her.”

She smiled faintly.

“But I always have something to catch up on,” she said. “And the more frantic I get, the less actually happens.”

“That’s the paradox,” Harold said. “It’s often when we settle and see the connections that something begins to heal.”

He let the words hang for a moment.

“That’s what we saw today too. When she understood the connection, it became less heavy.”

Sophie nodded.

“That’s what I hope,” she said. “To feel.”

Silence again. Not heavy. Just calm.

“But no more seriousness,” she suddenly said, straightening up. “There was actually an extra piece of Danish left.”

Harold laughed.

“That’s therapy at a high level.”

“Yes,” she said. “Let’s get home and have a cup of coffee.”

The Volvo continued through the gray afternoon light.

And this time it did not feel as if the world had stopped. It was simply turning—at its own pace.





# The Truffle Trap

## **Pipeline**

The clock read about 8:30. Sophie had settled herself with her legs up on the desk and the iPad in her lap in one of her favorite positions. Her fingers danced across the screen as she made quick calculations.

“Oh, you have to see this, Harold! We actually have seven cases in the pipeline right now, and they look incredibly similar. Six of them are about dogs. I honestly think we can optimize our time by running them as some kind of series. It gives me hope that we can increase revenue by maybe 40 percent this quarter. That would be fantastic for us.”

Harold paused at the coffee machine and looked over at her with a small sigh. “Sophie, is there really that much work ahead of us? I get a little worried that it’s turning into too much business, but that’s where we’re different.”

After a short pause, Sophie looked up from the screen. “Listen, Harold. The last of the seven cases actually looks really exciting. It’s that woman, Elena, with the truffle dogs. The one from YouTube—I think she has 200,000 followers.”

“Who are you talking about?” Harold asked. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard of her.”

## **Gold Miners**

“Oh, Harold, you’ve heard about truffle dogs. They’re the gold miners of our time,” Sophie continued as she scrolled. “A trained truffle puppy from Italy can sniff out values worth several thousand dollars in a single morning. They’re money machines on four legs.”

She shot Harold a look that revealed she was already mentally calculating whether she herself should invest in such a puppy. Harold had stopped stirring his coffee.

“But what does that have to do with this Elena?” he asked.

“She breeds the line,” Sophie replied, as if it were common knowledge. “She trains them, posts tons of videos on YouTube, and sells them at sky-high prices. But listen to what she writes: her best dog is on strike. Yes, that’s what she says. Something’s wrong. It has always loved its work, but now it has suddenly lost either the desire or the ability entirely. That’s what she wants us to look at. Can we?”

Harold tilted his head slightly from side to side. "It's not certain we can, but we can try. She shouldn't expect us to rescue her entire business, but maybe we can make sure the dog feels better. It sounds like it has lost its spark—or at least its motivation."

Harold took a cautious sip of the hot coffee and looked at Sophie with a gaze weighted by experience.

"Without ruining your enthusiasm, Sophie, my experience tells me that when too much money enters the equation—whether it's about animals or love—it gets complicated. Money has a way of shouting so loudly that in the end you can hear nothing else. The same was true of the real gold miners; most of them ended up antisocial and half-crazy."

Sophie shrugged with a skeptical expression. "You still have a bit of hippie blood in your veins, Harold. It's about balance. But a little financial ballast wouldn't hurt us."

Harold did not give up so easily. "Balance, yes—but it's usually found somewhere other than where you're looking. We can use that domain theory you're so fond of. Money has its domain, while our relationships, hobbies, and passions have another. If the boundaries become blurred, it easily goes wrong."

"Yes, yes, Harold. I can tell I've stepped on a sore toe, but I'm still fascinated by dogs that can find gold."

## **On Strike**

When they arrived at Elena's beautiful farm, she was already standing in the yard with her star dog, Bella—the face of all the videos and of the sign out by the road. Bella did not look like she had developed star behavior; she looked like an ordinary dog wagging toward guests. She certainly did not look like one who had gone on strike.

"She won't sniff anymore," Elena explained shortly after, when they were sitting over coffee in the large country kitchen. "My biggest fear, of course, is that for some reason she has lost her skill."

She paused briefly. “She was my first dog. It was with her that everything started. Without her, none of this would have happened. And she’s the foundation of my entire business.”

## **The Brand**

“Wouldn’t your business be able to run without her?” Sophie asked, half professionally and half curiously.

Elena considered the question. “My business is no longer directly dependent on her. It was three years ago, but today my brand is so strong that I can sell all the puppies without a problem. I have about twenty-five on a waiting list.”

“So, it’s something else about her that matters to you?” Harold interjected.

Elena nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, she’s something special. Once it was just her and me. No breeding, no YouTube—just the two of us walking in the woods.”

“And then she found a truffle?” Harold asked.

“Yes, actually!” Elena replied, seeming slightly surprised by the memory herself. “That’s how it began. Just the two of us. That’s why it’s so strange that she doesn’t want to join in anymore.”

Harold nodded. “She has a very special meaning to you.” Elena confirmed with a glance at her dog.

It was Sophie who changed the subject; her curiosity had been sparked. “Was it around here that she found the first truffle?”

Elena smiled. “Yes and no. Here I discovered her desire to sniff. I helped a little and hid different things with distinctive scents, but yes, it was actually over there in the woods behind.”

“Can we go over there?” Sophie asked.

Elena looked at Bella and then at Sophie. “Yes, why not. It’s been a long time since I’ve been there.”

## **The Woods**



On the way she pointed east. "Over there we have the training fields with camera setups for the videos. You may have seen them on YouTube?"

Sophie nodded. "Yes, it's incredible how they can sniff out the truffles, even when they're deep underground."

Bella walked along with them, as if she were the most natural member of the group. When they reached the edge of the forest and followed a small path into the brush, Bella suddenly seemed at home and disappeared ahead.

"It's strange walking here," Elena began, "almost nostalgic. So much has happened in these years."

"Good things?" Harold asked innocently.

"Definitely!" Elena replied promptly, then corrected herself. "Or both. There's something about the early days that's very special. Then comes success, and with it everything that takes focus. I suppose that's how it is with any business."

### **Factory Manager**

She paused, as if deciding whether to say more. "It easily ends up being about maintaining momentum, thinking strategically, and—in the end—about money... unfortunately. But that's how it is."

"Would you do it differently if you started today?" Harold asked.

"Absolutely," Elena answered firmly. "There are plenty of mistakes I could have avoided with the experience I have now."

"But more fundamentally," Harold continued, "did you choose right, or do you regret it?"

Elena looked at him with a mixture of surprise and familiarity. "My life, you mean?"

"Yes," Harold said. "Your life over the past five years. How it developed from hobby to business. Your whole success. Would you choose it today if you could start over?"

"That's a big question," Elena replied with a crooked smile. "But also, very relevant. It's not something I think about very often."

The brush had now given way to tall spruce trees and scattered oaks with small clearings between them. The ground was covered with a thick, soft layer of needles and leaves. Sophie did not join the conversation, but followed eagerly, trying to navigate around fallen branches.

“Money is nice, but it doesn’t make you happy,” Elena began her explanation. “The same goes for fame. It’s incredibly binding and rarely runs very deep.”

She gathered her thoughts. A fine drizzle had begun—a delicate net of small drops that seeped silently down through the trees.

“I would probably have kept it as a hobby,” Elena continued quietly and confidentially. “Maybe three...”

“... maybe three or four dogs at most,” Elena continued, drawing a deep breath. “But now I have twenty. And every single puppy that is born is a contract that has to be fulfilled. A promise to a buyer who has paid a fortune and expects a perfect machine. I no longer feel like a dog walker. I feel like a factory manager.”

They stopped in a small clearing where an old fallen beech formed a natural bench. Harold sat down heavily and looked at Bella, who circled around a tree stump a little further ahead.

“That’s the price of turning your passion into your livelihood,” Harold said quietly.

Sophie, who had otherwise been busy navigating around the mud, looked up. “But Elena, you’ve created something unique. Two hundred thousand people follow you because you’re the best. Isn’t that also a form of freedom—to be successful?”

Elena smiled sadly. “Freedom? Sophie, I can’t even take Bella for a walk without considering whether the light is right for a video. Every time she does something cute, I think: ‘Where’s my phone?’ I no longer see my dog. I see content for my channel.”

## **The Oak**

Suddenly Bella stopped. Her body tightened like a drawn bow, and her tail

stopped wagging. She pressed her nose directly to the ground at the base of a large oak. She did not dig. She did not bark. She just stood completely still and looked insistently up at Elena.

“What is she doing?” Sophie whispered and instinctively reached for her own phone.

“Leave it,” Harold said calmly.

Elena walked slowly over to Bella. She crouched down, exactly as she had done five years earlier, before cameras and strategies took over her life. She did not use her small, specially designed truffle-harvesting tool. She used her fingers.

After gently scraping away the top layer of soil, a small, knobby object appeared. It was not one of the expensive white truffles she sold to luxury restaurants. It was an ordinary black summer truffle—small and imperfect.

Elena sat with the knobby little thing in her palm while the rain quietly dampened her face. Bella nudged her shoulder lovingly and licked her cheek.

“She found it,” Elena said, her voice breaking. “But she didn’t do it for the camera. She did it... because I didn’t ask her to.”

### **Back to the Beginning**

Harold stood up and brushed off his pants. “She’s not striking against her work, Elena. She’s striking against your business model. She misses her friend, not her boss.”

Elena looked at the small black knobby thing and then at Bella. For the first time in three years, no one was thinking about the price per gram.

“Elena,” Harold said, “you are actually back at the beginning.”

### **Golden Balance**

The rain had intensified and now drummed rhythmically against the roof of the Volvo, while the wipers moved in their own sleepwalking rhythm. Sophie sat for a long time looking out at the dark fields before she set her iPad aside and turned toward Harold.

“Harold, it struck me just now, as we were driving away from the farm... this thing with Elena is actually a pretty precise picture of the two of us,” she began thoughtfully.

Harold raised one eyebrow and kept both hands firmly on the steering wheel. “Oh? Are we also starting to lose our scent for the good stuff?”

“No, quite the opposite,” Sophie smiled. “But we’re exactly the two sides of the case. I’m the one who fixates on money, the company, and growth. For me it’s a success when the business flourishes. And you... you’re much more focused on the play, the relationships, and what’s happening on the inside. I actually think it’s a fantastic image of our partnership.”

She paused and glanced at the seven cases she had celebrated earlier.

“I think we’re in a much better position than Elena is, precisely because there are two of us. We each have our own way of seeing things, and so far we’ve managed to make it work together. She only has herself. She doesn’t have anyone to stop her and ask: ‘When do we do one thing, and when do we prioritize the other?’ In a way, it gives me a sense of security that we have both aspects in play all the time. We have two domains we move in, and I think that’s incredibly healthy for our company.”

Harold nodded slowly and smiled beneath his mustache. “I actually think you’re right about that, Sophie. That’s well observed. It also means that each of us has a responsibility to represent our own point of view, so we don’t drift off course and end up somewhere neither of us really wants to be.”

“Exactly,” Sophie said, feeling a new kind of calm settle in her. “Because I don’t want us to just do everything for the sake of our pretty blue eyes—we have to be able to make a living from this. But I can also sense in you that you would never dream of trading human relationships for cold cash.”

“You’re absolutely right about that,” Harold rumbled warmly. “We are very different, Sophie. But maybe that’s precisely our good fortune—and our greatest chance to keep the balance.”

They drove on through the rain in silence, but this time it was a silence full of understanding. The Volvo felt a little warmer, and the pipeline of

seven cases suddenly felt more like a task they could carry together—without losing their soul along the way.





# The Line Between Us

## On the Road

The engine coughed briefly, as if the Volvo needed to gather it's courage. Sophie already had her seatbelt on and her phone in her hand, but she hadn't opened anything. She just stared down at the screen without seeing it

Harold noticed. She usually used the drive for emails, statistics, or ideas for the next post.

They drove for a while in silence. The morning sun lay low over the road, and the fields slipped past in long, unhurried stretches.

Sophie drew in a deep breath and looked out the window.

## The Question of Closeness

"Harold... do you think you can get too close to another person?"

He did not answer immediately. He kept his eyes on the road.

"That depends on what you mean by close."

She nodded faintly, still gazing toward the horizon.

"Like... that you lose yourself a little. That suddenly you're not quite sure where you begin and the other person ends."

"Has that happened?" he asked calmly.

She hesitated.

"I went on a date yesterday."

A small, almost apologetic smile appeared, then disappeared again.

"And?"

"And it was... good." She said the word slowly, as if testing whether it still fit. "Actually, more than good. It was intense."

Harold nodded faintly.

"Intense can mean many things."

"Yes." She shrugged slightly. "We talked for three hours without a break. Not superficially. Really. About everything. Family. Fear. Ambitions. What you want and what you don't want. It was as if... I knew him."

"That can be nice."

"Yes. It was." She turned briefly toward him. "And it was also scary... mostly afterward."

"Because?"

"Because I could feel that here was someone I could actually live with."

The words hung between them. She said them more quietly than she had intended.

The engine hummed evenly.

"And you don't want that?" Harold asked.

She gave a short laugh, without humor.

"That's the thing. I don't know."

Silence again.



She continued, faster now, as if the words had been lining up.

"I've built my life myself. My work. The company. My finances. My freedom. I can make decisions without asking anyone. I can travel, work, do what I want. I'm not dependent."

"No," Harold said softly. "You're not."

"And I don't want to become that." She crossed her arms, almost to underline it. "I want to be able to survive on my own."

"You already can."

She looked at him.

"That's not the same," she said.

"No."

He let the car glide into a curve.

"Maybe the question," he continued, "is whether you're afraid of losing your freedom... or of discovering that you actually want to share it."

She did not answer.

The landscape shifted from fields to forest. The shadows between the trees slid across the windshield like dark ribbons.

### **Be Careful**

"When I was sitting there yesterday," she said slowly, "it was as if something clicked. Not dramatic. Just... natural. As if it could become real. And in the same moment a voice inside me said: Be careful."

"Be careful of what?"

"Of giving myself away."

"Do you give yourself away," Harold asked, "or do you give yourself to?"

She swallowed.

"It doesn't feel that different."

"It can be," he said.

She sat for a long time without speaking. Then she drew in a deep breath.

"If you get really close," she said, "you become responsible for each other. Not just romantically. Practically. Emotionally. You can't just withdraw."

"No."

"It's a kind of binding."

"Yes."

"And I don't know if I dare that."

There was nothing ironic in her voice now. No lightness. Only honesty.

Harold drove a while before he answered.

"What's the worst that could happen?"

"That it falls apart," she said.

"And if it does?"

"Then it hurts."

"It does," he said calmly.

She looked at him.

"You're not giving me an easy solution, are you?"

"No."

He let a pause linger.

### **Too Close**

"But maybe the question isn't whether you can get too close. Maybe the question is... how much you dare to be part of what grows."

She turned her gaze back to the road.

"I don't want to lose myself."

"You won't," he said. "Unless you stop feeling what's yours."

She thought about that.

"So, what is close?" she asked again.

The Volvo moved steadily forward, the forest thinning as the road opened ahead.

He kept his hands on the wheel.

"Close," he said at last, "is when you can stand next to someone without disappearing. And without making them disappear either."

She let the sentence settle.

The engine hummed.

Outside, the light shifted. Inside, something else was slowly finding its shape.

"It's knowing that you can hold on—and that you can also let go."

She leaned her head back against the headrest.

"I hate that you won't just tell me what to do."

"That would be taking your freedom," he said.

For the first time since the conversation began, she smiled faintly.

"You're annoyingly wise."

"I've been told that before."

The car continued forward through the forest.

Sophie sat quietly, but the unrest inside her had changed character. It wasn't gone. But it had become clearer.

And maybe that was the first step.

### **Charlie and Cooper**

The two golden retrievers came to meet them. One moved heavily, with a gray muzzle and slow steps. The other stayed close to him, like a shadow that had memorized the rhythm.

"That's them," Mark said, coming out of the house with his hands in his pockets. "Charlie and Cooper."

Harold bent down and let the older one sniff his hand. Cooper almost immediately lay down beside Charlie, as if he had no intention of leaving him for even a second.

Sophie noticed.

"They stay close," she said.

"Always," Mark replied. "They've never slept apart. Never been alone. Not a single night."

They went into the living room. It smelled faintly of coffee and dog.

Mark sat down without quite finding rest in the chair.

"It's Charlie," he said, nodding out toward the yard. "He's nearing the end. The vet says months. Maybe less."

He said it matter-of-factly. But his voice was tighter than the words.

Sophie opened her folder.

“And Cooper?” she asked.

Mark drew a deep breath.

### **The Dilemma**

“That’s the thing.”

He looked down at the floor for a moment.

“If Charlie dies..., should I put Cooper down too? That’s my dilemma.”

Sophie straightened.

“No,” she said quickly. “That’s not how you do it. Dogs can adapt. They can grieve, but—”

“But?” Mark asked.

“But they don’t die from it,” she finished.

Mark nodded slowly.

“They’ve always been inseparable.”

Harold still said nothing. He was watching Mark more than the dogs.

“When did you get them?” he asked.

“Same year,” Mark said. “Shortly after Anna and I came back from Nepal.”

Cooper had walked over and laid his head across Charlie’s back. The old dog barely lifted his head, but his eyes were calm.

“They’re in the same basket,” Mark said, following the dogs with his gaze. “If one disappears... what about the other?”

“Do you think Cooper can’t find a new rhythm?” Harold asked.

“I don’t know.” Mark hesitated. “I just know... that’s how Anna and I were.”

Sophie set the folder aside.

“How?” she asked.

Mark leaned back. He smiled briefly, as if standing at the edge of something both beautiful and painful.

### **K2**

“We’d always been active,” he began. “That’s how we met. Not over coffee.

Not in some club. But in motion. Anna was the only woman I knew who could keep up—and who at the same time could make me stop.”

He smiled briefly at the memory.

“We cycled. Surfed. Climbed. We were almost never indoors. People said we were a team. And we were. But I didn’t know back then how close we really were.”

He looked down at his hands.

“I only realized that on K2.”

The room fell silent.

“We’d been out for nearly two weeks. The glacier beneath us. The fog coming in from the side. For the first time it wasn’t trekking anymore. It was vertical. Real climbing. Ice axes. Ropes. Hundreds of meters of open drop.”

He lifted his gaze and looked not at them, but somewhere far away.

“There we hung. Ten meters between us. The others vanished in the fog. We didn’t speak. We just waited together. Your body starts to shake when you hang that long. Not from cold but from realization.”

He drew a slow breath.

“If my line snapped... we both went. Not just physically. It hit me right there that our lives were tied together. Not just romantically. But truly.”

He nodded slowly to himself.

## **Soul Mates**

“That’s actually the right word,” he said quietly. “Soul mates. I know it’s worn out. It’s used for everything. But up there... I realized we weren’t just in love. We were connected.”

Outside in the yard, Cooper lifted his head. Charlie blinked slowly.

“The strange thing was,” Mark continued, “we never talked about it afterward. We didn’t need to. But from that day... we were never completely two again. In the decisive moments we were one.”

He fell silent for a moment.

“When she got sick, I never thought she could die. We were tied together. She was just as much a fighter as I was. We didn’t have any agreement that she could just let go.”

His voice did not break. It just grew lower.

“When she did... it felt like my line was still fastened. But without her at the other end.”

He ran a hand over his face.

## **The Quiet**

“I’ve kept busy since then. I’ve done all the things we would have done together. More trips. More speed. More height. I’ve lived in extremes because the quiet is the worst.”

He looked directly at Harold now.

“But I haven’t loosened the rope. I’ve just dragged it behind me.”

There was a long pause.

“The hard part isn’t losing,” he said at last. “The hard part is being the one left.”

There was silence in the living room, as if even the dogs had heard something that should not be disturbed.

Harold sat leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. He did not nod right away. He let the words settle.

“You haven’t cut the rope,” he said at last.

Mark shrugged.

“No.”

“But you’re not hanging from it either.”

Mark looked up.

“What do you mean?”

Harold took his time.

“If you were still hanging from it, you wouldn’t be sitting here.”

Pause.

“You’ve lived. You’ve climbed. You’ve traveled. You’ve kept up the pace.”

“I’ve kept busy,” Mark corrected.

“Yes,” Harold said calmly. “But busyness is also a way of holding on.”  
Mark looked puzzled.

### **Cut or Loosen**

“You’re talking about cutting the rope,” Harold continued. “That sounds violent. As if the connection has to disappear for you to live.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” Mark said quietly. “That if I let go... she disappears.”

Harold slowly shook his head.

“You can’t cut a rope like that.”

A nearly defiant glint appeared in Mark’s eyes.

“You can’t?”

“No,” Harold said. “It’s not in the rope. It’s here.”

He placed his hand flat against his own chest.

“You can’t cut it. But you can loosen the tension in it.”

Complete silence.

### **A Different Hold**

“Loosen?” Mark repeated.

“Yes. So, it doesn’t pull you backward. So, it doesn’t keep you suspended.”

Mark swallowed.

“But if I loosen it... doesn’t that mean I’m letting go?”

“No,” Harold said. “It means you’re holding it in a different way.”

Cooper had gotten up and was now standing a few meters from Charlie. Not far. But not directly on top of him.

Harold did not point. He didn’t need to.

“Dogs don’t die from loyalty,” he said quietly. “They grieve. And then they find a new rhythm.”

Mark followed Cooper with his eyes.

“We’re not dogs,” he said.

“No,” Harold replied. “We can choose.”

Something new entered Mark's expression. Not relief. Not yet. But movement.

"It will hurt," he said.

"Yes."

"It will feel like betrayal."

"Maybe," Harold said. "But who are you betraying? Her—or the life you lived?"

Mark did not answer.

"If your connection was real," Harold continued calmly, "then it wasn't only tied to a rope in the Himalayas. It was tied to what you became for each other."

He leaned back slightly.

"And you can carry that forward. Without hanging."

## **Anchoring**

Mark closed his eyes for a moment.

When he opened them again, there was moisture at the edges, but his voice was steady.

"I've been dragging the rope behind me," he said. "As if I were still waiting for her to pull on it."

Harold nodded.

"Then maybe it's time to anchor it somewhere else."

A long time passed before Mark responded.

"That's harder than hanging on a cliff face."

"Yes," Harold said. "It is."

## **After the Visit**

The Volvo rolled slowly out from the gravel road. In the rearview mirror, Mark stood for a moment with his hands in his pockets, while Cooper had lain down beside Charlie again.

Neither of them said anything for the first few miles.



The hum of the engine filled the cabin. It sounded almost different than it had that morning. More muted.

Sophie sat with her gaze fixed forward. She had put her phone in her bag without opening it.

"That was intense," she said at last.

"Yes."

"I understand him."

"Yes."

### **Beautiful and Dangerous**

She turned slightly toward Harold.

"It must be... it must be something very special to be that close to another person. Not just in love. But connected."

Harold did not answer right away.

"It is," he said then.

Silence again.

"But it's also dangerous," she continued. "If one falls..."

She let the sentence trail off.

"You don't necessarily fall with them," Harold said calmly.

"No," she said. "But you get hit."

"Yes."

She drew in a deep breath.

"At least I don't want to hang from the same rope as someone."

There was no question in her voice now. It was a declaration.

Harold glanced briefly at her.

"Is that what you want?" he asked.

"Yes." She hesitated. "I want to be able to manage on my own."

"You can."

"No, I mean... really manage on my own. Not be so dependent on someone else that my entire foundation shakes if he disappears."

He nodded slowly.

"You don't want to be vulnerable."

She looked at him sharply.

"It's not weakness to want to stand on your own feet."

"No," he said calmly. "It isn't."

A moment passed.

### **The Worst and the Best**

"But if you want to be completely independent," he continued, "then you also have to avoid letting anyone matter too much."

She said nothing.

"Then you might avoid the worst," he said. "But you'll also avoid the best."

She looked out through the windshield. The forest opened up and the fields came into view again.

"The beautiful part of it," she said slowly, "is what he described. Being two in everything. Hanging there in the fog and knowing the other is there. Not having to explain everything. Just... feeling it."

"Yes."

"That's what you really dream about."

"Yes."

She shook her head lightly.

"And then you also know it can disappear."

"Yes."

"It's an unfair construction," she said. "That we bind ourselves so closely when we know everything can break."

Harold smiled faintly.

### **Generous**

"It's also a generous construction."

She looked at him.

"Generous?"

"Yes. You give something of yourself. Not because you have to. But because you want to. You become responsible for each other. Not out of duty. But because you grow into it."

She sat quietly with that.

"But what if it goes wrong?" she asked.

"Then it hurts."

"And then?"

"Then you loosen the rope."

She looked down for a moment.

"It sounds easy when you say it."

"It isn't."

He drove in silence for a while before continuing.

"The hard part isn't tying yourself to someone. The hard part is daring to tie yourself, knowing that one day you might have to loosen it again."

She drew in a deep breath.

"So, you have to dare to hang... and dare to let go."

"Yes."

### **I Don't Want to Disappear**

She leaned her head back against the seat.

"I don't want to lose myself," she said quietly.

"You won't," he replied. "If you remember who you are."

She closed her eyes for a moment.

"I can feel both," she said. "The fear of being tied... and the longing to be two."

"That's a good sign."

"Is it?"

"Yes. It means you're not indifferent."

A faint smile crossed her face.

The Volvo continued forward through the open landscape.

Sophie looked out across the fields.

“I think,” she said after a long pause, “I’d rather risk being hit... than never have hung at all.”

Harold said nothing.

But he nodded almost imperceptibly.

And the car drove on.

## **The Call**

The Volvo rolled up in front of the office and stalled with a small jolt.

The engine fell silent.

They remained seated for a moment.

Harold slowly gathered his papers. The door creaked as he stepped out.

Sophie stayed seated.

She stared ahead, as if the road were still there.

Then she picked up her phone.

The screen lit her face in the gray afternoon light. She opened a message.

Hesitated. Closed it again.

She found a name. Pressed.

The phone rang.

She took a few steps away from the car, turning slightly away from the building.

It was answered.

She did not say much. Just a quiet “hi.”

The corner of her mouth lifted slightly.

Harold stood by the door and waited. He did not look directly at her, but he registered that she was not in a hurry.

A moment later she ended the call, slipped the phone into her pocket, and walked toward him.

“Shall we?” he said.

“Yes,” she answered.

They went inside.



# Until We Meet Again

If you've made it this far, thank you.

Thank you for spending your time in the company of these dogs — and the people who love them. Stories only come alive when someone is willing to step into them, and I don't take that lightly.

*In the Company of Dogs* is part of a larger series under the name *The Pet Therapist*. There are other animals waiting in that world, other families, other quiet discoveries. If you found something here — a tone, an atmosphere, a reflection that felt familiar — you may feel at home in those stories as well.

I've also explored similar themes of identity, loyalty, and change in my fiction collection *The Brotherhood*, and in *When Life Changes Men*.

HENRIK KRUSE

Though the settings are different, the questions are often the same: Who are we, really? And what shapes us when life shifts under our feet?

All of my books are available wherever books are sold — in paperback, as e-books, and several of them in audio format.

But more than anything, I simply want to say thank you for reading.

I hope we meet again in another story.□

— Henrik Kruse