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# ONCE UPON A DREAM

A Novel

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**Anchalee Viva**



# Once Upon a Dream

Elite Creative Literary Agency

A Novel

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## Once Upon a Dream

*Earth's deepest sea measured  
Highest summit scaled  
Non on Earth Man unable to conquer  
Save for his own psyche*

Lokaniti Verse

# PROLOGUE

*Outpatient file of Dr. Ron Sutton M.D., Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist.*

## *1) Patient's file*

Name:	Rain Panerai
Gender:	Male
Age:	10
School attending	Last year in an Elementary School
Mother's name:	Rosana Panerai
Career:	A small business owner (hair and beauty salon)
Father's name:	Silas Panerai (Stepfather)
Career:	A car sale manager

## *2) Patient's hospitalization history*

- Treatment for the pneumonia at age 5*
- Treatment for head trauma at age 9 (caused by an accidental fall from a bicycle)*

## *3) Patient's mental state & abnormality in behavior according to his mother's statement*

*The patient is a member of a family economically counted as*

at the middle- class level. He is extremely shy and aloof by nature: an introvert who has been habitually isolating himself from the rest of his family members—mother, stepfather, and two twin half-siblings—since his early childhood. According to his mother, he has no interest in any kinds of hobbies and rarely enjoys participating in any kinds of outdoor sports or social activities. In short, he always keeps his distance from people whether they are his relatives or strangers. However, the patient's mother always finds him preoccupied with books, particularly comic and Sci-Fi and fantasy genre, which he regularly borrows from his school's library, alone yet apparently content inside his own bedroom.

She also added some remark that for the past few years, he has been persistently asking her for having a pet—either a puppy, a kitten, or a parrot—but his request has constantly been rejected due to his stepfather's respiratory health problem: a chronic allergy generally caused by animal's furs and feathers.

Nevertheless, until lately, his mother considered the patient's behavior normal. She neither felt seriously worried nor regarded his conduct as an 'enfant terrible' type due to the fact that the patient has neither shown any signs of violence nor committed any juvenile delinquency. His mother has never received any serious complaints from his school. Before, he was generally well behaved and paid attention in his class. Although he did not show talents or abilities required as a prodigy child, his academic grades shown on his school report card was considered somewhat above the average. His recent school GPA (Grade Point Average) is 3.8. After school, the patient never hangs around with any of his schoolmates. Having no close friends, he always comes home early and alone, doing his homework promptly, having his dinner by himself, and taking a quick shower, ready to retire to his bedroom as early as possible.

*Although the patient's mother admits that the patient rarely shows any signs of affection or strong emotional attachment toward her, she has considered herself a caring parent, claiming her son's well-being has been her primary concern.*

*According to her statement, the problem obviously started five months ago. The patient's mother notices that shortly after his five-week hospitalization, due to the injury on his head caused by his bicycle accident, the patient's social withdrawal developed to the degree that it began to alarm her. He had avoided watching TV or playing video games at night in the living room either with his family or by himself. Instead, he had retreated into his own bedroom, locking himself inside, and never came out through the entire night until his mother had to knock on his door, waking him up so that he could be ready for school.*

*As a quite active working woman, the patient's mother has spent most of her time managing her own beauty salon business that she had started five years ago, with half a dozen of her employees assisting her. Several times on the weekdays, she has to come home late at night only to find the patient already went to his room. Whenever she knocks his door there is, as she has half expected, no response from him. She understands her son is in the middle of his sleep and thus, decides not to disturb him further. Yet, her uneasiness increases.*

*Since the patient's mother is not able to find time to do all the overwhelming housework by herself, she has recently hired a housemaid to cook, clean and take care of her household. About two months ago, her housekeeper complained that whenever the patient was at home he locked himself in his unhealthily messy and untidy room, refusing to open the door to let her clean up inside.*

*One time, the situation aggravated the housekeeper to a degree*

*that she made a phone call to the patient's mother at work, asking for permission to unlock the door and enter inside for fear that the patient might be up to something unacceptable such as doing drugs in his room. However the housemaid admitted to his mother that after she had entered inside she did not find anything suspicious as she had expected. The patient was instead in deep sleep on his bed and, after awakening, seemed genuinely surprised by her intrusion into his room.*

*Nevertheless, after that incident, the patient's mother decided to search the patient's room thoroughly during his absence; she checked under his bed and blanket, inside his closet and drawers including his school backpack. Yet, she could not detect unusual things such as drugs or porno books that she had suspected the patient tried to conceal from her sight.*

*Sometimes late at night, she even sneaks into his room as quietly as she could, trying to catch him off-guard but usually finds him, again on his bed, soundly asleep. And as her suspicion on her son's feigning a sleep so as to fool her is mounting, she decides to have a routine checkup without warning him in advance. One night she even sat silently by his bed for quite a while, while he was sleeping, waiting patiently for any unpredictable occurring but only to hear, again, his regular and deep breathing—a sign of a profound and peaceful sleep.*

*As months passed, the patient's oversleeping symptom accelerated to a level that it became her concern to ask her housemaid to wake him up every day for it was apparent he was not able to wake up on time even with the help of the alarm clock, which the patient himself had set promptly every night before going to bed.*

*On weekends, the patient keeps himself almost inside his room all day. (The patient's mother added that even his brothers have*

called him 'the Invisible Man' for they claim he simply 'exists' within his bedroom's perimeter.) Last month on one afternoon, the patient's mother abruptly stepped into his room as she recently did and found him sprawled on his bed, his body so still, his eyes half opened, completely oblivious of her presence. She shook him hard to wake him up, but it was in vain; he still lay down immobile and lifeless like a corpse. Apprehensively, she kept on shaking his body as she was shouting at him repeatedly until he was fully awakened. He calmly explained to her that, as the matter of fact, he had had a headache earlier and needed a good rest. Then, he had fallen asleep until he opened his eyes and saw her shaking him. That, with no more details, was all he had told her.

After that incident, the patient's mother decided to take away the patient's bedroom key for good, assuming that he would not be able to lock himself inside any longer. She afterward asked his two brothers to keep an eye on the patient and promptly reported to her if they suspected any signs that they felt out of the ordinary.

According to the patient's mother, under watchful eyes from his family's members, the patient's mental state—his absent-minded condition together with his withdrawal—does not show signs of improvement.

In fact, she affirmed that it has become worse.

Several times this week, his mother confirmed, when she started a conversation with him, hoping to improve their relationship, he often avoided her or, at best, participated with impassive response. In the worst-case scenario, he feigned all his attention to the conversation. Yet, as she noticed, the vacant expression in his eyes while listening to her reflected his oblivion of her presence which frightened her the most. It was clear that at that very moment he was actually lapsing into his usual but "peculiar" sleep though his eyes were still wide-open, looking straight at her.



*Another thing apart from his daytime somnolence that has increased her concern is her son's declining health. It's obvious that he has lost weight due to his loss of appetite. In fact, he has lost all his interest in everything except sleep.*

*At the end of the interview, the patient's mother admitted of her fear that she was wondering if her son was at the brink of insanity.*

*4) Patient's mental state & abnormality reported by a teacher staff at his school*

*All the patient's school teachers who participate in the interviews come up with the same story; in the past couple months the patient had a serious sleep problem in his classroom.*

*The patient often dozed off in the class and during the recess. Instead of playing after lunch with his classmates in the school playground, he sneaked inside and began to "take a nap" at his desk. In addition to this problem, his academic grades sharply dropped from the previous semester. Last month his homeroom teacher tried a couple times to contact his parents by phone, requesting them to attend the private meeting, regarding the patient's hypersomnia symptom that probably caused his falling academic grades. Instead, both parents showed no sign of cooperation. They never returned her calls.*

*Last week, the patient's hypersomnia condition increased to the level that, according to all of his teachers, even in the class he seemed suspended perpetually in the state of drowsiness while noisy activities from his classmates were going on constantly around him. In addition, according to the school bus driver, the patient, who daily took a school bus home, also had a habit of dozing on the bus throughout his trip.*

*In the past week, he did not wake up to get off the bus in time as he usually did when the bus stopped in front of his home. Being unaware, the bus driver drove past his residence and had to bring him to his house later. These incidents had already happened twice in succession.*

*As the situation worsened, his homeroom teacher made the decision to check the patient's school backpack and found inside a dozen sleeping pill tablets carefully wrapped in tissue papers inside a Ziploc bag.*

*Under a serious inquiry, the patient finally confessed that he had stolen those pills from the medicine cabinet in his own house. The patient added that the access to those pills was not difficult for him because there were always some bottles of sleeping pills kept inside that cabinet. His mother regularly bought them from the pharmacy store. She herself had developed insomnia and therefore needed those pills from time to time for a good sleep. The patient also let his teacher know that he had been taking these pills one or two tablets daily for nearly two months. His mother who was always occupied with her busy life did not notice some of her pills were missing. When forced to give a plausible reason for this strange behavior, the patient stood his ground by repeatedly insisting he simply preferred sleeping to being wakeful and these pills had been helping him a great deal for this reason.*

*After a long and serious discussion, the teacher staff came up with a conclusion that the patient needed psychiatric help. They decided again to make an emergency contact to the patient's parents, requesting them to bring their son to consult with a child psychiatrist or in the worst case scenario arrange for him to enter a medical treatment as necessary under a physician's care.*

*5) Additional patient's background needed a further search*

*1. Relationship between the patient, his biological father, and his mother*

*2. Relationship between the patient, his stepfather, and his two half-siblings*

*3. Marital relationship between his mother and his stepfather*

*4. Mental history of the patient's fraternal and maternal ancestors*

*5. Incident or incidents in the past that are the roots of the patient's trauma which cause him, who has already been a quiet child and an introvert by nature, to become so alienate to his family and his school that he needs to escape from his immediate reality by taking the sleeping pill regardless of its risky and dangerous side effect.*

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CHAPTER

ONE

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*F*irst appointment with Dr. Ron Sutton

*The patient, Rain Panerai, a young adolescent male of ten years old, slowly pulled the door open, entering Dr. Ron Sutton's small but comfortable office with reluctant paces. His pale face looked tense and scared, his eyes nervously darting around as if he was looking for someone he was so mortified to face.*

However, what he found inside that room was the warm, cream-colored walls, the doctor's mahogany desk, with a small cluster of bright yellow flowers in a dark green ceramic vase at the center of the office and two water-colored paintings of the picturesque and serene countryside's landscape hanging on the wall opposite the large window from which the warm morning sunlight was streaming in and brightening the entire room. The arrangement of the homelike furniture rendered the room a cozy, relaxing and friendly atmosphere.

Finally, the boy's eyes rested on the doctor who, as soon as glancing up and gazing at the child, eagerly stood up from his swivel chair, greeting his young visitor with a broad smile and extending his hands as a welcome gesture. The boy apparently managed a wan smile in return. But it looked as if he was going to burst into tears at any instant. The doctor noticed the boy's trembling legs as he tiptoed as quietly as possible across the room, approaching the doctor. Then he dropped awkwardly into the opposite chair, facing the doctor reluctantly.

In the big leather armchair that was seemingly dwarfing the boy, whose frail body in pale yellow shirt and blue denim pants looked too small for his actual age, he bends his head down, trying to avert eye contact.

The boy had a handsome yet fragile face. But to the doctor, he looked more like seven or eight years old rather than ten. Overall, his new patient didn't appear healthy both physically and mentally. Sensing the doctor's observing eyes on him, the boy instinctively curled up his body against the back of the armchair as if it could help him shrink until his presence in this room was invisible. The doctor stole a look at the young patient one more time before giving his patient another cheerful and amiable smile.

"Hello, Rain. Welcome to my office. Glad to see you today."

"Hello, Doctor..." the boy spoke in a low voice, barely audible.

"Rain," the doctor was clearing his throat, "please make yourself comfortable. I promise if you don't feel at ease to answer any of my questions that I'm going to ask, you don't have to answer them. Oh! But I know a nice boy like you must feel bad when you have to refuse someone's request. Well, let's work half-way to ease up our conflict."

The doctor opened a drawer on his desk. He was peering inside and pulling out a couple of postcards. He showed them to the subdued boy who now seemed a little curious.

“Look! These are two cartoon postcards: the one I’m holding on my right is Smiling Face and the other on my left is Grumpy Face.” Now, let’s play some fun games.”

He handed the two postcards to the boy with an encouraging smile.

“If you pick up Grumpy Face and show it to me that means, for whatever reason, you don’t want to answer that question. Period. This way, there will be no conflict between us because you don’t have to say no on my face. Isn’t it better this way?”

Gazing at those two postcards absentmindedly, the boy slowly put them face up on the desk in front of him.

“Yes, I guess so...”

“Well, let’s start the first and easiest one. Look around and tell me what impresses you the most in this room? Feel free to choose any item.”

“Oh...”

The boy couldn’t hide his surprise. He did not expect that question but with his doctor’s earnest smile he started to look around. His eyes were moving slowly, passing two charming water-colored paintings on the wall, the light green drapery on the pane glass window, yellow flowers in the vase, a big brown couch against the other side of the wall and back to the doctor’s mahogany desk. The doctor noted impassiveness and tiredness in his eyes.

“Anything you like?”

“Um...” the boy hesitated. Then he shook his head and muttered. “I’m sorry...”

“Nothing wrong with being honest. Don’t worry. Yes, you are

right! I feel the same when I have to look around my room day in and day out.”

The boy was blinking. It was obvious he didn’t expect such a frank remark from the doctor.

“Are you serious?” The boy couldn’t help asking. “Yes, I am. No answers are bad or ridiculous if they are honest. I assure you.”

“Thank you,” the boy’s voice was barely audible, but this time the doctor had noticed an expression so close to a smile from the boy. He hoped this open conversation would break the ice between them.

“Now, I have a new question. Don’t forget that you can say yes or no to me by showing any of the cards. Um...” he was clearing his throat in preparation. “I heard that you start a habit of a long, long sleep.”

He paused to see the boy’s reaction. But the expression on the boy’s face didn’t change. So, the doctor continued. The tone in his voice sounded casual, his expression full of enthusiasm.

“I guess you must like it while you’re sleeping. Isn’t that, right?”

With a silence, Rain lowered his eyes, his hand moving hesitantly toward the picture of Grumpy Face. When his hand reached halfway, it came to a halt. Then he slowly withdrew his hand from that card and placed his hand warily on his lap.

That was a good sign. Dr. Sutton smiled to himself. It was obvious that although the boy was still unwilling to answer he seemed aware and conscious that he was obliged to comply.

“I assume you’ve known something, perhaps a good secret about a sleep that no one knows. Don’t you want to share it with me rather than keeping it all by yourself?”

The boy didn’t reply. He lowered his head again and kept

staring down at his hands that he had put on his lap.

"You know what?" The doctor still went on with his casual, pleasant voice. "This way, you will have supporters. Because they will understand what you have been getting through. And you will never feel alone and alienated again. I believe if there's somebody who feels or thinks different from others, it doesn't mean something's wrong with him at all. On the contrary, I assume he must be someone so...unique. Why? Otherwise, he must think as millions of people think. If you agree, show me a Smiling Face. If not, throw me a grumpy one."

Rain swiftly glanced up at the doctor but still said nothing. However, as the doctor watched the boy's response, he saw a slight movement of the boy's hand. That hand was reluctantly moving to where the smiling face postcard was lying. Finally, the boy slowly picked it up and showed it to the doctor.

"Thank you, Rain," the doctor was beaming at the boy. "You are speaking your mind."

The boy managed a weak smile as his reply.

"Now, I assume that there must be something so special about your sleep," he was looking straight at the boy while saying solemnly. "But not a soul will have any chance to know if...if you don't want to share it. Agree?"

The boy paused and squeezed his hands. His gesture indicated that he was considering that question so hard. He started breathing heavily and, instead of using cards as the way of engaging, he burst into words.

"I...want to do what everyone else calls..." he was stuttering as if trying to find the right words, "...calls...a sleep. I...want to go on sleeping and no one," he stressed at the word no one, "...will ever come to wake me up."

Stopping short at the boy's blunt answer, the doctor managed



to keep his calm composure.

"You want to do what everyone else call a sleep," He repeated Rain's words in verbatim. "So, you don't call sleep a sleep like everyone else when you do sleep?"

The boy shook his head with his determined expression.

"Um...let's talk this way. Do you love watching movies? I bet you do. I bet you also love playing a superhero like Batman fighting a villain Joker in the video game. Oh, how about licking a popsicle bar to your last bite? But you will never have a chance to have such fun while you are in bed sleeping. Now, you make me so curious about what's so awesome about just sprawling down and falling asleep. But it must be so. Otherwise, you won't sacrifice all that fun you'll have while you are awake just for having a sleep."

The boy's lips began to move. But his lips were closed again. Searching for a point of entry, the doctor's expression changed yet the warm and cheerful tone in his voice remained.

"All right! Let's make a deal. If you tell me your...secret on your sleeping I am going to tell mine in exchange."

"Your secret?" The boy raised his head. It was obvious that the doctor's deal surprised him. "Even doctors have a secret?" the boy asked in disbelief.

"Of course. Everybody has some secret and that of course includes doctors," his laughter was genuine when he caught the boy's puzzle. "You are not alone for having a secret. So, you don't have to fear or feel ashamed if you have one."

The boy suddenly grew tense and nervous. "But if I tell you... you're not going to tell anyone, are you? Not even my mother..."

At the mention of his mother, a flash of anxiety mixed with resentment started flashing in the boy's eyes, "she'd told me before we got here, I shouldn't let my crazy stuff out of my

mouth.”

“Rain, please take me into your confidence. I’m pledging to keep your secret over that paper up the wall behind me which I considered the most important for my profession,” trying to find a way to comfort his new patient, he turned his head, pointing at the office wall behind where his medical certificate papers were hung. “Besides, if I double cross you, which would never happen, you can get even with me by exposing my secret to whoever is walking past you on this floor. Deal?”

To show his earnestness, the doctor stretched out his hand and waited until the boy slowly stretched his hand to him. Once their hands finally met; the firm handshake started.

“Doctor,” Rain was breathing heavily before blurting out. “At this very moment, what...do you think? Am I awake or am I in my sleep?”

“Well, I’d rather say you are wakeful,” he cautiously replied. And as if the boy’s question was a big puzzle so hard to crack, the doctor laughed and scratched his head. “Don’t you think so?”

“A proof,” whispered the boy. “Please... A proof that right now at this moment I’m awake.”

“A proof?” The doctor was repeating. He paused. But quickly, he replied with a triumphant smile. “What are you doing at this instant? You are sitting in my office chatting with me. Isn’t it correct? You’re not able to do all these acts if you are asleep.”

The boy stared at the doctor. “No, you’re wrong.”

“Wrong?” He pretended to sigh exaggeratedly “Am I? All right, I am probably wrong. Sorry about that. So, can you tell me what’s supposed to be the right answer, Rain?”

There was another long pause, another stretch of silence before the boy abruptly blurted out.

“Doctor, I know you never have an idea that...I’m in the

middle of my sleep right now,” the boy swallowed. “Please believe me. But I am.”

“You’re in your sleep now, you assure me. Umm... But I’m sure that I am awake, a hundred percent sure,” now with the stress of a puzzle in his voice. “How come two persons—one is sleeping and another awake—are able to engage in conversation so normally to each other? Does it make any sense? Like one plus one always equals two as a bare fact. It will remain that way for eternity. If that outcoming number was not two, the law of logic would turn upside down and collapse.”

“Yeah, you think you’re awake now,” the boy kept shaking his head firmly. The defiance from such a timid boy was baffling the doctor, “It seems right but it’s still wrong. Because in fact you’re only awake inside my dream.”

The doctor remained speechless for a minute, yet his face still put on a broad smile.

“Umm... Very unusual... Very interesting, really. Can you tell me more about this? I’m burning with curiosity now.”

“Doctor,” his voice pleading again. “After you hear what I’m going to tell you, please don’t think I am...a loony.”

Without the answer, the doctor slowly reached out his hand across his desk and gently took the boy’s hand. The boy immediately became rigid with that firm touch. After searching the doctor’s face and finding a warmhearted smile, he let his hand stay in the doctor’s.

“Rain, I know. I know you are a good boy. But more importantly, I know you’re not lying to me only to please me,” he couldn’t help smiling again. “I know you are honest because you are straight forward when you said nothing in particular in this room that had impressed you. Um...did you tell of your dream to anyone else besides me?”

The boy was blinking his eyes repeatedly. The doctor noted that his eyes started reddening with tears.

“I told Uncle Silas...”

the boy noticed the doctor raising his eyebrows he hastily continued.

“He’s, my stepfather. And that’s because yesterday he...he...” the boy began to stutter, “he...was...was so mad at me about the sleeping pills I took. So, I had to tell him why I took the pills. It made him burst into a fit. He yelled I was too crazy to stay with him in this house. He threatened to send me to be locked up in some horrible nut house and let the nurses beat the crap out of me...until I would come to my senses.” The boy was scrubbing his eyes and sniffing. “And he...”

Rain abruptly stopped in the middle of his speech. Still sniffing, he fell again into a long silence. The doctor nodded understandingly as he was quietly and cautiously studying the boy’s frail and skinny body. The doctor’s placid expression immediately changed as he noticed a bruise on a part of the boy’s upper arm that the short sleeve of the tee shirt, he was wearing barely concealed.

When their eyes met, Rain hastily had both his arms crossed tightly, looking terrified at the doctor. It was obvious he tried to hide that bruise. The doctor finally managed to suppress his impulse to insert more questions after he had caught the boy’s immediate reaction.

Dr. Sutton noted that the boy seemed to be in a more relaxed mood when he deliberately showed no sign of interest in his bruise. Instead, the doctor excused himself, getting up from his desk, walking leisurely to the back and disappearing into a small pantry section adjoining his office. Rain’s eyes followed him, partly nervous, partly wary, and partly curious.

A short moment later, the doctor strode back to his desk, eyes glittering, his hands carrying a small paper bag and some paper napkins. He handed them to Rain who still sat stiffly in his chair, eyes glancing suspiciously at the stuff in the doctor's hand.

"Open the bag and look at what's inside. It's for you."

With the doctor's insistence, Rain eventually took that bag from the doctor, forcing himself not to open it too eagerly. Rain peered inside and took it out as slowly as he could.

"Popsicle bar," the boy's voice barely hid a surprise that was mixed with a childish delight. "For...me?"

The doctor nodded. "Take a big bite and enjoy it!"

"Thank you, Doctor. But are...you sure?"

"Of course! It's for you."

He let Rain keep busy with the ice cream bar without interrupting that moment. A boy was always a boy after all. No matter what. He waited until the boy finished his last bite and timidly picked the napkin to wipe his mouth.

"Thank you. It's yummy..." The boy shyly murmured.

"I'm glad you like it," the mischievous smile started playing on the doctor's lips. "All right, now it's my turn to tell you about my secret in exchange as I promised. Are you ready now?"

The boy nodded his head eagerly in response while the doctor was warily scanning his eyes around the room as if he was afraid of being eavesdropped.

"Promise me never to tell anyone, especially my nurse..." he was lowering his voice and looking grave, "that young lady sitting at the counter outside my office, she's, my nurse. Promise?"

"Yes, I promise," he was looking at the doctor as solemnly as a ten-year-old boy could. "Please trust me. I've never double-crossed anyone."

"Thank you. Rain, I do trust you. How about you? Do you

think now you can trust me too?"

Their eyes met. Rain slowly averted the doctor's eyes. Dr. Ron Sutton was tracing an uneasy look on the boy's face.

"I..." the boy was sputtering. "I...want to, really want," he expected the doctor to be displeased. But when Rain glanced up, he found only the doctor's warm smile.

"That's okay, Rain. Nothing's wrong if you don't feel you can trust me now. Naturally, it takes time to trust someone. Trust is one of the most precious things one person can ever give to another person. That's why I have to earn your trust. Don't force yourself to say anything you don't believe just because you want to please others and make them feel good. A good person must be honest. But first of all, he must be honest to himself. Oh! Where are we at?" The doctor was now laughing pleasantly as he was purposefully shifting the tough subject of their conversation to the more cheerful one.

The doctor noticed that the boy had something he wanted to say. So, he nodded encouragingly to him.

"Um...don't forget you're going to let me know your...secret. I'm waiting."

"I know, I know you are dying to know my secret. Listen, here it is," he lowered his voice to nearly a whisper, his face suddenly turned extremely serious. "When I am alone and no one intrudes into this room, do you know what I usually do behind the back of all the staff?"

The boy was shaking his head in disbelief. Yet, he apparently just couldn't wait any longer to know.

"I sneak into the back of my office and take a big bite of my popsicle bar."

"But...you are a doctor," the boy was again gasping in disbelief.

"Why not? It is not a crime!" he couldn't help laughing when

he saw the boy's face. "Well, I limit myself to one popsicle bar a day, but it usually turns out to be two. But two are all I'll indulge myself in. How can you resist such a sweet temptation? Now, I hope you will never, ever, breathe a word to my nurse, Fannie, about my bad habit. Otherwise, she may spread that to all the hospital staff and put me into their laughingstock."

"Are you serious?" Dr. Sutton noticed that the boy forced himself from cracking a laugh. But it was hard to hold. So, he let out a giggle. "I think all doctors...um...outgrow popsicle bars."

"They are all sure to do...except me, probably," he'd shrugged before changing to a heartfelt laugh. "My favorite one is green, the lime flavor. How about yours?"

"I love the red one, the cherry flavor," the tone of the boy's voice now became more relaxed than when he earlier stepped in this room.

"That cherry flavor!" the doctor cried. "It's my little boy's favorite too, the red popsicle. Well, sorry about that. I should have offered you the red one. But all that's left in the freezer now are green which I keep just for myself," he chuckled. "Next time, I will stack up a whole bunch of red in the freezer to give you a nice treat. And also, next time..." his voice softening, "it will be your turn to tell me more about your sleep secret. Fair enough?"

The boy was nodding earnestly this time, also his eyes brightening. However, he meekly corrected the doctor. "I think you mean...my wake-up secret."

"Sorry about that. I have to admit I need time to um...adjust to a reversed new concept. So, to make sure I don't get it wrong, I'll repeat again. You've told me that at this very instant, you are not awake as I and anyone else assume. In fact, you are being in your dream. And me? My very presence is only a part of your

dream. Isn't it all, correct?"

The boy was nodding reassuringly with an obvious sign of relief.

"We're going to talk about it in the next session when you feel more relaxed with me. Well, now, I like to have a little talk with your mom just for a couple minutes. Will you ask her to come in here? There are some good comic books for you to enjoy at the waiting room outside while you're waiting for your mom. And now, after you leave my office," the doctor was twinkling to the boy, "you will never tell a soul, especially my nosey nurse, about my secret. Right?"

"I promise I won't," the boy shook his head vigorously. "I am a good secret keeper."

"Thank you, Rain. You are the best," the doctor then turned more serious. "Apart from that, will you promise me one more thing? Come to see me until you feel there's nothing in the world to fear. Okay?"

"Sure, I will..."

But as soon as the boy said the doctor found his fear was creeping back into his face.

"But, please, don't let my mom know what I've just told you. She will be so mad. She always says I talk...crazy all the time and it has really unnerved everyone."

"Over my dead body!"

To confirm his words, the doctor pressed his hand against his heart as a promise sign. He saw the boy sliding from the armchair and slowly walking toward the door. Before pushing the door open and stepping out, he halted, timidly turning his back to look again at the doctor who was in the middle of waving good-bye to him.

"Thanks so much...for a yummy green popsicle, Doctor."



“You are welcome, Rain and...” he paused and opened his heartfelt smile, “if you are still in the midst of your dream, have a really wonderful dream!”

“Yes, I am still in,” the boy nodded sadly. “And really want your wish to come true.”

A moment later Dr. Ron Sutton meticulously watched Rain’s mother, Rosana Panerai, as she was entering his office. She was in her early thirties, with neat make-up on her pretty oval face, a slim figure in a gorgeous turquoise-blue silk dress, and an energetic, swift movement. She smiled solicitously to him as she dropped in the armchair, eyes restlessly and curiously darting around. Her appearance and impression were completely different from her son’s—the active and attractive woman with lively spirit and confidence. And apparently, a strong female person.

“Hello, Doctor, good to see you again. How is my son? Did he give you a hard time?” she was asking him through the ripples of her laughs.

The doctor gave her a courteous smile. “Hello, Miss Rosana, nice to see you too. Oh no! Your son is such an angel to me. A nice and considerate boy.”

“An angel! Really!” She stressed her voice and laughed again.

The doctor quietly watched her as she fumbled inside her purse, pulled a cigarette and a lighter from it and started lighting the cigarette. She stopped short after glimpsing a non-smoking sign on the wall. She then stuffed them back into her purse, shrugging.

“He had embarrassed me to death just before I walked in your room. I let him wait on the bench outside, telling him I wanted him to behave while he was sitting alone. But just a split second after I’d walked away from him to your office, I turned

my head to check one more time how he was doing. Can you guess what was happening? I saw him closing his eyes again, yes, dozing.” She was now forcing a dry laugh. “Oh, he’s such a nuisance to me. Now, as you just met him face to face, what do you honestly think about my son? Don’t be sugarcoated. Does he really need some serious treatment?”

“This is his first therapy session. So, I didn’t bring up any specific subject during our conversation. It will discomfort and discourage him. One thing that’s obvious to me; he seems so scared. Very scared.” The doctor was stressing the word scared while he was holding her gaze. “I will say he’s a very vulnerable and sensitive boy from how he responded to my questions. Before proceeding further, I need to see him building up trust in me. Then, I can probe deeper into what has been troubling him. However, I am not able to do this without your cooperation and support.”

“What do you want from me?” her voice became reluctant and defensive.

“So far, I only need you to bring him to my office next week. He should come to see me at least once a week from now on. My nurse at front desk should be ready to arrange the next appointment for him—”

“Once a week!”

She was slightly raising her voice, abruptly interrupting his words.

“Is that okay with you?” His surprise was genuine.

“How can I afford giving him a ride and waiting for him until you’re done with him? Will it become a routine? I have to take care of my salon business every day except Monday, the source of my income for taking care of my family. And thank heaven, so far, I’m doing good.”

“Let me get it straight, Miss,” although he maintained his politeness, his voice was more assertive. “This is very crucial for your son’s well-being. It will be a huge benefit for him in the long run. And it will take no more than an hour just once a week. As far as I had a brief conversation with him, I recommend you for his proper treatment and professional counseling. Didn’t you tell me yourself when we first met that you were afraid something could be wrong in his mind and so, needed me to find out?”

“Yes, at the beginning...” her normal conversation speech suddenly turned into a gabble. “I was so worried when his teacher reported that he has an oversleeping problem in his school. But my husband doesn’t believe Rain needs help as his teacher has suggested. He believes Rain’s real problem has sprung from his laid-back nature. He has feigned asleep just to keep people away. He is a very cold and nonchalant boy. He never concerns himself with anyone or anything around him as far as I know.”

She then paused with a sigh.

“But when Rain’s teacher kept pressuring me to bring him to see you, my husband blamed me that I always let Rain have his way until he became an inconsiderate, spoiled brat. He complained that I let the boy put unnecessary burden not only on myself but also on him. And when he found out about the sleeping pills,” she sighed again, “he was so furious he stormed into Rain’s room, and I started hearing all the yelling and...all crazy noises. What a headache!” she pressed her fingers on her temples as if to support her sudden headache.

The doctor’s face darkened though his voice remained calm. “No need to tell. Yes, I saw a bruise on his arm although he tried his best to hide it.”

“What?” she cried out with a sudden nervous gesture. “The

bruise? Oh! What do you mean? I don't get it—”

His lips curving as if smiling, the doctor turned his head to look straight at Rosana who in turn slowly looked off into a distance.

“Don't you have any idea about that bruise mark? Didn't your son tell you anything or didn't you notice his bruises yourself?”

While she was still at a loss for words, the doctor replied to her, the tone of his voice hardening.

“He was beaten with a belt. No question about it. And the bruise must come from a man's belt buckle—made of solid metal. I guess it happened as your son was raising his arm to shield his face from the beating so that the belt buckle hit his upper arm instead. Yes, with a full impact. I am a child and adolescent psychiatrist. I always come across similar cases of abused children where domestic violence is a norm in those families. In more serious cases, I used to be at the witness stand in court when their parents were prosecuted and put on trial. And in your son's case, it's very possible your husband can be charged with child abuse and you...perhaps with a lesser charge of child negligence.”

“No. No. Don't...take me wrong,” she began stammering. “...I didn't do it. I never raise a hand against my son. You can ask him if you don't take my word seriously. I guess it came from..” with a sudden pause, she began to shift uncomfortably in her chair.

The doctor continued with a subtle smile of triumph. “So, I assume you can spare some of your busy time bringing your son to see me for his next therapy...until he becomes once again as happy as other ordinary boys.”

Without a verbal reply, Rosana lowered her eyes as she slowly nodded.

“I believe Dr. Golds already talked to you about Rain’s sleeping pills rehabilitation program too.”

“Um...do you think it’s that serious?” she was frowning again.

“I am not an addiction professional. I am not able to say whether or not it’s serious in Rain’s case. I hope it’s not that bad. But as Rain confessed to you, he has continuously taken the pills for over a period of two months it’s quite likely he has become dependent on that substance to a certain degree. If you let him go on, he may eventually experience what we call parasomnia. It’s the sleep disorders including unlikely behaviors like sleep walking and other dangerous activities occurring while in his sleeping state. So, I confirm you Rain needs to have an evaluation by a professional to determine which level of care is appropriate for his addiction treatment.”

“Addiction treatment?” she cried out. “What is that? He only took sleeping pills. They are over-the-counter sleeping pills you can buy from any drug store anywhere! I swear he never took more serious stuff, like cocaine or LSD.”

“I believe you, Miss Rosana. But he heavily took sleeping pills over two months. And I still hope he told us the whole thing, not the partial truth. All sleep drugs contain a substance that causes negative side effects no different from narcotics, only less severe. So, Rain might be required to participate in the rehabilitation program for drug dependent patients after the test. Of course, it’s the outpatient rehab. He doesn’t need to stay in the facility as an inpatient. He only comes to have a treatment as scheduled.”

She didn’t say anything for a moment before blurting out.

“Why is it such a big deal? I can watch him myself. And never will he touch those pills again, I declare.”

“It’s not that simple, Miss Rosana.” Dr. Ron Sutton said

patiently. "His abrupt quitting of the pills we simply know as 'cold turkey' can create dangerous side effects called the withdrawal symptoms. These symptoms include anxiety, panic attacks and most critically depression. We have to admit that Rain had already developed those symptoms even prior to the usage of the sleeping pills. The sudden stop of the pills even though under your care will aggravate his existing symptoms more than helping him. The right treatment should be a gradual pill reduction over some period of time or by replacement medication under professional care."

His painstaking explanation apparently didn't help lift up Rosana's mood. She sighed heavily.

"Oh, this boy... Why me?" Finally she muttered under her breath.

"Thank you, Miss Rosana," Dr. Ron Sutton said gravely. "I hope everything is clear now. See you and your son next week."



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CHAPTER

TWO

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*R*ain Panerai's first session therapy recorded by Dr. Ron Sutton

*Summary of the patient's relationship background with his family that partially causes the patient's mental problem.*

- The patient lacks an affectionate relationship with his mother.*
- The bruise found on one of the patient's upper arms indicates the physical abuse evident from his stepfather.*

*Diagnosis in progress*

*The patient, so far, shows significant signs of moderation that have a tendency to become a severe major depression disorder.*

*His symptoms—as characterized during the first meeting and as collected from family's and teacher's reports—include as below:*

- 1. Melancholic moods such as sadness, loneliness, and despair.*  
*(Note that this symptom is less common in children with*

- depression. Depressed children often display irritability rather than a melan-cholic mood.)*
- 2. Pervasive low mood, low self-defeat, and low sense of self-esteem.*
  - 3. Loss of enthusiasm or pleasure in normally enjoyable activities.*
  - 4. Withdrawal from social situations and activities.*
  - 5. Loss of interest in school and a decline in academic performance.*
  - 6. Hypersomnia (Note that this is considered the most significant among all of his symptoms although it is far less common among typical depressed patients, who mostly suffer insomnia.)*
  - 7. Distorted thinking (In this case, it is associated with the patient's unusual oversleep, which the patient claims and insists it is in fact his waking state.)*

#### *Analysis of the cause of the patient's symptoms*

*The patient is a friendless and remote young adolescent male who trusts no one around him. To protect himself from what he has constantly feared and distrusted, the patient possibly has found an escape by a means of subconsciously creating a world within and letting himself 'live' there—securely and peacefully. This is only my presumption so far. But at least it has supported the reason for the patient's desperate need to cling to his sleep to the degree that he even risks his self-harm by taking sleeping pills in order to prolong that state. It is as well possible that the patient has been experiencing hallucinations, continually occurring to him during his sleeping state, and in a form of recurrent bizarre dreams—that he claims is his 'reality'.*

*If the patient literally hallucinates as stated he may also be*



*vulnerable to a delusional disorder, a psychosis that the mental state of that said patient is losing contact with external reality.*

*In an equally serious case, it is also possible that—although too early for a conclusion—the subtype of major depression disorder from which the patient is suffering now falls into the catatonic depression category. It is nevertheless a rare and severe form of MDD involving motor immobility, muteness, and stupor—a motionless, apathetic state in which a person is oblivious or does not respond to external stimuli. In this case, and for several times, the patient had not responded to his mother and the housemaid's alarm when they tried to wake him from his trance-like state, which, according to them, he often showed in their presence.*

*It is within the possibility that the patient's bizarre thought that the reality (including the presence of myself) is actually his dream (and what in his dreams while he is in his sleep is instead his reality) could be the effect of the sleeping pills.*

*Possible treatment:*

- 1. Antidepressant medication*
- 2. Psychotherapy for depression: CBT (cognitive behavioral therapy), interpersonal therapy, and family therapy)*
- 3. Blood serum test to identify protein biomarker of the patient: a molecular diagnostic test, a new and advance method of major neuropsychiatric disorders*
- 4. MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) and CT scan (Computerized Tomography) to detect the abnormalities of the patient's brain size and its function.*

*The blood serum, MRI, and CT scan test although their results cannot be taken as the real proof to determine the patient's schizophrenic disorder, these three diagnostic tests are able to rule out other mental conditions which have overlapped symptoms.*

*Physician's personal comment:*

*Apart from his significant symptoms of mental problems as being described above there is almost nothing abnormal in the patient's general characteristic that I am able to detect. On the contrary, during our conversation, the patient was able to command common sense and reasoning to organize and support his thinking in good order and in sequence with no signs of confusion.*

*Furthermore, the patient showed in general a good memory and a sense of awareness. After being given questions to test his emotional response (without his awareness of that ongoing procedure) he showed an array of reciprocal mood responses—such as embarrassment, delight, excitement, humor, sadness, indignation, and so forth—appropriate to each given context and situation.*

*The most impressive feature I've found in this patient is his 'empathy'—sharp sensitivity to the other person's feelings. He seems to understand precisely what the other person thinks, feels, and needs even though the person whom he is associating with (in this case it's me myself) stays on guard and scarcely reveals thoughts and feelings overtly to him. Generally, this insight quality found in this patient is rarely seen even among normal children his age, let alone psychotic children in particular.*

*It must be noted that what I found from my patient during the first meeting is somewhat contradictory to his mother's remark about him on the same occasion in which she said her son is a nonchalant child who shows no concern for others.*

*Conclusion*

*This is an interesting case. The patient is a complex-minded adolescent boy whose intelligence will be able to surpass his mental problem if we are able to find the key to open the locked door on the invisible wall where a secret seed of his deep-root trauma is*

*embedded and hidden behind.*

*Rain Panerai's second session*

Dr. Ron Sutton smiled warmly after glancing up from his desk and seeing his new patient, Rain Panerai entering his office room.

"Hello Rain, welcome back. You're looking as shiny as a new coin today! Come on in. Let me take a close look at you."

Rain walked eagerly to the doctor yet still with a timid smile. However, he looked somewhat more cheerful today in his new olive and lime green striped tee shirt and dark brown denim overall. The boy was even wearing a brand-new pair of cool, trendy sneakers. Of course, to gain her parental credit, the boy's mother has to assure her son looked his best before bringing him to his doctor.

"Hello, Doctor..."

"You feel more at home in my office today, don't you?"

The boy dropped himself on the same armchair, this time without a sign of hesitation.

"Yes, Doctor," still with a timid smile on his face. "I feel good today." Suddenly, with a wider smile he added. "I am kind of all right to fall asleep today because...it's not bad. You are inside my dream right now."

"My pleasure," the doctor then tilted his head, trying cautiously to choose the words, "Um...however, I need a little more time to get used to the idea that I am a part of your dream."

"But it is true, Doctor," the boy said insistently though still sheepishly, "It's not a lie. You are inside my dream at this very moment. I wish..." the boy hesitated before blurting out, "I wish bad things won't happen to you while you're in."

“Bad things?”

The boy nodded solemnly. “That’s not...just a dream. It’s rather...” he paused, “it’s rather...a nightmare. And you’re in it now.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” the doctor was chuckling. “I don’t mind at all to be present in your dream even though it’s rather a nightmare. Honestly. I know how to take care of myself. I’m just curious that your mom, your friends, your teachers, and every single person you’ve ever known must be in your dream too,” the doctor’s voice was showing enthusiasm rather than a threat.

“Yes... they’re all in my dream,” the boy’s voice became low and strained. Suddenly he blurted out again. “That’s why I dread falling asleep to see them showing up in my dream. But for now, it’s quite alright because there’s no one else but you. Otherwise, I have to force myself to stay awake as long as I can withhold. Please don’t tell anyone in my family about it.”

This was not the first time the boy asked him not to tell his family. Sensing Rain’s desperation, the doctor, again, hastily pointed to his medical certificates up the wall behind his desk and smiled assuredly. The boy seemed less constrained as a result.

“Rain, you are telling me what I’ve perceived as your waking state is in fact your sleeping one. If so, I’m wondering when you are in your bed with your eyes closed, not conscious at all of what’s going on for the entire night and yet you refuse to define such a condition as sleep. And if you believe your sleep shouldn’t be called a sleep, what should it be called then?”

After staring at the doctor for one long minute, the boys told him matter-of-factly. “I just call it as it actually is. A waking, that’s it, which is opposite to where I am right now—dreaming.”

The doctor abruptly opened a drawer on his desk and pulled

out a notepad.

“I hope you don’t mind if I’m going to take notes during our talk,” he began to jot down something on that note pad. “Everything you told me, I assure you, is absolutely confidential. It means just between you and me and no one else. So far, I’ve learnt from you that I am wrong. Because right now, you are sleeping and dreaming. But I’m still curious. Can you describe... what it is like...while you’re, I’m using your term, really awake? Something different?”

doctor was holding his breath waiting for the answer. But there was a long silence after that. He sensed the boy’s sudden tenseness, so he kept waiting patiently for another moment. But after another stretch of silence, the boy still kept himself in silence.

“That’s all right, Rain, if you aren’t ready to tell me. ‘No trust no talk’ is our iron rule. Remember? Hey, do you notice something new in my office? Just look around.”

The doctor decided to shift their conversation to ease the boy’s growing downside mood. If his persistence went on, he was afraid he might be pushing the boy to the limit.

Feeling more relaxed, Rain swept his eyes around cautiously as he was told. His eyes abruptly stopped at one hidden corner of the office room. He cried out excitedly.

“A goldfish! You have a goldfish. May I take a good look?”

The doctor smiled encouragingly. “Be my guest.”

Rain hastily rushed toward that corner where a small glass bowl sat on a table. Inside that bowl, a little bright orange goldfish was swimming around, waving its long and draping tail slowly as if it was a golden butterfly swirling its wings in a circle. Rain leaned his head close to the fish bowl, his fascinated wide eyes fixing on the fish’s graceful movement. The doctor left the boy

to absorb all this delightful moment as he quietly noted the sudden change in the boy's recent mood.

"Does your goldfish have a name?" Rain asked excitedly.

"No, I've just got him today, just before you came," the doctor paused and opened his smile. "To make this boring room more attractive to you. How about giving him a nice name?"

"Um...can we call him Mr. Fin?"

"Mr. Fin? That's a terrific name. Well, I heard from your mom that you love pets. Do you have some dogs or cats at home now?"

"Um...I have one now," he replied slowly and averted the doctor's gaze. "His name is Ninja,"

"That's awesome. Is he a dog or a cat?"

"No," the boy was shaking his head. After another pause, he blurted out. "He's a tortoise."

"Wow! A tortoise! Something different. I know a kid who has a green snake and another who has a gecko as his pet. Oh, I know another one whose father made him an ant farm from a transparent plastic box with layers of sands and soils put inside so he can observe and study activities of a colony of ants how they organize and form a teamwork inside the networks of tunnels under the soils that can be seen through the clear walls in cross section. They said ants and sharks, not us humans, are both the most amazing creatures ever found on our planet. Ants are for their incredible strength to carry things ten times heavier than their weight and sharks for their super extraordinary senses that make them a champion of all predators."

The doctor found his new patient paying all the attention to what he said. The boy even added.

"I...like ants. Whenever I take a walk outside, I always look down carefully so that my feet won't step on them by accident."

"I know you will never harm them," he smiled at Rain. "In fact,

any kind of animal can bring fun and joy to the pet's owners as long as they're harmless and not any wildlife that's illegal to own. Anyway, you told me your pet is a tortoise. Most people always mistake a turtle for a tortoise. Because they look the same even to me. So, I guess you must know their difference."

This time the boy smiled and showed his earnestness to talk about his pet.

"I read from my school science book. So, I know their difference," he said with a tone of pride. "The turtles live in water, and they can swim as well as fish. But the tortoises live only on land. So, if you put the tortoises in water they could be drowned. Otherwise, they almost look similar, oh, except that the turtles' shells are flatter in shape and lighter in weight, but the tortoises' shells are dome shaped. And they can outlive you. Their life span is way longer than all animals on earth, the zoologists said."

"Wow! Your mom should be proud of you," the doctor beamed. "You are a smart boy. So, that means you and Ninja will grow old together as lifelong friends."

"But for now, he's just a baby tortoise. His size is no bigger than my palm," the boy was spreading out one of his palms and showed it to him. "I saved money from my allowance to buy him at a pet store near my house. He's such an adorable creature, so docile, so meek, so shy. He always hides his tiny head inside his sheltering shell. But you know what? He's so smart that when I use a pencil to tap his shell his head comes out to greet me. And do you believe this? He's so smart he can recognize me right away. Whenever he catches my sight, he starts to follow me around my bedroom," his voice now barely hid his pride and affection for his tortoise. "A lot of time I have to stop walking and wait for him to catch up with me. Poor little guy!"

"Really! What fun! But don't underestimate his snail-like

pace. Don't you remember a tortoise can beat a rabbit in a racing match in Aesop Fables? I know that all tortoises are hardcore veggies. As a result, they are the healthiest creatures on earth with approximately two hundred years lifespan at least. Some even reach five hundred years. Never have health problems with their high cholesterol or high blood pressure, "the doctor was chuckling. "Does anyone help you take care of Ninja too? How about your mom? Your twin brothers?"

At the mention of his family, again, the boy's cheerful expression gradually changed.

"Please, doctor, don't let them know I have Ninja... Apart from myself, you are the only one knowing about him."

"Them? Your family?"

The boy was hesitant. Then he nodded.

"Why don't you want them to know?" This time the doctor had no need to hide his astonishment. "This guy is as harmless as a newborn baby."

"Yes, Ninja is harmless, but they are not," the boy finally said.

"All of them?"

"All of them..." he was not only lowering his head but also his voice.

"Rain," the doctor said softly. "What have they done to make you feel so... uncomfortable with them?"

He didn't answer that question but kept the conversation on the topic of his pet.

"Before leaving home for school I have to hide Ninja from their sight. I take him inside my shoe box, which I put under my bed. I made a hole on the lid for him so he can breathe while he needs to be hidden inside. But if I stay home, I would sneak out to the backyard, with him inside my pant pocket, and put him on the grass lawn so that he can roam around freely. Oh,



how he loves to meander outside and nibbles at grass blades!”

“How long has Ninja been with you?”

“Just a couple weeks. But I’m getting so fond of him. If they happen to find out I keep Ninja...” his voice suddenly trailed off.

The doctor couldn’t hide his puzzle on Rain’s sudden upset.

“Why? I think it’s a good idea if you share Ninja with your brothers and have fun altogether? I’m sure your mom will allow you to keep Ninja if you just ask her. No burden for anyone to take care of such a teeny-weeny pet that needs so little to live on. She’ll let you have him.”

“No,” the boy’s snap startled the doctor. Rain was shaking his head wildly, his face darkening. “It never works.”

After a pause, the doctor finally decided to do what was supposed to be the last thing he wished: to encourage the boy’s delusion rather than to withdraw him from it. But it was his priority at this instant moment to uplift the boy’s growing low spirit.

“Had I had to get stuck in my dream and couldn’t have so far found my way out, had I been you, I would have looked for more pleasant things to add into the dream, like having a pet, to make up for all my unhappy moments I had to face in that dream.”

“No, it doesn’t work that way,” the boy repeated. His face was turning blank and cold.

“Do you mind if I ask why?”

“I always want a pet. But my mom never allows me. She said Uncle Silas is allergic to animal hairs. But I said it didn’t have to be an animal with hairs or furs. I don’t mind having any kind that I can take care of. I promised I would keep an eye on my pet and never let it bother Uncle Silas. I begged her so many times. But she always says no...”

He continued with some more confidence in his voice.

“Last year, my mom’s sister gave me a little puppy to take care of. He had white fluffy hairs as softly as a white cotton ball. My aunt told me he’s a white terrier. So, I simply called him Fluffy. My mom grudgingly let me keep him because it was my aunt’s dog. My aunt loved him so much. But she had a good new job overseas, and she couldn’t bring her dog with her. At first my mom thought of giving him away to one of her friends. But my aunt asked my mom to give her pet to me because she trusted me. And I begged and begged my mom until she gave in. Fluffy was the cutest and the most adorable thing I’ve ever owned. My prize possession. But Fluffy had a habit of peeing on the floor and chewing on Uncle Silas’ shoes, making him so mad. He vowed to find a way to ditch Fluffy. He even planned to take him into his car and drop him somewhere far from home so that my puppy couldn’t find the way back. But my mom didn’t let him. And Fluffy became the subject of their constant argument.”

At that point his voice started to waver.

“One day Fluffy had dragged out one of his brand-new expensive shoes and damaged it. That day he got home earlier. My mom still worked at her beauty salon. When Uncle Silas found out, it pushed him over the edge. He rushed to carry Fluffy by the neck and flung him into the air, then kicked him so violently my puppy flew up and slammed into the wall nearby...”

The boy suddenly broke down and started sobbing.

“I ran for my life to where he fell and picked him up into my arms. I never felt more shocked and horrified in my life. He was bleeding profusely. Blood was spilling from his mouth and nose, soaking his white furs as if they were dyed with bright red color. The blood was smearing all over my shirt too. Fluffy was whining softly as he was looking at me with his terrified eyes. Then he began to convulse violently and a minute later he just...he just

died in my arms...”

The doctor was listening in total silence. His eyes fixed intensely on the boy's face as Rain blurted out those words to unfold the terror, he couldn't keep with himself anymore.

“I carried him to the backyard,” Rain was now dissolving into choking sobs, “I tried to find the best spot under a tree shade to bury him. But Uncle Silas sneaked right behind me. He twisted my hands and snatched my puppy from me. He dumped Fluffy's bloody body into a plastic bag and threw the bag into the garbage can outside the house. While I was freezing in pure terror he laughed in my face and said the garbage can, not his backyard, was the place that damned dog deserved. I locked myself in my room the whole evening, crying my eyes out. My mom came home late that night and their ear-splitting argument started. But she came to my room in the morning and just said she wouldn't allow me to have pets anymore for the sake of the whole family. She complained she got too sick and tired of intervening in this crap. So, next time, if I brought more pets home, I had to deal with Uncle Silas' foul temper myself. She would wash her hand of that matter for good.”

The boy abruptly stopped, so overwhelmed with sobs he couldn't force himself to go on.

Dr. Sutton gently pulled Rain into him. He put his arm around the boy's trembling shoulders. Knowing it was futile to stop him, he let the boy cry his heart out while he was holding him in his arms, putting all his effort to comfort his young patient.

A heart-wrenching moment passed. Rain gradually collected himself. He shyly took a box of tissue paper from the doctor, pulled one out, and cleaned his tearful face.

“Thank you, Doctor,” he muttered.

“Don’t cry, Rain. Remember, you said everything is just a dream, right? It shouldn’t matter. Why suffer for something that isn’t real to you?”

The boy was glancing up, tears keeping streaking down his face again. “It isn’t real, but what if it’s worse than being real. Every time I fall asleep, I find myself trapped in this very bad dream, on and on. That’s why I dread falling asleep even for one split second, Doctor. I don’t...”

“There, there, there, Rain,”

The doctor kept rocking the boy gently as if he was a little boy. He waited for Rain to sober once again before he approached the boy cautiously.

“The first time when I met you, I thought what a handsome boy you are. Perfectly handsome. Let me see. You have big shining eyes, reflecting your sweet soul. You have thick, curly hair and two deep dimples. But you don’t look like your mom at all. So, I’m wondering if you take this striking look after your father’s features. Do you see your father from time to time? Do you know how he is now?”

“No, I’ve never seen him,” his tone was cold and indifferent as he was shaking his head. “I never knew anything about him. Neither his name nor his whereabouts. Not even what he looks like.”

“So, your mom never talks about your own father... Any particular reason?”

The boy shook his head. Then he used his hands to wrap himself as if he was getting cold. “Maybe it’s better that way. What if I find out he’s... worse than the one I already have?”

Dr. Sutton was silent for one minute, his eyes reflecting deep empathy.

“Rain, can you tell me what has made you scared the most

in your dream? Then, I can find a way to help you get rid of it.”

The boy shook his head again, this time his face expressed deeper despair.

“No, Doctor, neither you nor anyone else can help me because...” he was swallowing hard, “...because you are also living inside my dream just like everyone... Are you aware you aren’t real?”

Dr. Sutton nodded as if in acceptance of the boy’s statement before he said in a more earnest voice.

“Real or not real, just give me a chance to help. Then we will see.”

So far, Rain didn’t give any sign of resistance. So, Dr. Sutton took this chance. He kept the conversation flowing before the boy would stop.

“Do all your dreams always remain the same every time you sleep? Have they ever changed? At that point, I hope you don’t mind. I need to take some notes on what we’re going to discuss one more time.”

With the mention of his dream, fear was creeping back into Rain’s face. Yet he went on.

“Before that, I did believe the dream I have been dreaming since I remembered was my real life. I really did. There’s no clue that it’s not. Until six months ago I began to be aware that the life I am having is only a dream, the long, long dream in continuous series. Anyway, to know the truth doesn’t help me feel any better. In fact, it even makes me feel more hopeless.”

Dr. Sutton saw the boy’s utter bleakness in his eyes.

“Because there’s no way to get out...” his voice faltered and then suddenly stopped.

“Please, Rain. Can you tell me more? I know I can help you.”

“In a series of my dreams, I find myself as a boy called Rain,

living in this awful family with someone who claims herself as my mother but never really cares for me. And with an awful and rude man as my stepfather. When he's getting drunk, he treats everyone in the family really badly, especially me. Besides those two parents, I have two twin brothers who gang up to bully me and always put me into trouble. My dream shifts back and forth between two scenes—house to school, and school to house—just like a never-ending rerun movie that I have been forced to watch over and over.”

The boy was lowering his head and looking down at his feet.

“In school, I find the same group of teachers and classmates who are no better. When I feel I can't take that life in my dream any longer, I struggle and struggle to wake up in the middle of the dream, like trying to emerge from under water. But some strong and powerful hand always pulls me back underneath. It's either my mom or one of my teachers who angrily clutches and shakes my body and pulls me back again into this terrible, terrible dream. When my teachers find out I 'doze off' in the classroom they punish me for not paying attention in the class. They once put me to stand in front of the classroom and forced me to wear a dunce hat with mocking words Mr. Sleeping Beauty on it. I had to close my eyes in utter humiliation and let my classmates laugh their heads off at me as if I were a moron. After school that day, one of my classmates started calling me Mr. Sleeping Beauty and it had spread as fast as a wildfire until everyone in my school called me by that name.” Tears were welling up in his eyes again. “No one in the dream wants to be friends with me... No one except Ninja.”

“Rain, remember what it is?”

The doctor decided to take a dirty and worn paper napkin wrap from his drawer and began to unfold it, revealing a dozen

white sleeping pills inside the wrap. His voice remained calm as he showed the wrap to Rain.

“This was found in your school bag pack by your teacher. A whole bunch of sleeping pills. Isn’t it yours?” He asked the boy in his calm yet firm voice.

“Yes,” the answer came as a whisper.

“So, in order to stay awake longer, you have been using these sleeping pills, or the ‘waking pills’ in your own term. Do you think it’s the best solution to this problem? Rain, listen to me. Let me tell you about the disastrous side effects of these dangerous pills. It’s going to damage your brain; impair your judgment and memory, drain your energy, and eventually turn you into a living dead, someone brainless like a zombie you saw in the movies. Worst of all, sleeping pills overdose can immediately take your life. You have no idea what you are dealing with. I got your physical health report from your pediatrician. And it doesn’t look good. Over the past two months you took too many sleeping pills, and it already had an effect on your health. You are on the verge of becoming addicted to sleep pills. You are under your pediatrician’s care on this problem also, right?”

While waiting for the answer Dr. Sutton found Rain still bowing his head and keeping his eyes on the floor.

“Lately, my dream is getting worse...much worse,” finally the boy began to explain in a whispering voice. “I...have no choice. I have to find some way to stay awake as long as I am able to hold. I’m so scared...”

As he said with his pleading voice, Rain was stroking his arm absent-mindedly. It came to Dr. Sutton’s attention that it was the spot where the bruise mark had appeared. The doctor couldn’t help but pull the boy closer to him. He gave the boy a firm hug again as he said solemnly.

“Listen to me, Rain. I vow to help you have a better and better dream each time you come to meet me. You hear that, right?”

The doctor then abruptly opened his smile as if he just remembered some good news.

“Hey, how do you forget you’ve just added one more friend into your dream? It’s me! Can’t you figure out why I suddenly appear in your dream? There’s no such thing as a coincidence. Everything happens for a reason, doesn’t it? Now I know I came into your dream for this particular mission: to protect you from all bad people who have harassed you in your dream until they go away or become well-behaved. Don’t you get it now?”

Rain was blinking his eyes as his tears slowly stopped. “Are you sure? Is it true, Doctor?”

“Absolutely! Just wait and see. Soon you will see a good change in your nightmare. Only nice and caring people will be walking your dreamscape wonderland. And you will live happily ever after.” The doctor ended his promising words with his brightest smile.

“Really?” with a faint voice, his eyes flickering with hope. “Really?”

“Trust me,” he was looking into the boy’s eyes with a steady gaze. “Can you trust me now?”

Immediately he found the boy nodding vigorously.

“Thank you, Rain. You’re making my day!” The doctor was beaming. “Now, time to celebrate the blossoming of our friendship! So, excuse me for one minute.”

The doctor sprang to his feet. The boy watched him striding to the pantry at the back. After a quick moment, he walked back with something he was hiding behind his back.

“Close your eyes now,”

Though in puzzle, Rain followed the order promptly. When



he opened his eyes again as he was told he saw the two popsicle bars in each of Dr. Sutton's hands.

"A red for you! Green for me! It's party time!"

"Are...you serious Doctor?"

"Of course. Just take it."

Grateful tears brimmed in Rain's eyes as his hand reached for the red popsicle bar.

The doctor began to munch the popsicle while he kept on talking. "Oh, what the most blissful moment when you can at last relax and sit down to savor that juiciest thing on earth! Let me tell you about one episode in my childhood. It involved popsicles... I want to remind you that I once was a boy just like you, with a heart and a spirit and of course the mischief of a boy, not a frowning and grumpy doctor who's scaring some kids silly, probably including you."

"Oh, no. I never see you as a grumpy doctor. Not a bit. And I am all ears now. I really, really want to know when you were a boy."

As he started to enjoy his share of popsicles, Rain's ears were perking up, more than ready for the doctor's promising story.

"When I was a boy about your age, I liked to buy popsicles from an ice cream man who rode his ice cream tricycle carrying a huge cooler full of pop icles of all flavors—cherry, lime, grape, pineapple, orange, strawberry, you just name it... Every hot afternoon after school, that old man would stop in front of the school gate, tinkling his bell—music to every kid's ear—then we schoolboys would race to swarm his ice cream bike as if it was a world treasure. He let us pick the popsicle we wanted to buy from his cooler ourselves. If someone picked the special one with the tip of its stick painted red, it meant that the lucky kid would get another one free. And believe it or not, almost every time I bought a popsicle, I happened to be that lucky boy whereas

most of my gang missed out on that chance.”

Now, Rain, fascinated, seemed to be hanging on every word his doctor had said.

“Week after week, the old man was growing more suspicious of me. He assumed I had been playing some dirty trick on him, which of course wasn’t true. I was an honest boy then and an honest man now. He vowed he must catch me red handed very soon. One day when I ran to him as usual, he had me blindfolded before allowing me to choose among the whole bunch of popsicles in the cooler. So, I fumbled in that cooler and randomly picked one. Since I was blindfolded, I couldn’t select my favorite color. But after he had allowed me to open my eyes, I found out the popsicle I had grabbed surprisingly turned out to be, yes, green, as I had secretly wished. After my first bite, guess what happened next?”

“A red tip of that stick showed up...” the boy replied but his voice showed some doubt. “Am I wrong?”

“Yes, you are right!”

“So, you got another free popsicle over again,” the boy said incredulously.

“But it was too bad. After that incident, the ice cream man became so frustrated he declared on my face he would not let me touch his popsicle bars anymore. But if I insisted on buying his popsicle, he would rather pick one for me instead. If I didn’t want to follow a rule, he exclusively set for me he said he didn’t even care. Well, I had no choice but to agree on that deal. And guess what happened right after that?”

Rain was so intrigued by the doctor’s story his tears were almost gone.

“Your luck has already struck twice. So, it must be a miracle if...”

“It would be a miracle if I kept on being lucky over and over, right?”

A smile was playing on his face. “When the ice cream man handed that fateful popsicle to me with his insidious smile, my heart was pounding, for every eye now was fixing on me as I was taking one quick bite from that popsicle. Oh! I wish you could have seen the ice cream man’s shocked expression while I was raising my hand in triumph holding the red stick again. Ta-da.”

This time Rain was speechless.

“All my pals began to applaud and cheer as if we just won a football game. Anyway, that was my last free popsicle. Before the ice cream man was going bankrupt due to my overwhelming lucky star, he decided to exclude me for good from a patronage no matter whose hand, mine or his, would pick his popsicles.”

Rain raised his voice in half amusement, half indignance. “It wasn’t your fault. That ice cream man was so mean to you.”

“Fact is there is no such a thing as mercy in the world of business. Mark my words. You’ll experience that when you grow up.”

“Um...I’m just curious. What’s the color of the popsicle that ice cream man had picked for you?”

“What else? After peeling off its paper wrap, it was another green,” the doctor sighed with an amused smile. “Think everything happens for a reason, right? If so, I can’t figure out why my life always has something to do with the color green? Look! Today you come to me wearing stripes of green tee-shirt!”

“Most things that happen in my dream don’t make sense. That’s why,” suddenly Rain said flatly.

“It’s the nature of dreams. The logic-free realm where reasons do not exist. Every impossible thing is possible. My dream, your dream.”

“Anyway, the huge difference is your dream isn’t your prison, Doctor.”

“If your dream is your prison, mine must be the opposite,” the doctor chuckled, half-amused. “It’s a free zone, a free zone manifested to welcome all wildest wishes and desires that are normally chased out by reasons. That’s why every impossible, every unthinkable is able to exist in this reason-free zone.”

“But all your dreams are only a part of my dream. You just dream inside my dream. You know that, right?”

“Well, you are beating me now,” the doctor laughed, giving in. “Shall we change the subject to be more agreeable? You start first.”

“Um...I believe when you were young, the boy looked up at the doctor in awe, “You must be a cool and a...wild kid.”

“A wild kid?” the doctor chuckled. “I wonder whether this comment is a compliment or something opposite. But you’re right. I had a very restless spirit when I was a kid. I am a survivor of my own overwhelmed sense of wonder over everything around me. I once broke my leg because I’d leapt from a tree branch and landed on the ground below.”

“Wow!” the boy cried; his eyes glowing.

“That’s only because I was so curious to know how it felt to be free in the midair like a bird. Another time, I was nearly drowned in a pond trying to find out why the fish was able to breathe underwater. I thank my lucky star that I eluded death twice because some grown up nearby came to rescue me in time. Yeah, I believe that during my childhood I must experience a symptom of what psychiatrists today call a mild to moderate hyperactive disorder.”

“Hyperactive disorder? Does it mean something’s wrong?”

“Good question,” Dr. Ron Sutton chuckled again. “If a kid is so energetic that he exhausts every adult with his excessive

energy, a psychiatrist will say he has a hyperactive disorder problem. Most parents in the old days would never imagine the existence of that syndrome. They ignored it and thought nothing's wrong with a super active child who talked and ran around all day. The folks in those days seemed less fussy about their lives least of all their mental health. They accepted whatever they were given by their Providence and were content and even grateful with life as it was. But more educated people today, yes, even myself, tend to obsess over our mentality and believe we are suffering from at least one symptom or another out of a hundred mental problem categories. So hard to find one perfect, normal person in psychiatric criteria and standard today. It's rarer than hen's teeth."

He couldn't help giving himself a mocking laugh.

"Sorry for throwing such boring and heavy stuff on you. Don't forget who you are engaging in conversation with. A shrink, right?"

"I won't mind at all, Doctor." Rain insisted with a smile of relief. "You are telling me good stuff. At least I know I'm not alone because everyone today is likely to have a problem in their head one way or another too. Can you tell me more about yourself? I love to listen to everything about you."

"Well, some parts of my childhood weren't paved all the way with rose petals. I feared and cried too. Plenty of them. But I got myself through all those I feared. Anyway, as I grew up, I shifted all my attention from the outer world to a world within, that's on human beings, especially a secret of a human's mind, the most mysterious yet most fascinating of all. It—"

But with Rain's sudden burst of laughter, the doctor stopped short. This was the first time he saw the boy in a laughing fit.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

“Your lips! Your lips are turning green,” Rain hardly managed to subdue his laughter

“What?” He was rolling his eyes.

“How are you going to see your next patients? They’ll know you’ve just licked a popsicle!” Rain was wiping the tears from his laughter. “If you don’t believe me, you can look at yourself in the mirror.”

“Oh, no!” the doctor was staring at the half-eaten green popsicle in his hand and rolling his eyes again. “Excuse me for a moment.”

He rushed to a small bathroom at the back. After a few minutes he walked back in a quick stride, his face now bright and clean.

“Now do I look professional again?” Suddenly he let out a guffaw. “That’s the pot calling the kettle black. Don’t you know your lips are now as red as...ooh...fresh blood? You’re scaring me out of my wit. You look like a little vampire who has just bitten someone’s throat.”

They were laughing together. The doctor handed him a piece of damp paper tissue. Then he looked at the boy with his grave expression.

“Well, time to say goodbye again. This session is over now.”

“Oh,” Rain turned around reluctantly, blinking as if he was just waking up. “That’s pretty fast.”

“I’m glad you said that. It means our conversation did not bore you. And since today you’ve impressed me so much. I have a gift for you to bring home. I’m sure you’re going to love it.”

Rain’s face was lighting up with another surprise. “Oh...”

“Now, close your eyes again. Tightly. Hey, hey, don’t peek under your eyelids. More tightly. Don’t try to outsmart me, young man. All right, that’s good enough. OK. Open your eyes

now, wide, wider, wider. That's it."

As immediately as the boy opened his eyes, he let out a thrilled cry.

"Mr. Fin!"

He found in front of him on the doctor's desk, the glass fishbowl with the same beautiful, shimmering, goldfish swimming inside.

"Is this for real? Is Mr. Fin really for me?"

"Of course, he belongs to you now. Just take good care of him."

"Oh, he's looking so fragile. Is it easy to take care of him?"

"This is a rocket goldfish. This kind is quite easy to be taken care of and also the most popular among the goldfish family. Look at that beautiful tail. The fish is named after its long and flowing forked tail that looks like a rocket. Your Mr. Fin is only a juvenile. When he grows up, he will be at least fifteen inches long."

"Wow!" The boy cried and beamed.

"And of course, he will need a bigger tank to live more happily. If he is healthy, he will live as long as twenty years. Longer than cats and dogs. I believe all you want to know about taking care of this guy is in the guidebook I'm going to give you. But the most important thing is to clean the bowl and change water at least once a week. You got it?"

"Wow! How do you know a lot about animals?" the boy marveled.

"Well, that's because I am interested in all living creatures. Let's say I treasure all lives, big or small."

An instant later, Rain's smile began to fade. His buoyant laughter a short moment ago was gone. "Oh! They won't let me keep it. I don't think I can..."

"Yes, this time, you can. Just let me talk to your mom after

you leave this room. Take these with you also: a box of dry food for goldfish and a manual book on how to take care of this little guy. Today, Ninja is going to have a new buddy. How amazing everyone can be a friend to one another under the sun. Don't worry about your Uncle Silas or whoever. Just remember my promise. Till I see you next time. Goodbye."

The doctor began to spread his arms. Before he realized, Rain sprang from the armchair and ran into his arms, resting his head on the doctor's strong and secured shoulders.

"Thank you, Doctor. Thank you for...being so nice."

"Promise me one more thing, Rain. You have to listen to your pediatrician's advice too. Don't take 'waking pills' again. You don't need them anymore. As I said, I am helping you add more and more pleasant things into this bad dream of yours until it changes into a happy wonderland. All right?"

"No, I won't take them again..." Rain was murmuring. "My mom already took all the sleeping pills from the medicine cabinet and locked them in her drawer."

A short moment later after the boy had left the room, Rain's mother, Rosana, opened the door and stepped into Dr. Sutton's office.

"Dr. Sutton, you gave a goldfish to Rain, didn't you?"

"That's right. I hope you won't mind having such a little fish as a new member of your family."

Rosana didn't say anything, but he could tell she didn't sound happy.

"I hope you understand that it is part of the treatment. And it's an essential part as well. As far as he talked to me today, what Rain needs most is to love. He needs that more than he needs to be loved. I noted that he feels good when he gives, not gets. So, to help him develop a sense of this fulfillment that will lead



to his inner joy, I gave him a pet to compensate him for what he has longed for but never has. So Rain can give his love and care to it. I understand his stepfather is allergic to animals' furs. That's the main reason you don't allow pets in your house. Well, a goldfish will solve that problem, a win-win for both sides."

"Well, you sound like you believe I don't treat him well," with a defensive tone, she said. "It's not true, Doctor. I used to allow him to have pets. But you need to acknowledge that he is a careless boy. He didn't take good care of his pets and they died. So, I told him no more pets. Anyway, Rain still sneaked some small animals inside his bedroom and tried to hide them. I've never seen them myself,

but I know from his brothers what he has done behind my back. Honestly, I don't think that fish will last long."

The doctor tried to ignore her mocking smile.

"It seems you don't ask Rain himself when something happens but instead rely on his brothers' words. Then, you take everything they've said for granted. I don't say they enjoy giving Rain a hard time. But sometimes siblings can be competitive and act hostile toward each other especially if they are half-siblings."

"Of course, whom I should trust more between Rain and his brothers. Otherwise why do I bother bringing this boy over here to check what's wrong with him?"

With her defense for her other two sons and her attitude against Rain, the doctor decided not to further his question. It was hard to rely on someone who had a strong, prejudiced opinion.

"Thank you, Miss Rosana. See you and your son next time."

And with her half smile and half smirk, she left his office.



CHAPTER

## THREE

**T**he *internal phone on Dr. Ron Sutton's desk was ringing. He picked it up from the receiver and spoke promptly on the phone.*

"Yes, Fannie."

His nurse assistant's brisk voice came from the other end as he listened attentively.

"Doctor, you have a call from Rosana Panerai, your patient's mother. Are you able to speak to her now?"

"No problem. Transfer her call to me, please."

His nurse Fannie had put him on hold for a brief moment before Rosana's urgent voice started at the other end.

"Doctor Sutton, it's me, Rosana."

"Hello, Miss Rosana. Anything I can help you with? I remember, according to today's schedule, you're going to bring Rain over at ten o'clock this morning."

Her shrill voice started piercing his ears. "Doctor, I know I should have called to cancel his appointment yesterday. Sorry

about that. But since my son woke up this morning, he has not been feeling well at all. So, I would like to cancel his appointment probably until next week or whenever he's available. Then I'll call you again."

The Doctor was raising his eyebrows. He glanced at his watch and found it was nine o'clock now. "Oh! Sorry to hear that. How is he now? Anything serious?"

"No, no, don't worry, Doctor. He has complained he has a headache and a runny nose. I think he's just catching a cold. The weather now is really bad. The rain has shown no sign of letting up since early morning. So, I don't think it's a good idea to drag him out. If you don't mind, I have to go now. I will call you later for his next appointment."

The doctor was frowning on the phone. She told him the boy had just fallen sick this morning. But why did she then tell him she should have called him yesterday to cancel her son's today appointment? She couldn't be a clairvoyant who was able to see her son falling sick one day ahead of time. That discrepancy just didn't add up.

"He has improved quite a great deal in the last session compared to when I first met him. Do you mind asking him to come and speak to me on the phone for just a minute? It's going to be quick because I don't want to disturb him either."

"Oh! I'm afraid not. I put him to bed already for a good rest," her voice changed into a hasty tone. "Remember I told you I'm going to call you again? Now, I have to get to work."

"I'm sorry, Miss Rosana," his face was hardening as he tried to manage an apologetic voice. "You are right. I shouldn't disturb him on the phone because he has to get up from his bed for a talk. How about coming to see him myself after work at your home?"

The doctor noticed a pause before she went on. "Oh! Thanks for your concern. I appreciate that. But don't bother. He's fine. He's running a mild fever. I just gave him a cold medicine and let him rest," her voice was a little sharper. "No need to waste your time. Good-bye—"

"Please don't hang up. I need to talk to him now. Your son is now a patient under my special care. If he is sick enough to stay in bed, miss the appointment to see his doctor, and is not able to get up to talk to me for a couple minutes on the phone, it's my commitment to come to see him at his home myself. Don't worry. I do this out of my personal concern," he was stressing his voice. "I won't charge you, not even a penny for my visit."

Dr. Sutton noticed a long pause. He held onto the phone until a moment later he heard Rain's voice, low and indistinct, and barely audible.

"Hello Rain, is that you? Your mom told me you won't come to see me today because you aren't feeling well. Are you all right now?"

There was still an indistinct, muffling voice through the line.

"Oh! No," he cried out anxiously. "Are you crying, Rain? Just hang on and wait for me. I'll be over there in just a moment."

Rain's voice was incoherent now. It was obvious to the doctor the boy was forcing himself to stop sobbing. "I...am...all right. I...I...really want to see...you today...but...my mom...won't...let me."

Tracing the boy's growing dismay, Doctor Sutton lowered his voice. "Do you feel all right to talk on the phone now or do you want to wait until you meet me?" Then he spoke cautiously to Rain. "Is there someone in sight now?"

Rain's voice was now merely a whisper. "A minute ago...my mom stood right by me, listening to our talk. She...she just

walked out to my brothers' room to stop their fighting over something. She left me alone now. Doctor...please help me..."

"Go on. Can you tell me what's happening to you right now?" he asked urgently.

"It's Ninja..." Rain started sobbing uncontrollably again. "Ninja, my pet."

"Calm down, Rain, calm down. Draw in a deep and slow breath and you'll feel more relaxed. I'll be there in no time."

In his more subdued voice, the boy managed his best.

"It...happened after school yesterday when we all got home. Kay...one of the twins...sneaked into my room. He has done that lately because my mom had told him to keep an eye on me. He found Ninja under my bed. So, this early morning while waiting for the school bus Kay brought Kit, his brother, to sneak in again while I was taking a shower and preparing to see you. This time they took Ninja to play in their own room. When I found out what happened I freaked out and ran to take Ninja back. I never trust those two boys, especially Kit. So, Kit threatened me that if I didn't let them play with Ninja, he would tell their father that I have been hiding a pet behind his back. Oh, wait—"

Rain's voice abruptly disappeared. Dr. Sutton waited. Before he decided to hang up the boy's voice had come back.

"Sorry, Doctor. I thought I heard something that sounded like footsteps. So, I ran out to check. She's still in the twins' room. Thank God."

"If it's too much for you..."

"I can go on," his voice was almost pleading. "Then...then Kit started a menace. He took a pencil from his school backpack and cracked open Ninja's mouth with its sharp tip. Kit can do some cruel and horrible things that sometimes shocks me. His

number one thrill is to hurt animals. Like this time, he tried to stuff a jelly bean candy into Ninja's mouth and then laughed when Ninja gagged. It must really hurt Ninja because he snapped Kit's finger pretty hard with his sharp teeth. I saw blood trickling down Kit's finger making him scream and holler from pain. Finally, he let loose Ninja, giving me a chance to hastily carry him back and hide him under my bed while Kit was running out to bring in his father. Within a minute Uncle Silas stormed into my room."

The boy's voice was trembling and almost inaudible. The doctor had to strain his ears to listen.

"Uncle Silas's face grimaced with rage. Without asking any question he slapped me on my face so hard I lost my balance and stumbled, my forehead banging against the floor. It hurt so badly I thought I was going to pass out. I heard my mom rushing in and there they went again. They started fighting and bawling like two crazy people. My mom brought me to her room and put an icepack on the bruise and gave me aspirins. But that part of my face is still swollen. I think that's the reason my mom doesn't want you to see me today. Please..." the boy was whispering, "Don't let my mom know I told you. She will kill me..."

Dr. Sutton clenched his jaw. It took quite an effort for him to stay calm and in control of himself.

"How is Ninja? Is he safe now?"

The doctor heard a heavy sigh followed by a desperate whisper.

"I'm...going to save him right now. So, no one is able to touch him anymore. Oh! I just heard my mom's coming. I'm hearing her voice. I got to—"

Immediately, Rain hung up his phone. The doctor could

detect only a complete silence.

Dr. Sutton hung his phone as if he was losing all his strength. He dropped himself on his chair, immobile for a moment, trying so desperately to concentrate. An instant later, he hurried to pick up the phone again and spoke hastily to his assistant nurse up front.

“Fannie, I have an emergency case and have to leave my office now. I’ll be back soon. I just checked my other patients’ appointments and found I’m free until two p.m. But if you need me, feel free to call me on my cell phone. Yes, yes. It’s about my patient, Rain Panerai, that little dimpled and quiet boy whom you are fond of. Yes, he will be fine. Don’t worry. Thank you so much.”

Rain’s house was Dr. Sutton’s destination. The rush hour had gone. There was no traffic congestion in the late morning. Following his GPS guide for fifteen minutes, he finally found the location of the house where the boy had been residing.

A house in a middle-class neighborhood with a two-car garage and a small green lawn in the front yard finally came into his view. It was a large, one-story yellow bungalow style house with a wide surrounding veranda and two shed dormer windows of extra half story built into its sloping roof. He parked his car in front of that house, got out of his car and righteously rang the bell at the front door. He noticed that there was only one car parking in the two-car garage. It meant either the husband or the wife was still inside the house.

A middle-aged woman in her forties, he believed must be the housekeeper of the house, cracked open the door. She gazed suspiciously at the doctor until he introduced himself with a cordial smile.

“Hello Ma’am, I’m here to visit Miss Rosana’s son, Rain. May

I come in?"

She stood still at the door without a reply. He felt that she was reluctant to let him come in. Then she spoke out slowly. "I'm afraid Miss Rosana—"

"I am Rain's doctor. This is an urgent visit," he added solemnly, not averting his eyes from her, and then opened his friendly, wide smile again.

"All right," after looking him up and down from head to toe, she gave in. "I let her know you're here. Please come in and wait inside."

The housemaid finally led him into the living room of the house. The doctor's eyes swept across that unkempt place. While waiting for the presence of his hostess, he settled himself carefully on a sofa that was piled up with some stuff around him. Two or three tabloids and adult magazines were scattering on the floor. Those things obviously did not belong to this room. Two dishes with some leftover food and an empty can of beer were still left on the coffee table in front of him. He found a few burnt marks from cigarette butts and other dirty stains and smudges on the surface of that table and also on the carpet.

"Sorry about that mess. What do you expect when one grown man and three boys always clutter up this house? Oh, my! I can't clean up after them around the clock."

Once she brought him inside that room, she became more relaxed and chattier. She waved her hands feverishly and shook her head in annoyance while she was mentioning those family members. It was apparent that she was looking for someone to let out gossip. It was even safer for her if that someone she found was a total stranger with no connection with this family. So, she grabbed that opportunity which was coming her way.

"Pretty hard work, isn't it?" the doctor's eyes were exploring



around while nodding soothingly to her.

"Pretty Much. Oh! What spoiled brats!" she was rolling her eyes, tattling on. "The twins are in school now, thank God, but they left a pile of mess trailing behind them everywhere, those brats!" She snorted. Then she continued in a whispering voice. "You know? Their mother should bring them to see you as well and let you thoroughly check them what's wrong in their head. I bet you will find a whole bunch of maggots swarming inside."

"Oh, too bad to hear it. Hope they didn't give you too much of a hard time," he opened the door of juicy gossip for her.

"What do you expect for those little devils?" she snorted again and shuddered. "Tearing off a butterfly's wings and leaving it to wriggle and die, pushing a bug to move while it was pinned with a needle. The parents couldn't care less as long as these boys didn't bother them. I can predict their future as if I had a clairvoyance ball."

Dr. Sutton closed his eyes. An animal torturer since childhood... All child psychiatrists knew that was a warning sign. He finally decided to ask her more while he was holding his breath.

"How about Rain? Are you okay with him?"

"Well, I would say he's pretty weird," she paused and pondered while tattling on Rain. "As quiet as a mouse inside its hole in a wall. He always locks himself inside his room and rarely speaks to anyone." She then nodded in approval. "But he's all right, a considerate boy. Unlike the twins, he never gives anybody trouble. Maybe he feels safe behind his closed door only. You know..." she was lowering her voice, "his stepfather treats him like a little shit. Just this morning he beat Rain, and no one gave a damn. I swear—"

Just in the midst of their conversation, Dr. Sutton heard quick

footsteps from outside the living room. No sooner did the housemaid lady stop her gossip than the doctor found Rosana suddenly showing up at the door. The unexpected presence of the mistress of the house startled the poor woman. She stopped short and turned to Rosana with a sheepish look.

“Oh, Ma’am, I’m just about to come to tell you that you have a guest. He said he is Rain’s doctor, and this is an urgent visit. So, I...let him in.”

The housemaid explained in a dismayed voice when Rosana shot a suspicious look at her. Then, that chatty housemaid hurriedly stepped back out of the room, leaving Rosana to greet her guest in a cold and somewhat hostile manner.

“I’m very surprised you show up in my house. I don’t think my son needs you now. Haven’t I already told you on the phone nothing’s serious about his headache? I don’t have time for you at this moment, Doctor.”

“Miss Rosana, I’m sorry I showed up uninvited. I don’t mean to bother you,” he gave her an apologetical smile. “As a matter of fact, I’ve just happened to drive into this neighborhood for my other business. On my way out I believe it’s not a bad idea if I just drop by and see how Rain is doing. All I need is only a few minutes and then I will promptly leave.”

“But I’ve just heard my housekeeper say you’d told her it’s an urgent visit. So, I assume you didn’t just happen to drop by,” she was raising her shrill voice with self-righteousness. “You’ve planned to see him from the beginning.”

“Why? You should rather be pleased to see your son receiving extra care from his doctor. But so far,” he paused, “as a matter of fact, you don’t look pleased to see me.”

She was silent. She might be aware that she had gone too far. The doctor then saw her forcing a smile. “Sorry, I don’t mean to

be rude to you. I'm just a little too tired... All right, welcome to my house."

Dr. Sutton then noticed that the tone of her voice was abruptly changing in the middle of their conversation.

"Oh my! I should tell you earlier. So many things have come to meddle in my head today. Um...yesterday at dinner time, Rain slipped on the floor after he had knocked over a glass and spilled the milk. He stumbled face down. What a clumsy boy! So, don't be alarmed if you see some black and blue on his face. It's just—"

She was stopping short, beginning to notice the unchanging expression on the doctor's face as he kept listening to her in his cool and calm manner.

"It's an accident," a stress was in her voice. "He's always prone to silly accidents, cutting his finger with a blade, bumping into a wall, falling from a bike. You just name it. And yesterday, there he went again, slipping on the wet floor face down. It's me who pulled him up to his feet myself and took care of the bump."

Doctor Sutton was nodding in agreement with her. He even gave her the same courteous smile. But she detected a flicker of sneer on that smile when he slowly added, "oh, I see."

Rosana pursed her lips, half offended and half embarrassed. His nonchalance to all explanations she had given to hasten him out of her house had rendered his persistence in standing his ground. Unable to find an appropriate excuse to refuse his request for visiting her son, after a hesitated moment, she grudgingly led the doctor up the dim upstairs. With unnecessarily excessive force, she pushed open a door on one small attic at the far end that was used as Rain's bedroom.

"Rain, wake up," she was raising her voice, leading the doctor inside. "Do you hear me now? Your doctor is right here to see

you.”

The doctor darted his eyes around that messy, small room. He spotted Rain lying motionless on his bed at the darkened corner of his room, his body covered with a navy-blue blanket in Spider Man comic print. The room had a small dormer window at that corner. But the blind was pulled all the way down until the sunlight hardly leaked through, causing the entire room with a low and slanting ceiling roof to look gloomy and dim with a dank and dusty smell filling the whole atmosphere. Dr. Sutton slowly and carefully walked in tiptoe to where the boy was sprawling beneath his blanket.

Rain's small and frail body down from his neck was hidden under the blanket, his eyes seemingly gazing up blankly at one spot on the ceiling directly above him. It was apparent to the doctor that the boy was in a strange, oblivion state. He neither responded to his mother's loud stomping in his room nor her shrieking that followed.

His gaze was fixed on that same spot above his head, eyes wide opening. But anyone could tell he probably saw nothing at where he was looking. The doctor could tell that Rain's intense gaze went far beyond the overhead ceiling and the surrounding walls that seemed to trap both his body and soul. As he tiptoed to the boy's bed, he was overwhelmed with his own deep, bursting pity. Rain's face peering from the blanket revealed the swollen left side and a puffy eyelid. The doctor slowly bent over the boy and stroked his messy hair as tenderly as he could.

Obviously, Rain was oblivious to his doctor's presence; it did not help stir any flash of recognition. However, the doctor was positive that whatever the boy was 'seeing' while gazing at the ceiling must give him at least something of more comfort.

While the doctor was still bewildered at the sight of his young

patient, Rosana made her triumphant laughter.

"Now, you come to witness what I try to explain to you from the beginning. This is what he has usually become whenever he turns himself into..." she paused, trying to find a word, "into...a stone, or a statue, or a zombie, or whatever you try to figure out. I don't know how to call him when he turns into this. Can you change him into a normal boy with the help of a big psychiatry degree of yours? But I doubt it."

The only way to remain calm was to ignore Rosana's mocking voice. He stroked the boy's hair while he kept softly repeating his name. Somehow, there was a stir in Rain's rigid body. Rain's vacant eyes started blinking and flickering, a flash of recognition sparking up his dull face. In another instant, his parched eyes began to moisten with tears.

"Doctor..." the boy was groaning, "oh, that's you..."

"Yes, that's me. What's happening Rain."

"I try to get out from this terrible moment of my dream. But this time, I can't make myself wake up. I'm scared... Doctor, I need some waking pills, please. I need to get out right away."

"No, you can't take them." Doctor Sutton was now alarmed. "Talk to me Rain. Why do you need to get out so badly now?"

"I'm scared, Doctor. So scared," the boy began to whimper, his body trembling.

"Don't be scared, Rain. Though you're being stuck in this dream you're having me right now. I won't let anyone hurt you."

The doctor began to be aware of Rosana's remaining presence in the room from a sudden interrupt of her loud and sharp voice. She was throwing her hands up as if in great upset.

"I can't take this crap anymore. There he goes again, his crazy dream. I—"

The doctor had hastily hushed her before she started another

bawl.

“Please, let me talk to him,” then he quickly turned to Rain. “Yes, Rain, I won’t leave you as I always promise whenever you’re stuck in your dream. Nod to me if you hear my promise.”

Rain slowly nodded his head. The doctor’s face now lit up with relief after the boy’s response.

Rosana rolled her eyes and forced a laugh. “Sounds like you and Rain are sharing some conspiracy secret that only you wackos are able to understand one another. I was never with Rain inside your office when you gave him the therapy. I have no idea what was going on behind that closed door. But now I believe the treatment must be full of crap.

Then she craned her neck to her son.

“Rain, stop bleating, will you? I want you to go take a shower after your doctor leaves. I can smell the stink coming from you all the way across the room to where I’m standing.”

The doctor turned to face Rosana who was hovering around her son and showing no sign of retreating.

“Thank you so much, Miss Rosana. I do appreciate your cooperation. I think I’ve taken enough of your time. Now, before I leave, I just need to be alone with Rain for a brief moment. I hope you won’t mind.”

“I’m supposed you must realize by now,” she shot him a cold stare. “Half of what he’s prattling about are about some far-fetched fantasies he has muddled in his head. You can’t take seriously for all the weird and unearthly things he has been babbling to you. No one in the family has treated him like poop, I assure you. It’s only in his head. He is kind of paranoid in believing that everyone hates his guts. Well, it’s up to you now. Between this bonkers kid and his mother, you can choose which one you should listen to if you have enough sense.”

“Yes, I will,” he was looking her in the eyes. “For now, thank you for your advice and concern. I appreciate it.”

Sullen and indignant, Rosana shot an accusing glance at Rain’s direction. When she couldn’t find a reason to linger, she turned her back on them and trotted out with a loud bang right after she had slammed the door shut.

Dr. Ron Sutton sighed with a good relief as soon as she was out of their sight. Finally, she was heading to work and leaving them alone. A typical self-interested woman whose concern on her child was obviously not her priority.

Rain’s case is going to be a long and tough battle due to his mother’s hostility, but he would not budge an inch.

He dropped himself on the edge of Rain’s bed. Tears were trickling down the boy’s face as his parched and cracked lips tried painfully to open a distorted smile to greet his doctor. One of Dr. Sutton’s hands caressed the boy’s damp hair back and forth, then moved gingerly along a bruised forehead and swollen cheeks, while his other hand was under the blanket squeezing the boy’s hand for a comfort he needed.

Dr. Sutton was abruptly aghast.

“Rain! What a—?”

He hastily withdrew his hand from the boy’s and peered closer at his own, now smeared with blood red stains. In baffle, he hurriedly pulled the blanket down to Rain’s waist and lifted one of the boy’s arms out of the blanket cover. In disbelief, he found Rain’s thumb loosely wrapped with a piece of toilet tissue still soaked with blood.

Rain recoiled from the doctor’s touch. With a frightened look, he hurriedly yanked his hand from the doctor’s grip.

“Get your hand off me!” the boy started crying frantically. The doctor finally let go of Rain’s hand.

“Rain,” with his calm voice, the doctor attempted to take the boy’s hand again. “May I take a closer look at your thumb? I’m just wondering what hurt you. Remember? I came here for only one reason. To help and protect you. The last thing I ever think of is to threaten you. Please listen to me.”

The doctor slowly drew the boy’s injured hand closer to him. This time after a pause Rain gave no resistance. The doctor hastily yet carefully peeled the blood-soaked wrap from the boy’s thumb. As he raised Rain’s bare hand to have another close look, he found a small but deep gaping hole on the tip of the thumb. He frowned.

He was certain that the cut had been caused by a bite of sharp teeth from some small animal. Bloods were still seeping from the gape. Some were drying and began to harden into a crust on the skin around the nail. The cut was still fresh. So, he was positive the injury occurred after he had talked on the phone with the boy an hour ago.

Dr. Sutton became silent for a short moment until he made sure his voice could come out casually.

“Umm...I just remember. You haven’t yet introduced Ninja to me. May I meet your friend now?”

Rain slowly turned his face away from him as he replied in a deadpan voice.

“Sorry... Ninja is not with me now.”

The doctor rested his hands on the boy’s shoulders and nudged him back to meet his eyes. “Where is Ninja?”

“He...he isn’t in my dream anymore...” Rain was resisting the doctor’s hand.

Immediately, the doctor dashed under the boy’s bed, his hands frantically moving around, trying to grope something inside. A moment later, he stood up, his hands holding a shoe



box with small holes on its lid. The instant he opened the lid and peered inside; his body froze with shock. He fell into a long silence as his body went limp.

The boy turned his head to stare at the doctor. He kept gazing at him with the eyes that went totally blank and impassive.

After a few torturing moments had passed, the doctor slowly took a lifeless, stiff palm-sized tortoise out of the box. He carefully flipped its body a few times as he sniffed on its shell, trying to detect a certain smell. Then he stiffened again.

“For heaven’s sake... Why? Why, Rain?” His voice was shaking.

Silent tears were running down Rain’s cheeks.

The doctor bent over Rain, his shoulders drooping wearily. “You killed Ninja, didn’t you? I believe you forced down something deadly into his mouth. Here’s the proof,” he snatched Rain’s injured hand. “That’s why you got a cut. Ninja was so scared he had bitten you.”

He abruptly spun around.

“Now, how about the goldfish I gave you? Since I stepped into your room, I haven’t noticed it around here? Where is it?”

“I...put him right over there...”

The boy grudgingly pointed his finger at the direction where a trash can was standing. The doctor rushed to that corner, his hands digging feverishly into that trash can.

When he drew up his hand, lay beautiful lifeless Mr. Fin on his palm.

He remembered now. In the second session of the therapy, Rosana was not willing to let Rain have that goldfish for the reason that the pets under her son’s care always died.

“The death of both your pets is beyond my comprehension. I can’t find any sensible explanation. So, I beg you. Please tell

me why you'd done that."

The doctor tried to turn the boy to face him, but Rain still resisted that force.

"Don't you have any mercy on those two poor creatures? Oh! poor, poor things," he sighed sadly, then his tone changed. "All right Rain, if you don't feel you want to tell me now, I can wait. Remember I'm always waiting for you in my office. Now, you should get a rest. I will tell your mom to take care of the cut on your thumb and bring you to have a tetanus shot tomorrow. I won't disturb you anymore."

He forced his weak smile to the boy as a goodbye sign. But as soon as he rose up and turned his back on Rain, heading to the door, the boy abruptly sat up and grabbed his hand fiercely.

"Please. Please don't leave me... Don't leave me now," he began to sob hysterically while trying to stop the doctor from walking out. "Nobody cares about Ninja as I do. They just look for a chance to hurt him. All of them are cruel and mean and ruthless. All of them..."

"But don't you realize you yourself have just done the same thing they did?"

The doctor's question quietened Rain. Finally, he said,

"This morning, Uncle Silas blamed me for coaxing Kit to play with Ninja. He accused me of having a malicious plan all along to see Kit getting hurt by that tortoise. So, to punish Ninja, when Kit comes back from school this afternoon, he would..." Rain's face was showing horror, "he would let Kit ride his bike and run over Ninja in order to smash him flat..." Rain was now sobbing uncontrollably.

"I...I just couldn't take it. I just couldn't let those ruthless people gang up to torture Ninja any longer. And I know soon... very soon...Mr. Fin will be their next target. They will take him

out of the bowl and watch him wriggling on the dry floor until he is dead. I have to save my pets, Doctor. I have to release them out of my bad dream as fast as I can. Because the dream I have been dreaming lately is getting worse and worse... I did that to protect them. I didn't mean to harm them. Never. Please..." his voice finally became a whimper.

The doctor dropped himself on the boy's bed and listened attentively to every word pouring from Rain.

"I did the right thing, didn't I, Doctor?"

Dr. Sutton felt too weak to answer. He was sitting motionless for a moment before asking the boy with extreme caution.

"Rain, in the past, besides these two, have you ever set free any other pets from your dream?"

"Yes..." Rain was hanging his head. "Maybe a few more."

"Can you tell me what happened to them, Rain?"

"I...I..." the boy gulped. He seemed to give himself some moment to collect his courage.

"After my dog Fluffy's death I was very lonely. I was desperate to have another pet... any creature, anything I could get for comfort. So, I sneaked a guinea pig, Moo-Moo, into my room. He was as cute as Fluffy, only in pocket size. Yes, so fluffy too. He looked like a black and white baby rabbit. Anyway, he's still too big to get away from the twins' menace. Can you guess what would later become of Moo-Moo?"

"Something bad happened to him. I guess."

"Yeah. Just the next day, Kit and Kay found out I had Moo-Moo. I was surprised they seemed genuinely fond of Moo-Moo. They even promised they wouldn't breathe a word to anyone if I let them play with him. And of course, I had no choice. They promised to bring him back quickly. While I was worried waiting, the housekeeper, Maria, that one you just met a short moment

ago, rushed into my room. In her hands, she was carrying Moo-Moo. He was all soaked with water and barely breathing. Maria told me she'd heard Kit and Kay playing and screaming boisterously in the bathtub. She's suspicious that the two boys must be up to something not good. So, she opened the bathroom door and found that they just capsized a tugboat toy into the water in the tub with Moo-Moo trapped inside. She rushed to snatch Moo-moo out and brought him to me. She reported to my mom the havoc the twins had conspired, but Mom didn't lift a finger to stop them. Kit has been hers and his dad's favorite since I could remember. She always let him have his way. Oh, he's as sly as a weasel. He even bullies Kay behind her back too if Kay won't do what he wants."

"I guess...after that had happened, you saved Moo-Moo your way."

"He's barely alive when I got him back. Moo-moo was pushed under water for quite a while. So pitiful. But I didn't cry. I was too numb from shock. I don't think he would survive anyway. I didn't want to prolong his suffering. So, I strangled him. Moo-Moo was my first pet that...I helped release him from my nightmare."

"And...and what about the other pets?"

"The others..." the boy repeated the word absent-mindedly. "After I'd lost Moo-Moo my life became so empty again. Luckily, I found my new pet by chance one night inside the kitchen. It's...a mouse. He was scurrying around the kitchen searching for some scraps of food. I lured him with a piece of cookie. While he was busily gnawing that cookie, I took an upside-down bowl to trap him inside it. I then put him in the same shoe box I later put Ninja in and hid Mickey under my bed. Yes, I named him Mickey after a cartoon character Mickey Mouse. I fed him with

whatever I could grab from the dining table. He was a real comfort whenever I curled up on my bed at night and listened to his squeaks in the box, I put beside me. I kept praying that this time this little creature Micky would be safe beneath his secured box. But a week later Maria found him while she was cleaning up my bed. She screamed her head off when she opened the box and saw Mickey. That poor lady has an extreme fear of rats and mice."

"I know. A lot of people do, especially women. In medical terms it's called Musophobia, an irrational fear of rats, which Maria has."

"You're right. Believe it or not, Maria can get panicked and shaken just from hearing someone talking of rats in front of her. You can't even mention the name Mickey Mouse within her earshot. Isn't it funny? No wonder that her blood-curdling screams made Kit and Kay rush into my room and threatened to stomp him flat in her favor as soon as I was out of my room."

Rain was shaking his head and sighing as if he himself were a grownup dealing with some unruly, troublesome boys.

"Did you save all of them the same way you saved Ninja?"

He was nodding sadly and then added, "Except for Moo-Moo. I strangled him. But for the rest, they were poisoned."

"How about the poison? Where did you get the poison from?"

"It's the...rat poison. I stole it from the kitchen," Rain was hunching his back as his confession went on. "Maria always uses her rat poison to get rid of some pest in the kitchen. As I told you, her skin crawls at the mere sight of mice and rats."

"What does the rat poison look like in color and shape?"

"It's the white powder...looking like white crystal stuff. I found it in a small bottle under the kitchen sink. On the label it's a name that's spelled like um..." Rain started to spell the name slowly, "s-t-r-i-c-k-n-i-n or something like that, I'm not sure.

The spelling is hard to memorize. Anyway, it has a picture of a skull on the top of that name.”

Dr. Sutton felt a chill down his spine. According to Rain’s description that white stuff was unmistakably matched with strychnine phosphate, one of the most lethal toxic substances to humans as well as to animals if it was either consumed by mouth, or by inhalation or even by skin contamination.

“Strychnine shouldn’t be used in any household anymore. That poison might even be illegal by now. I wonder why she doesn’t use other kinds of rodenticides that are less harmful to people.”

“Um... I guess rats are so repulsive to her she just wants to wipe them out from the surface of the earth. Yeah, I believe she means to genocide the whole race of rats, probably,” Rain laughed nervously. “And that kind of poison seems the most effective, I guess.”

With his last and most important question remaining, the doctor kept his voice as casually as he could.

“Tell me honestly. Do you still keep that poison with you?”

“No, no, no, not anymore,” the boy’s speech came out fast, almost incoherently as he shook his head vigorously.

“Rain, please be honest to me. This is a very serious matter. That stuff is deadly beyond your measure.”

“No, I don’t have them now. I... I already threw them away,” his voice was hardening as he turned his face away from the doctor’s scrutinizing stare. A short moment later the doctor saw Rain’s shoulders trembling.

He nudged the boy’s face to meet his eyes.

“Rain, you have no idea how much I care about you. I will find every possible means to rescue you from your terrible dream you have been suffering and enduring for so, so long. I will, at

any price. But from now on, you will never save whoever or whatever you love and care this way. This is very wrong. It's absolutely unacceptable, not only to me but to every sensible, decent person."

Rain quickly averted the doctor's eyes because he could easily notice that his doctor was very upset and worried.

"You are destroying what I view as the most valuable. You are destroying life. As a physician, I have to save even a life of a monstrous criminal who is a threat to society. If he's dying and he comes to me for help, I have no choice but put my personal grudge aside and save his life. Yet, after he is saved, I must put him in the hands of justice so that he won't put anyone else into danger again."

The boy is nodding slowly in defeat.

"I can't imagine how a tenderhearted boy like you will be able to save yourself from your own guilt once you come to the realization of what you had done to other lives. That guilt will later haunt you to your last day. Because nothing will torture an individual more than a suffering from his own conscience. Remember, Rain, while you are being confined in your dream, it will be much, much worse if you have to face those despicable people alone without those loved ones of yours because you already made them out of your dream."

"You... You are right," the boy whispered.

"What we are discussing is very serious. You don't need to tell anyone what you've done to your pets. Don't tell anyone. It's going to worsen your situation. They are not able to understand, and we can't blame them. But I need you to promise me one thing. You will never again use poison as the solution to any problem. Never!"

Rain was nodding weakly again while whispering his promise.

"I'm proud of you. I didn't just say it. I do mean it,"

The doctor gently rested his hand on Rain's shoulder. He then shifted his concern to the boy's swollen thumb.

"I'm worried that the bite from Ninja will get infected. Before I leave, I'll ask Maria to clean and take care of that bite and I am going to leave a note to your mom to bring you to see my nurse tomorrow morning. Your mom has to. It's an emergency visit. My nurse will give you a tetanus vaccine shot. If you are bitten by any reptiles though as harmless as tortoises or even by domestic pets like dogs and cats, it's possible that you can get infected with tetanus bacteria. You know...it's also called the lockjaw disease. You don't want to have your mouth locked up forever, right?"

"Oh," the boy looked at his swollen thumb sheepishly.

"I will tell your mom that Ninja snapped your finger. You were frightened and dropped him by accident and so he died. It's better that she doesn't need to know more. And as a matter of fact, tomorrow is my day off. So, I'll go to see you there to make sure you're alright. And after you're done with a tetanus shot, we're going to visit the zoo for the whole afternoon. You loved animals. So, you will see them all. How about that?"

"Oh..."

For a moment the boy wasn't able to speak. But a sudden sparkle in his eyes told the doctor all what he felt.



*“Doctor, I know you never have an idea that...I’m right now in the middle of my sleep,” the boy swallowed. “Please believe me. But I am.”*

*“You’re in your sleep now, you assure me. Umm...But I’m sure that I am awake, a hundred percent sure,” now with a stress of puzzle in his voice. “How come two persons—one is sleeping and another awake—are able to engage in conversation so normally to each other? Does it make any sense? Like one plus one always equals two as a bare fact. It will remain that way for eternity. If that outcoming number was not two, the law of logic would turn upside down and collapse.”*

*“Yeah, you think you’re awake now.” the boy kept shaking his head firmly. The defiance from such a timid boy was baffling the doctor, “It seems right but it’s still wrong. Because in fact you’re only awake inside my dream.”*



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