

THE VETERINARIAN'S  
FIELD GUIDE to  
**Rabid Unicorns**

Vol. 1 Saint Quiche Island Archives



ELISE LOYACANO PERL

Thanks for downloading the sample to *The Veterinarian's Field Guide to Rabid Unicorns*. You can find the full book at Amazon.com (coming January 2018)

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SECTION I

Excerpt from *The Gastrointestinal Tract of Unicorns*  
Introductory Material

*The purpose of this textbook is to describe the gastrointestinal tract of the unicorn (equus silvus unicornuus) and its connection to this animal's dietary needs. The authors do not intend to cover every aspect of the unicorn's anatomy. Indeed, much research is still needed to fully understand this creature. But an introduction to its diet and digestion will allow both the casual and professional reader a deeper understanding of the unicorn's alimentary needs.*

CHAPTER ONE

I know what you're thinking. "Unicorns can't get rabies."

Think again.

## CHAPTER TWO

*About four weeks earlier*

Bertie wished he had come into work late. He'd been doing that a lot lately, and it was working pretty well for him. Better than being on time, anyway.

"Are you listening to me, Dr. B?" The shrill voice dragged Bertie back into the exam room. It was Mrs. Hookum, the latest reason Bertie wished he had come into work good and late. She yakked on. "My Pookie-Pie still has fleas. What you gave her didn't work."

He looked down at the half-bald poodle. "Did you use the flea medication I recommended?"

"No, Dr. B. Everyone knows that causes cancer."

"My name's actually Bertie. Or Dr. Vole"

"What?"

"Forget it. If you don't give your dog the flea medicine, the fleas won't go away." Bertie looked again at Pookie-Pie and her pink, raw skin; she looked so pathetic.

“Yes, but you only told me to get that medicine because Big Pharma is behind this office. It’s not the same anymore since Dr. Canard left.”

“He died.” Bertie had to agree with Mrs. Hookum. It wasn’t the same.

“That’s no excuse to go into cahoots with Big Pharma.”

“We aren’t in cahoots with Big Pharma,” Bertie said. “The flea medication I told you to get doesn’t cause cancer. I give it to my parents’ dog.”

“Yes, but he’s going to become a mutant. I just know it.”

Bertie sighed. What did he know? He was just a vet with loads of debt. He thought back to why he had gone into veterinary medicine, and it wasn’t for the people. Of course, you can’t tell that to admissions committees. That’s not what they want to hear. They’ve practically got radar everywhere to sniff out prospective students who don’t want to work with people. For six months before his interviews, he’d practiced his schtick of how much he wanted to help people by helping animals. The whole experience had left his smile muscles scarred.

And now? He wasn’t so sure he’d made the right decision. He thought back to the last vet school payment he hadn’t made—again. He wasn’t sure how much he owed anymore. Totting up his debt was like watching a horror movie, without the popcorn.

The first five years out of school, his work meant something, but then—

“Dr. B? Dr. B?” Mrs. Hookum said. “Dr. Beeeeeee!”

Bertie snapped out of his reverie. Mrs. Hookum look at him funny. “What do you want to use, then?” he said.

“How about herbs? Or spices? Natural remedies? Do you have anything homeopathic? Maybe vinegar?”

“Vinegar’s not homeopathic,” Bertie said. “It’s for salad.”

“My niece-in-law put warmed vinegar on her Bichon Frise, and she swears by it,” Mrs. Hookum said in an accusing tone, as though Bertie had been hiding the wonders of condiments all these years.

“You don’t need to come here to get vinegar, Mrs. Hookum.”

“Well!” Mrs. Hookum picked up her fake Chanel purse and tugged on Pookie-Pie’s sparkly leash. “Then maybe I’ll just go elsewhere.”

“Yeah, like a supermarket.”

Mrs. Hookum stood up to leave. Bertie opened the door for her, and she and Pookie-Pie waddled to the waiting room. Bertie followed them to reception. Sandra, the receptionist, had her nose stuck in her phone, which had a large sticker that said, “Brooklyn!”

“Give Mrs. Hookum one of those citronella candles for the patron saint of fleas,” Bertie said.

Sandra looked up confused. “Oh, I didn’t know those existed. I should get one for my pooch. What’s his name?”

“Whose name?” Bertie said. Did she not know her own dog's name? Talk about the great mind of Brooklyn.

“The patron saint of fleas, silly,” Sandra said.

“I don't know! Look it up on your phone. You spend all your time there anyway.” Bertie headed to the back, but Sandra and Mrs. Hookum's screechy voices followed him.

“Don't pay any attention to him, sweetie,” Mrs. Hookum said to Sandra. “He doesn't believe in natural medicine.”

“Oh, I do. Last week, I cured cellulitis with paprika.” She pointed to the red blotch on her arm. “It worked really well.”

“See, Dr. B!” Mrs. Hookum turned back to Sandra. “Big Pharma . . .”

Bertie didn't hear the rest. He slammed the door to the patient area. It was off limits to human clients. The vet techs were giving the animals their morning medicine. The barking and meowing from behind the bars of their cages calmed Bertie. He walked up to the first cage and reviewed the chart of an obese chihuahua so that he'd look busy.

His boss wouldn't be happy that he was hiding out here. He was supposed to wait in the exam room to create as fast a turnaround as possible. It wasn't the same since Dr. Canard up and died. Now, it was more like a drive-through. “Toss your dog in through the window! We'll get him back to you in thirty minutes or less or your next pet is free!”



Bertie remembered the day Dr. Canard had offered to sell him the practice. He was really tempted but figured he couldn't swing it with his debts. He slept on it though—for about six months. But then Dr. Canard had died, and it was too late to make any decision. Boy, did he regret that now.

“B! There you are!”

Bertie swung around. It was his boss, Dr. Roderick, who insisted on calling him B, even though Bertie hated that. Bit by bit, everyone else had started calling him B too.

“Glad to see you could fit us into your schedule.” Dr. Roderick's glasses glinted the same way they do in those movies starring near-sighted Nazis. He pushed Bertie towards the door that led to the exam rooms. “What are you doing here? Get to the exam room. Some nut job is waiting to see you.”

Another nutjob. Ever since Dr. Roderick had taken over, they'd been losing their old clients who missed the personable style Dr. Canard had spent years developing. They were replaced by people looking for fast and cheap service promised by the private equity firm and their glossy sales brochures.

Bertie grabbed the tablet from the rack outside the door. He touched something wrong, and the screen flipped to a different page.

“Crap!” Bertie missed the days of paper files. Dr. Canard's body wasn't even cold, and Dr. Roderick had already switched to a modern, all-digital system which would “prevent care provider error.”

Except the stupid tablets were always going to the wrong page. Bertie fumbled, looking for the right client file. No longer did they keep records using the pets' names. That wasn't "professional." Now everything was under the human's name.

He found it. A Dr. Om.

Great, thought Bertie. Would this be one of those people doctors who asked him why he hadn't become a "real doctor."

"I hate my life," Bertie said under his breath before pushing open the door.

Bertie turned on the smile he had worked so hard on all the years ago for his admissions interviews and put his hand out. "Hello, my name is Dr. Bertie. How can I help you today?"

The man stared back with big, blue eyes. His oversized shirt was half tucked in, and the extra bulk around the waist tried to hide in a jacket that didn't quite fit. He grabbed Bertie's hand in a tight handshake and held on enthusiastically for a few seconds too long, kind of like a salesman.

"Nice to meet you, Dr. Vole," Dr. Om said. "Nice to finally meet you."

Huh, he knows my last name, Bertie thought. How? His name wasn't posted at reception anymore, not since Dr. Canard had died and Dr. Roderick had taken down all the associate vets' names.

"I don't see a pet in here. How may I help you?"

"Take a seat," Dr. Om said as he sat down himself. Bertie didn't sit down right away. It was strange.

Clients didn't normally offer vets a seat. Dr. Om quickly gestured towards the chair a few more times.

Dr. Om rubbed his puffy hands together and smiled more widely. "I'm not here about a pet, although I love, LOVE animals. I love animals. I'm here about . . . a proposition."

"A proposition," Bertie said. Was he selling meds? He didn't have a suitcase, and his Rolex watch looked a bit high-end for a salesman. But he was sleazy in that enthusiastic, salesman kind of way.

"Yes, a proposition." Dr. Om rubbed his hands together some more. "A proposition."

"What would that proposition be?"

"I am looking for a vet to take over the veterinary services at my new . . . park."

"You mean a zoo?"

Dr. Om looked disapproving. "No, no, no. I don't like the concept of zoos. Not at all! Keeping animals behind bars is barbaric. Barbaric! Wouldn't you say?"

"Yes, well, some animals can get violent. Lions, tigers, and bears, you know? Anyway, I'm not a park vet. That isn't my area."

"This park won't be home to violent animals. Not at all violent."

"Nonetheless, I deal mostly in small animals. You should look for someone with the required expertise."

"No one has the expertise I need. No one!" Dr. Om tugged at his jacket in excitement. "Not yet, anyway. And I've done my research. You're being modest!"

Dr. Om giggled knowingly as though the two were sharing some secret.

Bertie didn't say anything. It was official. This guy was weird.

"And don't you hate your life?" Dr. Om said, adjusting his jacket. "Wouldn't a change be good?"

Crap, thought Bertie. He heard me.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say what I said. It's just been one of those—"

"Months," Dr. Om said. "Months, by my calculation."

Bertie sighed. "Yes, months. Look, I don't know what this is all about, really—"

"Then why don't you come to my park and check it out?"

Bertie didn't reply. He couldn't put his finger on it, but something about Dr. Om set his radar on high alert.

"Why are you so sure you want to hire me? Did you go to every other vet in town first? Am I like a last resort?"

"Not exactly," said Dr. Om.

"Not exactly?"

"Not exactly." Dr. Om giggled.

"Then what, exactly?" Bertie asked. "Why won't you tell me more about this place?"

"Why aren't you willing to consider the offer? I'm mean, at least consider it? You don't like working here, not at all, not since Dr. Canard died."

“You knew Dr. Canard?” Bertie said. Suddenly he trusted Dr. Om just a little bit more, although, come to think of it, maybe Dr. Canard had hated Dr. Om.

“We studied together at university. We weren’t exactly friends. We weren’t exactly enemies. We weren’t exactly friends . . . but not enemies. Not at all.”

He went back to distrusting Dr. Om. What was it about this guy that irked him? Was Bertie just being close-minded because he looked like a blowfish? Was he that shallow?

“You didn’t answer my question.” Dr. Om said.

“Which one?” Bertie said. He was having trouble keeping track of the conversation.

“Why won’t you consider my offer?”

The clock ticked behind Bertie. It made him nervous. He hated those clocks. Dr. Canard refused to have any reminders of time in his exam rooms. It was all about the patients. Now each room had a clock that monitored how many minutes the vets spent with each patient. Whoever spent the least amount of time at the end of the month got a bonus. Mr. Boss guy was sick.

So why wasn’t he willing to check out Dr. Om’s offer?

“I can’t put my finger on it,” he said. “I don’t get why you won’t tell me more.”

“Oh, but I will,” Dr. Om said. “I will. In fact, I am here to answer any question you may have. Any question, except that one. To get an answer to that question, you’ve got to come to the park with me.”

“See, that sounds creepy,” Bertie said. “Like you have a blood-thirsty, machete-wielding clown driving you around town and stowing your passengers in the trunk.”

Dr. Om giggled. “I promise you, I do not have a clown driving me around town.”

Bertie noticed he didn't say anything about blood or machetes.

“You haven't answered my question,” Bertie said.

“Which one?” Dr. Om's smile widened, as though he were playing a game.

“Why are you so eager for me to consider this offer?” Bertie said.

“You were right. Completely right. You aren't the first person I've approached. I talked to more obvious candidates. But they weren't fully convinced. But I kept up the search, and I found out about you. Dr. Canard and I didn't always see eye to eye—it wasn't all eye to eye—but I respected his opinion on many things, many, many things, including his judgment of character. Very good judge of character. He had a high opinion of you. And you have had interesting thoughts in the past.”

Dr. Om's tendency to tug on his jacket and hold up his hands defensively was getting on Bertie's nerves.

“Why weren't the other vets convinced?”

“It was a marketing error on my part,” Dr. Om said. He stood up and leaned against the exam table. “I think . . . I think I just told them too much too soon.”

Way too much and way too soon. They weren't ready for it, and as a result, they just thought I was a bit crazy. That's all. Just a bit cuckoo." He giggled.

"Crazy?" Bertie said. "With all due respect, that doesn't sound like a very good recommendation."

"It's how the human mind works, doesn't it?" Dr. Om moved closer to Bertie, as though they were both part of an enthralling conversation. "When we hear something we've never heard before and can't integrate it with more facts, our default conclusion is that the messenger is odd or crazy, even. It's all psychology, I promise you. All psychology."

"Psychology, huh?" Bertie said.

"I am now holding back. Holding back! I can't tell you. I have to show you. If you want to know more about my groundbreaking park, you'll need to come on down for a visit." Dr. Om rooted around in his jacket pockets till he found the card he was looking for. He jotted something down before handing it over. "Here, take this. Go ahead! Take it."

Bertie took a look at it. There was an address and a number.

"What's the number?" he said.

"Your first week's salary," Dr. Om said as he straightened his jacket and reached over to pat Bertie on the back. "I hope it will be an inducement. An inducement!"

Bertie looked at the number. "Holy pigeon poo."

It was enough to do away with his school debt in three months.

### CHAPTER THREE

The day ended about as well as it had started. Dr. Roderick passed by the exam room as Bertie's last patient, an incontinent pug, was leaving with his owner, Mrs. Peckipoo. Dr. Roderick pointed at the clock on the wall.

"You won't be getting that bonus at this rate!" he said.

"You know," Mrs. Peckipoo said. "I just don't understand why I always have to wait so long."

"Do you hear that, B? Gotta keep the assembly line moving for these people," Dr. Roderick said as he took Mrs. Peckipoo's hand in his. "Just for the long wait, you get a ten percent discount today."

"Thank you, Dr. R. I so appreciate that."

Mrs. Peckipoo waved her arthritic fingers at Dr. Roderick. Bertie was sure she batted her eyelashes at him as she tottered away with her dog.

Was she flirting with Dr. Roderick? Was she that senile?



Dr. Roderick slapped Bertie on the back. "By the way, that ten percent is coming out of your pocket. Pick up the pace, buddy."

"Yeah, sure," Bertie said. He slipped the patient tablet into the slot, but it clattered to the floor.

"If that breaks, you're paying for it," Dr. Roderick said.

"Pick up the pace, pick up the pace," Bertie grumbled to himself as he walked home in the cold January rain. He got to his front porch and fumbled with the keys. They fell onto the wet doormat.

The front door opened. Bertie looked up to see his landlady, her form darkened against the glow of her living room lamp. "Bertie, you're finally home! Have some hot chocolate before you go to your basement."

Okay, so it wasn't exactly his front porch. He rented the basement.

And no, he wasn't renting his parents' basement, thank you very much. He was renting his parents' neighbor's basement.

His parents didn't have a basement.

And actually, to be perfectly technical, it was a half-basement, which meant he had a half-window too, so phooey to anyone thinking Bertie was some cliché millennial living in his parents' basement.

That's more or less what Bertie told people until he got tired of telling them. Now he simply changed the subject if anyone asked where he lived.

He trudged into his landlady's kitchen. "Thanks, Fiona. It's been one of those days."

“You kids these days all work so hard,” she said. “You look exhausted.”

“Well, like I said, it was one of those days.”

“You don’t seem very fond of your job,” Fiona said. She put the hot chocolate down on the table.

“You worked so hard to get there. It’s too bad.”

“Well, you know. New boss. Hard to get used to him,” Bertie said.

She poured Cognac into her hot chocolate and held up the bottle with a smile as though to say, “You want some, don’t you?”

Bertie shook his head. “I’ll take mine straight. Thanks.”

“Why don’t you find a new job?” she said.

“I don’t know. Maybe I could. Or there’s always ignoring the problem and hoping it goes away.”

“That’s the spirit!” Fiona said. “You know what they say. ‘Bloom where you’re planted.’”

“Yeah,” Bertie said. What he didn’t say was, what if you’re planted right smack dab in the middle of stinkweed?

“I’ll tell you, a little bit of oh-be-joyful always helped me get through those awful jobs I had after my husband died,” Fiona said, holding up the Cognac again. “Are you sure you don’t want any?”

Bertie was tempted, but considering the number of Cognac bottles Fiona cycled through each month, he thought better of it. “Nah, I’ve got some research to do. Thanks for the hot chocolate.”

Fiona held up her cup as though to say, “cheers!” and Bertie went down to his basement.

Half-basement, actually.

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Bertie turned on the light switch at the bottom of the stairs. The bare bulb made a teepee of light that revealed a mattress on the floor, a kitchenette that Bertie had been planning to scrub down since Christmas, and a rickety wooden table in the middle. He stood looking at his surroundings, then pulled Dr. Om's card out of his pocket.

It couldn't hurt to look up information on the guy. He picked up his laptop from the mattress. The only way to get Internet in the room was to prop his computer up on the half-windowsill near the ceiling. From there, he could pick up his parents' Wi-Fi signal from next door. He hoped they hadn't changed the password.

Bertie typed in “GetMarriedAlreadyBertie\*7\_85.”

On second thought, maybe he did wish they'd change the password.

A Facebook notification popped up. It was from a friend asking him what was wrong with his cat. He included a blurry picture of the paw. Bertie answered, “It's hard to tell from this photo. You should really take him to the vet.” His friend typed back, “Dude! Why did I bother helping you study for that calculus quiz?”

Bertie wrote, "You mean the one I flunked?"

He wasn't sure he had flunked that one, but he figured it would make his friend mad.

He closed Facebook. Nothing good ever came of it. He typed "Dr. Om" in the search bar. It couldn't possibly be a common name. How hard could it be to find information on the guy?

Apparently, not so easy. The first line in Google said, "Do you mean drum?" A list of sites on meditation followed. The only Dr. Om he could find was the creator of some magic foot cream that promised to get rid of athlete's foot, arthritis, and ingrown toenails.

That didn't seem to have anything to do with a guy who ran parks.

He typed in "Dr. Om, parks," but still no dice.

What else do I know about the guy? Bertie thought. He had apparently studied with Dr. Canard. Come to think of it, he wasn't sure where Dr. Canard had gone to school. He checked into Dr. Frederick Canard, D.V.M. Turned out he had done his undergrad at Oxford.

Great. Fifteen minutes of Google, and Bertie was feeling less and less accomplished. He researched Dr. Om, Oxford, as well as Dr. Canard's vet school (Cornell), but nothing came up.

He rubbed his eyes. Who was this guy anyway? It was late, and the Internet had slowed to a crawl. He checked his watch. His parents would be watching reruns of "Magnum, P.I." on the web. The only way to

get decent Internet at this stage would be to crawl on to their laps.

He was exaggerating, but you get the idea.

Instead, Bertie crawled into bed. He had an idea of how to find out more about Dr. Om, but he didn't much like it.

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The next day, Bertie walked into the clinic extra early. He carried a triple caramel macchiato with extra chocolate sprinkles and half diet milk, half cream. He was pretty sure this was what Sandra ordered. He hoped so. Do you know how embarrassing it was to ask for sprinkles? Sheesh, he was a grown man.

"This isn't for me," he had told the pretty barista. She'd just rolled her eyes.

He walked up to Sandra and put the drink on her desk. What with her nose in her phone, she didn't see him.

"Psst, Sandra, I have a favor to ask," Bertie said as he leaned in. She didn't reply.

"Sandra, psst. I have a favor to—"

"A favor!" Sandra said at the top of her voice.

"You want a—oooooh, is that for me?"

"Yeah, extra sprinkles," Bertie said. He looked through the glass partition into the back rooms. He didn't want Roderick to know what he was up to.

"Could you keep your voice down?"

“Sure,” Sandra said at the top of her lungs. She switched to a stage whisper, which wasn’t much better. “Sure. What do you want, hon?”

“I need you to find some information for me,” Bertie said. “Because you’re really good with the Internet, apparently.”

“Awwww, that’s so sweet of you to say. Sure. What do you need?” she asked. She held her phone in the palms of her hand and looked up at Bertie with big eyes. The morning sun created a halo effect around her bleached blond head. The scene made Bertie think of a devout Catholic holding the host before partaking.

“Do you know that Dr. Om who came in yesterday?” Bertie asked.

“No.”

“He came in the morning. Around the time Pookie-Pie came in?”

“No.”

“He didn’t have a pet?”

“No. Why don’t you describe him to me? No, wait! I have a gift. Based on his name, I’ll figure out what he looked like.”

“Sandra, that’s okay,” Bertie said, getting nervous. He wanted to get this over with. “You don’t need to remember him.”

“Okay, here goes,” Sandra said. She closed her eyes and put her hands, still clutching her phone, up to her chin. “Om is a name that denotes tranquility. Therefore, he is a tranquil man. In his seventies. He is slight. He wears tailored suits that fit impeccably. He

speaks little, but when he does, one senses wisdom. He is short. He is thin. He is pale. He used to be blond. Now he has grey hair that makes him look distinguished.” Sandra opened her eyes. “How’d I do?”

“Well, he’s short.”

Sandra screeched in joy. “I told you I have a gift!”

“But everything else you said was opposite,” Bertie said.

“It’s an imperfect science. Okay hon, what do you want to know about him?” Sandra poised her fingers above her phone.

“At this point, anything. He apparently studied with Dr. Canard, but I don’t have a first name for him. It wasn’t in his file. I don’t know what kind of doctor he is.”

“Okay, let’s start with where Dr. Canard studied,” Sandra said. She looked up at Bertie expectantly.

“It was Oxford for undergrad,” Bertie said.

“Ooooooh, Oxford. Based on the name, that must be in Buffalo, New York. ‘Cause they got ox there,” Sandra said as she typed.

“What . . .?” Bertie didn’t bother finishing the question. Any minute now, Dr. Roderick would jump out from hiding and bark at him.

“Okay, so I can’t find any Om,” she said. “But I might be able to find the photos of Dr. Canard’s class. Let me see.” Sandra put her phone down long enough to crack her fingers and then got back to work.

Fifteen minutes later, Sandra looked up with stars in her eyes. "I've got lots of photos for you to go through. Let me download them and send them to your e-mail."

"Lots of photos?" Bertie said. "What, I've got to look at tons of photos?"

"Not if you have facial recognition software," Sandra said as she plugged a cable from her phone to the computer. "Do you have facial recognition software?"

"What?! No, of course not," Bertie said. "What would I do with facial recognition software?"

"Save yourself a lot of time on this, that's what," Sandra said. She sighed. "God help you, you'll just have to do it the old-fashioned way." She hit the send button and put her face back in her phone. "There you go!"

"Thanks," Bertie said.

"You're very welcome." Sandra took a sip of her coffee drink. "Hey, this is pretty good, Dr. B," she said. "The sprinkles aren't quite the right color, but it tastes okay anyway."

Bertie sighed. At least he had his photos.



## CHAPTER FOUR

Bertie also had his work cut out for him. In his spare time, over lunch, and under the light of his one bare half-basement light bulb, Bertie looked at photo after photo after photo. It had been over thirty years since they were taken. They were grainy in that 1980's kind of way. It was sort of like sitting with his parents watching reruns of "Magnum P.I.", only with less-good looking people.

By day three, he was losing hope. He stumbled into work on Friday looking at his phone. Bleary-eyed and wondering how Sandra managed to spend so much time ogling screens, he flipped to the next photo, and the next, and the next.

Wait, he thought. He stood dead in his tracks. Go back. Go back. There. There. There!

Bertie held the phone up to his face to get a better look. It was a group photo. Standing in the front row with all the other short people was Dr. Om. He had that same crooked smile on his face and big, baby eyes.

"Move away, Dr. B!" Sandra screamed.

“What?” Bertie said. He felt dazed, as though he had been transported back from the eighties, kind of like in the reruns of that show his parents watched, “Quantum Leap.”

His parents needed to broaden their horizons.

“Dr. B!” Sandra said. “You’re blocking the door!”

“Uh . . .” Bertie moved to the side. “Sorry.” A vet assistant with red hair passed through under his arm, which was still sticking out and holding onto the door frame.

“That’s okay,” the assistant said, and walked away really quickly.

“Sheesh, Dr. B, what’s up with you?” Sandra said as Bertie walked toward the counter, still in a daze.

“Ooooooh, I know what it is.” Sandra looked at him knowingly.

“What?” Bertie said.

“I was as surprised as you are. Could you imagine? What was Dame Judi Dench thinking? Her nose was fine before.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Weren’t you looking at the big news of the day?”

“About Dame Judi Dench’s nose? What do I care about her nose?”

“Then what it is, hon? You were off in another world there.”

Bertie bent forward and lowered his voice. “I found Dr. Om.”

“Who?” Sandra said. Could she say it any louder?

“Keep your voice down,” Bertie said. “Dr. Om.”

Sandra put on her stage whisper. "Who?"

"The guy you helped me find the other day?"  
Bertie said.

"Ooooooooooh, that guy. Hand it over, hand it over. Let me see."

Bertie handed her the phone while peeking into the back. Was Dr. Roderick prowling around yet, he wondered?

"Oh, that guy!" Sandra said at the top of her lungs. Then she put her finger to her mouth and whispered. "Oh, that guy."

"Yes, that's him, isn't it?"

"But his name isn't Om," Sandra said.

"What?" Bertie said.

"His name isn't Om. Look." She held the phone up and pointed to the names along the bottom. "He's at the front, right? 'Cause he's short. On the right, over there, you see his name?"

Bertie looked closer. She was right. His name wasn't Om.

It was Arthur "Artie" Manicewitz.

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For the rest of the day, every time Bertie passed by Sandra's desk, she was puckering her lips and mumbling with great effort. Bertie didn't even bother to ask what she was up to. With Sandra, it was best not to know too much.

“You know, Dr. B?” Sandra said. “It sounds like the name of a Jewish butcher.”

“What?” Bertie said. He immediately regretted asking.

“Manicewitz,” she said. Despite her great effort, she still mangled the pronunciation. “Manicewitz, Manicewitz, Manicewitz.”

See, this is why he hated dealing with Sandra.

“I suppose. I don’t know.” He tried not to sound annoyed.

“You not like Jews, Dr. B?” she said. Then she puckered her lips as she tried to say his name again.

“What? I don’t have any trouble with Jews,” Bertie said. “Where did you come up with this stuff?”

Sandra looked at him disapprovingly. “It’s not good to be prejudiced.”

“I . . . I’m not prejudiced,” Bertie said. “Listen, I’ve got work to do.”

As Bertie walked away, he could hear her mumble, “I thought you were Jewish.”

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That night, after calling his parents for the new Internet password, Bertie set his computer on the sill of the half-window and got to work.

Password:

BertieYouDoNotVisitYourMotherEnough\_7\*85.

Bertie sighed. It was time he signed up for his own Wi-Fi.

He typed “Arthur Manicewitz” into Google. A whole string of results littered the screen. Bertie decided to narrow things down. “Doctor Arthur Manicewitz.”

The list was still pretty long, but near the bottom of the page, there was a C.V. He clicked it open.

Bertie noticed that Dr. Om's stint at Oxford lasted only a year. He finished his undergraduate degree at a university on some Caribbean island named St. Quiche. He then worked on a doctorate for the next fifteen years in Ghana.

The doctorate was in genetics.

What was the guy doing running a park?

He clicked about, hoping to see some published work. There was no way to get a doctorate without. But, for some reason, Bertie couldn't access any of his journal articles.

Maybe Sandra could handle that, Bertie thought. But dealing with her probably wasn't worth the headache.

Aside from that, there wasn't much information on the guy. Apparently, he was a low-level scientist who hadn't accomplished much with his life. That thought made Bertie very uncomfortable, but he couldn't put his finger on why.

Then it hit him. That described him to a T as well.

If anyone were Googling Bertie right at this moment, they'd think the same thing: a low-level

scientist who hadn't accomplished anything with his life.

Not that anyone would be Googling Bertie at this point. Or ever.

The Internet had slowed back down to a crawl, thanks to his parents' reruns. He couldn't remember which one they'd be watching. It was hard to keep track.

Time to go to bed.

\*\*\*

After a night of sleep, Bertie made a decision. It kind of went something like this.

One the one hand, he hated his job. The pay from the park gig wouldn't just be enough to do away with his vet school debt in three months. It would also be enough to supply his empty retirement account. He could work at that zoo or park or whatever it was for a year or so and then quit and open up his own clinic. Or retire and sulk in the Caribbean. Or whatever.

The pay from Dr. Om would be enough to get him away from Dr. Roderick and his tablets and his time monitors and his booming voice calling him "B!" even though he hated that nickname. It would be enough for him to get away from the clinic that he used to love. It would be enough to get him away from the constant reminder of his mistake to not buy the clinic from Dr. Canard. Pack up and move away from regret for beaucoup cash.

So why wasn't he rushing to the address on that card and screaming, "Sign me up!"

Because, on the other hand, something about Dr. Om was really disturbing, and it wasn't just that the guy gave himself a stupid name. Bertie figured, why bother hooking his wagon to some weirdo who was a two-bit scientist to boot? What was the point if all he did was go from the fry pan into the fire? Maybe it was better to wait on something better.

He tossed Dr. Om's card in the wastebasket. The pile of bills next to the trash toppled over. He kicked them under the counter. It was time to head out to work.

As Fiona said, rot where you're planted.  
Or something like that.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Bertie got to work early again. The cold smell of antiseptic made his stomach turn.

That was a really bad sign for a vet, right?

The waiting room was busier than usual. Sandra had to scream extra loud at Bertie so he could hear her.

“Dr. B! Dr. R said, and I quote, ‘Get your keister into my office!’” She carefully read the message off of a Post-It note and cracked her gum.

Bertie wondered what was up. Sandra’s desk was peppered with Post-It notes. Was Dr. Roderick meeting with everyone?

Bertie sighed and headed to his boss’ office. He knocked on the door. “Good morn—”

“We brought in an efficiency expert.” Dr. Roderick didn’t even turn his head from his computer screen. “Guy said we should make this place 24/7. You’re on the night shift, from ten at night to six in the morning. Go home. Come back at ten.”

“What?” Bertie said.



“You heard me. Go home. Or go wherever. Come back at ten. NEXT!”

Bertie took a few steps back in shock. He bumped into a nervous vet assistant, the one with red hair. She grabbed his arm and said, “What is this meeting about, Bertie?”

Bertie felt bad. This was the only person who bothered to call Bertie by his right name, and he didn't know hers. Then again, she was new.

Or then again, maybe not. He wasn't sure.

“Efficiency expert told Roderick to change this to a 24/7 vet. I'm on the night shift now.”

Dr. Roderick screamed from his office, “Next! You! Gingerhead! Get in here!” Dr. Roderick paused, then waved her away. “No, don't bother. Go home. You're on the night shift.”

“Excuse me?” the vet assistant said.

“Next!” Dr. Roderick screamed, even though no one else was waiting to go in.

The vet assistant put her hand to her head. Bertie felt bad for her, whatever her name was.

He put his hand up to pat her shoulder, but then thought better of it. “It'll be okay,” he said, although he didn't really believe it himself.

It looked like she had some waterworks starting. Bertie took a step back.

“I'd better get going,” she said and shuffled out.

Bertie thought back to Dr. Om's card sitting in his waste basket. He had a free day ahead of him. Maybe he'd do more research.

\*\*\*

Okay, so more news. Back when Dr. Om was still plain old Artie, he had served a stint in a mental hospital.

How did Bertie find that out? Well, unfortunately, it had required a call to Sandra.

“Hi, Sandra?”

“Yes? Who is it?”

“It’s Bertie.”

“Who?”

“Bertie.” Bertie closed his eyes and squeezed the bridge of his nose. “B.”

“Dr. B! What’s up? Oops, sorry. Give me a sec.” Sandra’s voice pulled away. “No, Mrs. Hookum, Pookie-Pie shouldn’t be making wee-wee in the new garden.”

“New garden?” Bertie said.

“Yes, hon. Dr. R is putting in a new garden. The dogs really like it.”

“I bet,” Bertie said.

Great. Evil boss, check.

Night shift, check.

Huge communal doggie training pad, check.

“I kind of need your help again,” Bertie said.

“What can I do for you, hon?”

“I’m trying to find more information on that Dr. Om guy. Do you remember him?”

“Who? Are you moonlighting as a private detective?”

“No, Sandra. I’m not,” Bertie said.

“Cause my cousin needs one.”

“I’m not a private detective. But I do need to find some more information on Dr. Om, and the Internet doesn’t seem to have a lot.”

“Oh, that’s easy. Use the dark web.”

“The what?”

“The dark web.” She cracked her gum.

“How do I do that?” Bertie was regretting this call.

“You see, you got all these servers out there that aren’t supposed to be on the Internet. Loads and loads of them. But some people don’t protect them too good.” She lowered her voice. “You can sneak in through the cracks.”

“What buttons do you push to get there?” Bertie said.

Sandra explained, but made Bertie repeat “Step on a crack, break your mother’s back” three times. She found it hilarious.

Bertie wasn’t sure why.

“Are we all good, Dr. B?”

“Sure, thanks.” Bertie was about to put the phone down. Then he paused. “Sandra?”

“Step on a crack! Break your mother’s back!” She laughed.

“How do you know this stuff?”

“Master’s in computer science. Oops, Pookie-Pie is making more wee-wee. Gotta go.”

Bertie put the phone down. Sandra had a master's in computer science? Sandra had a master's in anything?

It was like that episode where what's his name stepped through a mirror and everything was sort of the same on the other side, but everything was different too.

Sandra had a master's in computer science. Talk about freaking sci-fi.

So that's how Bertie was able to sniff out Dr. Om's connection with a mental institution. "Connection" because it wasn't really clear whether he was a patient. His file was closed. But what would a geneticist be doing working in a loony bin? He must have been a patient.

Right? 'Cause mental hospitals don't hire geneticists.

Right?

Bertie threw the card back in the trash bin. Garbage pick-up was tomorrow, but he didn't take the garbage to the curb just yet.

He was feeling lazy. That was all.

\*\*\*

Pro: Dr. Roderick wasn't at the clinic during the night shift.

Con: night shift. Isn't that enough?

Bertie walked into the hushed waiting room that night. Sure enough, there was a half-done garden

sitting in the middle of the waiting room. A faint scent of pee and air freshener permeated the room already. He walked up to the counter. The red-headed vet assistant was standing at a large sign that said, “New policy: sign in when you arrive and sign out when you leave.” In smaller letters underneath, it said, “Forget to sign in and out, FORGET about getting PAID.”

Bertie looked over her shoulder as she signed in. At least he'd know her name now. That'd be less awkward.

It was Helsinth. Helsinth Beauregard.

Helsinth? What kind of name was Helsinth? Maybe she had really messy handwriting? And he was reading it wrong?

‘Cause, Helsinth?

“I’m surprised he doesn’t have us sign in on stupid tablets,” Helsinth (Helsinth?) said.

“Yeah,” Bertie agreed. There was a pause while he signed in. “So, uh, are you okay? You seemed upset before . . . Helsinth?”

“Oh, call me Hessa, please. What kind of name is Helsinth?”

Bertie laughed. “Right—I mean, no, it’s . . . it’s a . . . unique name.”

“It’s the name you give to a Nordic horse,” she said.

“Really?”

“Heck, I don’t know,” Hessa said. “It’s just what it sounds like to me.”

They had made their way to the back. There were no patients yet, and since Dr. Roderick wasn't there to corral them to the exam rooms, they stayed in the common area. A couple of vet techs leaned against the tables, poking at their phones and looking miserable.

The vet tech that Bertie remembered as Marvin put his phone down. "This sucks. I was supposed to go to the movies."

"Yeah," Hessa said. "I'm supposed to take care of my mother at night."

"Whoah. Yeah, dude. You win," Marvin said. "But doesn't your aunt help out?"

"She helps out during the day, but she's getting old herself," Hessa said.

"Who's with your mother now?" Bertie said.

"Nobody." Hessa looked down at her feet as though she felt really guilty. "I'm going to have to hire someone to watch her at night. With what money, I don't know."

"Well, you know what I heard?" The other vet tech came over. "Sandra told me in the ladies'. Pay will be based on how many patients come in."

"Oh, crap," said Hessa.

Bertie took another look out the door. Still no clients.

"Does Dr. Roderick know you take care of your mother?" Bertie said.

"I told him, but he probably forgot," she said. "You saw how he didn't even know my name."

Bertie felt kind of bad, on account of him not knowing her name and all. But then again, he wasn't her boss.

"So what do we do?" Marvin said. "Go out on the streets and drag in roadkill?"

"What?" the other vet tech said.

"You know, recruit patients," Marvin said.

"Any roadkill you know that pack Visa?" the other vet tech said.

"Hessy, why don't you talk to Dr. Roderick about your situation?" Bertie said.

"I don't know if I should," she said. "I'm pretty low on the totem pole. I can't afford to lose this job."

"He wouldn't fire you, would he?" Marvin said. "Hessy, you should say something."

"It's easy for you to say that, you know," Hessy looked down at her feet again. "You all could find another job easily enough. You have degrees. I didn't even finish college."

"Awww, sweetie," the other vet tech said. She gave Hessy a hug. "Don't think that way."

Marvin looked at Bertie as though to say, "Hey, Mr. Full-Blown Associate Vet, why don't you talk to Dr. Roderick?"

Or maybe it was Bertie's guilty conscience speaking. Since he was, after all, kind of senior here.

"Yeah, maybe I can have a chat with him," Bertie said.

"Good move, man!" Marvin said. "Although technically, Dr. R doesn't chat, he barks."

Bertie straightened his back to look more confident. "I'll . . . I'll try to make him listen. Somehow. Or whatever. You know."



## CHAPTER SIX

A grand total of one person came in that first night shift. She wanted directions for the all-night pizzeria she was sure was in town. Marvin did his best to sell her dog food, but she left empty-handed anyway.

“At least we know there’s an all-night pizzeria nearby,” Hessa said.

“But we don’t know where it is,” Bertie said.

It was six in the morning when the others left. As Hessa went out the door, she turned and said to Bertie, “You don’t need to say anything. It’ll work out. It always does.”

“Yeah, I know. But it’s not right. I’m going to say something. Or die trying,” Bertie said. He put his arms out in a gesture that he hoped would look humorously heroic, but he realized he just looked like he was stretching from fatigue. He put his arms back down.

“Thanks, Bertie. I appreciate it. Oh, good morning Dr. Roderick.”

“Morning,” he said as he let the door slam behind him, right in Hessa’s face. There was a sign in his arms. He made his way to the back.

Bertie watched Hessa run to catch her bus, then followed his boss. “Uh, Dr. Roderick?” Bertie said.

“What? Aren’t you supposed to be heading out? I’m not paying you for staying extra time.” Dr. Roderick went fishing for something in the supplies drawer. He lost patience. “Get me some tape, will you, B?”

Bertie found the tape and handed it over. Dr. Roderick taped the sign up in the common area. It read: “New policy: pay based on number of clients seen. Get cracking, people!”

Bertie stared. Could he do this?

“Dr. Roderick, about the sign—“

“You don’t like it, find another job.”

Bertie followed Dr. Roderick to his office. He wanted to back down, but he had promised Hessa he would say something. The poor girl needed a hand.

“Dr. Roderick, I’m concerned about the fact that the vet assistant Helsinth Beauregard has been moved to the night shift.”

“You got thirty more seconds to finish, B.”

“She needs to be home to take care of her mother, and with the new pay policy, she’s going to be in a tight squeeze. The night shift doesn’t seem to be very busy—”

“Did you do anything to bring in clients?”

“What, like go whack dogs on their nightly walks?”

Dr. Roderick stood up and stared up at Bertie. For such a short guy, he looked scary.

“No, I don’t suggest assaulting dogs, B. What I do suggest is that you get used to how things are here. I am not Dr. Canard.”

“I understand that, but—”

“You know what? Since you don’t seem to like it here, let me do you a favor. You’re suspended. For a week. Without pay.” Dr. Roderick sat down and pulled out a sheath of forms. “Now you’ll have more time to find that perfect job you’re always mooning after.”

Mooning after? Well, technically, yes, he kind of did want a better job, but he certainly didn’t talk about it at work. I mean, not out loud. Maybe just under his breath. But just once or twice.

If Bertie were to be perfectly honest, he’d admit he didn’t mind the suspension all that much. You know those lists with the top ten reasons that make you realize it’s time to quit your job? “I got suspended! Crack open the bubbly!” would make it somewhere near the top.

“Okay, Dr. Roderick. I can accept that, but can you move Helsinth to the day shift at least?”

“Nope, I won’t.” He had finished filling out Bertie’s suspension form and handed it to him for his signature. To Bertie’s horror, he started filling out another one. With Helsinth’s name.

“You four are a team,” Dr. Roderick said. “If you’re suspended, all four of you will get a suspension.”

“Dr. Roderick—”

“You’re going to be really popular now,” Dr. Roderick started to fill out the form for the vet tech. Bertie noticed her name was Sarah.

“Look, you can fire me. But don’t suspend the rest of them.”

“Too late. Paperwork’s done.” Dr. Roderick stood up. “Now get out.”

Bertie stared for a moment in disbelief, then he walked back out to the waiting area. Sandra had arrived. She was sipping her ridiculous drink with sprinkles.

“Oh, hi Dr. B. You’re here early,” she said.

“I’m on my way out,” Bertie said, opening the door.

“Oh, okay,” Sandra said. “By the way, Dr. B, I still can’t find the name of the patron saint of fleas. What is it?”

He looked back at her. He had a sudden slow-motion vision of him making a beeline for Sandra’s macchiato and dumping it all over Dr. Roderick’s head. He imagined his boss screaming in pain as red welts, speckled with chocolate sprinkles and whipped cream, formed all over his tortured face and smutted up his glasses.

“Visions of third-degree burns inflicted by sugary coffee drink on boss,” would probably come in spot three on the top ten ways you know it’s time to leave your job.

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Bertie was about to climb the stairs down to his half-basement when his landlady intercepted him.

“Bertie, dear, are you alright?”

“Well, you know,” he said.

“You seem upset. What’s the matter?” She took his wrist and pulled him with her to the kitchen. She was surprisingly strong.

Bertie had to admit. He wouldn’t say no to some hot chocolate, and if she offered Cognac, well, he might find himself in the mood.

“I was suspended from work,” Bertie said.

“What? Why?” Fiona said.

“Well, it’s a long story,” Bertie shrugged. He sat down at the kitchen table.

“Coming from you, that means it’s a grand total of two sentences. Cough up while I make your cocoa.”

Bertie gave her the rundown in three sentences, just to show her.

“That was very debonair of you, Bertie. Here, you deserve some Cognac in your hot chocolate. And Bertie dear, don’t worry about this month’s rent.”

Bertie tried to protest, but Fiona put up her twiggy hand.

“No, I insist. Think of it as an early birthday present.”

“But my birthday isn’t for seven months.”

“Think of it as a really late birthday present.”

“That’s, uh, really nice of you.” Bertie stood up to leave because his landlady looked like she was getting weepy.

“Your parents will be so proud of you, Bertie dear,” she screamed at him as he headed down the stairs. “So debonair!”

“Thanks, Fiona,” Bertie said. He felt like a lout for having left so quickly. He trotted back up. “I really do appreciate it. Really.”

He spent the next few minutes sitting on his bed staring at the latest angry letter from the bank. They were threatening to report him to credit agencies.

So things could get worse.

A police siren jolted him from his thoughts.

It was his phone. Police siren was his parents’ ring tone.

“Bertie dear.” It was his mother.

“Yes, ma?”

“What you did today was really sweet.”

“Thanks, ma.”

Her tone suddenly turned shrilly. “But you can’t go accepting rent-free months from Fiona!”

“Ma, I didn’t ask—”

“You know she’s broke, and every time she gives you a free month, you know who pays?”

“The piper?”

“Bertiieeeeeeeeeee,”

“Sorry, ma.”

“Your father and I pay. Because I feel so bad for her. Only your father doesn't know about it. Do you know how much he thinks is in our cruise jar?”

“I don't know.”

“And do you know how much is really in our cruise jar?”

“Not a lot.”

“That's right, Bertie. Not a lot. And now 'not a lot' is even less, because poor Fiona can't afford to go without your rent. Don't make me make you come home again.”

“Ma, no, I'm not going back home.”

“Get a job where you don't sabotage yourself! Oh, and that was a really sweet thing you did for that girl.” His mother hung up.

Bertie put his head in his hands. Then he took a swig of his cocoa.

He could get used to that Cognac way too easily.

\*\*\*

Bertie woke up sure of one thing. Well, two things, but both were related, so sort of one thing. Or 1.5 things. Or whatever. The math didn't matter.

1A: He would check out that job with Dr. Om. He didn't have to take it. Just check it out.

1B: He would invite Hessy to go with him. She needed the money, and she was in a mess because of him. Maybe Dr. Om would hire them both.

He jumped out of bed. Surprised at the Cognac-induced spring in his step, he was ready to face the day.

But first he had to find Dr. Om's card. Kneeling at the shrine of his discarded student bills, he picked through till he found the wrinkled card. He stuck it in his shirt pocket and headed out the door.

But then it struck him. How the heck was he going to contact Hussy?

There was one person who would know.

At this rate, he was going to become best friends with Sandra.

So, yeah. It was official. Things could definitely get much worse.

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Up on the sidewalk, Bertie pulled out his phone and dialed the clinic. The one thing he didn't need to worry about was Dr. Roderick answering the phone. He never stooped so low as to work reception.

The phone at the clinic rang. "Dr. Roderick here at Dr. Roderick's Fast-Turnaround Veterinary Medical Centre, Grooming Emporium, and Luxury Boarding Suites."

Bertie stared at his phone. "Crap, crap, crap," he said under his breath.

"Anyone there already?"

Bertie took a deep breath and put the phone back to his ear. He squeezed his eyes shut, like he used to



before his mother would pull off bandages from his knee. Making his voice as falsetto as he could, he said, "May I speak with Sandra?"

"Who?" Dr. Roderick barked.

"Sandraaaaa? The receptionist?" He waved at Mrs. Hillbiddy, who was walking past with her mutt. She looked at him funny. "The one with her phone biologically attached to her face."

"Oh, that one. She went out for lunch."

Bertie cursed Sandra and her early lunches.

"Oh, where'd she go?" Bertie's voice cracked.

"Why do you want to know? Who are you?"

Bertie put his fist to his forehead, willing himself to think of a decent answer. "I'm her mother. I want to visit her . . . before . . . I die."

Bertie smacked his head and mouthed the words "Loser, loser LOSER!" A passerby crossed the street.

There was a pause on the other end of the line. Finally, Dr. Roderick said, "At the crap diner across the street from the clinic. Know where that is?"

"Oh, do you mean the clinic that the wonderful Dr. Canard used to run? It will never be the same since he died." Then he hung up.

"So there, Dr. R," Bertie said as he headed back to his half-basement. "Even Sandra's mother can't stand you."

\*\*\*

It was a dumb disguise. Bertie knew it. But the last thing he wanted was for Dr. Roderick to recognize him, and his mother's pink cap with kittens on the front was as close to a disguise as he could get.

So he'd just have to be man enough to wear pink.

He pulled the cap low over his eyes when he parked at the diner and looked inside to find Sandra. Sure enough, she was still there, by the window. It was a cold day and his breath came out in clouds. He scooted into the diner as fast as he could.

Then Bertie realized scooting wasn't all that manly and aimed for swagger. But he was never very good at swaggering.

So he figured just plain old walking would be best.

He heard Sandra before he spotted her. She was staring at her phone laughing hysterically. He slipped into the chair in front of her.

"Sandra." Bertie said.

She didn't hear him. She laughed some more. It came out like a hoot.

"Sandra." Bertie looked at the clinic as though Dr. Roderick were spying out the front window. He knew it was stupid to worry about that. Dr. Roderick wasn't going to be staring out the window. He was going to be inside lurking around the other associate vets and making them rue the day they applied to vet school. Or communing with the devil.

Or both.

"Sandra!" Bertie said her name loud enough that the other diners looked over disapprovingly.

She screeched and dropped her phone on her sandwich. "Who are you?"

"I'm Bertie." He rolled his eyes. "Who do you think I am?"

"Oh!" Sandra retrieved her phone and put it to her chest, as though she were recovering from a heart attack. "I didn't recognize you in your disguise."

"I'm not wearing a disguise," Bertie felt silly since, well, he actually was wearing a disguise. And it was the worst disguise that should have fooled no one. He pulled off his hat and stuck it under his thigh.

"What do you want? Your job back?" She laughed. And laughed. And laughed some more. Then her phone went, "bleep!" and she shoved her nose into it again.

"Sandra," Bertie said. "Sandra, pay attention!" He grabbed the phone.

"What? Oh, you're still here. What do you want?"

"I need Hessy's phone number," Bertie said in a whisper. He didn't know why he whispered. It wasn't like Dr. Roderick could hear him from all the way over at the clinic. And even if he could, what business was it of his if he wanted someone's phone number? He straightened his back and said it more loudly. "Would you happen to have Hessy's phone number?"

"Who?"

"The vet assistant?"

"No clue."

"With red hair?"

Sandra looked blank.

“Green eyes?”

Still no light bulb.

“Helsinth? She now works the night shift.”

Sandra cocked her head to the side.

“She got suspended with me?”

“Ooooh, HI, of course. I know who H is.” Sandra said. Go figure that she would identify someone based on the latest gossip. Bertie should have led with that. “Why didn’t you just say her name?” Sandra’s fingers ran over the screen of her phone. For the first time, Bertie noticed Sandra had long, delicate fingers. She could have been a pianist. Or a surgeon. But only if the patients had phones anatomically stuck to their bodies would she have been willing to do the job.

“It’s so cute, you getting up the nerve,” Sandra said.

“Nerve? What?”

“To ask her out on a date.”

“What?”

“What, you deaf?” She raised her voice so everyone could hear her. “I said ‘It’s so cute, you getting up the nerve. TO ASK HER ON A DATE!’”

Everyone stared. Bertie sank in his chair. “I’m not asking her on a date. It’s about—Forget it. It doesn’t matter.”

“Aw, she’ll be so disappointed.” Sandra was still speaking at top volume. “She’s got such a crush on you.” The ladies at the next table over scootched closer. Their eyes got bigger.

“What?”

“I said, ‘SHE’S GOT SUCH A—’ Oooh, here’s her number.”

Bertie jotted down the number as fast as he could. He could hear the ladies at the next table whispering, “Young men these days.” He really wanted to get the heck out of there.

“Thanks, Sandra.” He put his cap back on. Then he thought better of it and took it off.

When Bertie got back to his car, he stared at the scribbled number. Maybe it was a bad idea to call. She probably blamed him for getting her suspended. Taking her to some job interview with a guy who had spent time in a loony bin could end up being a really bad move.

But then a face materialized in the window of the clinic. It was Dr. Roderick. He looked straight at Bertie.

Bertie was sure of it.

He put his cap back on and slammed on the accelerator.

\*\*\*

Bertie had been pacing in front of his apartment for half an hour, fingers to phone. What finally made him dial was the realization that Sandra was going to blab to everyone about how Bertie was sniffing around for Hessay's number. If he didn't call, Hessay would find out anyway. And who knows what kind of idea she

would take away from Sandra's gossip? It was best to take the bull by the horns himself.

He dialed Hessa's number. Her phone rang once, twice, a third time.

The point of no return, Bertie thought.

Although, technically, just because it rang didn't mean he couldn't hang up. He always made calls and hung up after the phone's first few rings, like that one time when—

"Hello?" Hessa said.

Crap. Now was the point of no return. Or anyway, the point of no return if he didn't want to be rude, because there was that time he had hung up once on a person—

"Hello?" Hessa was sounding impatient.

"Hessa?"

"Bertie?"

"It's me, Bertie." Crap, she had already recognized his voice.

"Yes?" she said.

"I'm calling . . . uh . . . because . . . I'm sorry I got you suspended. I feel really bad about that."

"That's okay. It's not your fault. You were trying to help."

"Yeah, fat lot of good that did," Bertie said.

"Anyway, I'm calling about . . . a job."

"A job?"

"Yes, a job."

"A job?"

Darn. What was he going to tell her? He rehearsed the explanation in his head to see how bad it sounded. It went something like this: Well, this whack job Dr. Om (that's a fake name, by the way) came to work recently and offered me a job at a park, but he didn't say what kind of park, and it turns out he's a loony toon. I did my research. But I'm so freaking desperate, and I feel so guilty that you lost a week of work because of me that I figure I'll go on that interview he offered me and invite you to come with me in case there's a job for you! But don't get too close. It might involve machetes.

Actually, that sounded kind of accurate. So he went with that after all.

Only he replaced "loony tune" and "whack job" with "eccentric." And he didn't mention anything about machetes.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The next day, Bertie and Hessa arrived at the address on Dr. Om's card.

"So," Bertie said. "You regretting jumping into the deep end like this?" He didn't want to admit it, but he was stalling.

"No, what's the worst that can happen?"

Bertie scratched his head and looked up at the soot-stained brick building. He didn't want to answer that question honestly. It involved machetes and deranged clowns.

"It doesn't look like a park, but this is the address." He blew into his hands to keep warm.

"Well, let's head in and see what they tell us."

Bertie figured that was as good a plan as any. He pulled on the squeaky glass door. A bored guard sitting in the foyer sent them up to the twelfth floor.

Dr. Om's suite was at the end of a dingy hallway. Bertie looked at Hessa. He felt stupid bringing her to this dump, but she still didn't seem fazed. He opened the door.



The sudden change in light made Bertie squint his eyes. The room was painted white. Huge windows let in what little sun there was. Bright metal tables ran up and down the room. Scientists in crisp, white coats looked into microscopes, stood at centrifuges, and entered data at slim computer monitors. A big, clear screen stood at one end. On it, numbers scrolled in fast succession.

“Didn’t expect anything this state of the art,” Hussy said.

“No kidding.”

No one seemed to have noticed them. He guessed they were too engrossed in their work. He couldn’t remember what that was like anymore.

“Um, excuse me?” Bertie said to a scientist at a computer monitor near the door. His name tag said Dr. Brittle. Dr. Brittle didn’t reply.

“Um, Dr. Brittle, excuse me?” Bertie said again.

Hussy walked right up to the employee. “Yoo-hoo, Dr. Brittle?”

Dr. Brittle started. His eyes widened when he saw Hussy. “How can I help you?”

“We’re looking for Dr. Om,” Hussy said.

“Right through there,” Dr. Brittle said. He pointed to the back of the room, where a shiny metal door said, “Dr. Om.”

“Thanks,” Bertie said, but the scientist didn’t even look at him.

They walked past a row of tables with test tubes. Bertie hesitated in front of Dr. Om's door. HESSY looked at Bertie, then knocked.

"Come in, come in!" an echoey voice said.

Bertie opened the door for HESSY. The room was in stark contrast to the lab. Stained, beige walls were bare except for a large poster of what looked like a genome sequence. A shabby desk with a wooden chair and an old boxy computer completed the furnishings. Dr. Om was zipping up a travel bag.

"Don't stand on ceremony. Come in, come in."

Dr. Om waved them into the room.

Bertie looked at the bag. "We can come back when you get back from your trip, if you need."

"Come back? Come back?" Dr. Om looked at him with shocked eyes. "You two are coming with me."

"We are?" Bertie said.

"Of course. Don't you want to see the park?"

"Well, yes, but how did you know I—we were coming?" Bertie said.

Dr. Om pointed at his computer as though the answer were obvious. "I saw you on my surveillance system."

"Surveillance system?" HESSY said. She looked from Dr. Om to Bertie with big eyes. Bertie was feeling really guilty for dragging her into this.

Another crap move on his part. He could kick himself.

“Yes, yes, surveillance system,” Dr. Om said. He gestured them over. “Come, have a look, have a look, Dr. Vole and Ms. Beauregard. Right over here.”

“How do you know my name?” Hessa said. She looked at Bertie, then back at Dr. Om, then back at Bertie again. “Did Bertie tell you?”

Dr. Om giggled. “No, no, no, no. My surveillance system did.” He giggled again. “Come, take a look.”

Dr. Om pulled them over by the elbows. He chatted excitedly, as though he were showing them his latest toy. “Let me show you. Let me show you.” He pressed a button that rewound the footage till Bertie and Hessa came into view. “Let . . . me . . . show . . . you.”

Bertie looked at the image of him and Hessa at the front door. Did he really slouch that much? He pushed his shoulders out, but it hurt his back. Dr. Om smiled at him, as though reading his mind. Gosh, this guy was creepy.

“Now take a look,” Dr. Om said.

Lines and circles appeared on the screen, like the facial recognition software you see on TV. The system made high-tech beeping sounds, and Bertie and Hessa's names popped up above their heads.

“My system connects to your phones to identify you. And . . .” Dr. Om rubbed his hands together. “I can pick from a variety of sound effects. See?”

He rewound the footage again, and this time, the computer emitted a “bong!” Dr. Om giggled. Or cackled. It was hard to tell. He rewound the footage

again. The names popped up to the twitter of singing birds. He rewound for a third time. Eerie laughter echoed through the room.

Dr. Om said, "That's the sound I use for my ex-wife. Which sound effect do you want for your name, Ms. Beauregard?"

"I like the birds," Hessy said.

"And you, Dr. Vole?"

"Is dead silence an option? And can I just not appear on your freakizoid monitor?"

"You're a disco guy. I can tell," Dr. Om said.

Disco? Disco!? Did Bertie come across as a Disco guy?

"Ooooh, disco," Hessy said. "Can I have disco too?"

Dr. Om smiled. "I'll give you ABBA."

"Ooooh, ABBA," Hessy said as she followed Dr. Om from the room.

Hessy was an ABBA fan? Bertie thought. What was wrong with the world?

Bertie followed Hessy and Dr. Om down the hallway. "So, uh, Dr. Om," he said. "Hessy came along because I thought you'd have an opening for her too."

"That can be arranged. I'm always looking for good people. Always looking."

They stepped into the elevator, but instead of pressing the lobby button, Dr. Om pressed the button for the roof.

"Aren't we going to the park?" Bertie said.

Dr. Om looked up at him like he was dense. “Of course. Of course! Where do you think we’re going?”

“It looks like we’re going to the roof,” Bertie said.

The doors opened, revealing a helicopter. Bertie’s stomach sank.

“Yes, indeed. The roof,” said Dr. Om. “And that will get us to the park.”

“Can’t we just go in a car?” Bertie asked.

Dr. Om smiled. “You’re afraid of flying.” It wasn’t a question.

How the heck did he know? Probably the stupid monitor told him. To the tune of death metal.

Hessy didn’t seem to be paying attention. Her eyes were bright. She screamed above the roar of the blades as she climbed up into the bird. “I’ve never been in a helicopter before.”

“If you take this job, you can go in the helicopter all the time,” Dr. Om said.

“I mean, if you’ll have me,” she said. “I know I came here without notice, and I don’t have that many credentials.” She put her face to the window as the helicopter rose in the air. Bertie had a feeling she didn’t care whether she got the job. She was just happy to be having some fun now.

He envied her that.

“Not a problem, not a problem,” Dr. Om said. “We need extra hands for general animal care.” He turned to Bertie. “And don’t worry. Vets don’t need to fly too often. Apparently, Ms. Beauregard will be happy if you delegate that task to her.”

But Bertie was worried anyway. He looked out the window while staying as far away from the sucking fall of death below. There was nothing that looked like it would be a park. The skyscrapers gave way to the factory district, which gave way to an airport.

“Where is this park?” Bertie asked.

“Oh, not for miles and miles. Or kilometers and kilometers, if you roll that way,” Dr. Om said. “The metric system is objectively the better of the two. Far superior.”

“Yes, but that doesn't answer the question. Where are we going?” Bertie said.

“Oh, you'll see soon enough.” Dr. Om rubbed his hands together in glee.

The helicopter suddenly banked left, which left Bertie's poor stomach banking right. They were getting ready to land at the airport.

Hessy kept her face glued to the glass while Bertie squeezed his eyes shut for the final approach. Once they touched ground, Hessy jumped out first. Bertie clung to the side of the door and then almost lost his balance on the way down.

Looking good, Bertie, he thought. Looking good.

A Jeep was waiting for them. Bertie found that weird. Who the heck goes from a helicopter to a terminal in a Jeep? But instead of driving across the tarmac, the Jeep turned into a tree-lined access road that looped around the main terminal and ended at a single, long runway. There were a number of planes lined up. They all seemed to be private.

Which all meant more air travel was in store for Bertie.

The Jeep braked in front of a 747. Dr. Om got out and spread his arms wide. "Welcome to my humble private jet." He giggled.

"What, you got your zoo in there?" Bertie said. Hussy slapped his arm.

"Ha ha ha! Dr. Vole, you know how I feel about zoos. And no, we have not gotten to the park yet." He waved his hands at them to follow. "And don't worry—no worries!—if you don't have your passports with you."

"I don't own a passport." Hussy furrowed her brow.

"Don't worry, don't worry. You get a pass from me." Dr. Om said. An employee at the gangway to the plane handed Dr. Om a thick sheaf of paper.

"What, you own the country where we're going or something?" Bertie said.

The only sound was the wind as Dr. Om signed the pages. Finally, he looked up and giggled. "I do now."

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The plane ride was uneventful for Bertie, if by “uneventful” you mean clutching the barf bag the whole flight and wondering when it became the norm to need luggage for a job interview.

And a toothbrush. And toothpaste. And a SWAT team to swoop in and extract your sorry behind. Bertie didn't bring any of that, and now they—he and Hessy—were on a plane to a park that featured who knows what located in a country that was who knows where? Some crazy loon of a scientist owned it to boot. So that crazy kook could do anything he wanted, right? Anything?

And the worst thing was that Bertie had gotten Hessy into this mess. Poor innocent Hessy who didn't even seem to see the danger in all of this.

“Bertie, you're looking a little green,” she said. She had finally peeled her face from the window long enough to notice. “You okay?”

“Not really,” Bertie said. “Not a big fan of flying.”

“I kind of noticed.”



Despite the air conditioning, Bertie's sweaty palms left a damp imprint on the barf bag. Dr. Om's face, with its crooked smile, looked up at him from it. Who put their face on a barf bag? He read the text underneath the double chin: Genetica Fantasía, Ltd.

Bertie wondered what he'd find if he Googled the company name. If it was anything like his previous searches on the guy, probably not much.

He looked up when Dr. Om excused himself. "I'm off to speak to the pilot. I'll be right back." He turned to Bertie. "Don't worry. Lunch will be soon." He giggled and walked to the front of the plane.

"Is he making fun of me?" Bertie said.

"It's hard to tell with him." Hessa said. She pulled the tray down and was looking intently at the back seat.

"What are you doing?" Bertie said.

"Checking for surveillance systems," she said.

"Are you making fun of me too?"

"Yes. And no. He's a strange one."

Bertie took a deep breath and held the barf bag closer. "You don't seem worried."

Hessa put the tray back up. "Well, I never had money to travel, so I might as well enjoy it while I can. And if I die, I'll worry about it then."

"It'll be too late to worry then."

"Point taken."

"Where the heck is he taking us?" Bertie asked.

"Who knows? He enjoys keeping people in the dark. Makes him feel important, I think."

Bertie looked at Hessa. She probably had a point. "I'm sorry. I figured this would just be an interview. I got you into this." The realization of the mess Bertie had created hit him. His pulse was racing, and he scrunched the barf bag between his fingers. "And now, he's practically . . . kidnapping us."

"That's an exaggeration. We could have left any time," Hessa said. "As long as we're here, let's just try to relax. We can always say no to the job if we don't like it."

"What if we can't?" Bertie said.

"What if we can't what?" Hessa looked at Bertie quizzically.

"What if we can't say no?"

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"Lady and gentlemen," the voice of the pilot boomed through the cabin. "We will be arriving At Dr. Om International Airport of St. Quiche in ten minutes. Please fasten your seatbelts and put up your tray tables. The temperature is thirty degrees. That's Celsius, folks. And the weather is sunny."

St. Quiche. The name sounded familiar to Bertie, but he couldn't quite remember where he had heard it.

"Dr. Om International Airport?" Bertie said. "You have an airport named after you?"

Dr. Om laughed. "No, no, no, no, no. I don't wait for people to name structures after me. I go ahead and rename them myself. Why wait? Why wait?"

Bertie looked at Hessy and rolled his eyes. When they landed, he noticed the airport sign still said St. Quiche Airport. He whispered to Hessy, “Apparently, they didn’t get the memo on the new name.”

She put her finger to her mouth but smiled.

Bertie gazed around the tarmac, relieved they were finally off the plane, although the humidity was suffocating as heck. He took off his jacket. It appeared they were in the Caribbean.

The Caribbean. Of course. This is where Dr. Om had gone to university. Whatever he was up to, he was doing it at his old watering hole.

The airport was small. They walked through a narrow door to the terminal. People’s voices echoed uncomfortably in the too-tight space. They made their way through what appeared to be a sorry attempt at a V.I.P. hallway and came out by where baggage claim was. People streamed out with shopping bags attached to luggage carts. Bertie figured goods must be pricey here, if people traveled to other islands to shop. Other bigger islands, he imagined. So St. Quiche was probably tiny.

Dr. Om flashed an I.D. and bypassed the line. He led Bertie and Hessy out to the sidewalk. Under the low overhang, the humidity was so heavy, it hit Bertie like a sack of sand. The area seemed to double as a drop-off and a pick-up for passengers. Old, clunky cars coughed up exhaust, making it all that much harder to breathe. Bertie wondered which car was waiting for them, but they kept walking. Bertie

struggled to dodge passersby and their luggage, but no one else seemed to care about staying out of others' way. Hussy stopped and looked back at Bertie, waiting for him to catch up. He noticed she wasn't even breaking a sweat. Together, they struggled to keep up with Dr. Om, who, despite his short, stout legs, could really foot it. The crowd finally thinned, and Bertie saw a field up ahead.

"I think this is the Caribbean, isn't it?" Hussy said to Bertie.

"Yup," Bertie said, looking at the palm trees circling the airport. He lowered his voice. "This is where Dr. Om went to school."

"You always wanted to come to the Caribbean," she said.

Bertie looked at her, surprised. He was about to ask how she knew when Dr. Om stopped dead in his tracks. They had reached the field, and he turned in a circle as though looking for someone. "Where is Saint? He was supposed to be here. Here! Waiting for us!"

Suddenly, Bertie heard the roar of rotors from above. "Oh, no, not another helicopter ride," he said.

"Last one of the day, Dr. Vole. Last one!"

As the helicopter landed, Dr. Om ran out to it, signaling for the other two to follow.

"Where were you?" he hollered at the pilot above the roar of the blades. The pilot jumped down. Dr. Om had to crane his neck to look him in the eye. "You're late! Late!"

The pilot laughed. "My good man, I am here."

“You’re late!” Dr. Om stamped his foot.

“Island time, my good man. Island time. Let me take your bag.”

Dr. Om handed it to him before climbing up into the helicopter.

The pilot shook Bertie and Hessy’s hands, smiling the whole time. “My name is John Castle. Please, just call me Saint.”

Bertie and Hessy followed Dr. Om into the helicopter as Saint swung into the front.

“Fasten your seat belts,” Saint said with a laugh. “And let’s see how well I know how to fly this thing.”

“What?” Bertie said. “You’re joking, right?” But no one else seemed to hear him.

As the bird rose up over the coast, Bertie tried to take in the view while leaning as far back into the cabin as possible. Dr. Om sat close to the open door, pointing to different elements and narrating what may have been a cohesive tour had the rotors not cut off half of it.

“We chose this,” Dr. Om said, “because . . . the beaches . . . actuarially . . . revenue . . . combined . . . rainforest ecosystem and . . . probabilistic revenue returns . . .”

Bertie heard Hessy say something about the fauna. It sounded like a question. Dr. Om laughed. “Don’t know much . . . but it’s all mine! That’s all I need to know! All mine!” He laughed. “All of it!”

Bertie stopped listening. They were headed towards the interior, where abruptly serrated

mountains were covered in dark green. Palms stuck out their heads like beacons. Or warning rods, maybe.

They were saying, "Get the heck out of here, you loons."

Or, you know, something like that.

The rotors hit a pocket of air as the helicopter bumped in for landing in a round clearing surrounded by more palms. As they touched down, Bertie felt his stomach lurch one last time.

"Thanks for the, uh, tour," Hessa said to Dr. Om as he gestured for her to climb down from the helicopter. Saint was already at the door.

"Glad to give it, glad to give it," Dr. Om said. He rubbed his hands together. "Dr. Vole, when you're ready to stop clutching the seat for dear life, feel free to disembark as well."

Bertie felt silly as he pulled his hands, knuckles white, from the sides of his seat and limped out of the helicopter. He saw two guards rush out of the forest and stand next to what looked like a sign covered by a blue tarp.

"Ah, wait here, you two. I'll be right back," Dr. Om said.

"You! Guards!" Dr. Om screamed as he headed in their direction. "Why weren't you guarding this entrance? Where were you? Top secret . . . Top secret!"

Bertie turned to Saint. "Do you know what Dr. Om is doing here exactly?"

"I don't have all the facts of what that crazy man is up to, but it's big, big, big," he said, smiling. "You will see for yourselves soon enough."

"Did you know that Dr. Om bought the island?" Bertie asked.

"No, I didn't," he said. A disturbed look momentarily crossed over his happy face. "Crazy man. Crazy man. But if the prime minister sold it to him, well, he is crazy too. One crazy man for another. Maybe it is all the same."

The three looked over at Dr. Om as he waved his arms in front of the guards. "If outsiders get in now. . . spoil the surprise . . . accidents!" Then as suddenly as he had started screaming, he stopped, turned around, and stretched his arms wide. "Dr. Vole, Ms. Beauregard, come along! We have a park to see."

"That is my cue to leave," Saint said cheerfully. "Enjoy your time at Dr. Crazy Man park." He shook their hands and climbed back in the helicopter.

Dr. Om prattled on as the helicopter rose. Bertie watched Dr. Om's mouth move to the deafening roar of helicopter blades. He hoped he wasn't missing anything important.

The helicopter flew away. Dr. Om gestured impatiently to Bertie and Hessy. "Come along. Come along. As you'll notice, we will take the scenic route along the trail that goes around the whole park, three hundred and sixty degrees! That way, you get an authentic feel for the tropics."

As much as Bertie hated helicopters, he wished he could fly away with Saint. Instead, he followed Hessy away from the armed guards and felt the darkness of St. Quiche's rainforest swallow him up.

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