



Not to hurt our humble brethren is our first duty to them,
but to stop there is not enough. We have a higher mission—
to be of service to them wherever they require it.

—St. Francis of Assisi



PART I

CHAPTER 1

In his second year at the Elkhorn Creek Veterinary Hospital in Carroll County, Ohio, three seemingly inconsequential things irrevocably changed the life of Dr. Jonathan F. St. Roche, DVM. The first was a dog with dry eye, the second was a goose who started seeing in black and white, and the third was a woman he'd known since the first day on the job. As fate would have it, at the end of this most unusual season, things between him and DeeDee Guzman, MD, would never be the same.

But first things first.

Jonathan's journey back to the Midwest began while he was studying at the Qi Institute for Chinese Veterinary Medicine in Wellington, Florida. Many of his classmates from Cornell vet school were ensconced in lucrative suburban small animal practices, and others were pursuing research or finishing specialties such as orthopedics, ophthalmology, or oncology. But Jonathan's horse work in Malaga, Spain, right after college, had convinced him of two things. He wanted to be a veterinarian, and he wanted to specialize in equines—despite the memories it might stir. He also believed that knowledge of integrative medicine would boost

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his marketability in the highly competitive East Coast horse show world.

But thanks to an encounter with a particularly narcissistic member of the horsey set, any reservations he'd quelled about the elite equine world bubbled to the surface, as well as an unexpected longing for a connection he thought was consigned to his youth. As he paced his small apartment, consciously breathing in through his nose and out through his mouth, his eyes landed on the classified section of the *Qi Institute News* he'd tossed aside. *Hmm . . . maybe there is another way!* He reached for the paper and his phone and called Nathan Jackson.

If Jonathan had a platonic soul mate, it was Nathan. They'd met during a tour of the horse facility at an open house for the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine. They found they shared a passion for all things equine, as well as one for playing squash. But, more significantly, Nathan had left the Kentucky horse world for a staff position at The Animal Care Center in Lexington.

"Yes, that's a two. Sorry about my handwriting—Jon! Hey, I'm between cats, so I can give you five minutes, or I can call you later," Nathan said.

"Five minutes should do it." Jonathan hesitated a moment. "I was just wondering if you missed the horse world at all?"

Silence.

"Did you fall and hit your head?" Nathan finally replied.

"Nooooo."

"Are you sure? 'Cause I can't believe you just asked me that."

"Well, you've been out of the business for a bit, so I was just wondering if there were any second thoughts on your part?"

"No. *None*. My assistant nearly breaks his back, and the first

thing out of the owner's mouth is, 'How's Warlord?' followed by, 'Was he even qualified to ride my thoroughbred?' Well, that was the last straw." Nathan took a deep breath. "Seriously, who needs that brand of craziness?"

"And you don't miss the horses?"

Nathan exhaled. "Funny you should ask. I was just telling the ophthalmologist—who, by the way, is my new squash partner—that I *really* enjoy small animal practice. As far as the horses themselves, I consult with the University on endocrine issues, but I don't have to interact with the owners, so that's cool. Why do you ask?"

Jonathan mentioned his irritation with the equine world and then read him an ad: "*Vet retiring and looking for clever, open-minded individual with diverse skills to join rural Ohio practice. Not much money, but a stimulating and varied clientele, with an opportunity for growth. For more information text or call Dr. Xavier Pratt.*" So, I was thinking that maybe I'd take a closer look. I miss the Midwest, and I think this job might give me a chance to use my skills with people who, I don't know, have their priorities straight."

"Look, Jon, I don't need to tell you about the good, the bad, and the ugly of the horse world, so if you're feeling even half the frustration I did, then yeah, take a good look at this job. Maybe it will give you what you're looking for. But I gotta go. Mr. Mittens is waiting."

Jonathan stared at the now-silent phone and contemplated his future. Then, without further hesitation, he called Xavier Pratt.

The man who met Jonathan at the Pittsburgh Airport was not what he envisioned from the deep and raspy voice on the phone

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that invited him to visit. Instead of being medium height with a solid build, full beard, and arms like tree trunks, Xavier Doolittle Pratt was tall, exceptionally lean, quick to smile, with brilliant white hair frantically trying to escape the confines of a Steelers ball cap. Gone was the gruff voice on the phone (he had been getting over a cold), replaced by a honeyed voice that put Jonathan immediately at ease.

“Welcome to Ohio, Jonathan.” Xavier smiled at the lanky young man with equally unruly hair, dressed in dark-wash jeans, a blue oxford button-down shirt, and a navy tweed blazer. He steered him toward the short-term parking. “Madge, my office manager, is eager to meet you, as is my wife, Janice, who also works in the practice.”

Heading west on Route 22 across the West Virginia Panhandle to Ohio, Jonathan enjoyed the rolling foothills and winding roads while Xavier extolled the virtues of a rural practice. “Carroll County has a population of about 28,000 people, so expansive countryside with plenty of opportunities to use all of your vet skills, as we have the standard rural animals—pigs, goats, cows, horses, and well,” Xavier cleared his throat, “other animals. But believe it or not, there is a surprisingly diverse and exotic population of companion animals too.”

Something about the way he said “other” sparked Jonathan’s imagination. “Others? You can’t mean that you have jackalopes in your practice?”

“Certainly not. They’re a Western Plains animal, never migrated this far east,” Xavier said. “Although, Elmer Stubb once told me he saw one on Hipster’s Ridge. I think it was the summer of ’96, maybe ’97. That was around the time we had a spike in the

local rabbit population, and well, Elmer was never one to say no to an afternoon libation.”

“Hipster’s Ridge?”

“Yep, it’s on the way to Steubenville, the birthplace of Dean Martin. There’s a lake nestled in the hollow below the ridge where men would go to drink and gamble during the first half of the twentieth century. Hipster’s Ridge got its name when, one year, Dean came back for a fundraiser in Steubenville and brought a few of his Rat Pack buddies along. They came to the lake for some fun and spent part of the evening on the ridge singing and drinking under the full moon. It’s been Hipster’s Ridge ever since.”

“What was it called before?” Jonathan asked.

“Pig Ridge.”

“Pig Ridge?”

“Yes.” Xavier moved left to pass a livestock truck carrying cows and waved to the farmer. “As you may know, William McKinley was from Ohio, where he was governor before he became president. While campaigning in this part of the state in 1891, some supporters took him turkey hunting on that ridge. Legend has it that a wild pig charged out of the woods toward him, and without thinking twice, he shot it right between the eyes. It was McKinley’s Pig Ridge at first, but eventually, it was shortened to Pig Ridge.”

Jonathan envisioned the sturdy McKinley standing his ground against a charging boar. *Or perhaps a bore of the political variety*, he thought and chuckled to himself.

Xavier continued, “Personally, I’d call it Flying Monkey Ridge.”

“*Flying monkeys?* You mean like *The Wizard of Oz?*”

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Xavier looked sideways at Jonathan. “Exactly! Only without the bellhop costumes. Seems every so often someone claims flying monkeys gather on the ridge—usually during a full moon. Most people think it’s a committee of buzzards, and a few claim that it’s a drift of gryphons.”

Jackalopes? Gryphons? Jonathan stared out the window at the twisting road, sweeping fields, and green hollows. *Flying monkeys? What’s going on here? Who talks this way? Is he nuts? Is everyone around here nuts?* He stole a glance at Xavier. *He doesn’t look like he’s delusional, but then, I don’t know what madmen are supposed to look like.* Jonathan shook his head slightly. *Hmm, here’s a thought. Maybe he’s trying to see if I have a sense of humor?*

“Gryphons! Good one!” He gave a short laugh before asking, “What do you think?”

Xavier turned left onto Steubenville Road in Amsterdam and continued toward Carrollton. “I think it’s time for lunch! Are you hungry? We’ll be in Carrollton in about twenty minutes. We can grab a sandwich at Caroline’s Deli before heading on to the clinic. She has great Reubens.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Jonathan agreed. He settled back to ponder why some people saw flying monkeys while others saw gryphons, and why that was so appealing to him.

“This *is* one of the best Reubens I’ve ever had!” Jonathan effused, then ventured a question. “If you don’t mind me asking, I’ve been wondering, is Xavier a family name?”

Xavier smiled. “Not really. I was named for Xavier Cugat.”

“The Rumba King?” Jonathan choked on his coleslaw.

“Yes! How do you know that? Not many people your age have heard of him.” Xavier patted him on the back.

Jonathan cleared his throat and sipped his iced tea. “My grandmother was a ballroom dance teacher, and she always had Cugat playing. She would dance around the kitchen while putting cookies on a plate and pouring glasses of milk. She especially loved ‘Sway.’ It was her all-time favorite.”

Xavier began to murmur the sultry tune while tapping the Latin beat on the edge of the table with his fork.

Jonathan joined in, then laughed. “You’re not going to ask me to dance, are you?”

“Have no fear! I’m a terrible dancer. My wife won’t even dance with me!” Xavier said. “‘Sway’ was also one of my parents’ favorite songs. They met at ballroom dancing lessons when they were in college. The night the teacher introduced the cha-cha and the rumba, she paired them together. My dad was a total clodhopper most of the time—but somehow, he was a natural at the Latin dances, and it was love at first dance. When Cugat released ‘Sway,’ that became their song.”

“That’s a great story!” Jonathan paused. “You know Dean Martin did a decent version of ‘Sway.’ I wonder if he crooned that atop Hipster’s Ridge...”

“Maybe!” Xavier laughed. He rose and turned toward the door, bumping into a tall, athletic blonde with startling green eyes. “Sorry, Anita. I didn’t see you there!”

“Well, I won’t sue if you introduce me!”

“This is Dr. Jonathan St. Roche. He’s considering joining the practice. And, Jon, this is Anita Vandenberg, one of our animal control officers.”

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“Nice to meet you, Ms. Vandenberg,” Jonathan said, extending his hand.

“You too, but call me Anita,” she said, taking his hand and grasping it with both of hers. “I hope you’ll like it here.”

“I do too.” Jonathan pried his hand out of hers.

“Just let me know if there is anything I can do for you!” Still smiling, she nodded at Xavier and headed to the counter to order.

Xavier shook his head. “Let’s go meet Madge and Janice, eh?”