

“The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.”

Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

## CHAPTER ONE

Death was part of the job, of course.

But why did it have to be the first client, the very first day? The poor woman was inconsolable, and Iris Kiernan could do nothing but stand by her side and let her grieve, loudly and messily. The box of Kleenex standing at Mrs. Walbright’s left elbow was fast diminishing, a small pile of used tissues accumulating like a soft, slow snowfall, damp and white, at her feet.

On the gleaming stainless steel table lay the tiny, still-warm body of a teacup Yorkie named Princess, her glossy hair tied up incongruously in a perky pink bow atop her head. Iris sighed to herself in sorrow and frustration. In twenty-some years of veterinary medicine, she had never seen a perfectly healthy dog with a life expectancy in the high teens go downhill so quickly without an obvious cause. By all accounts, Princess had been her usual bouncy, annoyingly yappy self until waking up this morning, listless and vomiting. Hustled, convulsing, to Iris’s practice as it opened its doors for the day, Princess was gone within a matter of minutes, and there was nothing Iris could do but watch in horror.

When Mrs. Walbright’s sobs abated somewhat, Iris approached her with a difficult, very sensitive question.

“Would you like us to do a necropsy, Mrs. Walbright? A post-mortem? It’s highly unusual, but then, so was Princess’s sudden decline.”

Red-eyed, Mrs. Walbright shook her head vehemently as she stroked the soft, inert body. “No...no, I only want to take Princess home. Please.” And she burst into a fresh round of tears.

Iris nodded, resigned. Excusing herself to do the paperwork, she left Mrs. Walbright alone with her dog and her grief.

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What a shitty “welcome back” to Michigan. Iris put her head down on her folded arms atop the desk in her office and let her gaze wander aimlessly over its scarred surface. The big oak desk had already been old and scratched when she was a girl, and she ran her finger tenderly over the deep gouge she herself had put in a corner when she’d been 12 and trying to “help” her parents by carrying a hamster cage that was far too big for her arms. She could still hear Mrs. Walbright’s wailing through the inevitable barking and whining that accompanied a veterinary practice, and she groaned at her bad luck: Dad had been busy re-suturing a nasty gash that a German shepherd had re-opened on its shoulder, so the futile task of attempting to save poor Princess had fallen to her. It was still literally her first hour at her father’s practice (her late grandfather’s practice), and already she was regretting her decision to move back to her hometown, hating it, hating everything.

Sighing, she gathered herself up and steeled herself to return to Exam Room 2. At her entrance, Mrs. Walbright gave her eyes a final swipe with the last of the Kleenex and grimaced at the empty box. Iris touched her briefly on the shoulder, then

wrapped Princess's little body in the personalized pink satin blanket in which she had arrived.

"I'm so sorry," she said, sincerely but inadequately, as she walked Mrs. Walbright to the door of the waiting room. Her next patient, at least from a cursory glance inside the cat carrier, appeared to be a bright-eyed, perfectly healthy Maine Coon, and Iris hoped for the best as the tech led a calm and purring Pattycake and her owner to Exam Room 1. Exam Room 2, with its lingering whiff of vomit and sad little snowdrift of tissues, would be mopped and sanitized, all evidence of Princess and her untimely demise swept away before the next patient was ushered in.

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Dogs *can* talk, Iris's favorite professor at veterinary school was fond of saying. It was simply a matter of knowing how to listen.

This dog, an affectionate chocolate lab named Bull, looked to be a particularly good communicator. He had something he was trying to say, and Iris was listening. According to his records, Bull had been a patient of this practice for nearly all of his six years. He had never suffered from anything more serious than an ear infection and had no cause for fear in this office. So his tail wagged slowly from side to side, fanning the air between the stainless steel lift and the veterinary assistant restraining him (unnecessarily, as Bull would rather lean against than move away from a friendly body). His stare was calm, liquid, and trusting.

Iris's own stare was focused on a patch of fur loss on the dog's left side, about two inches long, three inches high, roughly the shape of India. She was accustomed to seeing all sorts of dermatitis on animals, flakes and scabs and scales, but she was

rarely confronted with such extensive hair loss in one spot that wasn't obviously parasite-induced: Bull showed no signs of granulomatous lesions indicating ringworm, for instance. Even chemotherapy did not result in the sort of bald patches one saw in humans.

Charlie Hennessey, a large and generally cheerful man, frowned. Despite his name, Bull was a sweet animal with the disposition of an eager-to-please toddler, and the Hennesseys kept him in fine condition: regular check-ups, heartworm and flea preventatives, the right kind of food in moderation, plenty of exercise. They were model pet owners, and that they could have done something to cause this distressed Mr. Hennessey.

“How long has this been going on?” Iris asked without looking up from her patient.

“About three weeks, I guess. First there was a little flaking, but then clumps of fur started coming off in my hands. I mean, he sheds like crazy even under the best of circumstances, but not like this.”

“When was he last groomed? What did they use?”

“Last week. But it was our regular place, and they used the usual hypo-allergenic, oatmeal shampoo. He's never reacted to it before.”

“Did they spray –“

“I never let them put that godawful perfume-y crap on him.” He wagged his thick fingers at Bull, who responded by swishing his tail in larger arcs, making a drum-like banging sound against the metal upright of the examination table. “I like the smell of dog, to be quite honest with you.”

Iris smiled. So did she. An advantage, if you were going to be a veterinarian.

“He’s thrown up a couple of times, too, but that seems to have stopped.”

Her forehead creased with concern. “What’s he eating now?”

“Same thing he always has. Low-ingredient dry food: Natural Treat bison and sweet potato. He’s been on that for four years.”

“Good stuff.” Should be, at \$50 a bag.

“We try.” Mr. Hennessey looked embarrassed. “Well, there is one thing different, though I can’t believe that could be causing it. It’s only chicken after all…”

“What’s that?”

“These chicken jerky treats I got from my neighbor, Norm. Norm Wheeler. Is he a client here?”

“I honestly don’t know.” She had only been at this practice for half a day (hell, had only been back in the *state* – the *region* – for two weeks), not enough time to become acquainted with even a tiny portion of the clientele. Charlevoix Family Veterinary, though not as grand as when Dad was in his prime, was still a good-sized practice for a small town, with thousands of loyal clients extending back over 65 years to her grandfather’s day.

“Well, his Shih-Tzu, Willow – annoying little thing, Willow. I don’t much care for the smaller breeds in general, kinda prefer a dog that can really be called a dog, you know? Something substantial, like Bull here. Oh, sorry.” He blushed at the digression. “Got a little off track. Anyway, Willow died a couple of months back, of a seizure of some kind, poor thing, and Norm was cleaning out her things, and he gave

me an unopened bag -- I looked at the ingredients, though: chicken and glycerin. Seemed innocuous enough. Bull loved them, ran through them in no time. He couldn't be allergic to *chicken*, could he? I mean, he's a *dog*..."

"Anything is possible."

"And he's had chicken off the table loads of time..."

Though Iris would generally remark about dangers of table scraps, something stirred at the back of her mind. Hadn't she read...

"By any chance would these be that Castle Hearts brand? Or maybe...uh...Doggie DLite?"

Twisting his mouth, Mr. Hennessey replied, "I think so. I'm not sure. We finished up the bag and threw it away. I have no idea where Norm bought them. Is that important?"

"I don't suppose you'd remember if they were made in China?"

He shook his head. "I don't think so. I seem to remember a big American flag on the package." Thinking for a moment, he added, "Maybe an address in New Jersey."

Something pinged inside Iris's chest, like a rubber band snapping painfully back into place. She missed the East Coast. Desperately.

She forced herself to re-focus. "Sometimes what's listed on the package is a distribution company."

"Why is that important?"

Iris pursed her lips. “There was a mention of these treats in an email I got from one of my professional organizations a little while back. I don’t remember the details, I’ll have to look it up, but they mentioned reports of various allergic reactions. Since everything else is the same, this could be the trigger we’re looking for. Tell you what: you’re done with the treats, so don’t give him anything like that going forward. We’ll give him some antihistamine in case there’s some other allergen affecting him, and see how that goes.”

“Okay.”

Bull nudged up against Iris’s hand, and at the touch of his cold nose, she realized that she had stopped stroking the smooth brown head. Her attentions resumed at one end, the gently wagging tail at the other began to swing with the ferocity of a whip. With dexterity born of experience, the vet tech stepped quickly out of its way, laughing.

“Might take a while for the hair to grow back completely, weeks,” Iris explained to Mr. Hennessey, “maybe even a few months.”

Mr. Hennessey’s eyes looked suspiciously damp. He and his wife had no children, and he was as emotionally attached to Bull as a person could get to a dog. “I’d hate to think I did that to him, Dr. Kiernan.”

“Don’t worry,” Iris said with her best comforting smile. She had a whole range of smiles at the ready; every vet did, though most of hers were heartfelt, since she was happy in the profession (if not in her current location). “He doesn’t seem to be in any pain, and I have a feeling it’s fully reversible. Keep him on the low-ingredient food only, and we’ll check him again in a few weeks, okay?”

“Will do. Who’d have guessed, huh? Chicken jerky,” Mr. Hennessey said with a shake of his head and a wry smile. “From China. Hey, maybe they’re trying to kill us all.”

“Now there’s a pleasant thought,” Iris smiled back.

Waving goodbye to Mr. Hennessey, Iris retreated to her office and sat down at the computer to transfer her handwritten notes to digital records. Though the exam rooms and the surgery had been extensively renovated in recent years, the practice’s computer network was slow and clunky, the equipment nearly ten years old (and therefore not merely obsolete but practically ancient). This might have been a charming detail of a typical small-town veterinary clinic in another era but was now only irritating and inefficient, and she made a mental note to talk to Dad about the need to upgrade it. It put them at a disadvantage in a host of situations, including their ability to accept digital records from other practices. After updating Bull’s file, and waiting for what seemed like forever for it to save to the network, she opened her business email file and scanned for the one from the American Veterinary Medical Association with the warning about the chicken treats.

Ah, there it was:

*Some practitioners in the Midwest have reported allergy-like symptoms possibly arising from the consumption of certain brands of chicken jerky dog treats. These symptoms have included runny eyes, ear infections, excessive shedding, dermatitis and attendant dandruff, and persistent itchiness. Other symptoms include lethargy and loss of appetite. If treatment with antihistamines seems to be ineffective over the short term, simple allergic reaction may be ruled out. While it is impossible to discount other factors as causing these symptoms, ceasing the consumption of the*

*treats seems to result in improvement and eventual disappearance of symptoms over the course of 4-12 weeks, depending on the severity of the reaction.*

*The jerky treats are sold under a variety of brand names, including AllMine, Castle Heart, Cluckers, and Doggy DLite. While the brand names differ, all products appear to have the same ingredient list and are all distributed by America21 Pet Products of Bayonne, New Jersey; the product itself is manufactured in China.*

*We recommend that you advise your clients against the purchase of these treats, as the mechanism for causing the symptoms is unknown, as is any possible long-term damage. The quality of the product may be suspect. Phone calls queries to America21's Pet Products division were forwarded to an answering machine in the Consumer Relations Department, and have not been returned as of this date.*

Iris checked the date on the email. It was three months ago. Three months ago, she had been right in the middle of arranging her move, still grieving her mother's death, packing up her life to move back to her old hometown in Michigan. Three months ago she had sold her share of the practice she had spent twenty years building, the last remnant of her short married life with Peter, and decided to throw herself into keeping her father's practice afloat, as if that alone could keep him from crumbling. If she hadn't been particularly aware of updates in the industry, she guessed she could be excused.

Idly, she scrolled through the records of the other dogs in the practice, looking for patients that might have been similarly affected, and immediately realized that this would not be easy. It wasn't merely that the recordkeeping had suffered during Dad's bereavement – it was obvious that the digital client database itself had only recently been put into use, and only a fraction of their patients were actually in it. A glance at

her watch indicated that her next patient would be arriving in five minutes; a proper search would take hours.

Rolling back in the chair, she circled her shoulders in an attempt to ease the ache just below her neck. An astute massage therapist had once remarked that Iris clearly carried all her tension there. It was more accurate than he could have imagined, because she carried *everything* there: her regrets, her embarrassments, her failures, a lifetime of mistakes. Nearly every day was like hauling around a backpack filled with jagged, irregular rocks that weighed her down, pinching and prodding. While she was working – being useful, respected...being *Doctor* Kiernan – she could ignore it and in fact felt relieved of it. But when she was alone, with nothing better to occupy her, she couldn't resist taking one of those heavy stones out and turning it over and over again, examining it like some unusually interesting, rough-surfaced geode that might conceal something of value inside (but never did). Here was the ill-timed joke that humiliated her best friend in 5<sup>th</sup> grade; there, the inappropriate outfit she wore to meet her first boyfriend's parents. She never knew what memory would pop up, or from what time in her life. Mortifications dating back to nursery school could just as easily arise as ones from last month.

And then there were the regrets – many, many small ones, of course, but also the heaviest of the weights she carried, the feeling that she had disappointed everyone: from her father for marrying young and impetuously; to her mother, for not moving back to Michigan after Peter's death, particularly once she received her own diagnosis; to Peter, for putting off starting a family with him until it was too late; and to herself, for her cowardice and her countless failures (failing to have the strength of character to put her ethics over her appetites and become a vegetarian, for example. And now,

failing to save poor little Princess added a new weight to that pile). That her regrets were often contradictory did nothing to mitigate them.

“Dr. Kiernan? Your next appointment is here.”

The tech roused Iris from her reverie, and she nodded her acknowledgment. She left herself a Post-It note on the desktop to remember to check the patient records more thoroughly later. And “Later” could be any time, really. It was a convenient catch-all for anything Iris couldn’t bear to add to her burden.