

LEANN SWEENEY

AUTHOR OF THE YELLOW ROSE MYSTERY SERIES



THE CAT, THE QUILT AND THE CORPSE

When cats are in trouble, their nine lives come in handy.



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THE CAT, THE QUILT
AND THE CORPSE



A CATS IN TROUBLE MYSTERY

LEANN SWEENEY



AN OBSIDIAN MYSTERY

OBSIDIAN

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This book is for Maddie

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Curiosity is lying in wait for every secret.

—*RALPH WALDO EMERSON*

My cat is allergic to people—yes, odd, I know—so when I came in the back door and heard Chablis sneeze, I stopped dead. Why was she sneezing? This couldn't be a reaction to me. I use special shampoo, take precautions. Chablis and I are cool.

Besides, she hadn't been near any humans for more than twenty-four hours, since I was just arriving back from an overnight business trip to Spartanburg, a two-hour drive from my upstate South Carolina home. I'd left her and my two other cats, Merlot and Syrah, alone in the house, as I'd done many times before when I took short trips out of town. So how did human dander, better known as dandruff, find its way up her nose?

I released my grip on the rolling suitcase and started for the living room, thinking there could be a simple explanation for a sneezing cat other than allergies. Like an illness.

The thought of a sick Chablis pushed logic down to the hippocampus or wherever common sense goes when you have more important matters to attend to. I dropped my tote on the counter and hurried past the teak dining table. Since my kitchen, dining area and living room all blend together, the trip where I'd heard Chablis sneeze wasn't more than twenty feet. But before I'd taken five steps, I stopped again. Something else besides a sneezing cat now had my attention.

Silence. No background noise. No *Animal Planet* playing on the television. I always leave the TV tuned to that station when I go away. If the cats were entertained by *The Jeff Corwin Experience*, *Heroes* or *E-Vet*, I'd convinced myself, my absences were more tolerable. Okay, I'm neurotic about my three friends. Not cat-lady neurotic. At forty-one I'm a little young for that. But cats have been my best friends for as long as I can remember, and the ones that live with me now have been amazing since my husband, John, died ten months ago. They take care of me. So I try my best to take care of them.

Could the TV be off because of a power failure?

Glancing back at the microwave, I saw that the clock showed the correct time—one p.m. Perhaps the high-def plasma TV blew up in a cloud of electronic smoke? Maybe. Didn't matter, though. Not now. I'd only heard from Chablis, and none of my cats had shown their faces. I was getting a bad vibration—and I can usually rely on my intuition.

"Chablis, I'm home," I called. I kept walking, slowly now—didn't want to panic them if I was overreacting—and went into the living area. "Syrah, where are you? Merlot, I missed you."

I breathed a sigh of relief when I found Chablis sitting on the olive chenille sofa, her blue eyes gazing up at me. Himalayans look like long-haired Siamese cats and Chablis was no different. Her gorgeous crystal blue eyes and her champagne fur were accented by deep brown feet, and she had a precious dark face and a fluffy wand of a tail.

Her nose was running and she seemed awfully puffed out—even for an already puffy cat. Was she totally swollen up by an allergen other than dandruff?

I knelt and stroked the side of her cheek with the back of my fingers, ran my hands over her body

looking for the mass of giant hives I was sure I'd find.

Nothing. She was simply all bloated fur and loud purrs.

"I am truly sorry for leaving you overnight. Are you telling me you have feline separation anxiety?"

Chablis blinked slowly, opened her mouth and squeaked. How pitiful. She'd lost her voice. She had to be sick. With a virus? Or leukemia? Cats do get leukemia.

Quit it, Jillian. Call the vet.

When I stood to pull my phone from my jeans pocket, I heard Merlot's deep, loud meow and saw him perched on the seat cushions that line the dining area's bay window—a spot that provides a spectacular view of Mercy Lake. He knows the entire lake belongs to him, despite never having been closer than the window. But he hadn't been sitting there when I first came in, and he wasn't gazing out on the water. No, Merlot was looking right at me and his fur was all wild and big, too.

Since he isn't allergic to anything, dumb me finally realized that they were both scared.

And then I saw why.

Broken glass glittered near Merlot's paws—paws that could each substitute for a Swiffer duster.

My heart skipped. Broken glass . . . a broken *window*. "Merlot! Be careful." Fear escaped with my words. I attempted to mask my distress by smiling as I walked over to him.

Yeah, like Mr. Brainiac Cat would buy this fakery.

I petted his broad orange and white tiger-striped head while making sure none of his paws were bleeding. He seemed fine other than that he reminded me more than ever of one of those huge, shaggy stuffed animals at a carnival.

I hefted him off the cushions—he's a Maine coon, a breed that weighs four times more than the smallest felines. Merlot stays lean, usually hovers around twenty pounds. I was hoping to keep him clear of the glass, but he was having none of that. He squirmed free and jumped right back on the window seat and proved himself amazingly nimble by staying away from any shards. While I examined the damaged window, he intently examined me as if to ask, "How will you rectify this now that you're finally home, Miss Gadabout?"

The jagged hole in the lowest pane was large enough for a hand to reach in and unlatch that window. And it *was* unlatched.

"Someone's broken in. Someone's been in our house." But stating the obvious couldn't help them explain what had happened. Figuring this out was human territory. For a millisecond, I wondered about this—this *intruder* might still be here. I shook my head no. My cats are not fools. They'd be in the basement or under a bed if any danger still remained.

And exactly where was Syrah? My Abyssinian hadn't made an appearance yet. I supposed he could have been frightened enough to stay in hiding, but no. He was the alpha cat of my little pack.

Okay, I decided. This break-in had upset him. That was why he wasn't making an appearance. Either that or he was so angry I'd left him and his friends to be threatened by a burglar that he was hiding to teach me a lesson.

The thought of a thief frightening my cats produced anger and fear and the sincere wish that I'd had

a human friend who could watch out for things just like this while I was away. Since my husband's death, though, I'd been caught up in my own troubles and too proud to reach out to anyone. By making friends, getting to know my neighbors, might have prevented this whole episode.

I inhaled deeply, let the air out slowly. *You can change that, Jillian. But right now you need to find Syrah.*

That was what John would do if he were here. Hunt for the cat in a methodical, logical way. Solve this problem quickly. But I wasn't John and my calm began to crack like crusted snow before an avalanche. Between the silent TV, the scared animals and the absent Syrah, fear now claimed to be my only ally.

"Where are you, baby?" I called, my voice tremulous. "Come here, Syrah."

I hurried toward the hallway leading to the bedrooms, Merlot on my heels. Poor Chablis would have been on his tail, but was stopped by a fit of sneezing. I began the search through all three thousand square feet of my house, the house that was supposed to be our dream home, the one John and I had designed ourselves.

But this was no longer a dream come true. John, at fifty-five, had been far too young to die of a sudden and unexpected heart attack. Though I was coming to terms with his death, letting go day by day, thoughts of him always seemed to flood my brain when I was stressed. And a broken window and a missing cat were certainly enough to produce that state of mind.

I rushed from room to room, but didn't find Syrah hiding behind my armoires or beneath the dressers or under any beds. He wasn't in the closets or the basement, either. I went outside and checked the trees and the roof for a third scared cat. After all, the intruder might have let him out when he made his escape. But leaves had been falling for weeks, and spotting Syrah's rusty gold fur against the reds, browns and yellows of the oak, hickory and pecan trees in my yard would be difficult.

Syrah, however, is my most vocal cat, and when I didn't hear any meowing in response to my call I was sure he wasn't nearby. Cats have such good hearing that they can detect the sound of a bird stretching its wings, and I was nearly shrieking his name.

I finally gave up, and when I came inside I found Merlot sitting by the back door. I was trembling all over as I crouched next to him. He rubbed against my knees and purred while I took my cell phone from my pocket, ready to report the break-in.

"Are you trying to comfort yourself or me?" I asked as I dialed 911. The last time I'd had to do that—when John collapsed—had been the worst day of my life. This event certainly wasn't as horrible, but punching those three numbers again made it seem like John had died only yesterday.

My big cat circled me lovingly as I stood, nudging me, trying to comfort me as best he could. He knew how upset I was.

"What is your emergency?" said the woman who answered.

"Um . . . um . . . my cat is missing."

The dispatcher said, "Ma'am, this line is for—"

"I've had a break-in. There's a shattered window and—" My mouth was so dry, the words wouldn't come.

“Your name, ma’am?”

“J-Jillian Hart. I live at 301 Cove Lane in Mercy.” Merlot and I walked back to the living room and I picked up the cable and DVR remote. I hit the MUTE button to kill the audio before I turned on the TV. The Sony plasma worked fine and was tuned to *Animal Planet* as it should be. I jabbed the OFF button, wondering what kind of thief would break into my house and turn off my expensive TV.

“Ma’am. Are you there, ma’am?” It came out like “Ah you there, ma-aaam?” Very Southern, reminding me that I was far from our longtime Texas home and far from anyone who really understood what an emergency this was for me.

“Yes. I’m here.”

“I see this is a cellular numbah, but are you callin’ from inside the home?”

“Of course. My cat is gone and—”

“Officers are on their way. Do you feel safe or do you believe the intruder might still be inside or in the immediate vicinity?” Her South Carolina drawl was so thick and I was so distracted by worry that she might as well have been speaking a foreign language.

I closed my eyes, processed her question. “I-I’ve searched the house. No one’s here but me and my two babies.”

“But you do fear for your safety, ma’am?”

“I fear for my *cat*’s safety and—” Tears sprang unexpectedly to my eyes and I bit my lip.

“Ma’am, is something happenin’ right this minute? Is this intruder back?”

“No. It’s just that . . . I don’t know where he is. I can’t find him.” How pathetic I sounded. Syrah was a cat, after all.

“I fully understand your concern. My name is Barbara Lynne. May I call you Jillian?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“Tell me about these babies you mentioned. How old are they, Jillian?”

“Chablis is about five and Merlot is probably around eight. They’re fine. Well, not exactly fine because Chablis is having an allergic reaction and—”

“Oh my. Should we send an am-bu-lance?” Her previously unruffled tone was now laced with concern.

“I have medicine. She’ll be okay in an hour or two. I haven’t had time to give her an antihistamine. I’ve been busy searching—”

“Exactly where are your children, Jillian? I don’t hear them, but I assume they’re with you, with their mama?”

“Oh. Oh no. You’re confused. Chablis and Merlot are my two other cats.”

A pause, then, “Is that so?” Sweetness and concern had now left the building. She couldn’t have sounded any colder if she’d been standing in a blizzard in North Dakota.

I stayed on the line as instructed—I was “ma’am” again—and no longer felt any love from the

dispatcher. She offered only an occasional “Are you still there?”

Meanwhile, my panic worsened as I waited for the police. Possibilities ran through my head. The person who broke in obviously let Syrah out. My beautiful, wonderful cat could be lying dead by the road after being hit by a car. He could have fallen off the dock into the lake and drowned. He could have—*No. Stop this.*

I decided to do something constructive rather than continue to conjure up worst-case scenarios. To make sure Chablis and Merlot wouldn't run out the door if they got the chance, I put my cell on speaker and set it on the coffee table, then dragged their travel carriers out of the foyer closet. For once, crating them wasn't like trying to bag smoke. They were compliant, perhaps unnerved enough themselves to want the security of their carriers right now.

Not wanting them out of my sight, I kept them with me in the living room. I dreaded the arrival of sirens and uniformed strangers. It would only add to their trauma.

It didn't take long for the cops to show. Five minutes later I heard the cruiser's engine in my driveway, and the dispatcher quickly disconnected when I told her they had arrived. But the car had come without a siren—I guessed because this wasn't an emergency that required one.

Mercy is a small town—teensy compared to Houston, where I'd lived with John for the six years we'd been married. Seemed like you could get anywhere in Mercy in five minutes. I ran to the foyer and answered before the police officers could even knock. I was sure glad I'd put Merlot and Chablis in their carriers because, as expected, they freaked out and started up with a cat duet best suited for an opera: loud, mournful and tragic.

Two officers stood on the porch, one male, one female. The man said, “Deputy Morris Ebeling. Are you Jillian Hart?”

“Yes. Come in.” I stepped back.

“Deputy Candace Carson,” the other one said as they came inside.

She looked to be in her twenties and Morris had to be about sixty, his face round and pasty. His stomach hung over his equipment-laden uniform belt, his gut reminding me of a sack of potatoes under his brown shirt.

I led them into the living room, and Candace immediately went to the carriers, knelt and murmured to Merlot and Chablis in a comforting voice. They quieted at once. She was an animal person, that was her goodness.

“What exactly happened here, ma'am?” Morris's accent made me think he could have been dispatcher Barbara Lynne's daddy.

“I don't know,” I answered. “I was on an overnight business trip and came home to find a broken window. And my other cat is missing. He's an Abyssinian. Sort of amber with—”

“Is he an expensive cat?” Morris asked. “I mean, could someone have broken in to steal him because he's worth buckets of money?”

“No way,” I said with a laugh. “He was a rescue. After Katrina. So were Merlot and Chablis. They're all purebreds, but without papers.”

“What kinda papers?” he said.

“A pedigree. The papers that show who their parents were and that they are truly purebreds. If I doesn't have those, so no one would consider him worth a lot of money.”

“Anything else gone missin'?” Morris said.

“Nothing that I could tell from the quick run-through I made. But who cares?”

“Um . . . sure,” Morris said. “Who cares?”

The sarcasm wasn't lost on me, but even with his attitude, if he could help get my cat back, I'd be grateful.

Candace rose after one last “It'll be okay, sweetheart” to Chablis. “May I search the premises, Ms. Hart?”

Shiny blond hair was coiled at the nape of Candace's neck, and her eyes were as blue and intense as Chablis's, which I found comforting in a way.

“You might want to start there.” I pointed out the broken glass on the window seat cushion.

“I'd like to search from the basement up, if you don't mind. The stairs?”

“I've already looked everywhere,” I said. “If Syrah were here, I would have found him.”

Candace, even though she was young, reminded me of the principal at my elementary school who admonished me for chewing gum when I was about eight years old. Maybe the pine green uniform made her look like an authority figure to me.

“That means we've got a contaminated crime scene,” she said. “But I can work around that.”

Morris raised his eyes to the ceiling. “Not this crime scene rigmarole again. A damn cat is missing, Candy. Did you hear the lady say anything about missing valuables? Did you notice how her fancy TV and stereo are right here?”

“My name is *Candace*,” she answered through clenched teeth. “And—”

“Bet this event was some kid workin' on a dare.” Morris took a tin of Skoal from his pocket.

Candace said, “You ever consider that this lady is so distressed about her missing cat she might not realize valuables are gone? Some folks don't care about money and diamond rings above everything else.”

“Oh, for crimony sake. Then puh-leese, go find every piece of lint you can, *Candy*.” Morris pinched some tobacco and mashed it between his lower teeth and lip.

Candace's cheeks colored. She took a pair of latex gloves from her pocket and put them on. “That's exactly what I intend to do. The basement, Ms. Hart?” she said.

I pointed to the kitchen. “Through there. You'll see the door to the stairs.”

Morris was shifting his weight from one foot to the other. Seemed to me like he wanted back in his police cruiser as quickly as he could manage it. “I need to start the paperwork, Ms. Hart. Excuse me for a moment.”

He went out the front door and took his time before coming back with a clipboard. In the interim I'd filled a dropper with Benadryl, unzipped the top of Chablis's carrier and given her a dose. Poor baby's nose was running like a faucet now. I checked out Morris's shoulders for any dandruff when he

returned, wondering if he'd made her allergy attack worse. I mean, it was obvious that this reaction was caused by an intruder with dandruff.

Morris, whose graying hair seemed dandruff free, sat on the reclining wing chair across from the sofa, a simple, normal action that jolted me. That leather recliner had belonged to John and no one had touched it since his death.

It's okay. It's only a chair.

But anxiety mixed with grief made my stomach knot. I would have preferred to pace off the unwelcome emotion, but instead I sat on the edge of the sofa, hands clasped in my lap. Merlot and Chablis were already worried about their friend Syrah. They needed me to at least act like I was in a stable emotional state.

"You live alone, ma'am?" Morris said.

"No, sir. I live with my three cats—Chablis, Syrah and Merlot." Maybe I could make him understand through some sarcasm of my own that cats are as important as people.

But he didn't bother to write their names down. He just stared at me with tired brown eyes. "No gentleman residing here with you? Because I heard tell you was married."

"You heard tell?" I said.

"No secrets in Mercy, Ms. Hart."

"Apparently there are," I said softly. "My husband died unexpectedly not long after we moved here. Heart attack."

His forehead wrinkled in confusion, as if to say, "Why didn't I know this?" Then he said, "I'm sorry for your loss. Sorry indeed," and at least he sounded like he actually meant it.

Candace returned to the living room and, without saying a word, focused first on the window and then on the glass still lying undisturbed on the cushions. At least I'd done something right by leaving it there.

She took out her phone and snapped off a few pictures before removing a folded brown paper bag from her uniform pocket.

"Candy, what the hell do you think you're doing now?" Morris said.

"*Candace* is collecting evidence," she said, carefully picking up the pieces of glass and putting them in her bag.

"'Cause a cat ran off? I know you take your job real serious, and I try my best to respect that, but I'm thinking the county crime lab won't be happy about this particular evidence."

Candace said, "Someone invaded this kind lady's private property, so I disagree. And can we assume the cat ran off? Maybe the bad guy took him."

Morris sighed heavily. "Took the cat? Why in heck would someone break in to steal a cat? You can go the SPCA or—Forget it." He refocused on me. "For my report, exactly when did this happen, Ms. Hart?"

"I got in at one o'clock. Did I mention that this . . . this *person* turned off my TV?"

“Huh?” Morris said. “Don’t you mean turned *on* your TV?”

“No. I leave it on. I like people to think I’m home when the cats are alone.” For some reason I felt a little embarrassed about this, so I added, “Obviously that tactic didn’t work.”

“Can I offer a piece of advice, Ms. Hart?” Morris said. “Get yourself a dog. A real dog, like a German shepherd. A dog with a big bark and a bigger bite.”

“Sorry. I love dogs, but my cats don’t.”

“Okay, then get yourself a nice state-of-the-art alarm system. We got a guy in town who does that kind of stuff. Name’s Tom. Tom Stewart. Nice fella and—”

“Did you *touch* the television when you came in, Ms. Hart?” Candace interrupted. She was on her knees by the window seat, staring intently at the cushions, her tweezers poised and ready to collect more evidence.

“I used the remote,” I said. “I thought maybe the TV wasn’t working.”

“Gosh darn,” Candace muttered, getting to her feet. “Okay, we might still get prints off the TV if the perp shut off the television without touching the remote.”

“The *perp*?” Both of Morris’s bushy gray eyebrows were working. “We don’t have perps in Merced. We got dumb drunks and outta-control kids who should eat dinner with their mama and daddy more often. This is about a broken window, Candy.”

“And you have no idea when this break-in occurred?” Candace continued, seemingly unflustered by her partner’s lack of interest in what had gone on in my house.

But I sure appreciated her interest. “I left yesterday afternoon for a quilt show in Spartanburg. I make and sell small quilts for cats.”

“Figures,” Morris said under his breath.

I shot him a look. “I also make quilts that I donate for the children of the men and women in the military who have been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. I had a meeting with a charitable group this morning, gave them pictures of my designs and took their order for a hundred children’s quilts. Anyway, I left here around eight a.m. yesterday and I’ve told you when I returned.”

“You mind if I dust your TV and remote?” Candace asked. “I’d also like to see if I could lift prints off the window latch and the outside molding.”

Morris rose abruptly, his patience spent. “Candy, quit with this *CSI* crap. We’re leaving.” He offered me the best smile a wad of Skoal allowed. “You catch sight of any teenage boys lurkin’ around or peekin’ in your windows, you give us a call. And Billy Cranor can fix that window for you. He works at the hardware store.”

Morris turned and marched toward the foyer, waving a hand for Candace to follow.

But before she left, she took my elbow, leaned close and whispered, “I’ll be back when my shift is over. I’ve got my fingerprint kit with me at all times and I know how to access AFIS—that’s this big old fingerprint database. This bad guy’s not getting away with this. Try not to disturb the scene too much until I get back here.”

What a pair, I thought, once I’d closed and locked my front door. But Candace was certainly

dedicated, and even crotchety Morris Ebeling's eyes told me he was a decent guy.

I let Chablis and Merlot out of their carriers and said, "Come on, you two. We have flyers to make about our lost buddy."

As soon as I said the word *lost*, tears threatened again. I walked to my office, Merlot and a wobbly sleepy Chablis right with me.

It was only after I'd printed out fifty copies with Syrah's best picture prominent in the center, only after I'd stopped feeling sorry for myself, that I realized I'd never told Candace about Chablis's human allergy, how the intruder must have had dandruff. From watching her work, I was certain she might be the one person in Mercy who would consider dandruff important.

Once my flyers were ready, I duct-taped plastic wrap over the broken window to keep insects out of the house. That was about all duct tape could accomplish in this case. I was painfully aware that my home was unprotected from a second break-in. A call to security guy Tom Stewart was definitely on my to-do list. Good thing I'd sold ten quilts at the show yesterday. At a hundred bucks a pop, that meant some extra cash for a security system—one John and I had never thought we'd need in this sleepy lake town.

I thought about his hunting rifle and briefly considered pulling it out of the closet. But I don't carry for guns and have no clue how to shoot a rifle. Maybe I should plan on learning. Surely Mercy has somebody who could provide that service, too. Morris seemed to know everyone's skills; if he could give me a name or take it upon himself to teach me to shoot, then I could protect myself and my furry friends.

Shoot? What are you thinking? You don't step on ants or spiders. You couldn't even shoot Hannibal Lecter if he came calling.

Pushing these thoughts aside, I called my vet, Dr. Jensen.

"This is Jillian Hart," I said when the cheery lady at the front desk answered. Her name was Agnes if I remembered right.

"Hey, Ms. Hart. How's those three little darlings of yours? Nothing wrong, I hope."

"Syrah is missing and I wondered if anyone's brought in a lost cat. You remember him? The sorry Abyssinian?"

"I surely do remember that handsome boy. But we haven't seen Syrah. I don't recall—did you talk us up on having the microchips inserted when you were in last? Because, of course, you know that helps when our darlings get themselves lost."

No, I didn't get the chips, I thought. Probably because I am as stupid as the excuse I will not be making. "No microchips."

"I am so sorry, Ms. Hart. Maybe we can put in the chips for your other two. I can make that appointment right now," she said.

"I'll get back to you on that. I'm busy looking for a cat." *Microchips. Add that to the to-do list.*

I had to get moving, but I wasn't about to put Merlot and Chablis at risk by leaving them home. I wrangled them into their carriers again and took them out to my minivan.

Stoic Merlot tolerated my trip around the nearby neighborhoods as I hammered, stapled or taped my lost-cat flyers to telephone poles, street signs and even the FOR SALE signs at a few houses. I might have appreciated the crisp late-afternoon air if not for Chablis. She hated every minute of the exercise. Even Benadryl didn't keep her from howling her displeasure. I hoped a revenge hairball on my pillow wasn't in my immediate future.

After covering the areas close to home, I headed for downtown Mercy. It's a cute town that attracts

tourists who'd probably first visited more interesting places like Atlanta or the Biltmore Estate but weren't ready to give up on Southern charm and go home yet. There's a restored town center with green, gold and red awning-ed antiques stores, bookshops and little restaurants line the main drag. A brick courthouse and other well-cared-for old buildings mark the horizon. I'd never had much chance to shop in Mercy aside from my frequent trips to the fantastic quilt shop, the Cotton Company.

I decided that posting lost-cat flyers on the live oaks that lined the pristine street would be a giant no-no. Yup, Main Street was as tidy as a kitchen floor you'd see in a TV commercial. No flyers would fly here.

The local Piggly Wiggly might be an excellent option for advertising my problem. When I pulled into the parking lot, it was close to five p.m., and the cool fall day allowed me to leave the cats in the van, something I never could have done in hell-hot Houston during unpredictable October. I'd love that city, but had not experienced near the level of humidity here—at least not this past summer.

David, one of the sackers, allowed me into the store ahead of his train of grocery carts, saying, “Hello there, Ms. Hart.” He was maybe in his late teens, had this odd lop-sided head and a friendly, guileless expression.

“Hi, David,” I said. “Can I talk to you after you get those carts stowed properly?”

“Stowed?” David grinned. “Now that there's a new word. You're always giving me something to think on, Ms. Hart.”

He parked the carts and met me at the store bulletin board.

“What can I do fer ya?” he said.

I resisted the urge to calm the blond cowlick that had my attention. “One of my cats is lost and—”

“Not the one who only eats salmon? 'Cause that could be a problem out there where you live. No salmon in Mercy Lake that I've heard tell.”

Oh my gosh. I hadn't even thought about Syrah's food. He was the one who ate only salmon. Whether it was Fancy Feast or Friskies, he didn't care, but there had to be salmon in his dish or he'd turn up his nose.

“That's the one,” I said. “Syrah is out there somewhere and he's never been outdoors since he lost his first family during Hurricane Katrina.” I shook the handful of flyers I held. “Can I put a few of these up in the store?”

“Anything for a pretty lady. You could be a movie star, you know.”

I felt the heat of a blush. “I'm old enough to be your mother, David.”

“No, you ain't. My mother's got white hair. She says I gave her every one of them, too.” He smiled again and held out his hand for the flyers.

David stared at Syrah's picture for a few seconds. “So this is the salmon cat. Mighty nice-looking, just like you always say. If he caught one of those bass out of Mercy Lake, he might change his mind about salmon. My mama always says look at the good side. He could come back with a whole new appetite.”

I smiled. David was an angel. “I hope you're right. Think I'll pick up a rotisserie chicken for dinner.”

and get on home. My other two cats are in the van.”

David’s face lit up. “They are? Can I visit with them when yer done shopping?”

“Um, sure.” I was a little surprised at how excited he seemed.

But as we walked out to my van ten minutes later, with David carrying my dinner, he explained how his mother thought cats were bad luck. “When I get a place of my own, I’m getting me a cat. I love my mama, but she’s gotta let me grow up and move out sometime. And when I do, I’m having a cat—maybe a dog, too.”

I opened the back of the van. When David set down the grocery bag, Merlot turned his head away. Not happy. Chablis started up with her dismal meowing again.

I pulled her carrier closer and unzipped the top just enough so David could fit his hand in to pet her.

“She don’t bite, does she? Grandpa Nagel had a cat that was so mean he could run a dog off a meadow wagon.”

“She doesn’t bite. And she’d love a scratch on the head.”

David stuck his hand in and did just that. Chablis closed her eyes and started purring. “Wow. She likes me, huh?”

“If she could talk, she’d say ‘yes.’ Look how she’s closing her eyes.” If only more people knew what a cat can accomplish with a purr. David was beaming.

A few minutes later I was on my way home when my cell rang. The caller ID read MERCY POLICE.

“Did you find him?” I said when I connected. “Where was he?”

“Sorry, Ms. Hart,” Candace said. “I’m at your place and I haven’t seen your cat anywhere. Think you’ll be home anytime soon?”

“I’m five minutes away.” I wanted to add, “This is Mercy. Everything is five minutes away,” but I was too disappointed even to offer a smile as I made that all too true observation.

“Good. I took the liberty of calling up Billy and he says—”

“Billy?”

“Hardware store guy,” she said.

“That’s right.”

“Anyway, he’s meeting me here to get your window fixed. Can’t be sleeping in your house with a broken window, can you?”

“Thank you, Candace. See you in five.” That was a kindness and now I managed a smile as I drove on home. Small towns have their advantages—like genuine concern from a relative stranger.

Turned out, Billy looked familiar. Where had I seen him before?

Candace hovered near him as he fixed the window. If I read her smiles and body language right, she was flirting with the guy. He had dark brown hair, muscles that told me he could pry the lid off a nuclear reactor and just enough scruffy facial hair to remind me of that nameless actor on some crim-

show I watch. But where had I seen him before? I mean, I hardly knew anyone in Mercy.

While Billy measured my window, Candace went to work with her fingerprint kit. As I watched them, I decided she'd planned this all out. What better way to be that close to a hunk like Billy than be dusting while he was measuring? And it worked. They were ear to ear.

She kept glancing his way and he kept ignoring her. Guess putting in new windows is a fascinating occupation. When he left for his truck to get the new pane, her gaze never left his butt with its weighted-down tool belt.

Candace said, "What is it about a tool belt that just fills my mouth with spit?"

"That's not exactly an attractive thought, Candace." I smiled. "Besides, it's more what holds up the tool belt that has your mouth watering."

"You got that right. Now, back to business. I got nothing off that window. Perp musta worn gloves. I'll dust the TV, but I'm thinking I won't find anything."

And she didn't. By the time she was finished, Billy had cut the glass to size under Candace's adoring eyes, and I soon had a brand-new window.

"How much do I owe you?" I asked when he was done.

"Five bucks oughta cover it," he said. "The pane itself only cost a buck fifty."

"Is that all?" My purse was sitting on top of Merlot's carrier. He was sound asleep and Chablis had worn herself out, too. I took out my wallet.

"There might be one thing you could help me with," he said. "I'm a volunteer fireman and we put together this calendar. I know it's late in the year, but if you'd be so kind as to buy one, that would sure help our charity. We donate the money to kids all over South Carolina who've been burned in house fires or accidents."

That was where I'd seen him. "I bought one of those calendars way back when we first moved here. And aren't you, um . . . *featured*?"

His cheeks colored to almost strawberry. "Ma'am, it's for the kids."

"I want two more calendars, then," I said. "And by the way, I make quilts for charities. Children's quilts, so I could—"

"I need another calendar, too," Candace said quickly.

Billy's eyes met hers for the first time. "Now that's real nice of you two ladies."

I caught a lingering gaze between them. Candace was catching on about how to make Billy pay attention.

"What I started to say was that I have some quilts in the other room looking for small bodies to keep warm," I said.

"You'd give us those?" he said.

"That's why I make them. Let me get you a few."

As I left the room, I heard Billy say to Candace, "She's one sweet lady, isn't she? Young to lose her husband, though. Dan Meade caught that 911 call last January. Couldn't do a thing for the man."

I swallowed hard and picked up my pace. John's death would always leave a wound, but the constant grieving had to end—and I'd been making progress. He would have wanted me to move on with my life. And I was trying my best.

When I returned, quilts in hand, Candace was busy dusting the rest of the entertainment center for prints.

“I thought you said the intruder wore gloves?” I said.

“I know.” She faced me. “I guess I’m as stubborn as my daddy always says. Bad guys leave things behind, even the smart ones, and I want to find something this one left.”

Just then Billy came back into the house with three calendars. We paid up and he left, again with Candace admiring him every step of the way.

As soon as he was gone, she flipped the calendar open to July and said, “Now here’s what I’m talking about. Can’t have enough of this.”

Billy was shirtless and wearing his volunteer fireman pants, suspenders loose over broad shoulders. The man was oiled, bronzed and had muscles Superman could only wish for.

After we stared for a few seconds, Candace wiped a damp strand of hair off her forehead—she was a bit sweaty even though the evening was beginning to cool the house down considerably. She said, “Let’s get back to work.”

“Obviously you think there might be a clue here, so tell me how that will help find my cat. If I don’t get Syrah home by dark . . .” I’d been distracted for a time, but now my eyes burned. I willed back the tears. Tears wouldn’t help anything.

“You really love these cats, huh?” Candace said.

“They’re all I’ve got.”

She nodded, as if to tell me she understood. “I collected a clump of what looks like cat hair out near the end of your driveway—can’t say that’s what it is ’cause I got no hard evidence, but you want to take a look? If it belongs to your missing cat I can surely find a match here in the house. Plus there were tire tracks. I took a picture, but matching the tire to make and model probably won’t happen. No way the town’s gonna pay a nickel to search for a match since they’d be with Morris—decide nothing was taken. But that missing cat is as good as gold to you.”

“Syrah might have simply run off. That’s what most people would conclude. But he wouldn’t go with a stranger,” I said. “He’s too smart for that. This voice in my head is telling me he was stolen. But why?”

“That’s what we need to find out—why he’s gone and where he is. Doesn’t matter to me if you say Syrah ran off or was catnapped; I plan to help you,” Candace said.

“That means so much—you helping me on your own time.”

“I like you, Ms. Hart. Plus I need to practice my evidence-collection skills if I’m ever gonna get out of Mercy and get me a real police job. Sure, this is my home, but they’re not so hot here on using all the new scientific stuff that can help in police work. Just want to keep everything the same old same old.”

“Help me understand how any evidence you find will help you get a lead on Syrah.”

“Don’t rightly know. But you collect stuff, then you hope and pray the evidence leads you down the right road.”

I nodded. “I’ll buy that. Let me see what you’ve found so far.”

She’d brought in a little satchel that held her fingerprint kit and now took out a small brown envelope. “Haven’t sealed it yet. Wanted you to take a look first. But don’t go touching it, okay?”

She squeezed the stiff pouch open so I could look inside.

“Syrah is a sorrel color, so if it’s his hair it should be coppery ticked with chocolate . . . and the base of the hair should be a bright apricot. Together all these colors make him look amber.”

“Sorrel? Ticked? What’s all that mean?” Candace asked.

“Syrah is an Abyssinian cat. His color is sorrel. And ‘ticked’ means that chocolate is his second tabby color besides copper. He’s really just a fancy tabby cat.”

“Ah. I get it. But you sound like some kind of expert cat person. Are you?” she said.

“I know a lot about cats, but I wouldn’t call myself an expert. I like to learn things—just like you do, right?”

“You got that. Anyway, here’s what I found. Your cat’s hair look like this?”

I stared down into the envelope, but couldn’t see very well, so we moved closer to the window. Then I knew. “Yes. See the chocolate ticking? Cats can lose clumps of hair when they’re stressed, so that’s proof to me it’s his.”

“Let me tell you about proof. In my line of work, it’s not proof until it’s evidence of a crime. As of right now we can’t prove whether your cat slipped out when the perp came or left, or was in fact stolen. And if he was stolen, why leave the other two cats?” Candace said.

“Maybe the thief couldn’t find the other two? They know how to hide from me, that’s for sure,” she said.

“This Syrah—I remember you said he’s not expensive because he doesn’t have his papers to prove he’s a purebred. But maybe some idiot thought he was worth something even without these papers you’re talkin’ about,” she said.

“He’d be most valuable to me,” I said, realizing exactly how valuable even as I spoke the words. “Do you think the thief will call and say he or she has Syrah? Ask me for money?”

“That’s possible. Or whoever it was simply fancied your cat and decided he wanted him. You can’t tell what a person figures they can steal if they so desire. We had a perp once who stole Christmas lights right off people’s houses. I always thought it was Lewis Rainer ’cause his house is always lit up like New York City during the holidays. No way he could afford all those lights and snowmen and reindeer on the roof.”

“Let me guess,” I said. “You couldn’t prove it because you couldn’t get the evidence?”

“You are catchin’ on.” Candace smiled and it made her face even more attractive. “Anyway, you never hear about those animals lost during Katrina so much anymore, but lots of folks did lose the

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