

A DEAD EXEC FOUND IN A BATHROOM.
CAN IVY CLEAN UP THIS MYSTERY
BEFORE ANOTHER BODY TURNS UP?

Meow Mayhem

A FANCY CAT COZY MYSTERY

LISA LICKEL



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Fancy Cat Cozy

Mystery #1

Lisa Lickel

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1

I jolted alert to the rude 2:48 AM summons of my business phone. Fumbling for the receiver on my nightstand, I squinted. The name and number was unfamiliar. I frowned. In the middle of the night? This must be a crank call. I hoped it wasn't an angry-at-the-world abusive type. I was tired and not in the mood to be professionally pleasant. I held the headpiece next to my ear and answered. "McTeague Technical Services. This is Ivy. How may I be—"

"mm...get...help...call...mmm—"

"Don—" I couldn't make anything out through the crackling static and so I got out of my nice, cozy warm bed and went to stand by the window, hoping for a clearer signal. A burst of static rocketed me backward and I held the phone away from my ear. "Oww!"

I sat on the end of the bed and checked the phone, expecting smoke. The background was lit, but the call disconnected. I got back into bed but switched on my bedside light. I searched the caller ID and came up with Chicago. Summersby Building.

A chime indicated an incoming call from the same number.

"Hello? Who's there?" A soft buzz sounded and then a distinct click. At least the recorder had been on.

I yawned. Summersby Building was probably a construction company doing work for one of the new

businesses coming to Apple Grove. That's why I was here, too, invited on behalf of the mayor's new community growth incentive. I yawned again, turned my business phone to silent and pulled the covers up to my chin.

The next evening, after my third attempt to reach my friend Donald, the mayor of Apple Grove, Illinois, I ran my fingers across the screen of my personal phone, to view photos of my cat from last year at Christmas at my home in Maplewood. I usually found pictures cheerful. Comforting. But not the holiday ones which reminded me of all I hated about Christmas.

Now, in the twilight on the cusp of summer in a new and unfamiliar home, the images made me homesick.

When I'd moved here two months ago, April Fool's Day to be exact, the week after the annual spring CAT convention, the phone and cable companies wondered about how I could make McTeague's Services work with my three servers. I showed them Donald's letter of reference and the preliminary approval of the exception to the zoning ordinance in this quiet little neighborhood.

My business was dedicated to tech for non-techies, computer set-ups, web design, personal computer lessons. I supplemented that with other home-based requests that sometimes went along with my home visits, such as pet, houseplant, and mailbox sitting for those going away for whatever reason. Small businesses needed web maintenance. I also offered letter and blog writing services and help with forms. In this day and age of rapidly changing informational systems, everyone needed help.

I toyed with the phone. This evening, I couldn't

shake the feeling that Donald's silence was not a matter of choice. I needed to help my friend. I looked up a phone number and tapped it out.

"Apple Grove Police. Officer Ripple. How can I help you?"

"Hello. I...I need to report a missing person. Maybe a kidnapping."

"Name?"

"Ivy Preston."

"Right. High Vee? Could you spell that, please."

"I-V-Y. Preston."

"And where are you now, ma'am? Can you see any weapons? Do you know the name of your kidnappers?"

"Oh, no, Officer. It's not me. It's the mayor."

"Mayor? Got that. First name?"

"Donald."

"Donald Mayor. And is he a relative? Is there a note?"

"No...you've got it all mixed up. I'm calling about somebody possibly kidnapping Mayor Donald Conklin."

"You think someone's kidnapping the mayor? That's a pretty serious charge."

"Not doing it. I think they already did."

"We'll send someone over to talk to you. What's your address?"

"Three-twelve Marigold."

"Ah, yes. The Pagner house. And you have some sort of evidence?"

"Well, I received the strangest call last night on my business line and now he won't answer his private number. I'm worried."

"Business line?"

"I own the new tech services business in town. McTeague's. Donald invited me."

"OK. Sit tight. I'm sending Officer Dow over to you to take your statement."

"Thank you." I hung up and wondered what kind of a statement I was expected to give. I had the recording, but unless one understood the context, it could mean anything. Maybe I should call someone. How did I know I can trust the police here? On TV sometimes the bad guys aren't who people would think. My mental contact list was pretty slim. My neighbors, whom I didn't know that well. Mom—who lived a couple of hours away.

A knock on the door saved me from a slide into self-pity. I let in Officer Ann Dow, and smiled politely at the little blonde who looked as if the wind would carry her away if she hadn't been anchored by her sturdy shoes and even sturdier holstered, shiny black weapon.

"Thank you for coming." I'm not a giant, but I had a couple of inches on her. I refrained from telling her I could take point if things got dicey.

"So, tell me about this alleged kidnapping." The officer got out her pad and pen. She shushed her shoulder mic.

"The mayor is missing."

She didn't say anything at first. "And you believe that because...?"

"I received this strange call late last night. On my business line. Donald asked me to move my tech services business to help Apple Grove. Now he's not answering my calls."

"I'm not privy to the mayor's office practices," she said, straight-faced.

I ignored her implication and instead got out my office phone, explaining she could hear for herself. "This call came in, but it was all static-y and garbled. I couldn't make out much except 'Don,' and 'get.'"

She listened. "Get what? 'Don'? And you think it came from the mayor?"

"I don't know for sure. The caller ID said Summersby Building in Chicago. I just thought you should check it out."

Officer Dow tapped her pen on her pad. She shook her head and returned to the kitchen, me following like a lost puppy. "I'll make a report," she said, reaching for the door. "Maybe you should notify the FCC. If you get threatening calls, you should call the telephone company. We'll talk to Mrs. Bader-Conklin, who's been in the office today covering for her husband who's on a business trip. If that's all, I'll let you get back to...what you were doing."

"Thank you. But—"

Click. The door closed. She was gone.

And I thought Apple Grove seemed like such a nice town.

I let out a sigh of pure exasperation and tapped my size seven and half sandal on the tile floor. Last night's phone call...I just couldn't get it out of my head. I get mistaken numbers, of course, but I had a funny feeling. And that was a new one—Donald's wife had been in the office? Why had he called my business line?

Calling the police wasn't the best first move. But what else could I have done?

Maybe I should have been mad at him, instead of concerned. With my ringless fingers I tucked a loose spiral of my dishy-blah, frizzy hair back into its sloppy

bun. Donald would never have ignored me this long. And he'd want to talk about the next CAT convention coming up. That's Cat Association Titlists—the group where we met years and years ago. We both owned purebred Egyptian Maus, the only spotted domestic cat.

I have never been a whimsical person and uprooting myself to move to a new town was a major deal, not something I would have done under normal circumstances, but I'll get to that later. Let's just say his request, that I move my business and myself to Apple Grove, happened at a good time. That's me—Ivy Amanda McTeague Preston—of McTeague Technical Services.

If the police thought Donald was perfectly safe I should just wait until tomorrow and then see if Mrs. Bader-Conklin had some notion about what was going on. I could go visit her at the office and ask, casual-like, if she'd heard from him. And offer to work on the city's website.

~*~

My next hint that something was wrong was that Donald's assistant, Marion Green, was not at her usual post. If the mayor's office was open for business, Marion at least should be here, even if she supposedly had the week off. Donald joked that she was the one who really ran the town. The stern-looking, black-haired woman who infringed on Marion's space made me wait fifteen minutes. Donald usually came out of his office when he heard my voice. The light was on. I could see it shining under his door. I supposed Margaret—Mrs. Bader-Conklin—could have been

making an urgent call.

I heard a distinct sneeze from inside the office. Then the tap of high heels.

Why had I waited so long before getting concerned enough about Donald to call the police? Final registration for CAT was in two days. Donald never missed. He hadn't registered yet—I checked. We all register as early as we can for the next year to make sure we saved the date, even though the convention is always at the start of spring. He'd take his cat, Tut, out of his wife's hair for a while, since she was allergic to animal dander. He never said anything negative, but I got the impression the vacation was a three-way blessing between him, his wife, and Tut.

A woman opened the door to the mayor's office. I recognized her from a photo that Donald once showed me: Margaret. She studied me over half-glasses perched on a razor-thin nose, thin-penciled eyebrows raised toward her curled-under bangs. I shivered.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Miss Preston. Please." She gestured to me to follow her. And then she invited me to sit in the ugly, straight-back chair on the opposite side of Donald's desk instead of the comfy one in front of the computer. Donald had never done that.

I warily started a conversation. "I hope Marion isn't sick."

"I gave Mrs. Green a few days off. My personal assistant is with me." The wife of the mayor of Apple Grove leaned back in her husband's leather chair. "Now, what can I do for you, Miss...Preston?"

I swallowed hard. "Uh, well, Don—the mayor—isn't returning my calls, and he hasn't registered for our—the—CAT convention yet. I wondered...if you've

heard from him?" Dang, I tried hard not to squeak with nerves at the end. I couldn't help it, yet instinct told me that I must not show fear. I hoped she wouldn't get the wrong impression at my lame excuse to see her.

"What is the nature of your business with the mayor?"

I took a deep breath. Maybe I'd sounded a bit strange. "The mayor asked me to bring my tech services business to Apple Grove."

Margaret sneezed again and took out a dainty lace handkerchief. "Something in the air," she muttered, sniffing. "You must have a cat or a dog at home. I'm allergic."

"Oh?" I said, stopping before I mentioned I already knew that. Wrong impressions, and all.

"I recall Donald speaking of you," she said. "From that little group he goes to, right? So, did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Get him signed up."

"Well, that's something people usually do for themselves. Conference fees, and so forth..." I muttered.

"Oh, just send me a bill, then. Was there anything else?"

"So, your husband is around? He's all right?"

"Of course, he's all right. Why wouldn't he be? He just needed a day to...ah, get ready for that cat thing after...ah, meeting with company officials. Letty can handle business."

Letty must be the scary woman up front. Margaret stood, and I followed suit. She was taller than me. I supposed if I wore heels instead of tennies, I could have stared at her nose instead of her chin. Three black

hairs sprouted under her makeup. I pressed my lips tight to hold in the grin while she turned to open the door to her office.

"How's Tut these days?" I asked, testing her out on a whim.

"Tut? Oh—fine, just fine."

Mmhmm. "Mem's just fine, too."

"Mem? Memo? I don't underst—" She glanced over my shoulder. "Oh, ah, good to know. Excuse me while I, ah..."

I followed her line of sight to see Letty in the doorway, frowning, while her left hand came to rest on her folded elbow. We locked stares. Her brown irises had weird little gold flecks in them. She blinked first. She went back to her desk.

Margaret pushed forward, forcing me to move to the door. "Thank you. If you'll excuse me, we have a great deal of work. Good-bye, now. Take care."

I nodded to Letty on my way out. I got turned around in the maze of staircases and hallways and ended up leaving city hall by the back door. In my muse I dodged a dark-colored delivery van squealing right up to the exit before I found the walk that went around to the side parking lot where I'd left my car. What on earth would Mrs. Bader-Conklin do in her husband's office? Especially if he was in town and getting ready for the conference? But if he was getting ready why did he need me to register for him?

How I got home, I'm not sure. I don't think I ran into anyone on the way. I paced my tiny kitchen, three steps forward and back, as the evening wore on, deciding how much further to get involved in this business.

Judging by the officer's response to my initial

phone call, I wondered if I would ever rate any respect for my theory that the mayor needed help. I needed to find a better way to explain my dilemma to the police if I had the urge to call again.

I could talk to someone else. Of course! Someone else. Adam! He'd know what to do. How could I have left out Adam Truegood Thompson, Donald's other pet project. I grinned. Adam had moved to Apple Grove a week after I did. Mea Cuppa, his little bookshop and fancy coffee joint, needed more prep time than my machines, so he'd only recently opened. I spent an odd hour or two helping him sort merchandise and stock shelves.

I drove through downtown, chased by an occasional scrap of newspaper or leaf swirling in the spring breeze riffing up from the river through alleys. I knocked on the front door of the closed coffee shop. I didn't think Adam heard me at first, as he took some time coming down from his apartment.

"Ivy. What's wrong? Come on in. Sit down."

A solid comfort, Adam. I babbled. "I don't know where else to turn. Will you hear me out?"

"Of course, I will."

I glanced around, feeling vulnerable through the huge plate glass window. Anyone passing by could see us clearly. "Not here."

He seemed unfazed. "OK. Come on up. I wasn't exactly expecting visitors, though."

And clearly, he wasn't. He tossed aside a pile of towels and picture hangers and bade me sit on his recliner while he went to fix tea. I grew antsy. There was little room to pace with the floor covered with boxes and bubble wrap. I could barely tell the color of the carpet.

He smiled and put a steaming cup of ginger tea in my hand. "I told you it was a mess."

Ginger-mint. I inhaled. "Thank you."

He surveyed the room and grimaced. "Let's go in the kitchen, shall we?"

His kitchen was a different world. Neat and cozy. I could see where Adam felt most comfortable. We sat. I sipped while appreciating his patience. I mulled over a couple of ways to tell my tale and decided direct was best.

"Donald's missing. I think he's in trouble." I stopped and took a deep whimpering breath.

Adam put one of his gigantic warm hands over mine and anchored me with his calming gray stare.

I had no idea what he thought, but I trusted him.

"Ivy. Donald told us that he would be coming and going while he courted more businesses."

"This is different. His wife is running his office."

Adam's eyebrows went up with a comforting incredulity. He shook his head, his eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

I twisted my mouth and jiggled my foot. "Um, well. If there's an emergency, doesn't the city council president take over? But Margaret didn't say anything about an emergency. She said he was here—well, in town. And Donald hasn't registered for CAT yet. He planned to go, so I tried his personal number. Three times. To remind him. He didn't answer. Then, later, I received this strange, garbled call—I could only make out what sounded like 'Don,' and 'get' from some number in Chicago—it must have been Donald asking me to get help."

Adam sat back, not saying anything. Finally, he got up and walked over to the sink.

I admired his height and flexed back muscles, the efficiency of movement, but also his deliberation of thought before speaking. He was older than me—I'm almost thirty-two and single, thanks to my ex-fiancé Stanley—but I wasn't sure how much older he was. His wavy black hair was slightly salted at the temples, and his nose looked as if it had been broken at one time and fixed, but best of all, he wasn't married.

The tone of his voice led me to believe he wanted to take me seriously but was finding it difficult. "Donald's scheduled business trip yesterday wasn't to Chicago. What do you think might be going on?"

"I don't know. Donald is our friend. If he's in trouble, I want to help."

Adam's mouth twitched. "What kind of help?"

I sighed, thinking how ludicrous my actions had been and not ready to admit the call to the police. "Yeah. So, I thought I'd just go over to city hall and visit Margaret. You know, just ask if she'd heard from Donald. So, I did. But Margaret wasn't talking. Marion wasn't even there."

"She might not spend all day in the office if Donald is out," Adam reminded me.

I took another deep breath. "She said he was all right. But there was someone else there. Someone I didn't recognize, sitting at Marion's desk."

"Ivy, you wouldn't know many people here, anyway, remember? We just moved."

I liked the "we" part of his comment. "Right. But did you know that Margaret's allergic to cats? I thought she just hated them."

"That's one of the reasons Donald was so interested in that new company he hopes to bring to Apple Grove. Happy Hearts Bioengineering. They're

working to produce a hypoallergenic breed of animal.”

“I thought he was...well, maybe I hadn’t been paying attention. I thought he was going after a pet food company. Fel-feli—”

“Feli-Mix. He told me they’d signed an ‘intent to build’ contract based on getting the zoning approval.”

“Oh. Good.” I scratched my ear. Isis wandered in from a dark hallway to curl around Adam’s ankles. Adam’s Mau smoke female was daintier in appearance than disposition. My Mem had been at the receiving end of her ferocity since they’d been introduced two years ago at a convention. Poor Mem had only tried to be polite.

Adam nudged me back to the present topic at hand. “What did Margaret say?”

“She wouldn’t talk to me.”

He wiped a hand over his face.

“I didn’t think I was nosy. She asked me to get Donald signed up for the convention and send her the bill.”

“Oh?”

“Don’t you think that’s a little odd?”

“It’s unusual, but she could have just been trying to help Donald if he’s distracted with town business.” He smiled gently. “You’re still worried.”

“Yes, about him and Tut. I wish now I hadn’t called the police.”

He raised his brows and took a deep breath. “What exactly did you say to them?”

I grimaced. “That I wanted to report a...a kidnapping.” My voice dropped to a too-low whisper on the last word. I sounded perfectly ridiculous.

“Based on a phone call you couldn’t understand? And after the police officer stopped laughing?”

“He didn’t laugh at all! He sent a lady cop to check on me.”

“And?”

“She said she’d file a report.”

Adam uncrossed his arms and got up from the table. He gently removed the mug from my hands and raised me to my feet. I liked the feel of those hands. I liked the confidence he exuded even more. “Ivy, I can tell you’re concerned about this. Why don’t you let me go talk to Margaret tomorrow, see what I think. OK? I’m not dismissing you, but I have to think about this.”

I nodded. “It sounds wild. I need to do something, but I’m not sure what.”

Adam walked me to the door and down the steps. The moccasins he wore silenced his path across the floor of the shop. “You drove. You want me to take you home?”

I appreciated his thoughtfulness. “I’m all right.” I caught my reflection in the window of the door. My corkscrew hair flew in all directions—I looked like a nutcase. No wonder he had been concerned I couldn’t drive. I stopped and turned. The top of my head came to his shoulder, giving me a good view of his throat. His turtleneck shirt hid most of the scar that snaked around his neck and across his right shoulder. I never asked about it and I was too shy around him yet to pry, but I hoped that would change in the near future. “Thank you for listening. I hope it’s just some kind of mental lapse on my part.”

“We both care about Donald. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.” He flashed a grin and closed the door behind me, staying at the window to watch until I sat safely in my car.

I did not expect to sleep much, so after checking

my client list and the current work orders in my office, I settled on the couch with my pet, Memnet, nearby, and popped a movie into my player.

Mau owners often give their friends names popular in ancient Egypt for obvious reasons. Mem was a beautiful, black-spotted, registered silver male running past middle age. We garnered tons of compliments for his personality and outstanding looks, and he was as devoted to me as I was to him. He had been a staunch friend when Stanley decided he did not want to marry me—after we'd ordered the invitations and my dress, rented the hall, and the organist.

Memnet's scratching woke me sometime later.

Cold and stiff, I came to my senses abruptly when I heard a loud crack and tinkling sound from the kitchen.

Mem was not as cautious and streaked toward the sound, a silver shadow in the blue glow of the television screen. His screech was primeval.

My hand shook as I dialed the number of the police department with a legitimate complaint this time. After being assured they would send someone immediately, I peered into the kitchen to see the broken window panel of the door and the swinging chain.

Mem sat guard, his tail twitching and ears forward, his paw resting on top of a stone with something tied to it.

"What have you got, Mem?" I crouched, wary of glass. With a low growl pulsing from his furry throat, he reluctantly let me examine the rock. I supposed it was evidence, but it was in my house. And Ripple had laughed at me earlier, after all. With one eye watching for the police car, I hurriedly untied the string and read

the attached note.

“Busy-body’s don’t belong in our town.”

I hated misused apostrophes.

2

Donald should concede one point to his opponents of community growth: the crime rate was going up.

Mem never left off his fearsome stare—not even when the strobe lights of the police car pierced the house.

After the excitement of the photographs, fingerprinting and sampling of the streak of blood left on the door frame, I was allowed to clean my kitchen. Thanks to Memnet, the creep had not gotten in. At least, that was the reason according to the police.

“We’ll send someone around frequently, ma’am, to check on you. We’ve searched the premises. Is there someone I can call to stay with you? Or would you be more comfortable going away for the rest of the night?” Hopefully Officer Ripple didn’t recognize my name from my earlier call to report Donald’s kidnapping. “In case there are any lurking kidnappers.”

OK, so he did recognize my name. I gave him a tight little smile. But his comment made me wonder if this incident was somehow related to Donald’s disappearance. Absence. Whatever.

Memnet and I made our own search through the two bedrooms, the hall closet, and my second-story office.

I carried a bat as menacingly as I could. After the