

My name is Marlowe. You might say I'm in the security game. Been at it for a while and pretty much know what to expect. Or thought I did. Up until last week. That's when this little episode occurred. And it changed my view of things forever. You can bet on that. Because this tale ended in murder.

It all started at a downtown store called Catabilia. That's been my beat for the last four years. Not a bad place to work, either. It's neat and warm. The joint is owned by two people named Felix and Sybil. Felix has thick fingers, good for scratching me behind the ears. Sybil, she's got a lighter touch. Likes to give one long stroke from head to tail. You know the type. Cat lovers. You can pick them out a mile away.

So it's no surprise that they run this place called Catabilia. It's a store devoted to cats. Filled to the rafters with cat stuff. Cat cards, cat books, cat pins. Cat-a-brac. Statues of that Egyptian god with the feline head. You name it—if it's about paws and whiskers, they've got it.

Don't get me wrong. This is no cheap operation. They've got quality goods front to back. There's hardly anything in the store for under ten bucks. Felix and Sybil know what's what. You can't skimp when it comes to cats. None of your ridiculous catnip balls with bells. Just classy merchandise. The two of them have good taste. Well, of course they do. After all, they've got me.

By the way, just to fill out the picture, I'm a long-haired gray cat, with a sweet pale spot under my chin. You can't miss me. I'm pretty visible around the place. But don't be fooled by appearances. All I have to do is tip my head down to hide that spot, and I can vanish into the dark. Stealth is a little hobby of mine. Well, like I said, security is my game.

Now one thing I've learned about the security business is that it's a quiet gig. It's mostly a lot of watching and waiting. I lounge about, keep an eye out for thieves, sit on the desk for effect, give the place a cozy feeling. You know. Sure, there's the occasional crook to spook or rat to chase. But mostly the idea is to look innocent and sleepy while keeping an eye on everything.

All of that worked pretty well on the night of the murder. Which was lucky because the murderer would have gotten away with it, except for one thing... me. The murderer forgot that I was there, sitting perfectly still in the silence. And that I can see in the dark.

On the night in question, as the cops say, the store was closed. It was about nine o'clock. All the other stores were shut for the night too, and the block was dark. I was taking a little catnap on one of the shelves. Pretty tired from a hard day's work. Besides guarding the store, I usually spend some time rearranging things on the shelves. Moving them around, you know, for better visual impact. And that can be pretty exhausting.

Anyway, there I was dreaming about chasing a chubby little mouse down an endless hallway, when I heard someone at the front door. I perked up and got ready to pounce, but just in time I recognized the person coming in. It was Leah Bility. She was the bookkeeper for the store. I had forgotten that it was the first Tuesday of the month. That's always her night to come in and go over the books.

For some reason, the owners had installed a security system on the front door. It was just a camera that took a photo of anyone entering. Leah knew about it, smiled for the birdie as she came in, and closed the door behind her. Then, just like she always did, she went over to the desk. She opened her briefcase and set out her calculator, her ledgers, and her pencils. She made herself a cup of coffee. Then sat down and got to work. Realizing everything was in order, I settled down too and got back to my happy dream.

It was all quiet until about eleven o'clock. That's when the fuss started. And what should have been a perfectly innocent evening wound up as a real catastrophe. Four different people came into the store that night. They were all looking for Leah Bility. They all found her there. And each one of them had an argument with her before leaving. But one of those arguments ended in Leah's murder.

The first person to come in was Selman Nelson. That was at eleven, like I said. I had seen him before. He was a mousey little man in a gray suit. Not someone you'd think about much one way or the other. Leah heard the knock, then got up and let him in. He seemed real upset and was talking a mile a minute while nibbling nervously on something. Looked like a hunk of cheese to me. I didn't pay attention at first but, as they started to argue, I listened in. It seemed that Nelson and Leah were supposed to get married. And she had called it off.

"I won't stand for it," he squeaked, trying to look a lot taller than he was.

"My decision is final, Selman," she answered.

"You'll regret this," he warned, as he skittered out.

It was hard to believe that this frumpy accountant was the inspiration for such passion. But I figured it this way—people are weird. And I went back to sleep.

About an hour later there was another knock at the door. "Go Away!" Leah shouted to the visitor. But whoever it was didn't listen and began pounding. When she couldn't take the noise any more, Leah got up and opened the door. To her surprise, and mine too, it wasn't Nelson again. This time it was a tight bundle of nerves named Juliette Manx. I had seen her before too. She was Leah's business partner. She was pretty dolled up, wearing a pale pink dress with a red bow around her waist and a fancy lace hankie in her pocket.

"I thought you were going to the party," Leah said in a nasty tone.

"I was at the party! And guess who else was there? Our mutual friend Selman Nelson."

Leah didn't answer, but her silence seemed to Juliette like a slap in the puss.

"Well?" Manx demanded. Her hair was pulled back tightly off her face, which only emphasized the look of rage in her eyes.

"I was going to tell you about us," Leah finally responded. "But I've decided to call it off. We're not seeing each other any more."

"And that is supposed to make me feel better?"

"I'm sorry if I hurt you," Leah said coolly. "But it's over now. There's nothing to talk about."

"It isn't over until I say it is, Miss Innocent!" Manx said, then stormed out the door.

Whew! People can get pretty steamed up over that kind of stuff. And that wasn't even the end of it. At midnight someone began to fidget with the front lock. Leah watched the door for a few moments, thinking, like I did, that it might be an intruder. But when the door opened, Orville Cole let himself in.

Cole was the landlord of the building. That's why he had a key. He was a natty man wearing a blue pinstriped suit and a bow tie. With a black hat on his head. But the way he came into the store suggested he wasn't there to talk fashion.

"What do you think you're doing?" he shouted at Leah.

"Leave me alone! Please!" she answered.

"Not so fast, Pussycat," he said taking off his glasses for effect. "We had a deal going here. And I'm not about to let you louse it up."

"I can't go through with it. I told Selman the wedding was off."

"You what? Now listen to me. You are going through with it. You're going to marry that little wimp, and we're going to take his money just like we planned. You working on the books, me handling the 'accident'."

"Over my dead body," Leah said defiantly.

"You said it, Pussycat, not me." And with those words he slammed the door.

Finally, about a half-hour after that, there was more loud banging on the door.

"OK, Bility, open up. It's Louise Carroll here, and I've got a few things to say to you!"

When Leah opened the door, a woman barged in; she was in quite a sweat. The perspiration had soaked the hair around her face creating tight curls.

"Cat's out of the bag, isn't it, my dear?"

"What are you talking about?"

THE PURR-CEPTIVE DETECTIVE

"I followed him here. I know you two had a secret rendezvous!" Louise shouted. She was so pleased at her own discovery that she broke into an enormous ear-to-ear grin.

"Followed who?"

"Orville. He left the party and came right here. I saw him an hour ago. Planning a little something together? Like a secret elopement?"

"Orville Cole? What have you got to do with him?"

"We're engaged. Or didn't you know that?"

"He never mentioned that to me!"

"You expect me to believe that? Let me tell you something, you little tramp," she said, rubbing her nose, which was bright red from excitement. "No one steals a man from me. And certainly not a miserable number-cruncher like you!"

She tried to catch Leah's foot in the door as she slammed it after her, but the plan failed.

Well, as you can imagine, I was pretty wiped out by then. There was never that much activity in the store, even during business hours. Leah must have felt the same way because being totally exhausted she forgot to lock the door and fell asleep right there at the desk. It was finally quiet. The way I like it. But once again it didn't last long.

First I heard a sound at the door. Then I noticed the knob turning. Whoever it was found the door unlocked and slowly—very slowly—opened it a crack. When there was just enough room, the intruder slipped inside. It was completely dark. I looked down and noticed that the pale spot on my chin was showing. I covered it and narrowed my eyes into slits.

After standing perfectly still for a long time, the intruder reached into an inner pocket and pulled out a gun. I couldn't for the life of me figure out what the intruder intended to do. I know that sounds crazy, me being in the security business and all. I had heard of murders and even seen a few on TV. But I never realized that it was something people actually did. In real life, I mean.

It crossed my mind to make a move but, before I could act, the person at the door pointed the gun and fired. There was a slight popping sound. Then the murderer was out the door and gone.

I was shocked. Didn't believe my own eyes at first. Leah's body had barely moved. For all anyone knew, she could still be sleeping. And the whole terrifying scene just part of a bad dream.

But it wasn't. The next morning, Felix and Sybil came in to find Leah murdered at the desk. You can imagine the commotion that followed. Soon there were cops all over the place—inspecting, interviewing, and testing.

They had the photos from the security system and knew who had visited Leah. They knew what each one looked like. But whoever had committed the crime had avoided the camera on the final visit. And they had no idea which one of the four, if any, had come back later and pulled the trigger. For the moment, they were stumped.

Of course they were. No surprise. One thing you can always count on with people is that they'll miss the obvious. In this case—me. While they were all running around looking for clues, no one seemed to recall that I was there all the time. That I saw the murderer. I knew who killed Leah Bility.

I quickly realized that there was only one thing to do. And I spent almost twenty minutes doing it. It took some time thinking and searching. But by the time I finished, the solution to the mystery was clear as can be. All I did was gather items from the shelves that would tell them exactly who the murderer was. I lined them up on the desk so anyone could see. If not the cops, then certainly Felix and Sybil. They've been around cats long enough and are pretty sharp by now. I was sure they'd get the message. Now all I have to do is get their attention.

Put the puzzle together and see if you can solve the mystery. Who does Marlowe say killed the bookkeeper?

The Solution:

That should do it. Now all they have to do is compare the four items I've picked out to the written descriptions of the characters. Because all four objects point to the murderer. Orville Cole. He was so enraged at Leah's refusal to go along with their extortion plan that he returned with the gun.

I picked the mouse, not because it was gray and mousey like Selman Nelson, but because the hat pointed to Cole's black hat. And I didn't choose the Cheshire cat because it was chubby and grinning like Louise Carroll. I picked it because the blue stripes indicated Cole's pin-striped suit. The cat doll with the pink dress with lace trim might have been a reminder of the outfit Juliette Marx was wearing. But I selected it because it was wearing a bow, like Cole's bow tie. And finally, that cat statue with the glasses could only refer to the glasses Cole was wearing.