

# *The Curious Cat Incident*

*by Alyx Morgan*

"Hey Tabitha." Denny, the officer at the front desk, smiled when he saw me.

"Sergeant Bowers is waiting for you in his office."

I panicked for a moment until he winked one of his brown eyes at me.

"Very funny, Denny." I stuck out my tongue. "I'm actually here to see Marge."

He laughed and then called Marge Lipscomb, the officer who works the Records division at the station. I like to check out the department's unresolved mysteries to get practice for when I become a detective. Since Sergeant Bowers feels that a sixteen year-old girl has no business looking into dead police files, Marge is a co-conspirator in my clandestine research.

Like Marge, Denny supports my aspirations and treats me like an equal. He knows about the arguments that Bowers and I get into, and likes to tease me about it every now and then. I usually know when he's kidding, but some days he catches me off guard. I hate being gullible.

I sat down in one of the plastic orange chairs opposite the front desk. While waiting for Marge to arrive, I took in the atmosphere of the station. Officers sat at desks taking calls, others walked around doing filing. Occasionally a traffic cop came through the front door and handed Denny some paperwork. All in all, it looked like a regular business office, except everyone here had been trained to use firearms.

"So Tab," Denny interrupted my people watching, "are you working on anything exciting right now?"

"Nah, it's pretty dry at the moment. Besides, after spending a couple hours hiding out in a dumpster, Stu's not too keen to help me with any new cases."

Stu is my best friend. He's three years older than I am, and works at an auto repair shop. He's also supportive of my dream, so long as it doesn't involve him sitting among other people's trash again.

"Well, I wondered if you'd be willing to help me with something."

"Absolutely," I said and walked over to him. "What do you need?"

"It's not terribly exciting, but my girlfriend's kitten has been missing for a couple of weeks." Denny was interrupted by the phone. He put up a finger, silently asking me to wait a moment, transferred the call, then continued. "Jennifer's been so worried, and I was hoping you could find him."

An amateur detective doesn't always get the juiciest or most interesting cases. More often than not, they have to accept what's known in the business as a 'Rent' case; tracking a cheating husband, or searching through tons of medical records for insurance fraud, things like that. They aren't the most glamorous of cases, but they're the ones that help pay the rent.

When you're an amateur detective AND a high school sophomore, you get the teenaged equivalent of 'Rent' cases: cheating boyfriend, stolen bike, missing cat. They're even less glamorous, but a girl's gotta get practice somehow, right? Besides, as my hero Sherlock Holmes once said, "I abhor the dull routine of existence. I crave for mental exaltation."

"Hey, you know me, Denny." I smiled at him. "Any mystery is exciting. I can go over after I'm done here."

"That's great, Tab." Denny jotted Jennifer's address down on a yellow sticky note and handed it to me. "I'll give her a call and tell her to expect you."

It wasn't just the excitement of a new case that made me jump at Denny's offer -he was also a great guy. His father had moved from India to America when Denny was just a boy. Proud to be American, Denny joined the Navy right out of high school, and had been honorably discharged for exemplary service. After the Navy, he'd moved back to Alameda and attended the police academy in Oakland, where he excelled so much that he graduated a full six months ahead of schedule. I never saw him lose his temper or treat anyone with anything but respect and dignity, no matter how much they yelled at him when they came in to pay their "stupid" parking tickets.

Later that afternoon I stood in front of the address that Denny had scrawled on the note. It was an old Victorian-style house that had been converted into several apartments. The paneling on the outside was white with dark green trim around the windows and eaves. According to the piece of paper, Jennifer lived in apartment three, which was on the second floor. I walked up the steps, carefully avoiding the bowed wood and cracks. They weren't in horrible shape, but showed a few years' wear and tear.

I reached the top of the stairs and knocked on her door. Soon after, she opened it, and I was immediately struck by how beautiful Denny's girlfriend was. Denny was attractive in his own right, nearly six feet tall, brown hair and eyes, with skin the color of a good spray-on tan, but Jennifer was a cut above even him.

She was a couple inches taller than my 5'3" frame, and looked like an exotic model, with her caramel-colored skin and almond-shaped eyes the same shade as her long, smooth brown hair. Not a strand was out of place. She stared at me, confused for a second, then realization dawned. There was a fast interplay of emotions in her eyes,

and it was hard to catch them all, but I definitely saw sadness, desperation, and hope flash through.

"You must be Tabitha." Jennifer held the door open for me. "Denny phoned me earlier and said you would be stopping by." Her voice mimicked the desperation I'd seen in her eyes, but I also noted a faint accent, which made her seem even more glamorous.

"Yeah." I took off my coat and placed it in her outstretched, perfectly-manicured hand.

Jennifer led me to the living room and motioned me to sit down. I plopped onto a white suede armchair, and noticed how gracefully she sat on the matching couch. It occurred to me how gauche I must look to her in my blue flannel shirt and ripped jeans.

Normally, I don't care what other people look like, and don't try to compare myself, but she was in a league of her own. I like Denny, a lot, but I always thought his girlfriend would be more down-to-earth and fun, like he was. Granted I didn't know Jennifer at all, but I was struck by the fundamental differences in their character.

"Uh"--I tried to get out of my head and back to the reason I was there--"Denny mentioned that your cat has been missing for a couple weeks now."

"Yes," Jennifer said, and some of the sophistication slipped away as tears formed in her eyes. "Pickles ran out of the door when I was leaving for work one morning. I was in a hurry and could not take the time to go get him." She took a tissue from a box on the glass coffee table, dabbed at her eyes, and then took a deep breath as if to steady herself.

"Please excuse my outburst." *Outburst?* "Denny says you have the makings of a great detective. What do you need from me?"

I blushed at the compliment Denny had given me, but covered it up by scrounging in my backpack for my trusty notepad and pen. By the time I had the pad opened to a clean sheet, my face didn't feel as hot and I was able to focus better.

"What day did . . . Pickles, you said . . . run away?"

"It was two weeks ago, on Friday." Jennifer sniffled into the tissue. "As I said, I was late for work and I was heading to my parents' house for a birthday party afterwards, so my arms were full of presents and a suitcase. Pickles was curling around my legs right before I opened the door--I think he knew that I was going to be away for a couple of days."

"Have you left him behind when you went on trips before?"

"Just one other time," she said, and took a deep breath. "You see, I have only had Pickles for a couple of months. I am home most nights, but last month I went to visit my parents for Father's Day. They live near Lake Tahoe, so I usually stay there for the weekend whenever I visit."

"Did someone come by to feed him while you were gone?"

"Yes." Having composed herself, Jennifer was now wringing the tissue in her hands. Other than that she sat as still as a statue. "Denny kindly offered to feed and keep him company."

"And did Pickles seem upset by your absence when you got back?" I jotted a note to ask Denny about his time with the cat.

"I have heard horror stories of people returning home to find messes around the house, or feces in shoes, but thankfully no." She gave a faint smile. "The only thing I noticed was that Pickles followed me around more often than before I had gone away."

"He was more clingy?"

"Yes." Jennifer nodded, and a strand of hair fell over her shoulder. She quickly moved it back into place and sat still once more. It was unnerving. I felt the need to fidget in my seat just to offset her stillness.

"Okay, so back to two weeks ago." I turned a page in my notebook. "You said that on Friday morning your hands were full and you were rushing out the door to get to work and your weekend at your parents' house. Pickles was weaving in and out of your legs. Then what happened?"

"When I opened the door to leave, he ran outside. I tried to reach my foot out to stop him, but he jumped over it and ran into the garden at the side of the house."

"Which side?"

"The south side. There is a small garden between this house and the one next door."

"Is it a vegetable or flower garden?"

"It is a flower garden." Jennifer cocked her head to one side, like a dog would.

"Excuse me, but I do not understand why this is important."

"It might not be, but I want to cover all bases just to be sure." I jotted *flower garden* on my pad. "Has Pickles ever run outside before?"

"Not when I was not with him."

"You let your cat outside then?"

"Not often, but I feel that a cat, like a dog, does not enjoy being confined to a house all of the time. They are creatures of the wild, and I believe they need to be in touch with nature every once in a while."

I'd never owned a cat or dog, so I didn't have an opinion either way.

"However," Jennifer continued, "I only let Pickles out in the backyard, where there is less chance of her getting hit by a car."

"But you left by the front door that Friday morning?"

"Yes."

"I wonder why he ran out that way then." I looked up at her, pursing my lips. "I would think he would've been too scared to run out of a strange door."

"I am sorry, but I do not have an answer for you." Jennifer bowed her head, like she'd let me down somehow.

"It's not your fault." I felt the need to reassure her. "I was just wondering out loud."

"Ah, a rhetorical question." She raised her head and smiled. "A very useful tool for a detective, as I understand."

"Yeah, well, it helps me to hear the questions running around inside of my head." I looked back over my notes. "Is there anything else you can tell me, Jennifer? Maybe a neighbor who saw something? Have you talked to the people who live in the house on the other side of the garden?"

"Yes. It was too late for me to talk to them when I returned that Sunday, but Monday I went over to ask them if they had seen Pickles. Their daughter, Lydia, was very upset to learn that Pickles was missing. She will often come to visit when I bring Pickles to the backyard."

My senses perked up at the mention of this.

"How old is Lydia?" I asked as nonchalantly as possible.

"She is a very sweet little girl. She is six years old, and loves to play with Pickles."

Something in my gut told me Lydia was our cat nabber, but it was all circumstantial. I decided to get some more information.

"Have you put out any missing cat notices?"

"Yes. I posted flyers around the neighborhood."

"Do you have any extras?"

"Yes. Please wait one moment." Jennifer left the living room. I heard her footsteps echo through the apartment, first to the linoleum in the kitchen, then to hard wood flooring in what I assumed was an office or den. I heard her shuffle some papers around, then she came back.

"It was Denny who suggested that I make up these flyers and post them around the area."

She smiled and handed me a sheet of light pink paper. On it was a picture of Jennifer holding a multi-colored kitten. He had orange, brown and grey coloring, along with some white (which looked pink because of the paper) on his nose and paws. There was also the standard info that people put on signs like these: when the cat went missing, where its home was, who to contact, stuff like that.

"And you say you posted these all around your neighborhood here?"

"Yes." Jennifer sat back down on the couch. "Denny helped me make them, and he and Lydia helped me put them up that Monday night."

"Hmmm," I said. "I didn't see any as I was walking here earlier."

"No?"

"I'm sorry, but no." I looked at her and noticed tears starting to form in her eyes again. For such a poised woman, she sure got weepy over a cat. Sheesh. Still, I had agreed to help find Pickles, so I needed to be nice.

"I'll take this and go walk around the block," I suggested. "Maybe people have posted yard sale signs over them."

"Thank you, yes please." Jennifer grabbed another tissue to dab at her eyes. "I will wait here until you get back." She walked me to the door and held it open.

"Please find Pickles." She gripped my arm as I passed through to the porch.

"I'll do my best."

I walked down the steps and glanced at the lamppost on the corner. There were several sheets attached, so I went for a closer look and found yard sales that were a week old, but no flyers like Jennifer's underneath. I turned the corner and checked every post on that side of the block. Nothing. I walked the entire block that way, with the same results.

As I passed Jennifer's house, I saw her watching me through her living room window. She had one arm wrapped around her waist, while the other was squeezing a tissue.

I don't understand why people get so weepy about their pets, but maybe that's because I've never had one. Well, that's not true. I vaguely remember having a goldfish when I was six, but he died when I overfed him one day. His food looked like confetti, and I thought he might want a party (gimme a break, I was six). But my parents wouldn't get me another pet until I learned how to take better care of one. They died four years later, and Grams is allergic to animal dander, so we've never had pets. Pets are all right I guess, I just find it weird that Jennifer would get all bent out of shape over a cat that she's only had a couple months.

I walked to the end of the block again and crossed the street. I saw a bit of pink paper flapping in the warm breeze on the first pole. Sure enough, there was Jennifer's

Missing Cat flyer, half-hidden by a flyer for an upcoming yard sale. I found similar signs on posts all around the block. *Why would someone remove the signs from one block, but not the next one?* That's when it hit me; Jennifer said that Lydia had helped her post some of the signs.

I ran back to Jennifer's block and bent down to the height of a six year-old girl. I walked around the entire post and saw nothing. Certain that I was on the right track, I went to the next post and found a corner of pink paper trapped beneath a staple. It looked like the rest of the sheet had been torn off. I found similar remnants on several of the posts, some even with lettering matching that of Jennifer's flyer.

As I made my way back around the block, I saw a family getting out of a minivan in front of Jennifer's place. There was a mom, a dad, and a little girl with red curls and wearing a pink sundress and white sandals.

"Hi there," I said, walking toward them.

"Hello," the dad replied. The mom reached for the little girl's hand and eyed me with friendly suspicion. The girl cocked her head to one side and just looked at me, the way most kids will openly stare at someone, taking in every detail.

"I'm trying to help Jennifer find her lost cat Pickles."

Everyone's expression changed. The dad's face relaxed and he nodded, while the mom gave a 'poor dear' shake of her head. But I was most interested in the reaction of the little girl, who I suspected was Lydia. Her eyes went wide, and she looked like she'd gotten her hand caught in the cookie jar.

"It's so sad about Pickles," the mom said. "Jennifer has talked to all the neighbors around here, but no one seems to know where she is."

"Yes," I said and moved my gaze to hers. "She's really worried about her."

"And you're helping Jennifer?" the dad asked.

"Yeah. Her boyfriend Denny asked me to help. I'm Tabitha Patterson." I offered my hand and he shook it.

"I've heard Denny mention you a couple times," said the mom, and we too shook hands. "You want to be a detective, right?"

"Like Nancy Drew?" The dad looked amused at the thought.

"Like Sherlock Holmes," I corrected him. I had nothing against Nancy Drew, but I identified more with Holmes.

"Well, I'm sure Jennifer is glad you're on the case," the mom said and looked down at her daughter. "Did you hear that, Lydia? This lady is going to help Jennifer find Pickles."

"You're Lydia?" I bent down so that she and I were at eye level. "Jennifer told me how much you love Pickles, too. She said you even helped her post up some of these signs." I took the folded sheet out of my pocket and showed it to her. Lydia barely nodded.

"Yes, every time we mention Pickles, Lydia cries." The mom picked up Lydia and held her on her hip. "She's been asking us for a while to get her a kitten, but we're just not sure she's ready for that responsibility yet. So it worked perfectly when Jennifer got Pickles. She would let Lydia play with him in the back yard."

"That's nice of her." I stood up and looked at Lydia. "So you miss Pickles too, huh?"

She gave another nod. This time, her bottom lip came out in a little pout.

"She even takes out some food, just in case Pickles comes back and is hungry."

The dad walked to the other side of Lydia and kissed her cheek. "Don't you, honey?"

Again, nothing but a nod.

"Wow, that's really nice," I said. "I'm glad you're looking out for Pickles, Lydia."

Tears started to well up in her eyes now, and I knew she was close to talking. I just had to tread carefully, so that her parents wouldn't get mad.

"And you haven't seen him yet, huh?" I asked her, then looked at her parents. They shook their heads, while more tears formed in Lydia's eyes.

"Nope, no sign of him yet," said the dad. He took out his keys and fiddled with them until he found the house key and started toward their front door.

"That's too bad," I tsked and looked at Lydia, "'cause Jennifer misses her kitty just as much as you do. She was crying today when she told me about it."

Lydia sniffled and buried her face in her mother's neck.

"I hope you find him soon," said the mother. "It's such a shame." She followed the dad toward the house.

"I don't want to go to jail, Mommy!" Lydia whined.

"What are you talking about, honey?" her mother asked and lifted Lydia's head up off her shoulder.

"I just wanted a kitty."

The mother stopped walking, a look of shock and comprehension showing on her face. I decided to wait the confession out, wishing every criminal was this easy to crack.

"Lydia," her mother said with a warning in her tone and waited for the little girl to quiet down. "Did you take Pickles?"

"He ran away when she left for work," Lydia said, tears running down her face. "I saw him run to the back yard. I went outside and he came to me." She rubbed her little fists over her eyes. "He wanted me as much as I wanted him."

"Young lady." Her father came over to Lydia and the mom. "Are you telling us that you stole Jennifer's kitten?"

"But he wanted me, too, Daddy!" She was full-out crying now, her little red curls bobbing up and down with each sob.

"That does not give you the right to take someone else's pet," said Lydia's mom. She waited until the little girl's wailing died down. "How would you feel if Pickles had been your kitten, and he was gone one day?"

There was silence for a while, then Lydia's quiet voice. "I would be sad."

"And how would you feel if someone you knew had taken him away from you, making you sad?" asked the dad.

"I wouldn't like them anymore." Lydia's shoulders sagged and her bottom lip popped out again.

"I'm sure Jennifer will still like you, honey." Her mom hugged her. "But you need to give Pickles back."

"Okay." Lydia gave a hiccough and climbed down from her mother's arms. She and her father went into the backyard and returned a few minutes later. Lydia was holding the same kitten pictured on the flyer. He was purring and looked healthy.

Lydia walked over and lifted Pickles up toward me, holding him under his front arms. His back legs automatically crouched up into his belly and his striped tail curled around his back paws. I took the kitten and cradled him to my body. Pickles started mewling immediately, clearly missing Lydia.

“Do I hafta go to jail now?” Lydia asked, her lips quivering. I looked at her parents who were trying not to laugh.

“I’ll make a deal with you,” I said and bent down so that our eyes were on the same level. “If you take Pickles back to Jennifer and explain what happened, I promise you won’t go to jail.”

“But Jennifer won’t like me anymore.” Lydia looked at Pickles and petted his head. Pickles began purring again.

“Jennifer will be so glad to have her kitty back, I’m sure she’ll forgive you,” I said. “It might be scary sometimes, but you gotta tell the truth. It’s not good to lie.”

“Okay.” Lydia slumped her shoulders again.

The group of us walked up the steps to Jennifer’s apartment. The door was open before we even knocked.

“Pickles!” Jennifer smiled, as tears of happiness now pooled in her brown eyes. She took the kitten out of my arms, and hugged and kissed him. Pickles gave a small meow. She walked toward the living room and we all followed. I made sure to close the door behind me, so Pickles couldn’t escape again.

I stood in the hallway while Lydia and her parents explained what had happened. Like I’d told Lydia, Jennifer was so happy to have Pickles back that she wasn’t mad.

“Thank you for taking such good care of him, Lydia,” Jennifer said, and stroked Pickles, who was curled up on her lap and purring again.

“I’m sorry I took him.” The little girl wrapped her arms around her mother’s leg.

“I accept your apology.”

"Can I still play with him in your backyard sometimes?" Lydia rubbed her eyes and yawned, apparently exhausted by her crying fit outside.

"Of course you may, Lydia." Jennifer smiled, and Lydia's face lit up with glee. She let go of her mother's leg and walked over to the couch. Jennifer placed the kitten on the cushion, so that the little girl could pet him easier, then walked over to me.

"If I may ask you, Tabitha," Jennifer said, "how did you know Lydia had Pickles?"

"My first clue was when you said Lydia liked to play with him in the backyard," I said in hushed tones. I didn't want Lydia to think she would get into trouble again.

"But what was suspicious about that?"

"On its own, nothing. But when you said how upset Lydia was when he went missing, I suspected she knew something."

Lydia's parents walked over to us, leaving their daughter to play with the cat.

I had to tread lightly here, because I didn't want her parents to think badly of me for suspecting their daughter. I told them about how I found none of the flyers on this block, but did on the next. I said how I'd remembered Jennifer's comment about Lydia helping to post the flyers, which made me look at the first block again, but at Lydia's level this time, and how I'd found remaining pieces from those that had been torn off.

"I assumed Lydia isn't allowed to cross the street, so she could only remove the flyers on this block. Then, when I met you two," I indicated Lydia's mom and dad, "and you mentioned that Lydia had always wanted a kitten, but you weren't sure she was mature enough to have one, that was the final piece to the puzzle."

I looked over at the little girl, now lying asleep on the couch with Pickles curled up around her head.

"The guilty looks she gave when I mentioned that I was helping Jennifer solve the mystery told me she would confess at any moment." I looked back at her folks. "I'm actually surprised she didn't crack before now."

"Well, she always got worked up whenever we mentioned Pickles," said Lydia's dad. "but I just assumed she was really sad that he was gone. We were actually considering getting her a cat based on how much she missed him."

"I certainly don't want to reward her actions by getting her a pet now." Lydia's mom looked at her husband. "But maybe we could get her a kitten for Christmas."

He smiled in agreement. It seemed as though Lydia would have her own playmate in a few short months.

"Denny was right, Tabitha," Jennifer said when Lydia's parents went back to the living room to pick up their sleeping child. "You will be a great detective someday."