

PET IN PERIL

Previously published Worldwide Mystery title by

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LIGHTS, CAMERA, MURDER!

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PET IN PERIL

ONE

‘FRED AND BARNEY are depressed.’

‘That’s the silliest thing I’ve ever heard,’ Kitty said. Fran was her best friend and all but what was she thinking? Kitty served them each a plate of eggs and sausage at the kitchen table. OK, so it wasn’t *real* sausage. It was soy and quinoa sausage and Fran hated the stuff. She’d made that clear on more occasions than Kitty cared to remember. ‘Eat before your food gets cold.’

Fran kept up her monolog while generously pouring tons of ketchup over her breakfast because when it came to faux meat of any kind, Fran wasn’t a fan. Not even a faux fan. She said the faux sausage tasted like the recycled cardboard box the stuff came packaged in.

She said that often, too. The woman wasn’t one for holding back her feelings.

‘Animals can be quite emotional.’ Fran stabbed at an egg and took a bite. ‘I don’t know why you insist on paying extra for cage-free, free-range eggs when the eggs from the egg factory are cheaper. They all taste the same to me.’

Kitty nibbled at her food. ‘I feel bad for the chickens. They ought to be free.’

Fran rolled her eyes. ‘The next thing you’ll be telling is that we’re only going to be buying our eggs from chickens that have been home-schooled as well.’

‘Very funny. You did just say that animals have emo-

tions. Chickens are animals, too.’ Fran liked to tell people she had a Type A personality. Kitty liked to kid her that it was more a Type B personality, B as in blabbermouth.

‘And they do,’ Fran said between mouthfuls. She might have complained constantly about the food but it hadn’t yet stopped her from eating it. ‘And you have to pay attention to their emotions.’ She jabbed her fork in Kitty’s direction for emphasis.

Kitty wolfed down her food and stood, dropping her plate in the sink. ‘I don’t have time to discuss the emotional needs of my pets right now, Fran.’ She wiped her hands on her apron. ‘I have a business to run.’ The nature of Kitty’s gourmet pet chef business meant that she was up at the crack of dawn six days a week. On the seventh, she was glad to sleep in late, if the cat let her. The dog took a much more live-and-let-live attitude and allowed her to sleep in as late as she liked.

Fran turned to face Kitty at the stove. ‘You’ve got to listen to them. Every wag, every purr tells a story.’

This from a woman who’d never had a pet, not so much as a goldfish. Kitty was juggling various pots and pans. Every burner was ablaze. ‘You know I love Fred and Barney. They’re like children to me.’

She cracked open the kitchen window to let some air into the apartment. According to her weather app, it would be a haze-free day in Los Angeles with the high climbing into the nineties. Kitty grabbed a clean wooden spoon and began stirring it slowly around in a steel saucepan, watching the gravy turn golden brown. Kitty was baking a large meatloaf that would be sliced into smaller portions and distributed to several of her clients’ pets later that day. While she used to love the

meatloaf her mom made with ketchup on top, Kitty knew her clientele would like the beef gravy better.

‘I’m just saying,’ replied Fran, not one to back down. She’d gone on a sudden bead kick and purchased a bucketful of recycled kona wood hair beads and woven them into her long black locks. When she whipped her head from side to side, it made a sound like a soft rain falling through leafy trees. ‘Fred is in a funk. Barney, too, if you want to know the truth.’ Her green eyes fluttered as she scrunched up her pouty red lips to shoot Fred an air kiss.

Kitty peeked in the oven window. The meatloaf looked about done. The overpowering smells of meats and veggies brewing together in the small space was beginning to overwhelm her—almost as much as this conversation.

‘Now you’re going to tell me you know what *my* pets are thinking?’ She wiped her damp brow with the corner of her apron then pushed the window up the rest of the way. Kitty glanced appraisingly at Fred and Barney. Fred was the sleek black Labrador Retriever that she’d adopted from a local rescue organization. Barney was a frisky tuxedoed stray cat that had followed Kitty home one day when she was out for a stroll and had since more or less adopted her.

Were they looking a bit forlorn?

‘Maybe I should make an appointment with the vet.’

‘The vet?’ The New York faction of Fran’s accent grew stronger as she grew more strident. ‘They don’t need needles and shots or to have an ice-cold thermometer shoved up their tender nether regions.’ Fran Earhart was part German on her father’s side and all Jamaican on her mother’s side. She’d spent the first years of her

life in NYC, then the family had moved to Kingston, Jamaica in her father's effort to give his family a better life.

Later, Fran, hoping to make a living as a makeup artist, had struck off for Miami on her own, then LA. Fran eventually landed a job at Santa Monica Film Studios, which was exactly where Kitty was now working part-time as well. The two had met a couple of months back when Kitty had shown up for her initial meeting with the producer of a possible cooking show for pets. Kitty had got the job and a new bestie and roommate in the bargain.

'You asked my opinion and I'm giving it to you, girl,' Fran continued.

Kitty refrained from correcting Fran. She had definitely *not* asked for Fran's opinion about the state of her pets' mental health.

'Fred and Barney are in a funk. It's time you took them to see a shrink. The vet,' she snorted. 'Katherine Elizabeth Karlyle, I cannot believe you even said that. Shame on you.'

Kitty shook her head firmly. 'I am *not* taking my dog and cat to a pet psychologist. That's crazy,' Kitty replied. 'No pun intended.'

Katherine was her given name but everybody called her Kitty. When she was a mere babe, her parents had owned a silvery Siamese named Princess. Every time her mom called 'Kitty, kitty, kitty,' to attract the cat, baby Katherine had come running—or crawling to be more precise—thinking that her mother was calling her. Thus, a nickname was born. Princess, on the hand, never came running unless the kibble bag was shaking.

‘I think it is exactly what you, Fred and Barney need. Right, Fred?’

The Lab raised his head at the sound of his name.

‘Don’t you dare answer, Fred.’ Kitty waved her spatula then turned her attention to the two-quart saucepan on the back burner. She was making up a batch of her popular liver and oatmeal bran dog biscuits. ‘Psychologist, please. I am not about to go all Hollyweird like my clients.’ She didn’t mean that in a bad way. Kitty ran a struggling gourmet pet chef business out of her house and relied on the wealthier members of Los Angeles society whose pets she created meals for on a regular basis. Her clients were quirky but harmless for the most part.

Of course, all that was changing now with the new TV show, *The Pampered Pet*, coming to TV in a few months. They’d already shot and aired a pilot and were well into the first season’s batch of episodes, with three shows ‘in the can’ as Greg Clifton, the show’s director, liked to say. Now that she was a newbie TV cooking show host she wasn’t struggling quite so much these days. Except with her roommate’s rantings.

Kitty was still waiting not so patiently for her first real paycheck from the show. She’d been hounding the show’s producer who continually promised the check was on its way, but somehow the money hadn’t made it into her slim checking account yet.

Fran had suggested she hire an agent to represent her. That was one suggestion of Fran’s that she might be right about. Fran had given her the names of a couple good-sized local agencies and Kitty was considering talking to one of them soon.

‘Why not see a psychologist?’ Fran said, not letting

go. She dipped her index finger into the big yellow mixing bowl on the counter between them then licked it clean. 'Not bad. Could maybe use a little more salt.'

'Hey, those are for my clients' pets.' Sure, the girl wouldn't eat tofu but she had no problem eating pet food.

'Oh, you mean those same clients that take their precious little poochies and kitties to pet psychologists?' Fran folded her arms and taunted her roommate. 'In fact, girl, didn't you tell me that you actually got one of your client's pets that way? You know, that magician guy whose wife I met.'

'The Fandolfis,' Kitty muttered as she popped a tray of doggie bones in the oven above the meatloaf.

'What was that?'

Kitty slammed the oven shut a little harder than necessary. 'I said the Fandolfis.' Her voice held a note of resignation. It was true. George Newhart, a pet psychologist in Beverly Hills, had referred a pet or two her way. He'd spotted her business cards tacked to a bulletin board at a local health food shop, grabbed several and handed them out to his clients, several of whom had apparently expressed a need to do even more for their precious pets than the already outrageous act of taking them for pricey weekly sessions with a pet psychologist.

Kitty cast a nervous glance at the ceiling. The rattling of the stove, not to mention Fran's booming voice, might raise the wrath of her upstairs neighbor, Mirabelle Stein. It didn't take much to get that wrath in gear. The Widow Stein was a deceptively demure-looking elderly woman of French-Jewish descent who lived directly upstairs from Kitty. If the Widow Stein had been

mannung the Maginot Line the Germans might never have invaded France.

Mrs Stein typically could be found wearing a black frock with white piping and smelling of rosewater. She also quite typically had a tart countenance—like she spent her days sucking on sour, hard lemon candies—at least, she looked that way every time Kitty ran into her around the apartment complex. An occurrence she always dreaded and did her best to avoid at almost any cost.

The widow's one joy in life seemed to be complaining about Kitty and her pets to the building's manager, Jerry Frizzell. While she had rarely seen Jerry, she had often heard him—usually when he was demanding the rent or when he was relaying one of Mrs Stein's latest complaints against her. Sometimes he put those complaints in writing and delivered them to her in the much-dreaded form of written notices. Kitty had a stack of them in the back of her bureau, buried behind her underwear—where they belonged.

At least rent hadn't been a problem of late. With Fran as a roommate to share expenses with Kitty's finances weren't as bad as they'd been the past couple of years. And though the money had not yet been very forthcoming, with the new gig as host of *The Pampered Pet* on the CuisineTV network on top of her somewhat sketchy career as a gourmet pet chef—a job she loved despite its hardships, lack of security, meager pay and Hollyweird clientele—her credit rating had improved, if not her aforementioned checking account. Fortunately, Santa Monica Film Studios was giving her a small advance against her CuisineTV contract money.

Sure enough, three resounding bangs rattled the overhead lights. *See what you did?* mouthed Kitty.

Fran snorted and launched her boot at the ceiling. It struck heel first. ‘Keep it down up there, Mrs Dingbat! Some of us are still trying to get our beauty sleep!’

The black leather boot clattered to the kitchen floor and Fred dutifully retrieved it for her, albeit a bit slobbered up, but Fran didn’t seem to mind. ‘Thanks, Fred. Good boy.’ She glanced up at the ceiling. ‘Somebody’s going to kill the old dingbat one day.’

‘Must you?’ Kitty asked. The boot had left a three-inch long curved scuffmark on the ceiling. How was she ever going to explain that to the landlord the next time he came to inspect the place?

‘What? What did I do?’

Kitty shook her head. ‘Come on—help me load this stuff up.’ She glanced at her watch. ‘We’re going to be late as it is and you know how Steve gets.’

As Kitty backed the car out of its slot, she caught a glimpse of Mirabelle Stein, dressed in shaggy pink slippers and a matching housecoat, coming up the walk and heading for Kitty’s front door. Her gray hair was done up in a haphazard knot atop her diminutive head. Kitty hadn’t heard the end of the boot-throwing incident.