THE SECRET LIVES OF CATS

by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Art by Mark Evan Walker

* * * *

Science fiction writer Kristine Kathryn Rusch uses the pseudonym Kris Nelscott when she writes at novel length in the mystery field. Says the *Seattle Times*: “Nelscott excels at setting a scene...” and that’s true whether the scene is one of big, historical events such as the 1969 Chicago Eight trial, which forms the backdrop to her last P.I. Smokey Dalton novel, *Days of Rage*, or the very small world of cats, which she enters here.

* * * *

Homer Ziff didn’t believe in adages, but after his long and eventful spring, he couldn’t help but think that whoever put the words “curiosity,” “cat,” and “kill” in the same sentence had to be onto something.

It all began with his own curiosity—about his cats. Homer Ziff lived alone with two indoor cats and six outdoor cats. Well, six he could pet and hold; there were others—the friends, neighbors, and hangers-on, he called them—who visited at meal time or for a rest on the back forty in the midafternoon sun.

Not that he had a real back forty. But his backyard was an impressive three acres, complete with woods and stream. One of the reasons he’d bought the house was that it had the best of both worlds: In the front, he had a small lawn that led to a quiet residential street; in the back, he had acres of property that covered a protected wetland. No one would ever build behind him, the lots next to him were full, and the houses across the street had reached their maximum size according to code.

He knew his neighbors by sight (rather like he knew their cats) and he would nod at them whenever he saw them, but didn’t engage in conversation. He couldn’t bring himself to talk to them, not after his first attempt, when he’d stuttered at a man several doors down, and the man had rolled his eyes and walked away.

Homer would like to have blamed his surly neighbor for his own lack

of congeniality, but that wouldn't be fair or accurate. Homer didn't engage most people in conversation. He had a stutter that got worse when he was nervous.

Over the years, he'd learned to prefer his own company. He liked being alone with his thoughts and his cats and his property.

And it was his thoughts that made being alone possible. Not that his thoughts were original—sadly, they weren't—but they were organized, and that had given him an edge. Once upon a time, he had been a professor of physics at Oregon State University. A rising star when he was hired, he'd become a stalled star by mid career—a man for whom the great things expected never materialized.

Which would have been well and good except that stalled stars had to be stellar teachers and he was not. He was pathologically shy, and his stutter got worse in front of large groups. He was better one on one, but stalled stars weren't allowed to teach the smaller classes. He had to teach some large sections as well, and he dreaded them the way he dreaded a visit to the dentist.

But he did have one valuable skill. He could explain things clearly. His gift of clarity had gotten him through graduate school and into an important teaching position. And it made him into something of a rebel.

Because of his gift, he threw out the suggested text for 101 Physics (a more confusing book he'd never seen) and wrote a series of notes that sold in the campus bookstore—not just to his students, but to students from other physics classes. The bookstore owner called him one day to ask whether students at the nearby University of Oregon could purchase the notes. Then students from some of the private colleges made the drive from McMinn-ville and Portland to get his notes, and finally, the chairman of his department said, "Y'know, Ziff, you could make a fortune on those notes if you just turned them into a book."

So he did. It became the number-one 101 Physics text in the country, which led his publisher to ask if he would write a simple physics book for the masses, which he did, and another for children, which he did, and suddenly Homer Ziff no longer needed to worry about being a stalled star. He had become a rising star again—or maybe even an established one—and could have his pick of the courseload within his department.

Only the books had given him another gift. Financial independence. He no longer had to teach. And since standing in front of students made

him so nervous that he sometimes spent the hour before class in the restroom, he decided that the prudent move would be to quit.

He bought his marvelous house, made sure his finances were in order, and then retired to write a half-dozen more popular science books, with more under contract.

Some days, the cats were his only companions. He didn't mind, really. He never stuttered when he spoke to cats, and they didn't care that he lacked original thought.

They were happy that he provided food and shelter and a bit of companionship.

He was happy to have them purr.

Because of them, he had become a little cat-obsessed.

He had been surfing the Net one night when he discovered a Web site designed by a man in Germany. The man sounded like a kindred spirit. He lived with a cat to whom he devoted an inordinate amount of time. That cat was an indoor-outdoor cat, and the German man wondered how his cat spent his time outside the house.

So the man, who appeared to be some kind of engineer, modified a digital camera, put it around his cat's neck, set it up to take pictures every minute and a half, and sent the cat on its way. The resulting photographs were charming and inspiring.

Homer found himself staring at his outdoor friends, wondering how their days went. One cat's routine illuminated the life of one cat. Six cats' routines might actually be the beginning of some kind of scientific study.

At least, that was what he told himself as he used the instructions on the German man's Web site to build six "catcams." After some struggle, Homer managed to attach them to five of his outdoor favorites (he gave up on the wily old tom—who not only drew blood, but managed to slice him up badly enough to require fifteen stitches on his left hand).

Then he sent the five on their mission, hoping to discover the secret lives of cats.

* * * *

And he did. He discovered all sorts of marvelous things.

He saw the same feline faces in his yard, in his neighbor's yard, at the century-old schoolhouse down the street. He realized that each cat had not only its own routine, but shared a neighborhood routine as well.

Mornings began at his house, with a treat of kibble and soft food, followed by a trek to the dumpster behind the local Burger King, then a long rest under the bleachers at the old school.

The ground beneath his neighbors' cars and his own Ford pickup served as sites for daily conferences. A house three blocks away provided an afternoon snack, usually followed by dumpster diving at a local fish market and the nearby Dairy Queen.

On warm days, the cats tromped down to the wetlands for drinks from the springs that prevented anyone from building behind Homer's property.

He would have blessed those springs, if he hadn't seen something curious.

On the earliest photos the springs looked like a primeval swampland. Cats, due to their low-to-the-ground perspective, took the most amazing photographs. Apparently the wetlands at dawn (or was it dusk?) had ground fog, which made everything opaque and surreal.

The swamp (he didn't know what else to call it) had tree limbs and branches and sticks rising from the muck, all hidden by the ghostlike grayness of the fog. To his surprise, the cats didn't drink from the water here. They sat in front of it—all five of them—as if they were watching something.

Subsequent photos on different days showed something that resembled an elephants' graveyard. What he'd initially thought were tree branches were bones sticking out of the mud. Some of the bones were covered in moss. Others had ivy growing around them like large green cobwebs.

The ivy gave him some perspective, but not enough. He couldn't tell what kind of bones these were. Cats are small creatures and the cameras took photographs from that small perspective. Bones which seemed huge in some photographs seemed tiny in others.

Those others, he soon realized, were taken from some kind of height.

Either that particular feline photographer had climbed a tree or it sat on a bank or it watched from a stump.

Homer found it curious that the cats never got close to the elephants' graveyard. They always sat back. But as the weeks went on and the photographs accumulated, Homer realized that the graveyard was a spring haunt, just like the school had been in the winter.

The cats weren't interested in food; they were observing something.

And that intrigued him.

Because cats, like humans, had a scientific turn of mind.

* * * *

He had noticed that scientific frame of mind from the day he brought home his first kitten. Cats not only studied things, they made a study of things. One of his cats decided to probe the mysteries of ice cubes—how they turned into water, whether they could be carried, why they sometimes shattered. Another spent an entire week learning how the front doorknob turned. Eventually that cat learned how to turn the knob herself; fortunately she never did figure out the necessity of pulling the door open.

Or maybe opening the door didn't interest her. The front door was the only one with a cut-glass doorknob. It refracted light. The cat may have been more interested in the prisms inside the knob than in using that knob to go outside.

Homer never mentioned these thoughts to anyone else. He often felt as if he put too much time into his cats. And then he discovered that German man's Web site, and realized he was not alone in his obsession with cat thought.

But, Homer would have wagered, the German man did not have an entire second computer devoted to the photographs that the cats created. Nor, Homer suspected, did the German man spend as much time trying to figure out what his cats were thinking as they stared—not just at the elephants' graveyard, but also from underneath cars or beside dumpsters.

The cats seemed involved in a part of life that Homer had somehow missed.

* * * *

As the spring went on, he realized the cats were studying the elephants' graveyard the same way that his indoor cat had studied that doorknob. They just hadn't gotten to the touching stage yet.

He would know when they did. Daily, he got a series of photos of the backs of pink tongues, lapping water from a puddle or a stream or a bowl that someone had placed outside. He would get photographs of near-dead prey wriggling out of a mouth.

But he saw nothing like that near the bones.

Only cats, watching the swampy water as if it held the secret of the universe.

Then, one Sunday afternoon, everything changed.

A little white female he called Mata Hari, because of her attractiveness to the males (even after she was fixed) and her tendency to wander off on dangerous and secretive missions of her own, brought home a defining photograph.

Every day, she sat in the same spot near the swamp. The little camera around her neck took a variation of the same photograph—a bone fragment sticking out of the primordial ooze. Sometimes the fragment was brown with mud and sometimes it looked almost white. But over time, he realized it was the same fragment, which meant she sat in the same spot daily, studying something that she felt was important.

Only that Sunday, the fragment was covered by a human hand.

The hand loomed in the photograph, the fingers dominating the scene. They rose upward toward the sky, the ridges of the knuckles visible against the blackness of the muck. Dried cuts marred the flesh along the back, and the fingernails—clipped short—had dirt embedded all the way down to the skin.

Mata Hari had brought home ten pictures of the hand, which meant she spent fifteen minutes contemplating it, twice as long as she usually spent at that spot. The cat had managed to get several different angles, and oddly, each was farther away than the previous one.

The hand put the other bones in perspective. He returned to his photo files, opened the relevant pictures next to the photo of the hand, and

compared.

His breath caught. What had seemed like animal bones—small and fragile, old, abandoned, like elephants in their graveyard—were not. They were too large. He had been more accurate with the foggy photos when he'd thought of the bones as branches and logs.

These bones were large. No domesticated animal, except maybe a Husky or a Rottweiler, would have bones like that. Nor would most of the wild animals around here. This area was too populated for bears, even with the wetlands below. Maybe a deer or two had died down there, but certainly not a bunch of them. The coyotes were the size of raccoons, and barely larger than the cats, and there were no wolves here.

Which left only one other creature that could have provided the bones.

Humans.

And the latest victim had just arrived.

* * * *

He needed to know if any of the other cats had photographs of the hand.

He got up and peered out his window. Two of the other cats had returned. He stepped outside and removed the memory card from both cameras, careful to put in a new card before he shut the cameras off. He'd tried night photos before, but the flash had scared the cat so badly that it had run in circles, screaming.

He hadn't known cats could scream.

He gave each cat some pets and a small treat, then went back inside and downloaded the photographs.

In every bunch, a handful were duds—blurs, unrecognizable objects, a paw in front of the lens. These two batches were no different. But he set aside the blurs and unrecognizable objects this time, deciding they might be useful.

Then he scanned the images until he got to the swamp.

These cats had come to the graveyard as well, and at about the same time as Mata Hari. In fact, one of the unrecognizable objects might have been her haunch as the other cat sniffed her in greeting.

These cats stayed even farther away. He found photographs of an entire arm, covered in bruises, and a bit of shoulder. His hands were shaking as he magnified the images.

The arm and hand had clearly come from the same place. He could see the bone fragment, the moss-covered bones, the ivy-covered bones, and the brackish water. Now he knew why the cats didn't drink here.

He wasn't even sure why they came—they were well fed, so they didn't need to eat decaying flesh. Were they watching something decompose? Or were they hunting the rats or some other creature that frequented the wetlands?

For the first time since he started this experiment, he felt frustrated that he couldn't ask.

And then he found the money shot.

Or what would have been a money shot had he been a photographer along the lines of Weegee—the man who photographed corpses at crime scenes.

This shot was worthy of Weegee as well: a naked woman, her back arched, arms and legs splayed over what he had once thought were branches, her face turned toward the camera.

His shaking grew worse as he magnified this image. Her face had no real expression. The mouth was open, battered and bloody, the nose flattened, the cheeks covered in either blood or dirt.

But the eyes got to him. The eyes didn't look human. They looked like something out of a bad horror movie—filmed over with white, unfocused, and empty. It wasn't even fair to say that they were staring, because they weren't. There was no intelligence behind them, no thought, no anything.

He leaned away from the computer and frowned. Something about the image was familiar. At first he thought it was simply the way the woman had fallen, and then he realized what it was.

She had come to his door. Four days ago. She'd parked her SUV

against the curb, the windows open, her daughter—who was ten, maybe eleven—crying inside.

The woman had knocked, and he almost didn't answer because she looked so angry. But when he pulled the door open, she smiled at him.

"My daughter is selling candy so that her band can go to the regional tournaments." She opened the box. "Would you like to buy something?"

He didn't look at the candy. He looked at the crying girl in the SUV, wondering what her story was. He could probably guess. She didn't want to sell the candy, but her mother had tried to force her. And when that hadn't worked, the mother decided to do it herself.

"She's shy," her mother said, as if confirming his thoughts.

He couldn't condone this kind of behavior, not from an adult. He hated bullying in all its forms, having been a victim of it when he was young and skinny and too nerdy for his own good.

But the woman made him nervous, and he couldn't say what he wanted to, which was, *Let your daughter be herself. Not everyone is a good salesperson.* Or good with people. Or even good one-on-one.

Instead, he struggled with, "N-N-No th-th-thanks."

And shut the door.

The woman remained on the porch for a moment, as if she couldn't believe he'd been that rude, and then she'd walked back to the SUV. She'd tossed the box of candy at her poor daughter before getting inside and driving away.

If she was here, in this swamp, somewhere in the neighborhood, where was the little girl?

He was reaching for the phone before he even realized what he was doing, and dialed 911. When the operator answered, he said, "I think there's a dead body in my neighborhood."

And that brought the detectives to his door.

* * * *

They were in plain clothes, but they showed him badges. He recognized both detectives from the local paper. They had been working on some kind of task force, and they had their pictures in the Metro section often enough that he could almost remember their names.

Fortunately for him, he didn't need to. They introduced themselves.

The man with the silver hair trimmed so close to his neck that it looked like whiskers was Detective DeCarovich. His partner, a woman who looked like she could bench-press Homer without any effort, was Detective Ortiz.

They came inside Homer's house without invitation, and wanted to know where he had seen the body. He brought them the photograph, which he'd printed out on his laser printer, and they asked again where he had seen her.

So he had to explain—slowly because his stutter acted up—about the cat cameras and the experiment. The detectives stared at him as if he were crazy, so he finally waved them over to the computer and showed them the German man's home page, complete with instructions on how to build the camera.

Ortiz was the one who finally realized that Homer was serious. She turned to him, her dark eyes wide and stunned. "You did this with your own cats?"

Then she turned toward Princess, his pampered white Persian, who looked like she had starred in the Fancy Feast commercials. Princess was lying on top of the red satin pillow he had placed on his couch as a joke, and she looked about as indolent as a cat could get.

"Not her," he said. "The outdoor cats. The more or less feral ones."

DeCarovich crossed his arms. He clearly didn't believe Homer and might even think Homer had something to do with the woman's death.

Homer crooked a finger. "Come with me," he said. "But quietly."

He led them into the kitchen, which overlooked the back forty. Fortunately, Mata Hari was in her afternoon spot, on top of a rock near an overgrown rhododendron, stretched out and sound asleep.

"See that box around her neck?" he said. "It has her camera in it. There are four other cats with cameras as well."

“Forgodsake,” DeCarovich said and shook his head. He clearly wasn’t impressed. He acted more like a man who had thought he’d seen it all, only to be surprised by something this weird. “Why would you do that?”

“Curiosity,” Homer said. “I wondered what they do all day.”

“Eat and sleep,” Ortiz said.

“Actually, no,” Homer said. “They’re quite active...”

And then he let his voice trail off. The detectives weren’t interested in his cats. They were interested in the photographs. DeCarovich was looking at the dead woman again.

“You really don’t know where this is,” DeCarovich said.

“No,” Homer said. “And I’m not even sure it’s on my property. It could be anywhere in the neighborhood.”

“Or farther,” Ortiz said. “Cats can have a territory of twenty acres or more.”

DeCarovich turned toward her as if she had suddenly gone as crazy as Homer.

She shrugged. “I grew up around cats.”

DeCarovich let out a small laugh, the kind a person used when he discovered he was among people he thought beneath him. Homer had heard that laugh a lot as a kid, and he didn’t miss it.

His face heated, and his throat tightened. The stutter would get even worse. He knew the symptoms. He had to struggle just to start his next sentence, but he knew the tricks: Don’t get stuck on one word. Instead, recast your sentence into something else.

“M-M-Maybe I can reconstruct where they go,” he said. He led the detectives back into his study so that he could open the computer photo files. “I have d-d-days’ worth of photos. Maybe th-th-there are l-l-landmarks.”

He called up the files and started with the swamp and elephant-graveyard photos, working backwards through each cat’s imagery

file. He wished now he hadn't thrown out most of the blurred and unfocused photos. They might tell him something.

Ortiz was leaning over his shoulder as he worked. DeCarovich walked through the room, studying Homer's books and his framed awards.

"You wrote these?" he asked after a moment.

"Y-Y-Yes," Homer said.

"Science guy, huh?"

He wanted to go for a self-deprecating "kinda" but the "k" would give him trouble. He had to settle for another stammered "yes."

"I guess guys like you would do stuff like this. Experiments, huh?"

But Homer was careful not to answer that vague a question. He still had the sense DeCarovich believed he was involved in that woman's death.

"Th-Th-The p-p-pictures?"

"Yeah." DeCarovich looked at him.

Homer nodded. His throat had tightened so badly he knew he wouldn't be able to get out another sentence easily.

"Damn," Ortiz said beside him. "These cats go underneath everything."

They did, too. Under leaves, between bushes, under rocks. There was no clear trail, nothing recognizable, at least to human eyes.

"You actually think this guy's onto something?" DeCarovich asked, no longer trying to hide his contempt.

"I think we finally found the boneyard," Ortiz said, and Homer was the one who shuddered.

He remembered the articles now. These detectives had just formed a task force to investigate a series of missing-persons cases, all women in their thirties who disappeared in broad daylight.

"Except we didn't find it, not yet," Ortiz was saying. "These cats can't

tell us where it is and if we try to follow them, we'll make sure they never go there again."

"We'll have to do a grid search," DeCarovich said.

"And destroy a lot of physical evidence along the way." Ortiz sighed. "At least now we know what happened to Ann Kemmel."

"Th-Th-That's the woman?" Homer asked.

Ortiz nodded.

"Wh-Wh-What about her daughter?"

Both detectives stared at him as if he had just confessed. He swallowed and forced himself to tell them about the incident with the candy bars and the SUV.

"F-F-Four days ago," he said.

"That's when she disappeared," DeCarovich said. "Only her kid wasn't with her. Her kid was at home the whole time."

Homer shook his head. "I saw her. She was in th-th-the c-c-car."

"How would you know?" DeCarovich asked.

"She was c-c-crying real hard." He felt his face get even redder. "I th-th-thought her mother was b-b-being mean."

DeCarovich's eyes narrowed, but Ortiz didn't seem to notice. She turned toward him.

He raised his eyebrows. "I thought we were too easy on her."

"I can't believe she was lying," Ortiz said. "She must have seen something. I'll bet she was scared."

DeCarovich shook his head. "She was just another—"

He waved his hand at Homer, and Homer wondered what word DeCarovich left out.

"She st-st-st..." Homer couldn't say the word. He never could under

stress. “She has a speech d-d-defect?”

“Like you,” DeCarovich said.

Homer nodded. He had been right, then. The mother had been treating her like his mother had treated him, believing that he could overcome his problems with just a little more hard work.

“She was in the car,” Ortiz said. “She was lying.”

“Lying,” Homer said slowly so that he wouldn’t stutter anymore, “makes a speech problem worse. Any stress, even small stress, will make the problem worse.”

He got it out without a single mistake. His cheeks grew even hotter. DeCarovich frowned at him, but it was no longer the frown of the impatient. It was a frown of consideration.

“You think the kid saw something?” he asked Homer, and Homer got that sense again that DeCarovich still suspected him.

Homer’s throat tightened, so he shrugged.

“I’ll bet she did,” Ortiz said. “We need to reinterview.”

“With the photographic evidence.” DeCarovich picked up the printout. “Can we keep this?”

Homer nodded.

“She’s going to be just as afraid of us as she was the last time,” Ortiz sighed.

Homer knew what she was imagining. Trying to interview a child whose mouth continually betrayed her would be difficult at best.

Ortiz took the photograph from DeCarovich. “Too bad you can’t put a video camera on those cats. Then we could just find the body and the evidence. There’s bound to be some if he’s been using that spot for the past five years.”

Five years. Homer started. They were investigating five years’ worth of disappearances? Five years of dumping dead women into a primeval swamp?

“It c-c-can’t be t-t-too cl-cl-close,” Homer said. “We’d smell it. Me and the neighbors. Bodies...”

He didn’t have to finish his sentence. Ortiz was nodding.

“You’re right,” she said. “We need a topo map.”

“You want wind charts too?” DeCarovich was being sarcastic.

“I’m serious,” Ortiz said. “If we can find the body without talking to that kid—”

“We have to talk to her,” DeCarovich said. “We have to know why she lied.”

Homer knew DeCarovich was right. But the two thoughts—the video camera and that little girl—gave him an idea.

“D-D-Don’t show her the photograph,” he said. “She won’t be able t-t-to t-t-talk after th-th-that.”

“Listen, buddy,” DeCarovich said, but Ortiz put a hand on his arm.

Homer made himself take a deep breath. “What I meant was I might b-b-be able t-t-to modify the c-c-cameras. Instead of every ninety seconds, I might be able t-t-to have images every five.”

“Which would just show us more leaves and trees and rocks,” DeCarovich said. “Nice try, but that’s going to give us more of the same.”

“No,” Ortiz said. “It won’t. It might show us where the cats go into the woods. Can you set up a time stamp too?”

“Yes,” Homer said. “If we know where they go in, the angle of the sun might tell us what direction they’re going.”

He realized after he spoke that he was no longer nervous. He liked the female detective. She didn’t intimidate him.

“These cats aren’t looking up,” DeCarovich said. “We can’t see sunlight.”

“Through the leaves, on the ground, we’ll get some stuff. C’mon,

Rick," Ortiz said. "You've done similar things with shadow."

"I still think we do a grid."

"Let's give Mr. Ziff a chance," Ortiz said. "His cats might help us."

DeCarovich snorted. "Like they can do that."

"They already have," Ortiz said. "They gave us Ann Kemmel, and a reason to reinterview her daughter."

DeCarovich glared at Homer. "You get one day for this nonsense. One day. After that, we do a grid."

As if Homer had a stake in not having a grid search. He just wanted them to find this poor woman's body. And figure out what else was down in that swamp.

Near his house.

Someone had been dumping bodies near his house. Near the safest place he knew.

He shuddered.

"Would you like a c-c-copy of th-th-the photo files?" he asked Ortiz.

"Yeah," she said. "We have some computer whizzes who might find some answers here. And give me the URL for that German Web site, so they know this is legit."

He nodded, made copies onto a CD, and wrote down the Web address for her.

She tapped him on the arm as a thank-you. "This is kinda cool," she said, holding up the CD in the jewel case he'd given her. "Who knew that cats did such interesting things?"

"Yeah," DeCarovich said as he led her out the door. "Like staring at dead bodies. Who knew?"

* * * *

Homer couldn't let DeCarovich's sarcasm and attitude get to him,

even though it brought back not only Homer's high-school days, but his teaching days as well. More than once, he'd caught his students in the hall, making fun of his stutter. Often they were the students from his 101 Physics class, and it was right after the unit on particles.

He had no trouble discussing electrons and protons or baryons and mesons. But quarks. Quarks caught him every time. That "ka" sound tripped him up and it got worse the longer he taught. The closer he got to the discussion of elementary particles, the more difficulty he would have.

Just like that little girl. He wished he could interview her. His stutter would put her at ease. She would be able to tell him what she saw or didn't see. She would be able to tell him how she survived when her mother hadn't.

He sighed and turned to the project at hand. He was glad he still had that sixth camera, the one the old tom had fought off. Homer was able to experiment with it. He couldn't set the timer for five seconds—it simply didn't work—but it could go off every ten seconds.

The problem was that it used a lot of energy when it took that many pictures. He found some larger memory cards, but he didn't have adequate batteries, and it was too late to buy any new ones.

So he would have to pick his times, hoping he got the right part of the day.

Then he checked his cupboards. He had a lot of canned salmon and tuna. He would need it. He would have to catch each of his feral photographers, remove their cameras, modify them, and reattach them. Then he'd have to catch the group again tomorrow and remove the memory card.

Twenty-four hours really wasn't enough.

But it was all he had.

* * * *

By dawn, he had replaced the cameras on all of the cats.

Mata Hari was the first to return. She brought him a lovely series of photographs of the undercarriage of every car on the street. Just as the memory of the camera filled, she had crawled under a fence near the

school.

He wondered if that was where she would go to get to the swamp, but he had no way of knowing.

He removed the camera, reset its automatic timer to begin shooting later the following day, but knew it would do no good.

DeCarovich would hold to the twenty-four-hour rule. The man probably still suspected Homer. Homer knew that by now, his fingerprints would have been removed from the jewel case to see if he had a criminal record (he did not) and the computer-crimes unit would make sure that he hadn't dummied up the German Web site. They would find that he hadn't faked the Web site and that his cats had been taking pictures now for more than a month.

DeCarovich would also check Homer's work history, his phone usage (which was almost nil), and his bank records, which would probably surprise the detective. Popular science books made money—even if men like DeCarovich weren't interested.

Although Homer didn't know how someone like DeCarovich couldn't be interested. His job was all about science. Just on this case alone, they'd be using topographic maps and sunlight angles; they'd be removing fingerprints and studying computer records; they'd probably be using DNA to identify what was left of the other bodies.

Just by that quick reckoning, Homer figured their work would touch on geography, physics, computer science, biology, and chemistry. And all of it—even the deductive reasoning that DeCarovich was probably using to continue to blame Homer—required a meticulousness that only the best scientists could achieve.

So Homer had to hope that the other cats would bring him something, something recognizable.

Something good.

* * * *

The answers he sought came, surprisingly, from Einstein—a small, shy male with a shock of white hair over his tiny furrowed brow. Einstein had been difficult to conquer: It had taken weeks to catch him to neuter him, and weeks after that to regain his trust. That he wore a camera at all was

amazing; that he actually showed Homer the trail to the body was a shock.

Homer thought Einstein was one of the few cats who didn't make a daily pilgrimage to the swamp. Apparently he did go, just didn't stay as long as the others, and so sometimes he didn't get a good photograph. Also, Einstein was the cat whose photos were most likely to blur because he ran almost everywhere.

But on this morning he meandered toward the swamp through the hole in the fence that Mata Hari had found, around a stone with the year 1908 carved into the top, and then down an embankment into a copse of trees.

Einstein actually followed a tiny trail. Homer hadn't noticed it on the previous shots because it looked like a bare line in the earth, nothing spectacular. But on the ten-second shots, it was clear that the bare line was connected to other bare lines—a rabbit path that wound around the 1908 rock and into the trees.

There he saw a moss-covered old-growth stump from some ancient logging, and several late-blooming irises in front of a ruined log that Einstein crawled on top of to peer into the swamp.

The body looked worse today; less like the woman Homer had met and more like a corpse. Einstein had gotten several good pictures of it, and Homer didn't study any of them.

Instead, he copied the entire memory card onto a CD, printed the files, and called Ortiz.

She wasn't at the station. The dispatch patched him into her cell. She answered on the fourth ring, sounding annoyed.

Homer identified himself, then said, "I think I know where the path is."

"Thank God," she said. "We'll be right there."

And they were. Within fifteen minutes, they had parked in front of his house. DeCarovich looked less dyspeptic today, but Ortiz seemed frustrated.

They had been talking to the little Kemmel girl when Homer called, although "talking," DeCarovich said, "isn't really the word for it."

Homer didn't ask about it. He figured they'd tell him if they wanted to. It wasn't his investigation, after all. He was just helping with one small part.

He put the printed photographs in a line, with little gaps between them. Next to them, he put a map of this section of the neighborhood.

"See this?" he said, pointing to the fence. "That's part of this house."

He pointed to a house not far from the school.

"And this rock?" he said. "It's behind the school. They christened it last year as part of a rededication. It's been there since the school was built."

He had highlighted what he believed to be the path leading into the trees.

"I figure you can use the landmarks—the irises, the old-growth stump, the log—to find her."

"You didn't look?" DeCarovich asked.

Homer frowned at him. No one in his right mind would investigate this on his own, not when he understood the science of trace and the importance of keeping a crime scene uncontaminated.

"No," Homer said. "I figure th-th-that's your job."

The stutter surprised him. He thought he was confident enough in his map not to tighten up. But that hint of a threat in DeCarovich's voice had been enough to bring back the stutter.

"We need to go down there," DeCarovich said.

"Let's send a team," Ortiz said, studying the photos.

"Let's not waste taxpayer dollars until we know we're in the right place."

For once, Homer agreed with DeCarovich. They didn't say much more to him. They took the printed photographs, the map, and the CD, and then they left.

He felt at loose ends. Despite his sensible thoughts about the crime

scene, he did want to investigate it himself. He wished he were more involved.

After all, his cats had been the ones to discover what Ortiz had called the body dump. If only they were trained cats. He could send them down the path to the swamp with cameras around their neck and watch as the detectives officially found Ann Kemmel's body.

But he couldn't assign the cats anything, and he could only view what they wanted to look at. Mostly, all they cared about was the undercarriage of cars.

Then he frowned and headed toward his computer. The cats loved the undercarriages of SUVs more than actual cars. SUVs had big tires and a wider frame, but a lower undercarriage than a truck. That gave the cat a lot of places to hide and even more places to visit with little feline friends, all in the comfort of a shady spot on the street.

But one photo had come to mind. A photo taken by yet another cat—Galileo—somewhere around the time of the candy-selling incident. It had been a blur photo, and Homer had tossed it, but he hadn't yet cleared off the memory card.

He grabbed all the cards that needed clearing and started cycling through them one by one. He didn't find any more images of the path to the swamp—he knew he wouldn't—but he did find several of a parked SUV with unfamiliar tires.

And then he found the photograph he was looking for. Two photographs, actually. One of a skinny leg with a single pink girl's tennis shoe about to touch the pavement—and another of a pink-and-blue blur disappearing behind a bench across the street.

He closed his eyes, trying to remember what that crying girl had been wearing that afternoon. He just remembered her face, splotchy and humiliated, her eyes swollen from all the tears she'd shed. He could also remember the SUV, with its blue and silver metallic sides.

Silver, like the side where the pants leg brushed.

He opened his eyes and studied the next two frames. He didn't see any more pink-and-blue blurs, but he did know where that bench was. It was several doors down from his house, right across the street from his surly neighbor, the man who had rolled his eyes when he'd heard the ferocity of

Homer's stutter.

Homer went cold.

He wondered if he should call Ortiz. He didn't want to bother her, not when she was looking at the crime scene.

Instead, he opened a file on his computer, looked at the neighborhood map he'd downloaded earlier, and studied the wetlands.

They not only ran behind his house, they ran the entire length of this side of the street, ending (or beginning, depending on your point of view) at the century-old schoolhouse.

Anyone who wanted to could carry a body across their own personal back forty into the wetlands and walk through the overgrown wooded area to the swamp without being seen.

No wonder DeCarovich had suspected Homer. Homer fit all kinds of profiles. He was reclusive. He lived alone. He had access to the so-called body dump. He even inserted himself in the investigation.

His hands were shaking again. He wasn't sure if he had important information or not. The two detectives were still having trouble talking to the daughter. But Homer had evidence she left the SUV on her own and ran away.

Before or after her mother had disappeared?

He logged onto the Internet and looked up what he could find on the disappearance of Ann Kemmel. She only rated a few paragraphs in the paper on the day after her disappearance. But those few paragraphs were enough.

She and the SUV were missing.

She was last seen here on his quiet block in the middle of the afternoon on the day she disappeared, selling band candy for her daughter.

Just like he'd said.

He sank deeper into his chair. His mouth was dry. He was innocent. Ortiz knew that or she would have confiscated his computer. They would have come into his house with a warrant.

Or maybe they were waiting to find the body.

Maybe they needed just a little more for probable cause.

* * * *

A knock on the door snapped him out of his reverie. His heart was pounding and his face was already flushed. He knew he looked guilty. For all his caution, he had done so much wrong.

It would only be a matter of time before someone would come to arrest him.

He managed to leave his study, walk across his living room, and peer through the glass in the door.

Ortiz stood there, arms folded behind her back. There was no sign of DeCarovich.

When she saw Homer, she nodded. She didn't smile.

Here it was: fair warning. She had come to ask if she could search his house. He would tell her to get a warrant. He would use his small fortune to hire the best criminal defense attorney in the state. He might even get his publisher's publicist to get him some interviews on his good Samaritan deed gone wrong.

He pulled open the door.

"We found her." Ortiz sounded tired. "And the others, most likely. I just wanted you to know. Your cats were right."

He waited for her to say the next part, the part about searching his house or getting a warrant. But she didn't.

She seemed to be done.

"Wow," he said. "The photos worked?"

"There was a cat path," she said. "The lab techs are down there now. It's a mess. But no one would have smelled it. Too far from houses. Too far from that school."

“The cats had to know.”

“The cats must have smelled something decaying, but it didn’t interest them. None of them are starving.”

He smiled in spite of himself. Her comment had echoed his thoughts.

And besides, she’d seen his outdoor cats. They clearly weren’t starving.

“Um,” he said. “I was wondering one other thing. Th-th-that girl? Did she run away from her mother?”

Ortiz frowned at him. “How did you know?”

“I th-th-think I found some more pictures.”

She came inside without asking, but she did take off her shoes. They had a swampy smell—or maybe she did—the beginnings of decay.

Princess and his other indoor cat, King, came out of the bedroom, sniffing the air. So that smell did attract them.

“I think I found pictures of the SUV,” he said, and told her about the underbellies of cars, how cats socialized there, and how much they seemed to like a shady spot on the road.

“We were talking to her when you called,” Ortiz said. “Poor kid. She’s going to need therapy for the rest of her life.”

He looked at the detective. She was already peering at the photographs on his computer.

“Why?”

“She says her mother went inside a house to sell band candy, and she ran away. She went to her grandmother’s, but her grandmother brought her home.”

“And no one saw the mother again.”

“That’s right,” Ortiz said. “Missing Persons wasn’t even that interested since the SUV was gone too. They figured the mother had run off.”

He pointed out the skinny leg, the pink shoes, the blur of blue-and-pink across the street.

“And you know where this is, don’t you?” Ortiz said.

He nodded.

She grinned at him. “Too bad we can’t put those cats of yours on payroll.”

“You wouldn’t like them as employees,” he said. “They go their own way.”

And it wasn’t until after she left, with more printed photographs and more files on CD, that he realized he had had an entire conversation with a woman he liked and hadn’t stammered.

At least, not much.

He thought of it as a victory.

He didn’t realize it was also the beginning of an odyssey.

* * * *

Ortiz and DeCarovich got a search warrant for the surly neighbor’s house and found blood in the basement, and all sorts of other grisly things. The man had done exactly what Homer had hypothesized: killed the women (after abusing them sexually), then waited until dark and carried their bodies through the wetlands to the wider swampy area, dumping them there. Sometimes he would move their cars before he killed them, sometimes afterwards.

DeCarovich believed that there was a car dump like there was a body dump, but so far, no one had found it.

Ortiz kept Homer apprised of all of it. She even visited him a few times, always asking about his cats. Finally she told him she wanted to go to dinner with him, but she couldn’t, not until the trial was over.

The trial. He hadn’t thought of it. The grand jury, the testimony. The cross-examination.

He could already see what was coming:

He was a central part of the case—actually, his cats were—and he would feel like a failing professor all over again. Stammering his way through his stories, wishing that he could find a way to mitigate the talking part, and still explain—meticulously—his role in the arrest.

He decided to write out his testimony, to plan it, detail by detail. And as he did, he threaded the photographs through the text.

It only took him a week to figure out what he had.

A true-crime book.

An unusual true-crime book.

No one else had ever written anything like it.

He summoned up his courage and showed it to his agent. She loved it. She proposed a few other books as well—one just a book of photography by his cats. She showed him a curious coffee-table book from several years before of cats painting (actually just sweeping their paint-covered paws over walls and floors) and told him it had been a bestseller.

He agreed to do it all, but prosecutors wanted him to wait until his testimony was finished so that he wouldn't be accused of helping the police for money.

He wondered how anyone would think he had rigged his cameras to his feral cats for money, but he knew that people could believe anything.

So he waited. And he testified. And he did feel humiliated.

Until Detective Ortiz—her first name was Susan—took him out for a celebratory steak dinner. She had praised him, called him brilliant, and even said he was interesting.

He didn't feel interesting.

But he liked her attention.

He liked her.

He was so glad that the case had wrapped up quickly. He had been a

star witness—not *the* star witness, though. That proved to be the little girl, with her father at her side, pointing out the man she'd last seen with her mother.

The surly neighbor, who no longer rolled his eyes at people who stuttered.

They had convicted him, two of the people he held in contempt. They had ended his life on the outside.

Two stammerers—two momentary stars—and five wandering cats, reluctantly sharing their secret lives bit by tiny bit.