

Cat Corner Circle

Caesar Rodriguez returned to the precinct, contemplating whether or not he made the right decision at the apartment. In his defense, a superior made the call, so he wasn't guilty of any misconduct. Still, he felt responsible for leaving his legendary partner in a deadly situation.

"Rodriguez, where's Vigenère?" the police chief asked impatiently, pointing to the growing pile of case files on his desk.

It wasn't out of the ordinary that the Inspector would cherry-pick the weirdest cases and disappear from time to time. As a result, the "easy cases" would mount in his absence. Caesar walked over to his desk and opened the top file. It was empty.

"Hey, Chief?" he shouted across the chaotic precinct floor, which was littered with spilt coffee and discarded crime theories. The open bullpen setup didn't make sense given the hectic environment. Agents crashed into each other like they were racing to an imaginary finish line.

Chief didn't respond. He was neck deep in requests from other precincts to scout potential next targets of an active serial killer who recently disclosed their name to the authorities: Killer Kat.

The constant threat of Killer Kat made everyone's past week a living hell. No one knew much about the perpetrator, who hid behind unsuspecting cats with detonating communication devices implanted into their bodies. These cats roamed the streets as strays until someone stepped within a cat's activation radius, at which point a recording would play. The last victim captured a piece of the message before he tried to run:

Hi, my name is KK. If you want to live, follow my instructions. Stay within ten yards of me at all times. If you disobey, I will release a poisonous toxin.

Four city blocks were affected by the controlled chemical explosion that followed, with symptoms ranging from paralysis to death. This killer wasn't bluffing. And worse, the victims seemed random.

Caesar double checked the blank case file, then discarded the folder onto another pile that contained an old note to buy his son a Dr. Seuss book as a present. His phone message light started blinking.

"Strange..." Caesar mumbled to himself. The phone hadn't rung.

He picked up the phone and tapped the blinking red button. As he listened to the message, something seemed off. Caesar punched his desk in disappointment when he heard the killer's voice in the background. Clearly another person was trapped by the recording's horrid demands.

His computer dinged with a new email notification. It was from the Inspector. Caesar hung up the phone immediately and clicked his inbox icon. It read: "Find me at 3120 Corner Circle."

Caesar sat down in his chair, puzzled by this demand. Before he could run a search, Chief walked over to him and added a folder to the case pile: a mascot had been assaulted during the local color run.

"Rodriguez, what's up?" The Chief leaned against his cubicle, clearly in a hurry.

"I think I just got a voicemail from another victim," Caesar replied.

"Another recording?" the Chief confirmed, pushing himself away from the desk.

"Yeah, but this one feels different," Caesar insisted.

“Track it down and keep me updated.” Chief pointed at Caesar as he backed into his office. “And find Vigenère, will you? We need him more than once a week.”

“Yes sir,” Caesar said quietly, imitating his Chief’s stiff posture and stern demeanor.

Another email notification ding – again from the Inspector. Caesar eagerly opened it, hoping for some clarification. It only contained one word: “NOW.”

He was used to the Inspector’s uncanny timing, but this seemed extreme. Everything that had happened since Caesar entered the precinct felt scripted. An empty file, phone message, first email, and now a demand to leave right when Chief’s office door shut. It was as if Vigenère could see him.

“Son of a…” Caesar chuckled as he spotted the newest addition to his cubicle – a chameleon that belonged to Vigenère’s previous partner, who recently retired. The Inspector gave him this glass figurine a few days ago, before they had entered the apartment. One eye shined a little differently, but Caesar never thought anything of it.

He waved his hand in front of the chameleon, then picked it up to investigate the eye further. Another email. Caesar smirked. He thought he had cracked the mystery, until he read the message: “You’re smarter than you look. Ready to play a game? – KK”

Caesar froze – Killer Kat? Did the retired partner sabotage Vigenère? Were they being watched? He quickly pulled up a map on his phone and searched for 3120 Corner Circle. Nothing popped up. Caesar slumped in his chair. The name itself made little sense. Circles don’t have corners.

Suddenly, 15 cats trotted into the precinct, followed by a hooded person, wearing a nondescript white mask. A couple agents jumped from their seats and reached for their guns in defense. They watched as the cats headed straight for Caesar, stopping by the drawer of his desk.

“Am I good now?!” the hooded person shouted to nobody in particular. Nothing happened.

“Sir,” Caesar addressed the man, “what is your name?”

“Ken Kennedy,” he replied in a muffled British accent, still shaking in fear.

“What happened?” Caesar asked, recognizing the potential significance of his initials.

“Sorry, I didn’t want to die,” Ken lamented.

Without the connection to an active serial killer case, Ken presented as a crazy guy who believed he was under duress from his over-controlling cats. Caesar knew better than to write him off. However, Killer Kat never led victims toward other people. This felt like a different MO.

“Nothing to be sorry about—is someone threatening you?” Caesar asked.

Ken pointed at the cats. Each had identical orange and white striped bodies with little brown noses, but only one showed a curious demeanor. The precinct had experienced copycat killers before, but usually well after they released information to the public. Nobody should have known about Killer Kat. The precinct just assembled a private criminal profile less than 48 hours ago.

“And what did they tell you?” Caesar watched the leading cat closely as it sniffed at his drawer.

“To stay within 10 yards…” The man was interrupted by Chief, who had heard enough.

“Mr. Kennedy, have you ever been here before?” Chief inquired bluntly.

“No, sir, I live in a different county,” Ken replied.

“Then why do these cats act like they smell something familiar?”

“I was told to follow them, wearing a mask, until they found Mom or Dad.”

“The cats’ parents?”

“Yes, sir. I was just as confused as you when we walked into this building.”

Chief tried to open Caesar’s desk drawer, but it wouldn’t budge. Clearly he’d forgotten about the recent security installment inside the precinct. Everyone’s desk drawers now required a biometric fingerprint and 11-digit passcode to open the lock.

“Rodriguez, open the drawer,” Chief demanded. He wanted to end this stupid act quickly.

Caesar scanned his thumb and entered his passcode into the keypad. The system denied his attempt. He tried again, same result.

“Someone must have changed it.” Caesar turned to Chief.

Ken’s phone began to buzz in his pocket. He slowly removed the device and handed it to Chief. It was a text: “If you want to live, solve the cube in less than 30 minutes.”

“What cube?” Chief asked impatiently.

“I have no idea,” Caesar answered, looking frantically around the room.

“Is that it?” Ken knelt down and confirmed his theory. The lead cat had a tiny cube attached to its collar. The other 14 cats had metal tags with three to six digit numbers to identify them. He unbuckled the leather strap of the cube collar. The desk drawer began beeping.

“Clear the building!” Caesar waved everyone toward the exit, flashing back to the apartment.

“Rodriguez, that’s not your call to make.” Chief stated.

Caesar confidently leaned in. “With all due respect, sir, this needs to stay between you and me.”

“Fine,” Chief nodded in agreement. People began to file out of the room. After documenting a clue inventory, Caesar ushered Ken and the cats into Chief’s office, playing it safe with the 10 yard rule.

With everyone gone, Caesar and Chief met back at the desk. They investigated the cube with a magnifying glass as the drawer continued to beep. Five minutes had passed. It looked like a logic puzzle—only two sides had words that made any sense. The other four were cryptic.

“The Inspector might be in danger,” Caesar blurted in a moment of silence.

Chief paused to stare at him, then said slowly, “I received a mystery message from Vigenère earlier today with two obscure rotated pictures of animals. The beeping quickened.

“Wait, what animals did he send you?” Caesar wanted to put the pieces together.

“A bull and a bear,” Chief replied.

Caesar’s eyes lit up. He realized 3120 Corner Circle from earlier was another clue. The rest of the puzzle fell into place. An 11-digit passcode revealed itself. Chief watched as Caesar typed the final digits into the keypad, then caught something glowing out of the corner of his eye. He dove to push Caesar to the ground as the chameleon exploded, sending glass shards in every direction.

“Nice work, gentlemen.” Ken opened the office door, removing his elaborate costume. It was Vigenère. He walked over to the keypad, hit enter, opened the drawer, and stopped the timer.