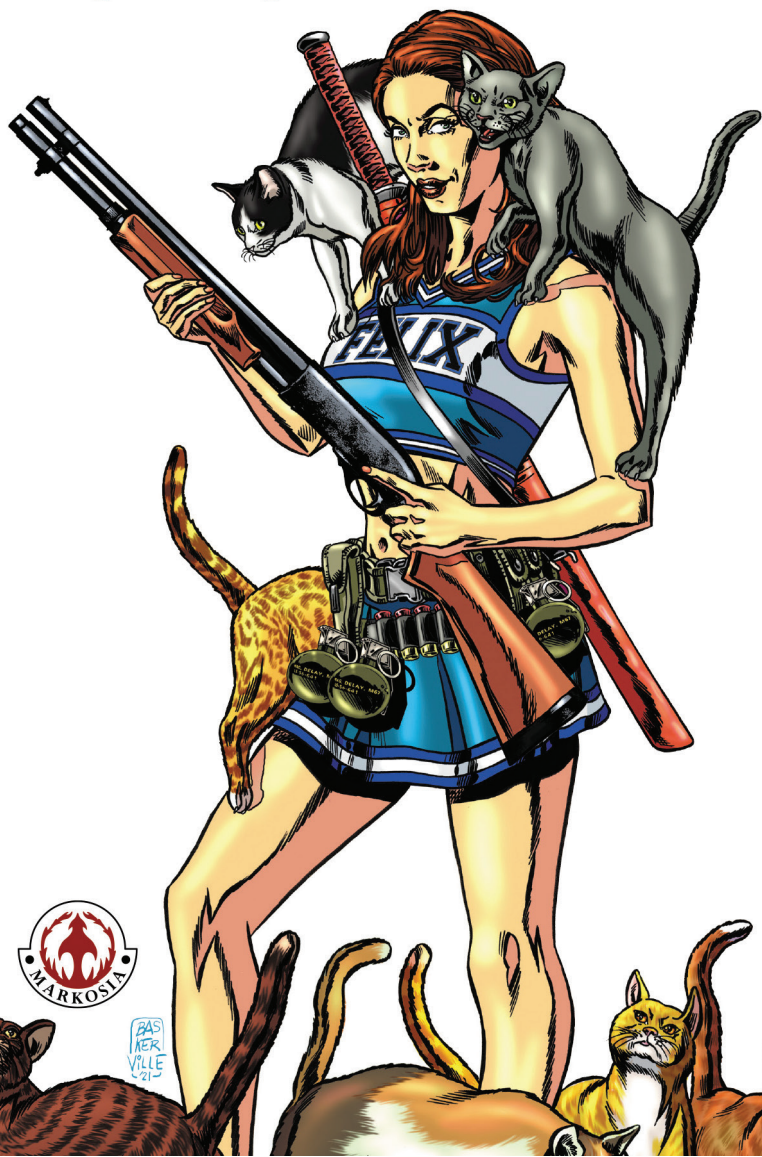


COMORBIDITIES

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Cat Problem

Chapter 1

I live in Felix, Colorado, and everyone here loves cats. Even the people who hate them. And that's why we paid attention when they started disappearing.

In Felix, people don't think with their minds; They think with their cats. Felix is like *The Truman Show's* set, cute and charming creeping towards dystopian. Virtually every house, every building, every public property homaged cats, like a company town for Bastet or some other supposedly extinct feline god. And, because Felix had an essentially cat-based economy, Felicians ignored certain downsides to cat concentrating, like extermination of the local bird and critter populations. In fact, even the few birds of prey occasionally swooping in for a cat lunch found themselves torn apart by the target's compatriots. (Actually, nobody complained about the birds till the

bugs got out of control, their natural predators having been obliterated, and so Felix soon became Colorado's insecticide capitol. They assure us the poisons aren't poisonous to us. Or the cats. But I digress...)

My stepdad, Killian, is an animal behaviorist. He said deranging the food chain inevitably deranges everything else. I guess he's kind of a prophet, but, and it goes without saying, the unheeded kind. Because living too long among cat motifs offsets the normal most other people take for granted.

Still, reality's been creeping into Catopia, like Poe's party-crashing Red Death. At first, no one noticed. Except Mayor Blanche. Mayor Blanche owned Felinities, a cat curio shoppe (her spelling, not mine) interdicting all forms of aesthetic refinement and good taste. Blanche was definitely toxoplasmotic: unmarried, pudgy, frumpy, and awkwardly friendly. Mayor Blanche spreadsheeted every cat she could, keeping birth and death records rivaling the town's vital statistics database. She maintained numerous social media accounts for her favorites. Felicians continuously updated them with selfies, photos, poems, stalker videos, and other expressions good manners used to curtail. She also tallied sightings, and when some of her favorites stopped appearing and she couldn't find their bodies, she started sleuthing. Only about a hundred accounted-for cats disappeared, and a hundred out of ten thousand is a who-gives-a-shit statistic, especially for a population size measured algorithmically to only 75% accuracy.

Still, Blanche was gonna Blanche. She melted down memorably at a town meeting and the video attracted the press.

XBC-Denver sent Aikiko Tang to cover the story. She was mid-20s, their prettiest and perkier talent, delighted to take an assignment promising to go national because cat people are, well, cat people. She stood in the town center with Mayor Blanche, their contrasting appearances amplifying the absurdity. Aikiko wore a suit conservative except for its too/low, too/high tailoring (well, depending on who you ask). Mayor Blanche was bitter-ending middle age in a teal sweatsuit rhinestoned with cats.

But they were both serious cat people, and that's all that mattered.

At least a hundred cats watched them from myriad crevices built into downtown, curious about the newbie accompanying their grand patroness. Milo, a fearless American Wirehair, approached Aikiko. Aikiko smiled, beckoning him. He jumped into her arms.

“Oh my God he's perfect!”

“That's Milo.”

Milo licked Aikiko's face.

“Oh my God can I take him home?” Aikiko cradled Milo while brandishing a microphone. Her camera operator gave a thumbs up.

“Okay, Omar.”

Game face: playful and professional. “This is Aikiko

Tang reporting for XBC-Denver from the town of Felix, Colorado. Felix is known, unofficially—”

Blanche interrupted. She couldn't help herself. “We're working on getting that changed from unofficially to officially!”

Aikiko nodded politely. “Felix is arguably the cat-friendliest town in the United States.”

Blanche, again: “Not just arguably. And not just here! We're the cat-friendliest place in the whole world!”

Aikiko declined to quibble. “Roughly ten thousand feral cats live here, thanks to cat-loving locals. They've even gone so far as to make the city-wide speed limit fifteen miles per hour to protect their little friends.”

Milo struggled in her embrace. She smiled. “In fact, while I was preparing for broadcast, this little guy decided to welcome me to town. His name's Milo!”

She put her nose to Milo's. “Hey, Milo!”

Milo meowed. “Oh my God, I love love love him! I could meme him forever!” She quickly regained composure. “Sadly, many of these critters have disappeared over the past few weeks. I'm here with Felix Mayor Blanche McCormick to discuss this mystery.”

Blanche, a politician, was comfortable before the camera even as her frumpy weirdness compelled and repelled viewers in equal numbers. “It's really heartbreaking. Over the past few months, some of our favorite characters have just, well, disappeared.”

“How many are missing?”

“We think about a hundred. I know that’s not a lot compared to ten thousand, but nobody thinks of people that way.”

“How do you know they’re missing?”

“Well, I just haven’t seen them. I keep a database of as many of them as I can. Photos, names, and vaccine records. I even tried taking paw prints for a while, but I kept getting bitten.”

Aikiko struggled to thwart the wrong kind of smile. Then Milo scratched her. “Ah!” He fled.

Blanche continued, indifferent. “We even have rewards out for the ones who have the most Instagram likes. I mean, that may sound inequitable, but we’re hoping that people will find other missing friends along the way.”

Omar laughed. Blanche frowned. Aikiko smiled.

I guess I should introduce myself. I’m Artemis Condon. I’m a high school senior. And a hottie. And, most importantly, a cheerleader. A school board member since watchlisted for a sixteen claiming to be eighteen had designed the Felix Wildcats Cheer Squad outfit I wore. Maximum jail-baitery. But that’s why we’re here, right? I mean, that’s why I was there. But please don’t write me off as a bimbo just yet. I think you’ll find me mildly compelling as we proceed.

I had new ink, a cheetah chasing its tail around my navel, intended to make a certain someone

who disdained what used to be unorthodox body modification to submit what used to be unorthodox feelings I'm pretty sure she had for me. Nearby, on my tablet, a world class cheer squad did a wildly dangerous, amazingly awesome wall pyramid flip my squad hoped to try.

My phone chirped. A text from Willow Oliver, Cheer Squad Captain.

- Williver: "Wot u ^ 2?"
Artemis: "Crushing on myself. New ink!"
Williver: "Bullshit! Where?"
Artemis: "Slut button north."
Williver: "GTFO!"
Artemis: "Wanna pic?"
Williver: "Ha!"
Artemis: "That's not a no."
Williver: "I wanna do it."
Artemis: "???"
Williver: "The thing."

A sharp breath. Mine.

Williver: "The pyramid flip."

Another sharp breath.

- Artemis: "Did u prax?"
Williver: "Nope. I'm just gonna Steroids+
PCP+ Trust in Jesus."