

Please enjoy this excerpt from
Time Spent With A Cat
by Chuck McKenzie

You're about to get a visitor," said the cat, sitting on—or rather, hovering about a centimetre above—the edge of my desk. It glanced pointedly towards the wall behind my chair, where my framed certificate hung.

State of Victoria
Department of Law Enforcement
Private Investigators Licence
James Carpenter

"Might want to straighten that up," the cat continued. "You really can't afford to look sloppy in front of clients right now, can you?"

I hate cats. I really do. Feral, lazy, arrogant creatures. So it does seem unnecessarily ironic that my Conscience took the form of a talking calico cat. Maybe the current popular theory about Consciences being 'shared subconscious projections' is

crap after all. Or maybe I just really do hate myself that much. Four whole months since everyone, worldwide, got a Conscience, and still nobody can explain a damned thing about it. All *I* knew for sure was that my previously thriving business had pretty much ground to a halt as society worked through the resulting chaos.

“Up yours,” I snapped, and flicked the pen I’d been holding at the cat. The pen, of course, passed right through the animal and clattered against the floorboards.

There was a knock on the door. Three sharp raps.

I bit down on the follow-up insult I’d been about to hurl at the cat. I’d already learned the hard way that potential clients get twitchy if they catch you swearing at a cat, even a possibly imaginary talking cat that everyone can see and hear. I stood up, angrily buttoning my coat. “Come in,” I called, forcing a smile

Of all the people I might have guessed would be at the door when it opened, Alan Cook wouldn’t have been one of them. I felt an expression of shock touch my face momentarily before I was able to clamp down on it, staring impassively at my visitor.

Alan nodded, flashing a smile that vanished almost immediately. “Hey, Jim. Long time, no see.” I said nothing.

Alan shuffled uncomfortably for a moment, standing there in full military uniform with his cap tucked underneath his arm. “May I come in?”

I sat down again, carefully considering my response. Clearly taking my failure to scream abuse as an invitation, Alan stepped into my office, leaving the door open behind him, which only fuelled my irritation.

There was a long, awkward pause.

“Well,” I said eventually. “This...is a surprise.”

Alan gestured towards the empty chair facing my desk. “May I?”

I made a vague gesture. Alan took a seat, placed his cap on the desk in front of him, then glanced around at the bookshelves and filing cabinets lining the walls. I opened my mouth to speak again, and at that moment a tall figure walked in through the open door behind Alan. “Holy crap!” I said.

Alan’s Conscience bowed, his eyes remaining locked with mine as he treated me to a huge grin that shone blindingly white against ebony skin. “*Beau-ti-ful* day, Sah! Allow me to introduce myself—”

“Baron Samedi,” I interrupted. “From the movie ‘Live and Let Die’.” I gave Alan a look. “I never knew you were a James Bond fan.”

Alan sighed. “I’m not. But we both know that counts for nothing.” He glanced pointedly at the cat on my desk.

Samedi laughed delightedly and clapped his hands together. “Just so, Sah! Just so!” His voice was rich and creamy, exactly as I remembered it sounding in the film.

“Well, I’m starting to feel better about being stuck with an animal I despise,” I said. “Better than being stuck with what probably comes across nowadays as an Uncle Tom routine.”

Alan’s normally pale face turned crimson. “It’s no bloody joke, Jim! Half the people I interact with now assume I’m a dyedin-the-wool racist!”

“You’re not?”

The crimson tone deepened. “No, I’m bloody not!”

“Well, if it’s any consolation, in ‘Live and Let Die’ Samedi used his seemingly subservient demeanour to cover the fact that he was actually a pretty damn scary dude. Powerful and deadly. Almost took out Roger Moore with a machete.”

“Gee. Thanks so much for that. I’ll send a memo around the office.”

I smiled thinly. “Unlike you, I *am* a fan. Want to swap?”

“Hey!” the cat protested.

“I wish!” Alan began to relax into his chair. “Wouldn’t *that* make life a whole lot—”

“Alan?” I interrupted.

“Yes?”

“What do you want?” I asked, wishing I hadn’t thrown the pen at the cat, so I could tap it against the desk to indicate how valuable my time was.

Alan drummed the fingers of both hands against the desktop for a moment. He looked stressed, but that’s what the army does to you. He was plumper than when I’d last seen him, with a colonel’s insignia on his shoulder-board. His uniform was beautifully clean and laundered, which meant he was either in a relationship, or far better domesticated than when we’d been cadets together. It looked like staying with the army had been good for Alan. And that stung. I’d been the one who’d been expected to rise through the ranks, after all.

“I wanted to offer you a job,” Alan said, at the same time as Samedi piped up, “He wants to apologise, Sah.”

Alan turned sharply in his chair. “Will you please be quiet?”

“Well, which is it?” I asked, glancing back and forth between them.

“Both would be good,” the cat said, and I felt an unfamiliar glow of camaraderie, which faded quickly.

Alan looked at the cat, then back at me. “It talks.”

“It does,” the cat confirmed. “Well spotted.”

I resisted the urge to snap my fingers in Alan's face to get him to focus. "Well?" I pressed.

Alan visibly floundered for a moment, and I almost felt bad for him. Almost. "Yeah. Both," he admitted. "Look, Jim—I'm truly sorry."

I waited.

"I never asked you to take the rap for me," he went on, "but..."

"But?"

Alan shrugged. "I should have spoken up. I know that. They clearly knew it was one of us, but I guess neither of us thought *you'd* get booted out over it. And when you were, I should have 'fessed up. Apologised." There was an awkward pause. "I do understand if I'm just a bit too damn late with this, but...yeah. I'm sorry."

I opened my mouth, having no real idea of what I was about to say.

"Apology accepted," the cat said, before I could get a word out.

I turned to berate the cat, then realised that despite the emotions stirred up by Alan's visit, the anger just...wasn't there anymore. "Yeah." I gave Alan a look, nodding slowly. "Sure. Okay. We're cool."

Alan did his best to maintain a military demeanour, but I saw how he sagged slightly in his chair. This clearly hadn't been easy for him. Not that I was ready to fully forgive him.

“So anyway, how the heck are you a colonel already?” the cat asked Alan. *A fair question*, I thought. It takes a minimum twenty-one years to go from officer cadet to colonel, even assuming one has the drive, ability and suitability for an army career. Last I'd seen Alan—just over fifteen years ago—he'd had none of the above, being an undisciplined party-brat looking for a blokey work culture to immerse himself in while he waited for his inheritance. The polar opposite of myself. Another reason why getting kicked out of the army had hurt me so badly.

Alan cleared his throat. “Look...what happened to you was a massive wake-up call for me. I knuckled down. Pushed myself. Had some lucky breaks along the way. And, if I'm honest, some rules were bent to get me to where I am now because it turned out I had a certain...*efficiency*...in overseeing tech projects.” “Special Operations, huh?” Alan said nothing.

“I bet it's Special Weapons,” the cat said in a sing-song voice.

Alan gave the cat a sharp look.

“*Definitely* Special Weapons,” the cat fake-whispered to me, extremely loudly.

Samedi inclined his head slightly. “We cannot tell you that, Sah. Unless, of course, you wish to take the job...?”

I drummed my fingers against the desktop for a moment. “Okay. So what’s the job?”

“Homicide investigation.”

“What? A murder?” I gave Alan an incredulous look. “Why the hell wouldn’t the military police be dealing with that?”

Alan looked down at the desk, then back at me. “There are...complications,” he admitted. “The deceased isn’t military, and wasn’t conducting her research on military grounds. She runs a private research company, and was about to pitch what she suggested would be a game-changing piece of tech to us. It could be...bad...on several levels if anyone directly connected to the military went barging in to investigate.”

The cat tilted its head quizzically. “Why not the regular police, then?”

“Yeah, good question,” I said. “Well?”

Alan cleared his throat again. “Well, the fact is that the tech in question, whatever it may be, was developed by the contractor using military funding, and if that information was leaked, even accidentally, by anyone outside of our department, it could have...repercussions.”

I raised an eyebrow, and sensed the cat doing the same.

“Repercussions?”

“Security repercussions. Such as hostile parties targeting the private companies we deal with.”

“So, just to be clear, Special Weapons is funding research by offsite private companies—presumably not provided with military protection, by the sounds of it—as, what? Private contractors? Why wouldn’t this be conducted at a military base, and by your own people?”

“It’s a newish policy I implemented,” Alan explained. “We take the budgeted research funds and, rather than allocating the full funding to our own developmental groups, we spread it across numerous private companies that are looking into areas we think may prove interesting, with the contractual stipulation that we get first pick of anything of value they come up with.”

“So these companies receive a sort of retainer?”

“Exactly. The funds tend to encourage a greater commitment to the research these companies are undertaking—”

“So it’s actually a bribe?” the cat interrupted.

“It’s an *inducement*,” Alan said firmly. “And because we’re not funding the entire process for any given company, our budget goes further than if we kept it all in house. We can spread it

across a greater number of specialist bodies, which yields greater results.”

“And when these companies discover something amazing, you swoop in and grab it?” I asked.

“No,” Alan said, looking rather aggrieved. “We don’t just ‘grab it’. We contractually agree to purchase the full rights to it, for a more than generous amount. After that, sometimes we provide additional funds for the company in question to further refine or produce the tech, and sometimes we take it off their hands and continue with further processes entirely in house, depending upon our requirements and circumstances. And the companies that come up with the goods tend to then receive ongoing funding to come up with more goodies. Everybody gets what they want.”

“It all sounds frightfully civilised,” I noted. “So, in a nutshell, you don’t want outsiders trampling all over this murder investigation because you don’t want them to mess with anything you’ve poured developmental money into?”

Alan nodded. “Exactly.”

“Anything else I should know?”

Alan sighed. “Yeah. Well, we filed a motion in court to convince a judge that letting non-specialist investigators in on this was potentially dangerous to the public. Additionally, we

reached a sort of compromise to ensure the investigation would be conducted by a non-military party so as to publicly distance ourselves from the case, with that party nominated by myself, while agreeing that I'd also personally remain in touch with the nominated investigator as a sort of safety liaison. You'd obviously have to submit full reports and sworn affidavits afterwards to disavow any possibility of collusion between you and I, but—”

“Okay, wait,” I interrupted. Something just wasn't adding up here. “So, I get why you can't have the cops or the MPs involved. But in that case, why not approach someone with the precise specialist experience you need, like a scientist, or someone else from the company the victim worked for, or even just someone who knows their military tech? Because I'm guessing that whatever knowledge your investigator needs, I don't have it. Outside of the tools I use as a private investigator I don't have any major expertise in technology, let alone current militarygrade tech, especially not after being out of the army for over a decade. Surely you could use the vast resources at your disposal to find and vet a suitable investigator, so I genuinely don't see why I'm your go-to guy for this investigation.”

Alan exhaled loudly. “Because we don't have the *time* to find and vet an expert, whereas I knew I could immediately get

the judge on board by citing *your* impressive record as a private investigator.”

I nodded, not entirely surprised. Once you’ve been in the army, they never really stop watching you. And I figured maybe Alan had personally kept tabs on me for the same reason that some people like to check up on ex-partners: a creepy combination of nostalgia, guilt, and obsession. “Is the judge not aware of our...history?”

Alan clenched his jaw slightly. “Very much so. I came clean about everything. Full disclosure.”

“That must have hurt,” the cat said. I didn’t have to look to know the animal was smiling smugly.

Alan nodded curtly. “Yes. But this is too important. I needed to demonstrate to the judge that you were one of the best at what you do, and that you weren’t going to do me or the military any favours.”

“Because Jim hates your guts,” the cat stated helpfully.

“Hey, cool it!” I snapped at the cat.

Alan shrugged helplessly. “Okay, yeah. And also—” I smiled thinly. “And also...because you could prove that that I can keep my mouth shut?”

“Just so,” Samedi said gently. “Just so, Sah.” There was an awkward pause.

“Okay,” I said eventually. “So why don’t you have time to find the expert you *really* need, as opposed to a convenient ringin?”

Alan fidgeted in his chair. “Well...the judge gave me a strict time limit on our nominee investigating the scene before she opens it up to the civilian police. She’s just as concerned about the military contaminating evidence as she was about the cops screwing with hazardous tech. Police forensics are already on the scene, assisting us, but—”

“How long?” I interrupted impatiently.

“Six hours.”

“FUCK!” the cat shouted. I bit down on a similar epithet, staring incredulously at Alan.

“From the time that I left the judge,” Alan added. “Which was an hour ago.”

I actually laughed. “Oh, okay then!”

Alan made a pleading gesture. “Look, I know it’s ludicrous, but it’s all I’ve been granted. So I need to know right now if you’re in or out.”

I hesitated.

“Look, we both know you don’t owe me a damn thing,” Alan continued, “but I’m over a goddamned barrel here, and the clock is ticking. If I can’t solve this case to the judge’s

satisfaction within the allotted time, the law is going to swoop in and secure the crime scene themselves, with everything Scott was working on taken as evidence—computers, notes, materials, the lot—and it could take years for us to get it all back, assuming that we ever do, which is unacceptable. So how about we move right past talking this through and jump straight to me offering you a ludicrous amount of money to take on the investigation? You know, to compensate for the ludicrous situation?” “How much money?” the cat asked.

“Samedi?” Alan prompted.

Samedi held up his right hand, palm facing towards me so I could see the dollar value that had materialised there, seemingly written in white chalk. *Interesting*, I thought. *Using his Conscience for secure communication*. “Your fee, Sah.” I blinked. My mouth may have dropped open slightly.

“Great poker face, dude,” the cat muttered.

I mentally shook myself, regaining my composure. “Right. Okay. That seems...fine. And what if I don’t actually solve the case?” I held up a hand as Alan opened his mouth. “To be clear, I will genuinely do everything humanly possible to crack this. But given the time limit—”

“I was going to say,” Alan broke in, “that this is just your consultancy fee.” The sum on Samedi’s palm shifted and

changed. “*That’s* your final fee if you manage to close the case.” I actually swore this time.

The cat gave me a look. “That’s a lot of kibble.”

“Okay,” I said. “Let’s...I mean, I’m in.”

Alan extended his hand across the desk. After a moment I stood, grasped it, and shook. “You can take me directly to the scene?”

“Car’s waiting outside.”

“Okay. Let’s go.”

“Look,” Alan said, as we took the stairs three at a time down to the street, our Consciences floating beside us, “the time limit isn’t necessarily as grim as it seems, because there’s really no doubt about who committed the murder. I was already on premises with some of my team, awaiting a demo of the promised tech. We heard a brief, shouted argument, then a gunshot. Rushed in, saw the husband standing near the body, nobody else in the room, nobody else on premises, windowless room with a single point of access.”

I frowned. “Sounds like an open-and-shut case. So what’s the issue?”

It was Samedi who replied. “Because there’s no weapon, Sah. No weapon at all.”



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