

The Cat Who Saved Straker's Life

by Pamela McCaughey (2001)
based on the series "UFO" (1969-71)
created by Gerry and Sylvia Anderson, and Reg Hill

An illuminated clock on the bedside table read 4:34 am. The predawn silence had been interrupted by a startled "Ow!" Then Straker realized he's been the victim of another early morning ambush. He reached out to snap on the light, and in doing so, moved his foot under the covers.

Thump! Another "Ow!"

"Friggin' cat..." he muttered, his bleary blue eyes staring down to the end of the bed where another set of blue eyes returned his gaze.

A kittenish grin was on her little black masked face, and her hind end was gyrating, waiting for more undercover movement. Straker wriggled his toes and Cleo-catra pounced gleefully on his foot again, sinking her needle-sharp fangs into his flesh, even through the sheet.

"Hey you! That hurts!"

But, Cleo just looked up at Straker, with blue innocent Siamese eyes, in mid-bite, as if to say, *"Do you mind? I'm busy here..."*

Straker opted to pull his foot out from under the sheet and get up. He knew that there would be no peace until he went out to the kitchen and fed Cleo. He'd had her only a few weeks, and he still wasn't used to her ritual of food acquisition.

The Siamese padded out of the bedroom behind him, yowling insistently. She knew she'd won yet again. Straker took the can out of the fridge. It amazed him how Cleo could distinguish between sounds like the fridge door opening, the electric can opener working, and her name being called when she'd done something naughty. The first two sounds brought her on the double. The latter not at all. He plopped some cat food into her dish and stood watching while she hovered down her portion and looked up expectantly, with an *"Is that all there is?"* expression on her face. Straker was sure singer Peggy Lee must have been a cat in a former incarnation in order to have sung that song with so much feeling.

The sky outside was just turning a misty pink and mauve with streamers of pale gold. *"No rest for the wicked,"* Straker thought ruefully. He was never going to get back to sleep now. He fetched a deep sigh and prepared his drip coffee maker, spooning some of Juan Valdez' Colombian grounds into the filter. Next, he rummaged in the fridge again, looking for something to go with the coffee. There were several half empty Schwan Chinese take out boxes, something green and fuzzy that he didn't want to examine too closely, and a long out of date container of milk. "Oh, that's just great!" he muttered to himself, "Now what am I going to put in the coffee?"

Straker rooted about in the cupboard over the sink and came up with a bottle of powdered coffee creamer. He wrinkled his nose in distaste. How old was it? But, there was no other choice, and he's never learned to drink coffee black. It was one of the few luxuries left in his ascetic lifestyle. That and his wine-tipped cigarillos.

At almost sixty years of age, General Straker, supreme commander of SHADO, was still a

slim, hard-bodied, handsome man. The steely blue eyes were as bright as ever, and his prematurely silver hair was trimmed and combed back stylishly. Straker dressed with panache, in keeping with his continuing cover as a film executive.

Unlike most movie magnates, Straker lived in very a simple manner. He ate sparingly, and when he did, he preferred spicy exotic cuisine to standard British or American fare. He had been a non-drinker for several decades. He was by nature a thinker, a brooder and a loner. His few friends were a couple of his fellow officers at SHADO. His neighbours knew him as a private man who rarely spoke and never smiled. He was a man alone.

So, why had he chosen to bring a Siamese cat into his home? He wondered that daily.

The scent of the coffee was wafting out of the percolator. A further raid of the kitchen cupboards produced a box of instant oatmeal, so Straker prepared it in his microwave, rather than waiting for the kettle to boil. Cleo was now up on the kitchen island, where Straker had perched on his bar stool. She sat watching him sift powdered creamer into his executive sized coffee cup, her head tilted to one side, her black tail end curling and uncurling slightly.

"I fed you. What else do you want?" Straker had taken to speaking to Cleo from the time she came home with him. She walked over and rubbed her head on his chiseled chin, purring softly. Straker scratched her behind one ear and watched her blue eyes close in pleasure, "Now if I only had that effect on human females," he mused aloud. But, the truth was, Cleo was the only female company he'd had in some time. The last female in the house had been Canadian astronaut Tina Kovac...better not to go there, he warned himself sternly.

The microwave beeped and Straker took his bowl of oatmeal out, sprinkled on some brown sugar and stirred it up, preparatory to eating it. Cleo had gotten down and was batting about a small fur mouse.

She had plenty of toys, Straker had seen to that. Cleo spent a lot of time by herself, while he was at work. In the first week, he'd come home to chewed paper reports, bits of dried flower arrangements on the floor, unrolled toilet paper streaming everywhere, and an overturned lamp or two. Cleo was totally unrepentant and let him know in no uncertain terms that she must have her amusements. Hence, the toys. There were fur mice, small rolling balls with little bells inside, and soft catnip-filled things to chase. He also discovered, from the small items fallen into in his kitchen sink, that Cleo liked sitting in the window over the counter. There were smudgy little nose prints all over it. But, while Cleo might have made Straker's home her queendom, she had no desire to venture outside the front door at all, and Straker was relieved. He didn't want to lose her to a speeding car or an illness contracted through exposure. This surprised him. He wasn't generally fond of animals.

Straker watched Cleo gamboling on the floor with her mouse. There was an innocence there that smote his heart. And, yet, for all her innocence, she was hard wired by nature to also be a very efficient predator. She might have been declawed by her previous owner, but she still had all her keen feline senses for the hunt, and she engaged in it endlessly, with Straker's toes as her prey every morning!

Through the kitchen window, Straker could see his mostly overgrown garden out back. The perennials came up year after year, and except for a neighbourhood teenager who mowed his lawn for a weekly fee, there had never been any landscaping or work done to make it more beautiful. He occasionally took his coffee on the back deck on sunny days, but that was the extent of his outdoor activities. In recent years, to avoid that middle-aged spread that so many desk-bound executives suffered, Straker had bought and utilized a series of exercise equipment. He stocked his family room not with comfy couches and electronic equipment, but

with a Stair master, a Nordic Track and a Bow Flex, and he was faithful about working out, too. The mindless exercise took his mind off more difficult subjects. Straker had spent a lifetime, it seemed to him, avoiding sensitive topics and memories.

Pouring another cup of coffee, Straker headed back to his bedroom. Cleo followed him again, and when he sat down and put his feet up on the covers, grabbing a sheaf of SHADO files off his bedside table to read with his java, she curled up in his lap - a warm little ball of soft fur. He reached down to pet her and she purred sonorously, a soothing pleasant sound.

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It was the phone that woke Straker this time, not Cleo's fangs. It trilled incessantly until he grabbed the receiver and realized it was his cell phone ringing. That meant he had to dump Cleo off his lap and get up to remove it from his dresser.

"Straker here," he barked.

"Ah, General. We were wondering where you were," the voice at the other end replied.

"I'm...am I supposed to be somewhere in particular?"

"We had a briefing scheduled for 08:00 this morning. It's now 10 o'clock."

"Damn!" he thought, *"I fell back asleep..."*

"Is there anything wrong, General?"

Straker broke his silence, "No, Dr. Jackson, I'll be in shortly."

* * *

After the fastest shower on record, and a quick swallow of mouth wash, Straker dressed simply and drove to SHADO HQ. He sat down to his briefing with Jackson, who made it obvious he'd rearranged his schedule to accommodate Straker's tardiness.

"What have you got for me, Doug?" Straker gratefully accepted a cup of coffee with real cream this time.

"The final report on Kovac is ready for your perusal." the doctor handed over a computer disc.

Jackson watched Straker's face carefully, and Straker knew what he was watching for, "Fine. I'll send you my comments via e-mail when I've read it thoroughly. Who else has seen it?"

"As per your orders, you'll be the first. After that, it's a matter of your choice."

"I'll let you know," he stood up, draining his coffee cup, "I'll be home if anyone wants me."

* * *

Reading the Kovac dossier was not something Straker wanted to do at work. He wanted to do it privately, with no interruptions. Remembering his empty fridge, and some other necessary items, Straker made a quick stop at his local supermarket to pick up some coffee cream, microwave able meals, frozen TV dinners, cat food, and litter. And toilet paper. Cleo still found toilet paper trails amusing.

Cleo met Straker at the door with a cheery Siamese comment, and followed him out to the kitchen, where he dumped the grocery bags on the counter. She jumped up onto the Corian-surfaced counter top, nosing into each bag, checking their contents. *"Anything for me?"* she seemed to be asking.

After putting his few things away and throwing a micro meal into the nuker, Straker plugged in his laptop and inserted the computer disc. He shooed Cleo away from the keyboard, but she sat there, fascinated by the movements playing across the computer's active matrix screen. She reached out a paw and pressed it on the screen as Kovac's image came up, then

looked at Straker as if to say, *"Why can't I touch her?"*

The microwave cycle was over, and Straker rescued his meal, transferring it over to a small tray so he could sit at the kitchen island and eat while he read, his glasses perched on the end of his nose. Cleo hunkered down and curled up, her front paws tucked in under her chest, half dozing beside him on the counter while he perused Jackson's report.

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By the time Straker finished the final report, the sun had set. Dr. Jackson had produced yet another astute and precise dossier. He'd answered many of Straker's questions. But it was almost all based on the hard scientific facts. There were questions which couldn't be answered with logic. Questions, which many weeks later, Straker still pondered in his heart. Jackson could posit why Kovac had done what she'd done. He could theorize very intelligently. But, Straker knew Kovac's actions had not been borne of science. Their basis was far more human. He should have seen it coming, but he'd been so busy pretending not to notice, that he missed all the clues. And, now that strange empty spot in his heart still nagged.

Reading for so many hours on his laptop screen was beginning to give him a headache. He got off his bar stool and noted the time. The whirring sound of the electric can opener brought Cleo wide awake, and she sat up expectantly as Straker lifted her dish from the floor and spooned food into it. Rather than make her get down, he placed the pink dish on the kitchen island and stroked her soft tawny fur while she inhaled her Fancy Feast. Afterwards, she sat down and proceeded to fastidiously wash her face, whiskers and front paws. As far as cats were concerned, cleanliness was next to godliness, and all cats knew they had once been worshipped as gods in ancient Egypt!

It was time to get some shut-eye. Straker returned to his bedroom with some Earl Grey tea, a habit picked up from Kovac. He'd developed a taste for her favourite tea blend, and often finished his days with a mug. He glanced up at the watercolor portrait of Cleo on his bedroom wall. Kovac's signature was scrawled on the bottom. For a hobby artist, she'd produced some nice work. Straker had taken another of her portraits and framed it for his office at SHADO. He'd even found a half completed portrait of himself among her personal possessions. The idea that she'd thought enough of him to draw him was strangely comforting. Straker kept it stashed in his dresser drawer, along with some of her music CDs and clothing items, retrieved after she...left.

Cleo hopped up on Straker's bed. She slept with him every night, usually curled up against his side, or between his ankles, depending on his position in the bed. Her small warm body was like a hot water bottle - albeit a hot water bottle that purred.

"Well, little girl, the end of another day," Straker said aloud to Cleo. He set his alarm clock, with a small grin - he probably would have a Siamese wake-up call long before the clock went off.

Straker laid over on his back and stared up at the ceiling. Cleo got up and laid on his chest, her head tucked in against his neck, her soft breath exhaling on his skin. He put an arm around her small form and dozed off thinking, *"Whoever said dog was man's best friend never had a cat..."*