

Scott Sunderland, Private Eye

Scott Sunderland couldn't believe he was running late for his meeting with his first ever client. He slammed the door of his '87 Yugo, accidentally shutting his tie in it in the process. He swore and awkwardly jabbed his key at the lock, adding another couple of marks to the already abysmal paint job. Muttering darkly under his breath, he picked up his suitcase and booked it up the four flights of stairs to his brand-new office.

He fumbled at the lock, adding a few more colorful expressions as he practically fell into the room. The minute he stepped through the door (which read: Scott Sunderland, Private Eye on the nameplate above the frosted glass window), he realized something was very wrong. He took stock of the large wooden desk that dominated the room. Papers and ink spilled over the surface haphazardly giving the unsettling impression that somebody had disemboweled a particularly large dictionary. Rain hammered against the lone window behind the spindly wooden desk chair and an abused looking coffee pot sat on a small second-hand table in the corner. The floor was littered with discarded paper cups and coffee stirrers.

But perhaps most unsettling of all, the entire room was in black and white.

Scott let out an exasperated sigh. "I don't have time for this Lenny," he said hanging up his jacket on the old-fashioned wooden coatrack standing by the door. He took a seat behind the desk and popped open his briefcase, taking out a couple of manila envelopes and a small notebook. "Miss Curtis will be here any minute now and I want her to take me seriously."

With a small flicker, Lenny popped into view. He was about the same size and shape as a small cantaloupe with one side shaved away and replaced with a brightly lit screen. Like most of the Companion-233 model AIs, his silver surface was crisscrossed with brightly lit blue lines that were as functional as they were aesthetic. His screen currently displayed "?".

“Look,” Scott said, “I need this job, okay? If I don’t get a paying client, I’m not going to be able to afford the rent on this place. They’ll kick me out.” He glanced at the undergraduate diploma in his suitcase. He’d brought it with the intention of hanging it up in the office, but in retrospect it didn’t seem like a particularly good idea. After all, a philosophy degree wasn’t a particularly impressive qualification for a private investigator, even if it was from Villanova.

A knock on the door startled him out of his reverie. “J-just a second!” he called. “Can you put the room straight, please?” he whispered.

“...” said Lenny.

“Oh for God’s sake, can you at least fix the weather?”

“YES”

It took a second before the image laid over the window flickered and daylight came streaming in through the room. It was grey daylight, but it would have to do.

Scott adjusted his tie and, in a moment of inspiration, kicked his feet up on the desk. Smooth, very smooth. “Come in!” he called. There was a pause. Then the sound of someone trying the door handle. Another knock.

“Dammit,” Scott swore, nearly falling off his chair in his haste to get up. “Just a moment, sorry, sorry.”

“LOL” Lenny added helpfully.

After a moment of fumbling with lock, he flung the door open and gestured inside. “I’m so sorry about that, please, come in.”

The client eyed him but stepped inside. She was average height with an unusually striking figure; not model material perhaps, but she carried herself in a way that was almost regal, and she made the rather practical suit-and-skirt she wore look like something out of a

designer catalog. As she took in the office, she tucked a stray strand of her close-cropped black hair behind her ear. Of course, it could have also been brown. And her clear grey eyes could have actually been green or blue. He shot an angry glance at Lenny behind the client's back before seating himself behind the desk.

"I like what you've done with the place," Miss Curtis said.

Scott felt his face heat up. "I'm sorry about that. I've had sort of a complicated day..."

"It's alright. I actually quite like it." She had a high-pitched breathy voice that inflected the end of her sentences as if she was asking a question.

Scott cleared his throat and tried to ignore Lenny who was hovering behind her displaying "HA HA." "Yes, well, why don't we talk about why you're here Miss Curtis?"

"Oh please, call me Kara."

"Alright then Kara, you said on the phone someone went missing, correct?"

Kara nodded. "It's been very stressful. I haven't seen Lauren in almost a month now. I mean, I'm used to her wandering around, but...to be gone this long..." Kara broke off biting her lip in a way that Scott couldn't help noticing. He shook his head slightly.

"That's awful," Scott said gravely. "I promise I'll do everything I can to find her for you. But first, I need you to answer a few questions." He consulted the notepad again. "When was the last time you saw Lauren?"

"Um, it was sometime in March...the twelfth I think? It was a Monday, that's for sure. I remember because I had yoga that day, so I was late letting her out for her evening walk."

"Monday...the...twelfth," Scott repeated. He paused a moment. "Evening walk? Um, how old is Lauren exactly?"

"About six maybe? I don't know for sure." He could see tears forming in her eyes.

An odd uneasiness began to fill Scott. “Your six-year-old has been missing for two weeks? Is there any reason you haven’t contacted the police yet?”

Kara furrowed her eyebrows. “No...should I have? I didn’t think they’d care...”

“I’m pretty sure they would if they knew your six-year-old daughter had gone missing.”

“Daughter...? Lauren’s my cat.”

Scott left the office – no, wait, he hit the street, that sounded much better – Scott hit the street about an hour after Kara had left. He’d gotten a description of the cat as well as several of her favorite haunts. He would have been out looking ages ago, but it had been difficult to sort through all of Lenny’s image files and delete the holograms that had covered his room when all Lenny was interested in doing was flashing cat pictures and videos at him.

As if on cue, the little computer bobbed in front of him with yet another picture of a cat mid-leap with a stupid caption. He fantasized briefly about buying a new computer.

He sighed. Even if he could bring himself to get rid of Lenny there was a reason he’d gotten his private investigator’s license in the first place. He was broke, no job, driving the same piece of crap car he’d bought in college. The only reason he had anything as nice as Lenny was because his parents bought him as a gift when he decided to go to Villanova for computer science. Oh sure, Scott liked computers. Hell, he was pretty good with them too. The image filters Lenny spent so much time abusing were something he’d put together as a project when he was bored in school. But no matter how much he loved tinkering with that kind of stuff it never stuck as a career option for him. He wanted something more...interesting. Something he’d look forward to doing when he got out of bed in the morning. Something that required a razor-sharp intellect and absolute cunning to-

He felt Lenny pressing into his chest and he realized that he'd walked right past his destination. The first place he wanted to check was the small animal shelter he knew was around the corner from his office. Kara hadn't been by there yet, somehow, and it seemed like the best place to start. In fact, thinking about it, it seemed like hiring a private investigator without hardly bothering to look yourself seemed like a strange first step.

A bell chimed somewhere as he walked into the animal shelter and it wasn't long before a teenager in baggy cargo pants and a loosely fitted tank-top came out of the back. Her blonde hair looked bleached and it fell over one grey eye in a way that was clearly meant to give the impression that she didn't care. She carried a small dog – a Yorkie maybe? Something that wouldn't quit yapping at any rate – tucked under her right arm.

“Shut up Butters, for the love of God,” she said to the dog. He subsided with a small huff. “Hey there, can I help you?” she asked Scott. He was distracted by her seemingly constant swiping at the hair obstructing her vision.

“Yes, actually, I was wondering if you'd taken any cats in in the last two weeks or so.”

“You're going to have to be more specific dude,” she said. She moved behind the counter and sat the Yorkie down on it where it eyed Lenny warily. “We get a lot of animals coming and going here.”

“Right, of course.” Scott reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his notepad. “Cat I'm looking for is...black with a white patch under her chin...white paws, green eyes and...oh, right, a collar set with rhinestones.”

The girl tensed up behind the computer. “A collar?”

“That's the one. Have you seen it?”

Her eyes shifted left and right. “Um, why are you looking for this cat sir? I need to know if it’s your animal for...records and things like that.”

She must have been new at her job, she was awful nervous. He shook his head; who was he to throw stones? “I’m looking for it for this lady, she wanted my help.”

“Son of a bitch,” she said under her breath.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, um, nothing.” She flicked through a couple of screens on her computer. “We did have the cat, sir but, um, somebody came and...picked him up. Yeah, that’s right, he got picked up...last week.”

“Really?” That was unexpected. If this girl was really so worried about who had what claim to what animals, letting some stranger walk out with the wrong cat seemed like an odd oversight.

“Um, I could check in the back for you, you know if you’d like?” She looked stressed. She must be seriously upset about giving the cat to the wrong guy.

“Yeah, sure, that would be great.” He gave her what he hoped was an encouraging smile. The girl scooped up the small dog and hurried off into the other room.

She emerged a few minutes later shaking her head and looking even more distressed. “I’m sorry sir, she’s not here.”

“That’s alright, thanks for checking.” Scott left the shelter and hit the street. He paced down the sidewalk back to his apartment thinking. He checked his pad again and stared at the blocks that Kara had listed as Lauren’s favorite haunts.

“Lenny, do me a favor, bring up these addresses for me on a map.” The currently playing video of a cat batting its own reflection paused.

“?” asked Lenny.

“I just want to check something, alright?” He read off the four blocks and Kara’s address.

“Let me know when that-”

As he rounded the corner, something hit Scott around the midriff and he felt the wind knocked clean out of him. He went down hard; stars burst in his vision as his head hit the pavement. With a grunt, a man with broad, if unremarkable features stood up clutching something in a fist that could have palmed a bowling ball. Before Scott could even sit up, much less form coherent sentences, the man was gone

He continued to lie there, trying to figure out whether he had a concussion or not, and how he would go about figuring that out in the first place. Eventually, he felt something cold and metal pressed against his cheek. He looked over to see Lenny nudging him.

“OK?” he said.

Scott grunted and pushed himself to his feet. This was a quieter part of town and there hadn’t been a single witness to the assault. Either the man had planned this carefully, or he had gotten very lucky. “I’m fine, just, dizzy.” He managed to get to his feet and took it as a good sign that the world only spun for a minute or two. “What the hell was that all about?” Scott mumbled.

“(“ said Lenny.

“Really, I’m okay.” All things considered, it could have been a lot worse. He brushed some dirt off his pants and stopped suddenly. He checked his pocket. Then the other. Then his back pockets. His notepad was gone. He whirled around as if the guy who’d hit him would be standing nearby, but he was nowhere to be found.

“What the hell is going on here?”

Scott sat in the coffee shop across the street from his office stirring his drink slowly. He hated coffee as a rule, but he felt like he should drink it on principle or something. In all the movies, the PIs drank coffee or smoked cigarettes while they brooded, and he wasn't sure if he could handle smoking. At least the folks here had stopped laughing at him when he asked for ample room left in the cup for cream and sugar.

Something wasn't adding up. Clearly this case wasn't just about finding some missing cat. He felt the tender spot on the back of his head that was busy swelling up into something the approximate size and shape of a large rodent. Maybe this was something he should just contact the police about. He'd been assaulted for crying out loud, there was no call for him to get beat up over some stupid cat.

He sipped at his coffee and forced himself to keep from cringing at the flavor. He thought about Miranda, not for the first time since they'd broken up. He wondered what she'd tell him now if she could see him like this. Probably something along the line of "I told you so." He remembered their last fight, how she'd told him if he wasn't going to get a real job she was going to leave. Yelling about how he wasted his time at school taking the "easy classes" instead of the ones he could make a career with. Walking out with a philosophy degree instead of the computer science one his parents had thought they were paying for. Then, when he came and told her he'd found a website that would get him licensed...

"Miranda, I'm telling you, it's a real job! And hell, I can't think of a cooler job than being a real honest-to-god private eye!"

Miranda stared at him. Somehow in his memory she was even taller, the angles of her cheekbones more sever. Her eyes were black instead of green and he was pretty sure she never breathed fire when her nostrils had actually flared like that.

“Am I supposed to be impressed? How the hell are you supposed to pull that off? You don’t know the first thing about investigating! Do you even know what that job’s going to mean, what the expenses are going to be?” She went on like that for some time. Scott felt smaller and smaller as, in his mind, he watched her throw her stuff in a suitcase and storm out the door. A lone saxophone played mournfully in the background and the rain came down in sheets out the window next to-

Scott glared at Lenny who cut the music. After a second, the window flickered back to the clear twilight sky.

His head hit the table with a thunk. “I thought these flashbacks were supposed to make me want to work harder,” he grumbled. What he really wanted to do was go crawl in a hole.

He looked up to see Lenny floating an inch or so from his face. His screen displayed the icon for his map application. With everything that had been going on, Scott had completely forgotten that he’d given Lenny the addresses to look up. He waited for some sort of flood of resolve, some sort of spark that would put him back on the trail. Failing that, he figured that at least he might have some helpful information for the police later.

“Put it on the table Lenny.”

The computer’s blue lights glowed and there was a flicker over the table’s surface. A map of the city laid itself over the wooden surface with the blocks marked in red. A little green light indicated Kara’s apartment, somewhere in the business district. At least now Scott knew how she had been able to afford a private investigator just to find her cat; you didn’t get an apartment in that part of the city without some serious buying power. The blocks marked in red formed a perfect square around the apartment, and none were far from what would have been Lauren’s home. In fact...

“Lenny, zoom out so I can see the shelter we went to.”

When the picture adjusted, Scott was even more baffled. “Both of the other shelters in town are closer to her apartment than this one,” he mused. “What was she doing so far from home? And why was anybody looking for her way out here in the first place?”

Lenny’s screen flashed to a picture of a flustered looking cat standing on a steering wheel of a car with the caption “I have no idea wat is goin on.”

“Me too bud. Me too.” He took a long pull of his coffee and almost got it down without gagging on it.

In the end, Scott decided to wait on calling the cops. It wasn’t guilt or drive to succeed that motivated him, but rather the sinking suspicion that he wouldn’t get paid if he did so. And a quick check of his refrigerator that night proved that missing that paycheck might end up being disastrous. So after a breakfast of a banana and a couple slices of cheddar cheese, he wrestled with his car until it wheezed to life and drove the thirty or so blocks to Kara’s apartment.

The building was nicer than anywhere Scott was likely to live in his lifetime. The revolving door opened up into a very spacious lobby that looked closer to something you’d find in a fancy hotel than anything else. He spoke to the doorman who directed him to a guy at the front desk, who made a call to Kara’s room before he was allowed to take the elevator up.

Kara answered her door with a small smile on her otherwise concerned face. As it turned out, her hair was actually brown, but her grey eyes were the exact same shade as they’d been under Lenny’s stupid filter. She ushered him inside and Scott took a seat on one of the enormous armchairs in the living room that could have fit his entire apartment. Everything in it looked high-end and brand new, from the carpet laid out over the hardwood floors to the freaking

curtains which might have been made of silk. Kara, in a white suit this time making Scott wonder what she did for a living that required her to sit around at home in a suit, didn't sit down, but fidgeted nervously in the middle of the room.

“Can I get you anything? Tea? Coffee?”

“No thank you, I'm fine.”

Kara nodded. “Alphie? Alphie, can you bring me a cup of tea please!” she called into the other room. “For my nerves, you know,” she said to Scott.

“I understand. I know you're worried about Lauren, but I had a few more questions I'd like to ask you if that's okay.”

“Of course, of course.” At that moment, a sleek white pod shaped something like a large egg with two spindly appendages drifted into the room bearing a tea tray. Lenny took a break from amusing himself with yet another “ninja cat” video and bobbed excitedly over Scott's shoulder.

“Oh, this is Alphie,” Kara said accepting the tea.

“You didn't meet him last time, but this is Lenny. He's mostly supposed to *stay out of the way*,” he said.

Lenny took no heed, staring at Alphie and unashamedly displaying “<3 <3” on his monitor.

“I'm sorry about this,” Scott said, his face burning with shame. “They gave him to me when I was in school, and I never got around to updating him.”

Kara laughed, but it sounded strained. “It's fine. Alphie's actually my daughter's. He just helps out around the house.” Alphie was drifting behind Kara and looking supremely disconcerted, an impressive feat given that it had no expressive features.

“You have a daughter?” Scott asked, finding himself trying to discreetly shove Lenny behind the armchair.

“Yes, a real animal lover. She’s just so torn up over Lauren being gone...”

“Is she here? I wouldn’t mind talking to her, see if there’s anything she’d know about where Lauren could have wandered off to?”

“Oh, well, she works during the day.”

“Well, could you tell me where she works? An address or something?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t know that,” Kara said waving her hand as if to ward off the question.

“Some place on the other side of town.” She paused a moment. “Actually, now that you mention it, she had me drop her off at work when I came to see you yesterday.”

Scott wasn’t impressed. There were lots of places she could be working in the area. She could be anything from a secretary for one of the offices to a barista at his coffee shop. “I’ll see if I can find her. In the meantime Kara, do you mind if I ask you why you came to me first before even checking the shelters to see if she was at one of them?”

“Oh, well, of course *I* didn’t check there, I’m far too busy. Lindsay took care of that for me.”

“Your daughter?”

“That’s right.”

Just at that moment, Lenny, who had finally seemed to calm down, burst out from behind the chair and started doing laps around his head. “!!!!” he said.

“What? For the love of God, I know he’s got a nice chassis, but calm down already!”

Lenny stopped and gave him a look that seemed condescending somehow. It was weird how AIs seemed to be better at facial expressions than most people. He rushed over to a nearby wall and pulled up the map from yesterday, zooming in on the animal shelter.

“Yes, I know, we went there yesterday.” He glanced at Kara. “The girl working there said a *man* had taken the cat, remember?”

“What? Somebody found my baby?” Kara’s voice was rapidly approaching the kind of pitch reserved for dog whistles.

“Well, yes, but the girl at the counter said that somebody had come in and...and...of course!” Scott leapt out of his chair excitedly. “Kara, I think I know who took your cat, and if I’m right, I can track them down.” He started making for the door, Lenny trailing along in his wake. “I’ll let you know as soon as I know more,” he stopped and turned at the door, “but I think I’ve cracked the case!”

Scott burst into the shelter, perhaps a little more forcefully than was strictly necessary, which, in the end, probably contributed more to the solving of the case than any powers of deduction Scott may or may not have possessed. For when he came charging into the shelter, preparing to describe the man who tackled him outside the shelter and asking if he left any kind of contact information he could track him down with, he caught the girl behind the counter completely unawares and unable to hide his small orange notebook in time.

There was a moment when neither of them did anything. Scott took a second to look past the blonde hair, where he could now see the brown roots coming in, and take in the shape of her face, the way she held herself despite her outwardly “teen punk” appearance and her clear grey eyes.

“Lindsay?” He said.

“DUH” Lenny added.

Lindsay dropped the notebook and took off running into the back of the store. Scott swore loudly and pursued her as fast as he could. He had height working for him, but she was clearly trained to run and knew the layout of the back room better. She knew where to put her feet to avoid the bags of dog food and kitty litter and who knows what else was lying around. Scott, meanwhile, managed to find and trip over every single one of them. Lenny coasted along behind him playing the *Indiana Jones* theme song.

When Scott reached the back of the store, one foot caught in what he suspected to be a litter box, he was just in time to see the door swing shut. He charged out the door, dislodging the kitty box as he went and immediately ran head-first into the brick wall of the small courtyard. He bounced off and ended up sitting down very quickly, clutching at his nose and forehead. “Could have sworn there was an alley back here,” he said to nobody in particular. “There’s always an alley...” At that moment, Lindsay, who’d begun to climb the garbage can up and over the fence to the left, slipped and came crashing down on Scott’s lap.

Lindsay pushed herself to her feet, eyeing Scott as he nursed his new injuries. Then, with a triumphant crescendo, Lenny bobbed amicably out of the door after them, leading a fascinated black-and-white cat with a glittering collar. Scott checked the tag, which read: Lauren Curtis. Lindsay looked from the cat to Scott. She rolled her eyes and collapsed against the wall behind her.

Scott managed to stand up and walked over – no, wait, sauntered, much better word – and sauntered over to Lindsay

“So,” he said, “this is the part where you confess. Why’d you do it? Why’d you tell me the cat was missing?”

“What did Mom tell you was in the collar again? Rhinestones?” Lindsay laughed. “They’re freaking *diamonds*. Mom loves that cat more than anything. I was just going to sell the collar, than turn up with Lauren myself. No harm, no foul.” She glowered at the sky, which had decided to be a sullen grey today, perhaps just in case somebody was feeling like glowering at it.

“So, who *attacked* me yesterday?”

Lindsay winced. “That was...my boyfriend. I told him I needed your notebook so I could see what you knew...I called him while I was in the back, he only works a block away. I’m sorry if he was a little...overzealous.”

“That’s a word,” he said rubbing the back of his neck.

“Look, I know what you’re going to say, alright? That this isn’t the way I’m supposed to work things out with my mom, and I should talk to her, blah, blah, blah.”

Scott raised an eyebrow. “Actually, I was just going to ask if you had an icepack lying around.”

Scott sat in his office that afternoon holding an icepack to the back of his head and staring at the check in his hand. Somehow it didn’t feel like he’d earned it. Words like *lucky* and *clueless* kept drifting through his head, usually in Miranda’s voice. Somehow he still felt like she wouldn’t be impressed. And this first case hadn’t gone nearly as he expected. He leaned back in his chair and looked at the ceiling.

“But I did it,” he said to himself. And the money he made would settle this month’s rent *and* buy him some much-needed food. Kara had been so grateful to have her beloved animal back that she’d paid his fee and then some. He slid the check into his drawer.

Lenny chose that moment to throw his calendar up on the door. It showed an appointment in five minutes new client. “Plz?” he asked.

Scott sighed. “Fine,” he said, “but only the filter. It’s growing on me.”

Maybe things hadn’t gone exactly as he’d hoped, but he’d done it, hadn’t he? He’d seen the case through successfully. Maybe he could actually make a career for himself here. After all, he did have what was quite possibly the coolest job in the world.

With a small smirk, Scott Sunderland, private eye, kicked his feet up on the desk as the room faded to black and white. Smooth, very smooth.

After a moment of thought, he got up and unlocked the door.