Under Cover Cat

Story by John Lutz
We've got a problem here. Or rather, they do. And I'm not sure I want them to solve it because...well, I've got my reasons.

My name is Intrigue. I'm a cat of the male persuasion. An orange mixed breed, if you like to be exact, and I do. I had a recent crisis in my life, and it looks like I'm going to experience another one.

On the surface my life seems good, staying warm, lying around eating Fish Bit cat snacks, making the rounds now and then to visit the various female persuasion cats in the neighborhood. I mean, I've got a posh existence here and I know it.

Look at the guy who thinks he owns me, Carl Rank, the fella with the eyeglasses, dark good looks and expensive suit. You can tell by his eyes that he's not quite as smart as he thinks he is, which is all the advantage we cats need. Now look where Rank and I live, this swanky apartment with the plush carpet and trendy furniture, the potted plants, that scratching pole over in the corner. Look at those French doors that lead out to a balcony where I can stretch and lie outside on warm afternoons and sun myself while I gaze out over the high rent district. None of this comes cheap.

Rank does okay for us because he's a vice president in charge of project development at Undercover, Inc., the big perfume company that makes all those TV commercials shot with fuzzy lenses and advertises in all the high-tone fashion magazines. Rank is the guy who a few years ago sold the public on Intrigue perfume, the scent endorsed by movie stars and all those high-fashion supermodels. Intrigue was the perfume that put Undercover on the corporate map. Then Undercover became one of the biggest perfume companies in the world by aligning itself with the fashion world. Models' and designers' testimonials made Intrigue chic and helped to sell oceans of the stuff, even though it makes me sneeze. I'm named after that very successful scent, which at first I minded but now I don't, as the money is good indeed.

Undercover's about to launch a new perfume, Mata Hari, and it is Rank's job to oversee the development of its image, packaging and retailing. (Notice how I learn a lot about the occupations of the ones who think they own me. Edu-cat-ion, you might call it.) Mata Hari is what's causing this latest problem.

I smelled trouble instead of perfume that morning when we entered Undercover's high-security building and rode the elevator to the offices on the tenth floor. Rank takes me to work with him often. Arthur Pungent, the founder and president of Undercover, Inc., doesn't mind. In fact he approves of me. The image of a sleek, handsome cat hanging around the place adds to its swank image, he said once. I can buy into that. At least once or twice during the work day, I make my way down to Reception and strike some poses. Everyone seems amused and pleased, and they see me almost as part of the decor. What they don't know is that I'm more than just a front for the company. It's easy to underestimate a cat, which is the way we like it.
You think I don’t know what’s going on here? Think again. Before I came to live with Rank, I was one of a pair of cats owned by a private investigator. He called us his gats. The other cat was a demanding, but exotic Siamese named Samantha. The two of us got knowledgeable about real undercover work. Then one day our owner had Samantha "fixed," as he put it, and renamed her Sam Spayed. That was when I made my tearful departure and found myself mixed up with Rank. I adopted him when he came to the pound looking for a free pet, though he’d say it was the other way around. The point is, I might be a feline, but I got a good edu-cat-ion in the human criminal mind. So none of this surprises me.

As soon as we get off the elevator, Rank goes straight to his high-security office and uses his personal card with his thumbprint on it to unlock and open his door. That’s the way all the offices are at Undercover, Inc. To get inside them any other way, a visitor has to press a button alongside the door, which sounds a buzzer, and whoever is inside behind the desk presses another button, which unlocks the door. These are private offices in the strictest sense.

Rank no sooner puts me on the floor and sits down behind his desk when the buzzer sounds. Rank presses his entry button, another buzzer sounds, and E. Gordon Lily, the Research-and-Development vice president who concocted Mata Hari, comes charging in, his face alarmingly pale. I can see right away he’s got his back up about something.

"It’s gone!" he cries. "Somebody stole it!"

"It?" Rank asks, looking confused like only he can."

"The formula for Mata Hari!" Lily says. "It was taken last night from my office."

"That’s impossible," Rank says, "unless somebody else has your right thumb."

"But it happened!" Lily insists. "Maybe some sort of cat burglar got it!"

Hey, wait a minute! I think. Then I realize Lily’s accusation is really a kind of compliment. Industrial espionage is rampant in the high-stakes worlds of high fashion and high scent. Perfume companies exist in fear that the formulas for their newest scents will be stolen and imitated by a competitor. Sometimes millions of dollars are spent for security measures to keep even more millions from being lost. This time, those security measures failed.

I tag along as we hurry across the hall to Lily’s private office. Like all of Undercover’s high-security offices, it is accessible only from a long hall. There are fire stairs at the end of the hall, but they’re impossible to open from the outside. Other than that, the hall can be reached only by a separate elevator. An Undercover employee’s ID card is necessary to activate the elevator.

The door to Lily’s office is open, which is itself a serious breach of security regulations. But I guess they figure it doesn’t matter now, the cat being out of the bag, so to speak. I sidle in behind Rank and scoot between Lily’s legs so I can find a spot to observe what’s going to happen here. Look at this place, which is pretty typical of Undercover Inc.’s big-wigs’ private offices, designed not to
look like offices at all, with their snooty high-fashion motif. The desks are usually like that one, fancy tables, really, and each office has one of those mannequins dressed in a haute-couture outfit. Check out the weird bowl of fish — jail bait if I ever saw it. And would you look at that artwork. Anyone in my litter could do better.

The office is crowded. In addition to E. Gordon Lily, Carl Rank, and myself, Arthur Pungent is there, along with sales manager Odora Clark, janitor Olf Actory, and the head of security, a big slow guy, but smart, named Malo Dorous.

"I urge that no one touch anything in the office, sir," Malo is saying to Pungent, "until the police get here."

"We aren't going to call the police unless we must," Pungent says. He's a big guy about fifty, dressed trendily all in black in a suit about three sizes too large so it makes him look thinner.

"You're chief of security, Malo. It's your job to get to the bottom of this without bringing in the law, the news media or a lot of negative publicity. Undercover's stock would plunge if we made it public that the formula for Mata Hari was stolen."

Just then my nose picks up this strong, sweet smell, and Amber Gris, the supermodel who's slated to appear in Mata Hari TV commercials and magazine ads, sashays in exactly like this female feline I used to know, and stands with one hip stuck way out. She smiles but no one else does. Odora Clark, who is herself attractive in human terms, but not when compared to Amber, glares at the tall, thin model.

"Is this a party, or did somebody drop a contact lens?" Amber purrs. She can put on the dumb act, but I always saw through it. E. Gordon Lily waves his arms around and tells her the Mata Hari formula is missing.

"Stolen from this office last night," Odora Clark adds. She looks angry about the theft, the men's tie she is wearing is knotted so tightly it seems to be making her face red and her eyes bulge.

"Missing is one thing," Amber says, "but how do you know for sure the formula was stolen?" Everyone stares at her.

"Summarize the situation for her," Pungent orders Malo.

"When Mr. Lily got to his office this morning, he found it locked as usual," Malo says in his molasses-slow drawl. Everything about him seems slow and haphazard. His designer brand suit can't disguise his lumpy, irregular shape. He reminds me of some dogs I've known. Hounds mostly. Not terriers. Cats loathe all dogs, but terriers are the only ones we respect. Any cat will verify this.

"He used his card to enter, then noticed a copy in his machine. He was shocked to see it was the last page of the Mata Hari formula."

"Shocked!" Lily repeats. "And when I checked my file cabinet, I found the formula in its
folder, but it was backward and had obviously been removed then replaced. Copied on that machine!” He points toward a copy machine on a fancy table. "Stolen away!”

"Don't be melodramatic," Pungent says. I wish I could second that.

Malo continues. "Building security doesn't appear to have been violated. Neither has this particular office's security system."

"Maybe somebody just made a copy to take to their office and read," Amber says sweetly, her widely spaced eyes sparkled above her prominent cheekbones.

"The Mata Hari formula was part of a maximum-security red file," Malo reminds her. "Company regulations state that copies of red file documents are to be made only with Mr. Pungent's permission—and with at least two witnesses present who sign a form stating the date, time, how many copies were made, and for what purpose."

"It has to be that way in our business," Pungent says. "Our competitors are ruthless and devious. They employ spies left over from the Cold War."

"Spies like infiltrators?" Olf Actory asks, leaning on his dust mop, obviously fascinated by the idea of spies in the building. He's a gnarly little gray-haired guy with his own curious history as a career Navy man before becoming chief of maintenance at Undercover, which is another way of saying he's the guy who empties the wastebaskets and mops up. He can't get into executive offices alone, and always waits until morning before entering and giving them a quick cleaning. Just because he has a government security clearance left over from his service days doesn't make him any more trustworthy as far as I'm concerned. And I can tell with just a sniff of his clothes he's got a dog at home. That doesn't make me like him a bit more.

"It was an inside job!" Lily yips, unwisely ignoring Pungent's advise about laying off the melodrama.

"That's right," Malo agrees. "It had to be someone already in the building. Which narrows our list of suspects to those who worked late last night. Mr. Rank was here, along with Amber Gris, reviewing the photographs for the new Mata Hari ad campaign. Olf the janitor was here, as was Odora Clark, working in her office on marketing strategy for Mata Hari. And, as it turns out, Mr. Pungent was in the building late, working in his office."

"Even I can't override security and enter individual offices after work hours," Pungent points out. "And why would I steal my own company's valuable formula?"

"Couldn't Mr. Lily come and go as he pleases in his own office?" Amber asks.

"Mr. Lily was at a banquet last night and has an iron-clad alibi," Malo tells her.

"And remember, I'm the one who reported the theft," Lily says. A little too defensively, if you ask me. "And I guarantee you that my office was locked when I left yesterday. I would never
commit a breach of security.” Sure, I think, and I would never nap on the couch.

“You are no more a suspect than I am,” Pungent says, to calm him down.

“Was Amber with you all the time, or was she out of your sight at some point?” Malo asks Rank.

I knew the answer to that one. “She was gone only for a few minutes, when she took the elevator down to the lobby to use the vending machines to get us snacks and coffee,” Rank says honestly.

“I can’t believe any of us stole the formula,” Odora Clark blurts out. “We all know and trust each other. The thief must have been a very clever cat burglar”. I winced. That cat burglar thing again. But I know people react automatically to some things, like Pavlov’s dog did in that experiment when that Russian scientist proved he could make a dog’s mouth water with hunger at the sound of a buzzer. Well, what do you expect from a dog? Or from humans? Anytime people hear something was stolen from a high apartment or office, they immediately assume it was the work of a cat burglar. Now, my idea of a cat burglar is the guy who stole a friend of mine who – Well, that’s another story.

“I expect this case to be solved forthrightly,” Pungent says firmly to Malo, talking like a guy who heads a multi-million-dollar business, expecting the impossible just because he demands it. Everybody in the room knows that what Pungent is really saying is that Malo’s continued employment at Undercover, Inc. depends on his ability to prove who stole the Mata Hari formula.

“I believe I’ve solved it already,” Malo says in that deceptive slow drawl of his. Everybody looks at him as if he just coughed up a hairball.

“That’s why I asked that nobody touch anything,” Malo says. “If you look around carefully, you’ll see that the clues to the crime’s solution are right here in this room.”

**NOW, PIECE TOGETHER THE PUZZLE AND SEE IF YOU CAN FIND THE CLUES THAT LEAD TO THE CAT BURGLAR!**
Solution:

I can’t say I see what you mean,” Pugnut says. After turning in a slow circle and scanning the office.

“Notice the mannequin’s feet,” Mako says. “And the crooked yellow cover that’s only held with a single screw. Then, the haier of glass on the objects directly beneath the vent.”

“You’re saying the burglary entered the office through the air-conditioning vent,” Odoa Clark asks incredulously.

“Not at all,” Mako says. “The burglar came through the door.”

“Explain.” Pugnut grits.

It’s more obvious,” Mako says, explaining his moment of superiority. “When you take into account the arrangement on the mannequin’s feet, as well as the fake pawn prints on the copy machine.”

Of course I can feel the tear on my back rise.

After the pawn print on the desk, near the entry button. “Everybody looks at me. I get low and back beneath a chair. But not so far that I can’t still see out. I have to know what’s going on.”

I’m curious enough. I know where that sometimes leads.

“Why could a cat open the file cabinet and remove the Mako Hair Formula?” Liy Akes.

A cat6 griphs,” Mako says. “But notice the one and a half-inch-aged tears over the area on the floor.” I noticed from myself, and thought about going over and eating them. Too late now.

Where’s your wife gone?” Mako asks in that unmistakable growl of his. “The thief training a car to burst the entry button when it passed a signal. Then the car was inserted into this office.

To burst the air-conditioning duct, whose still had been loosened during the day so it was open before I noticed the office through the door when the button was pushed.”

After the vent cover was replaced, the thief took the car out with him, locking the door behind him.


So the car came in through the vent. Mako went on. “Knocking loose some of the duct.”

And jumping to the mannequin’s back and making us go to the door, leaving us on the white page just and jumping us to the mannequin’s feet and turning us to the door, leaving us on the white page and continuing a pass on the face. But it’s a pass of understanding, a false. It performs as_transfered, and presses the entry button when it hears the signal.” And was swallowed as usual with all-things-transparent. Or keeps the window of the under-cover copier. While cutting up on the wary machine. It had a certain amount of the window of the under-cover copier. While cutting up on the wary machine. It had a certain amount of...
UNDERCOVER CAT

The original formula in the life of a painter. There sometimes must have sparked the thrill, made him

furry with fun and glee over the office or replacing the second screen in the new cover.

Rank suddenly paws toward the door. "Hush, Mr. Plassen's moving swiftly for such a big man. Tackles

him and gag him to his feet. Then business is done. Quite as a cat. I can't help put

trick and admittance...

"Why did you have to hurry out of here last night? "Mava asks Rank.

I heard the elevator coming back up. "Rank says resignedly. Giving up too easily. I think. He

should say nothing and wait for his attendance. Maybe try to pull his way out of his mess. I can see

the good life slipping away.

"I had to rush and get out of here and back to my office."

Then it's true. Cat!!" Plassen says looking angry and perturbed. "You training Institute to let

you into Lily's office!"

"Yes. It was easy. I used my intelligence entry button in my office. When I wished two long.

One short, intelligence was rewarded with a snack. Each time he pressed the button. He's a remarkable

smart cat and cunning on feet. I could have kissed his feet. Despite the fact he was acting like more

of a pound than a terrier."

Tear vein and age serve to strange closer on the other side of the wall. "Rank continues.

"After Amanda went downstairs for snacks I entered the door. Using intelligence to signal intelligence. It

was initiated through the vent. Then work back to my office and used return to signal intelligence. It

took me only a few seconds to get back across the hall and open the door when I entered the business

and it initiated pressing the entry button on Lily's desk. I knew it couldn't have much time in there so I tried

as initiating pressing the entry button on Lily's desk. I knew it couldn't have much time in there so I tried

to make the most of it. It's hard to see for initiating accidentally pressing that copy button because I'd

forgotten away with it."

"You can use the next several years feeling snug. Your cell. Plassen says in his
tough

CEO voice. He picks up the phone and calls the police.

So can I understand why I couldn't make sense so far. It isn't just that I've lost my

prop with Rank - I'll somebody land on my feet. But you're hands in the other market,

how I was trained to respond automatistically to a signal. A Pavlovian response. The animal

psychologists call it. It's train them Russian experiment. I told you years ago and years after. So all seem to have

really pulled through another. After that was training like... well, I'd like a good. They all seem to have

forgotten about me for the moment. I'm going over there and eat the rest of those snacks."

7