



Read the story



Assemble the secret puzzle



Solve the mystery

Under Cover Cat



Story by John Lutz

UNDERCOVER CAT

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.

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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

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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

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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

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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!*

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Solution:

the office.

"I can't say I see what you mean," Pungent says, after turning in a slow circle and scanning

"Notice the mannequin's hat, sir," Malo draws. "And the crooked vent cover that's only held with a single screw. Then the layer of dust on the objects directly beneath the vent."

"You're saying the burglar entered the office through the air-conditioning vent?" Odora Clark asks incredulously.

"Not at all," Malo says. "The burglar came through the door."

"Explain," Pungent directs.

"It's more obvious," Malo says, enjoying his moment of superiority, "when you take into account the orange fur on the mannequin's box, as well as the faint paw print on the copy machine." Oh-oh! I can feel the fur on my back rise.

"Also the paw 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, even though I know where that sometimes leads.

"How could a cat open the file cabinet and remove the Mata Hari formula?" Lily asks.

"A cat didn't," Malo says. "But notice the one and a half fish-shaped treats over there on the floor." I'd noticed them myself, and thought about going over and eating them. Too late now.

"Here's how it was done," Malo says in that infuriating slow way of his. "The thief trained a cat to push the entry button when it heard a signal. Then the cat was inserted into this office through the air-conditioning duct, whose grill had been loosened during the day so it nudged from behind, it would swing down on one screw as if it were on a hinge. Then the thief signaled the cat, entered the office through the door when the button was pushed and the buzzer sounded, copied the Mata Hari formula, and replaced it in the file cabinet. After the vent cover was replaced, the thief took the cat out with him, locking the door behind him."

"Diabolic!" Pungent exclaims, then looks thoughtful. I can sense a new perfume coming.

"So the cat came in through the vent," Malo went on, "knocking loose some of the duct's dust, and jumped to the mannequin's hat and then down to the floor, leaving fur on the white box and catching a paw on the lace bodice and unraveling a thread. It performed as trained and pressed the entry button when it heard the signal, and was rewarded as usual with fish-shaped treats to keep it busy while the thief copied the formula. But the cat didn't eat all the treats, and was attracted to the warmth of the just-used copier. While curling up on the warm machine, it inadvertently touched the copy button and ran off an extra copy just before the thief removed the last page and replaced

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the original formula in the file cabinet. Then something must have spooked the thief, made him hurry without checking over the office or replacing the second screw in the vent cover."

Rank suddenly bolts toward the door, but Malo, moving swiftly for such a big man, tackles him and drags him to his feet, then pushes him down into a chair. Quick as a cat, I can't help but think admiringly.

"Why did you have to hurry out of here last night?" Malo 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 attorney, maybe try to bluff his way out of this 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, Carl!" Pungent says, looking angry and betrayed. "You trained Intrigue to let you into Lily's office!"

"Yes. It was easy. I used my identical entry button in my office. When I whistled two long one short, Intrigue was rewarded with a snack each time he pressed the button. He's a remarkably smart cat and caught on fast." I could have kissed that guy, despite the fact he was acting like more of a hound than a terrier.

"That vent duct also serves the storage closet on the other side of the wall," Rank continues. "After Amber went downstairs for snacks, I entered the closet, turned Intrigue loose in Lily's office through the vent, then went back to my office and used the intercom to signal Intrigue. It took me only a few seconds to dart back across the hall and open the door when I heard the buzzer as Intrigue pressed the entry button on Lily's desk. I knew I didn't have much time in here, so I tried to make the most of it. If it hadn't been for Intrigue accidentally pressing that copy button before I'd removed the last page, no one would have realized the formula had been copied and I would have gotten away with it."

"You can use the next several years feeling smug in your cell," Pungent says in his tough CEO voice. He picks up the phone and calls the police.

So you can understand why I didn't want this case solved. It isn't just that I've lost my plush home with Rank - I'll somehow land on my feet. But now everyone knows how the theft worked, how I was trained to respond automatically to a signal. A Pavlovian response, the animal psychologists call it, from that famous Russian experiment I told you about. And that's what I really hate about this whole affair, that I was treated like...well, like a dog. They all seem to have forgotten about me for the moment. I'm going over there and eat the rest of those snacks.



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