



UNDERCOVER
COT SERIES



SHAKEN, NOT PURRED

"A plot full of twists... a super smart sleuth... a smidgen of romance. Cupcake baking scientist Dr. Bree Watson will lure the readers in with her intelligence, and capture them with her charm."
-Denise Swanson, *New York Times* Best Selling Author

KELLE Z RILEY

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Chapter 1

1st Undercover Mission

Being a spy wasn't all it was cracked up to be in the movies.

What had she gotten herself into? She was a chemist, not a spy. At least, that's what her diplomas said.

Bree stepped from the podium, hands shaking. Petrochemical engineers swarmed her, shouting questions.

"Can you show us what chemical binders you used to add stability?" The voice rose above the others and Bree turned to the speaker.

"I'd love to..." she gave a tiny, deliberate shrug, "...but my attorney won't let me."

"Damn patent attorneys." The crowd chuckled in response.

Bree's hands steadied. The diversion thinned the crowd and stanchied the flow of questions. Good thing since Bree was posing as an expert in a field she barely knew, presenting data on a fictional product, hoping to catch the interest of a suspected international terrorist. Her presentation was nothing more than a baited hook.

Outside, Texas summer heat baked the sidewalks and withered the grass. Inside, Bree shivered—whether from fear or the chilled hotel air, she didn't know.

"Good job." Matthew Tugood's voice sounded in her head via her hidden earpiece. She fought the urge to reply and focused on the crowds headed to the exhibit hall. "He's here," Tugood said, voice low and calm. "At your nine o'clock."

Bree swiveled to the right.

"Nine, Bree. Not three. Remember, under that blonde wig, you're still a brainy brunette."

She looked left and immediately encountered the outstretched hand of a tall Asian man with thick dark hair. The target they had code named Zed. "Intriguing paper." His slightly accented English sounded as if he was Chinese or perhaps Korean. "Ice that burns is a paradox. I've always considered gas hydrates too unstable for practical use. But your work makes them seem less, shall we say, dangerous."

Her skin prickled at his smooth words. Sweat slickened her hand as she shook his, her eyes never leaving his hooded gaze. Was he testing her? Challenging her?

“Thank him.” Tugood’s voice hissed through the headset.

Bree managed a terse reply.

“You seem nervous,” Zed said with a smile. “Is this your first paper at the SPE conference?”

Bree nodded, grateful he blamed her nerves on the talk. “I just joined the Society for Petroleum Engineers.” She tugged her hand from his grasp.

“You did a good job. I’d like to discuss your research further, if you have time.” He produced a business card. “My name is Lei Chan.”

She studied the card. “Nice to meet you, Dr. Chan.” Bree handed over one of her fake business cards. “I’m—” she paused, mentally reminding herself of her cover identity, “Catherine Holmes.”

“Dr. Catherine Holmes,” he said, consulting her card. “Impressive. But I’ve never heard of *Energy Unlimited*.”

“We’re a startup company.”

“I see. Are you headed to the exhibit hall?” He steered her toward the crowded vendor area while asking questions about her research.

In her other ear, Tugood fed her a constant stream of information to pique Zed’s interest. Bree struggled to keep her face impassive, her conversations straight, and her cover ID intact. All while trying to interpret Dr. Chan’s questions, gestures, and facial expressions in light of what Tugood had told her about him.

By the time they reached the exhibit hall with its sumptuous lunch buffet, her brain felt as thick and gooey as freshly poured asphalt. A headache pounded behind her eyes—and in her eyes. Wearing green contact lenses to disguise her boring brown color had been a mistake. Under the blonde wig, her scalp prickled with an itch she didn’t dare scratch.

When Dr. Chan greeted another colleague and moved away, Bree panicked. Tugood needed her to gain Zed’s trust. “Dr. Chan... Wait.” She scurried after the pair. “Wouldn’t you like to arrange a time to...”

Zed halted and turned back to her. “I’ll be in touch, Dr. Holmes.” His lips twisted into the tiniest of smiles. “Soon.”

“Let him go, Bree.” *Was that disappointment she heard in Matthew’s voice? Resignation? Or was it her imagination?*

She snagged a can of Diet Coke from one of the buffet’s coolers and downed half in quick gulps, hoping to clear her brain.

Shaken Not Purred (Undercover Cat Series)

Her first undercover mission for the Sci-Spy organization presented more problems than a freshman chemistry book.

Most of which centered on the damn earpiece. And the irritating voice it transmitted.

Over the last hours, Tugood's once soothing baritone had morphed into an annoying mosquito-like drone, constantly with her and rarely wanted.

Worse yet, the earpiece itched.

Bree tried to nonchalantly rub the irritation away. Only to be subjected to a different irritant. "Stop that." Matthew Tugood's strident tones reverberated inside her head. "Touching your ear interferes with my ability to hear. And it draws attention to the earpiece."

Bree buried her head in her conference program to hide her response. "I'm a PhD chemist, not an idiot," she snapped, resisting the urge to say more. It would do no good and only get her another lecture on undercover protocol.

"Stay sharp, Dr. Watson."

It's Mayfield-Watson. Bree gritted her teeth and lowered the program. *Or Dr. Catherine Holmes.* The thought of her cover identity caused her headache to throb more fiercely.

She scanned the room, ignoring her Sci-Spy colleague, Milt Shoemaker, who lurked nearby. Tall and slender to the point of being gangly, "Shoe" literally disappeared into his cover the minute he donned the maintenance worker uniform. Without straitening from his stooped, hangdog posture, he lifted his head and gave her a covert thumbs-up. She'd made contact with her target and hadn't required backup intervention.

Now, Bree had a more pressing problem. Thanks to two cups of coffee and a can and a half of Diet Coke, she desperately needed a bathroom. And privacy.

She craned her neck to look past the vendor booths advertising everything from chemical additives to oil drilling equipment. Objective number one was in sight.

She headed to the ladies' room, wondering how to achieve objective number two. Privacy.

Her pendant necklace, plastic rimmed glasses, and briefcase all contained hidden cameras. She flipped the necklace over, slipped her

glasses into their case, and draped her suit jacket over the briefcase, effectively blinding Tugood and team.

“What are you doing?” His voice held a trace of annoyance.

“I need to use the bathroom.”

“So go.”

“Turn your surveillance off.” Bree rubbed her ear, wondering if stuffing a tissue in it would deafen him.

“How can I keep you safe if I can’t see or hear what’s going on?”

“Five minutes, Matthew. Please.” She hated the whine in her voice, but a full bladder did that sort of thing to a woman.

A heavy sigh sounded in her ear. “Two minutes. Then, ready or not, the sound is back on. If your cameras aren’t letting me see what’s happening, I’ll have Shoe set off the sprinkler system and force an evacuation. Got it?”

“Three minutes,” Bree countered.

“One minute, fifty seconds and counting.” A click followed Matthew’s warning.

Bree hustled into the bathroom, amazed at the weight that lifted from her shoulders the moment Matthew no longer followed her every move.

Dammit. James Bond didn’t have to put up with this kind of crap. Being a spy was *so* not like in the movies.

Chapter 2

Sci-Spy Team Headquarters

Morning light bounced off the white exterior of the corporate complex, blinding Bree as she trudged across the parking lot. She shaded her eyes, scanning the new signage. Science Professional for Hire - Sci-PHi.

“Looks like the old building got a facelift while we were away,” Shoe said as he came up beside her. “And no geese.” He glanced down, his features softening as he searched her face. “How’s it feel being back at the day job after our first mission?”

“Like I’m still undercover—except I’m wearing normal clothes.” She gestured to her casual slacks and flats. “I don’t understand why

Tugood and his partner bought our *entire* research company. Why not just hire the few of us for the undercover work they do?”

“Like he said, a temporary science staffing business is a great cover and good way to keep track of chemical technology without raising suspicions. And the proceeds fund our covert activities.”

“Yes, but do you believe that?”

Shoe shrugged as they walked the building. “Personally, I think he didn’t want all the researchers to lose their jobs after the unfortunate events last spring.”

Unfortunate events. Not the way most people would describe murder and fraud. But Milt Shoemaker wasn’t most people. He was like her: a spy posing as a chemist. Or was it a chemist posing as a spy. Perhaps, something in between. One of five in the entire company.

“Maybe. But it means more people I have to lie to about what we’re doing.” Bree unlatched the door using her key card. “I hate lying to my family and friends,” she grumbled.

“Then don’t have friends.”

Bree glanced at his now tight-lipped expression. She swallowed the urge to ask about his family and went about her day, preparing for the dreaded Monday morning staff meeting.

She arrived in the conference room a few minutes before nine, coffee in hand, and slid into a seat beside her friend Kiki. “Are you okay?” Kiki whispered as she nodded to the empty place at the head of the table. The motherly concern in her voice contrasted sharply with her spiked hair and youthful attitude, hinting at the decade that separated them in age.

Bree nodded. “I’m fine. I can deal with the *new* boss.”

Kiki shook her head. “You can’t be okay with him getting the promotion you deserve. He was barely competent when he was your technician. He’s out of his league as your boss.”

“I’m *fine*,” Bree repeated. Troy was a pain in the—He was a pain. Period. In every way possible. But Bree couldn’t let Kiki know the reasons behind Troy’s promotion, no matter how much her friend worried about her.

When Troy strode into the room with his assistant Norah Kingston trailing behind, Bree slumped in her seat. As he settled in at

the head of the table, Norah crammed a handful of gum in her mouth and chewed noisily. Today, her goth attire consisted of purple leggings, a short black skirt, and layers of purple-on-black tee shirts. Her neck, wrists, and ears were festooned with chains featuring skulls and bones. She blew a bubble. Purple, of course.

“Since when did Norah start chewing gum?” Bree asked Kiki.

“Since she learned it annoys Troy.”

“I’ll get her a jumbo pack next time I’m at Costco.” Bree sent Kiki a grin.

The worst part of being a spy—far worse than itchy earpieces, lack of privacy, and risk of exposure—was not being able to share any of it with Kiki. Or her family. Or anyone who hadn’t been recruited to work undercover.

“Everyone, I need your attention.” Troy rapped his knuckles on the table, causing Bree’s coffee to slosh over the rim of her cup. Bree swiped at the spill with her napkin and clenched her teeth to keep from snapping at Troy.

The noise in the room didn’t decline. “People,” Troy tried again to get them to quiet down, “pay attention.”

Silence followed. Broken immediately by Norah popping a large purple bubble. Troy flinched. “Some of you,” he continued irritably, “have not yet requisitioned your new business cards.” Troy glared at Bree. Behind his back, Norah mouthed “sorry” before blowing—and popping—another bubble.

Troy flinched again, his jaw tightening. “CIC has been sold and the staff reassigned. We’re now Science Professionals for Hire. Sci-PHi. Bree, do you give your consulting clients old CIC cards?”

“No,” Bree muttered. *I give them a card that says I’m Dr. Catharine Holmes.* “I’ll order my cards.” *And add them to the stack of fake identities that clutter my wallet.*

Before Troy could say more, Norah popped another bubble.

“Dammit, Norah, stop that.” Troy whirled on the girl, only to receive an insolent shrug for his reprimand.

“We could all use a lot more professionalism around here.” He turned to the rest of the department. “Kiki, how’s the new forensics lab integration progressing?”

Kiki took her time, downing a swallow of coffee and waiting for the atmosphere in the room to settle before speaking. “I’ve worked with Nate Rayburn and his analytical lab techs to get them trained to handle the police lab overflow. The bulk of the labor is processing rape kits, but we’re almost up to speed on everything we need to know.”

“Good. The police contract is a big one. Steady lab work. I’m glad it’s on schedule.” He turned to the other department members. “Those of you not training on forensics techniques will continue working with clients who require 3rd party verification and other contract jobs. We’re not a research company anymore.” He shot another glare at Bree.

“What about our consulting clients?” Milt stretched, leaning back until his chair balanced on two legs. “Where do they fit in?”

“You should know,” Troy replied, letting irritation slip into his tone. “The consulting clients are scheduled and run through the Special Projects Division. You’re always off installing pumps and chemical feed stations and whatnot. And Bree spends most of her time doing god-knows-what for god-knows-who.”

“So,” Milt continued, “Mr. Tugood’s division.”

“Yes. Matthew Tugood’s Special Projects Division. But you both still report to me. And speaking of special projects, Bree, the energy company you consult with sent a letter of commendation.” He waved a paper in front of her before tucking it away. “Would you care to share the highlights with the rest of the team?”

Bree gave him an apologetic half smile. “I presented a paper on the endless energy gas hydrate project. I can’t say more without violating the non-disclosure agreements.”

Silence—and blank stares—met her pronouncement. Bree shrugged it off, glad no one asked questions. The fictitious research about potential explosives had served its purpose—capturing the attention of Zed. Now, she had to reel him in and hope he led her to other members of his terrorist organization.

“Endless, unlimited energy,” Troy muttered, breaking the silence. “Sounds like a perpetual motion machine, if you ask me. I think the Special Projects Division went out on a limb with this one. I hope you don’t get burned, Bree.”

“So do I.” A trickle of dread slithered down her spine. Being tainted professionally wasn’t the problem. Fear of being burned in the spy world—of having her cover blown during a mission—kept her awake at night more than she cared to admit.

Milt banged his chair down with a sharp crack. “Dr. Mayfield-Watson is the most competent scientist I know. She won’t get burned.”

Tension seeped from Bree’s shoulders when she heard Milt’s encouragement. After years as an unappreciated jack-of-all trades, Milt was thriving in the new Sci-Spy organization. His ability to disappear into his cover—something Matthew claimed Bree also had—impressed Tugood and inspired Bree.

Troy grunted and glared at Milt before reminding everyone to record their billable hours and turn in their monthly reports. He adjourned the meeting, but waited for Bree as she made her way out of the conference room.

“The Director of Special Projects appears to have taken quite an interest in you. He’s asked you to meet with him. Again.” Troy’s eyes narrowed to glittering slits. “Don’t you think as your manager, I should be involved in these meetings?”

Bree ignored his petulant tone and ineffective glare. “It’s just a review.”

“A review of the work your non-disclosure agreement won’t allow you to talk to me about?”

The edge in Troy’s voice made the hairs on Bree’s neck stand. Until today, he hadn’t taken much interest in her projects. The all-purpose excuse of working at the fictional client company covered her absences from the labs. If he started micromanaging her, it could compromise her undercover work.

“Personally, I don’t think it has anything to do with agreements or special projects.” Troy stopped walking and turned to her. “I’ve seen the way Matthew Tugood looks at you. Like you’re a piece of candy and he’s craving a sugar fix. The question is, does he want you in his bed or taking over my office running the FAR department? Or maybe both.”

“That’s uncalled for.” Bree stared at Troy until he opened his mouth again, then deliberately cut him off. “Tugood coordinates senior scientists working with consulting clients, nothing more. He doesn’t

want to replace you.” *And he definitely doesn’t want me in his...his intimate circle.*

Bree ignored the flash of warmth that surged through her at the thought of seeing Tugood in more intimate circumstances.

He’s off limits. She mentally ticked off the reasons. One—he was her handler in covert operations. Two—he was the secret owner of her new company. And three—he was, as his name implied, too good to be true.

Sexy super-spies like Matthew Tugood might use scientists like her for their own purposes, but Bree knew better than to think he’d fall for a well-endowed (okay, overweight), soft-around-the-edges, dreamy-eyed geek. Especially one so plain and unremarkable that she could disappear into a cover without any effort.

The more she reminded herself of that, the less likely she’d be to get burned. Not as a scientist. Nor as a spy. But as a woman who dared to put her heart on the line.

Chapter 3

Bree hustled along the second-floor walkway connecting the research and business sides of the complex. The business hub, once bustling with marketing, legal, and support professionals, now consisted of a few offices for the owners’ team that handled official company business.

Unofficially, Sci-PHi was a front company for the espionage activities of Matthew Tugood and his former partner, Gary Dolinski. Tugood handled spy missions through his Special Projects Division. Dolinski—she assumed—financed the operations using cash from his sprawling conglomerate of companies.

Bree steadied herself with a deep breath and knocked on Tugood’s door. He opened it and gave her a warm smile before ushering her in.

What Tugood’s office lacked in space, it made up for in security. The walls consisted of soundproof, and presumably, bulletproof material. They closed the main door and walked to a bookcase. Bree ducked under Matthew’s arm and tugged on a worn copy of Webster’s Dictionary. The shelves swung open, revealing a hidden elevator. Bree stepped inside.

“How did the staff meeting go with Troy?”

Bree shrugged. “The usual pompous-ass behavior.”

“Are you sorry we picked him for the role of department head? We could have promoted Kiki instead.”

Bree’s gut cramped at the thought of even more lying to her best friend. “No, Troy is easier for us to manipulate and control.” She sighed. “Today he was just miffed about not being invited to my meetings with you. He thinks you might want to promote me to his position.”

Matthew followed Bree into the elevator and the bookcase door closed behind them. The already small space shrunk to something barely larger than a test tube. A pheromone-filled test tube. As always, being near Matthew caused Bree’s pulse to speed up and her senses to go on alert. She inhaled the faint whiff of soap radiating from his clean-shaven jaw.

“So, is that all? He’s worried about his job?”

Bree swallowed. “No.” The heat from Matthew’s body wrapped around her, as potent as a physical caress. “He also thinks you want me for your lover. It’s ridiculous.”

“No, it’s not,” Matthew replied slowly. He leaned against the elevator wall, pushing farther into her space. Close enough for her to watch his eyes darken from a stormy-sky gray to deep charcoal. Her heart pounded faster and she sucked in a breath saturated with his scent. His essence. “I think being lovers would make a great cover.”

The elevator lurched to a stop. Bree pushed past Matthew to open the door. “Get over yourself, Tugood.” She fought the lightheadedness that her sudden movement caused. “Even if someone would buy that story, I doubt I could pull it off.”

“Posing as my girlfriend would strain your acting abilities?” The grin he flashed her reeked of mischief. “I think you were very convincing just now in the elevator.”

Bree didn’t respond. Instead, she walked to the wall of computer monitors that dominated the Sci-Spy Tech-Ops Center. Once the executive suite, the rooms now looked like something straight out of a superhero comic book. Bree scanned the security feeds from around the complex, images of the bat cave swirling in her mind.

“I assume you called me in to discuss the next steps with Zed.”

Shaken Not Purred (Undercover Cat Series)

“The next step is to let him contact you. Once he trusts you, we’ll move forward. We’re running a long-term game here, Bree. Uncovering Zed’s network and plans may take months. When he contacts you, let me know. Otherwise, do nothing.”

“Why is the Zed mission so important to you?” Bree watched as Matthew’s lips compressed into a thin, hard line. Seconds ticked by. Eventually, he spoke.

“A little over two years ago, an oil drilling platform exploded in the North Sea. Do you remember?”

She shook her head. “No. I was focused on water and mining projects, not oil.”

“The incident was hushed up, and except for a few environmentalists wagging fingers, it didn’t make much news.” He stared at her, eyes narrowing. “By design.”

“Do you mean our government hushed it up?” Bree wrinkled her brow. “Or the oil company?” She opened a search window on one of the computers before directing her attention to him.

Matthew paced the width of the room, his steps edgy with suppressed energy. “I was on that oil platform—posing as a chemist. Employed by the company Zed worked for. He visited the site less than twelve hours before the explosion.” He stopped, frozen in thought.

“And?”

“If I hadn’t eaten bad sushi and needed to be airlifted off the platform, I would have been on it when it exploded.”

“The explosion could have been an accident. A coincidence.”

“It was a weapons test.” His flat tone left no room for argument.

A chill raced up Bree’s spine. She’d been currying the interest of a mastermind of *weapons testing*. Not some low level operative. She turned to the computer screen where her search yielded a handful of photos and news articles about the incident. Weapons testing.

Matthew could have died in the explosion. One he believed was set by Zed. It explained a lot.

“The day after the explosion I burned my old identity. I cleaned what I could out of the labs, resigned, and disappeared before Zed could make another move to stop my investigation.”

Matthew's voice washed over her. She didn't need to look at him to detect the pain and anger behind his words. "However long it takes, however many blind alleys I have to go into, I will find him and dismantle his organization. That's all you need to know for now."

Silence—and the hum of computer monitors—filled the room. Bree closed the search window and drew a few cleansing breaths while pushing the new information to the back of her mind. "So, if you don't want to meet with me to talk about Zed, why am I here?"

She turned to find Matthew leaning against the polished wood of an executive desk. Something in his stance set her nerves on edge—and not in a pleasant way.

Instead of answering, Matthew walked over to the refrigerator and pulled out a can of Diet Coke. She ignored the brush of his fingers as he handed it to her and focused on the rigid set of his shoulders.

The teasing Matthew of this morning was gone. So, too, was the anguished Matthew of a few minutes ago. The man who faced her was sculpted of muscle, steel, and determination. No softness, no humanness anywhere.

Her heart dropped to the pit of her stomach and she braced herself for his next words.

"One of my government clients contacted me with a new mission. What do you know about running a meth lab?"



Two days later, Bree sat across from Paul Bender in a tiny office at a private local college, wondering if she should have let the Sci-Spy makeup artist stencil a tattoo on her after all.

Paul's heavily lined, sun-weathered face belonged to someone in his 80s, not his 60s. The faded ink—maybe a snake?—crawling from under his conservative collar to disappear into his ash-gray mullet definitely should have stayed in the 1970s.

Bree shifted in her seat and tried to remember what she'd read in the dossier on Paul. Brilliant organic chemist. Founded the company *Naturalistics* with his wife nearly two decades ago. Politically liberal, but fiscally conservative, if his stock holdings and bank records could be trusted. Vegan since 1992.

Not much to go on.

Meanwhile, Paul scanned the papers she'd given him. She couldn't cross her fingers for luck, so she crossed her toes instead and hoped Tugood's cover story for her held up.

"Looks like your university and this temporary agency worked everything out through my secretary." Paul punched in a few numbers on his speakerphone.

"You rang?" The raspy voice of a life-long smoker crackled from the device.

"I'm here with Cat Holmes. Says she's been assigned to work with us for a semester as part of her chemistry BS program. You satisfied with her paperwork?"

"I am. You satisfied with her knowledge of chemistry?" A phlegmy cough punctuated the question.

"I'll know by the end of the day." Paul cut off the call and turned back to Bree. "You know what a Michael Addition Reaction is?"

Bree scanned her memories of organic chemistry reactions and came up blank. "Not specifically. But it's a standard organic reaction. I know exactly where to look up the details."

Paul stared at her for a minute then cackled with laughter. "You'll do, Holmes. Not afraid to admit there's something you don't know, smart enough to know how to find the answer, and plucky enough to give it to me straight. I like that."

He punched in an extension on the phone and picked up the receiver. "Tonya, we've got a new employee. A student intern from UIC." He listened for a moment. "Of course, I mean University of Illinois at Chicago. Is there another UIC? I'd like you to show her the ropes.... Yeah...in my office."

He hung up and grinned. "Tonya's all but taken over my place in the lab." He listed some of her accomplishments. "She's brilliant. PhD in chemistry and physics from MIT. I think it goes to her head." He raised his voice at the last words, making sure Tonya heard him as she stepped into the office.

"All this time, I thought you kept me around for my looks." A ripple of laughter followed the comment and Bree angled herself to study the trim young woman in a pristine lab coat. Her stylish haircut, warm mocha skin tones, and dazzling smile could have made a Hollywood talent scout do a double take.

Bree swallowed, more intimidated by Tonya's unconscious grace and easy femininity than by her MIT degrees.

"Only a fool judges a woman by her looks, Tonya. Not that I don't appreciate a beautiful woman. But it's your mind that appeals to me. That's why you'll be running this company after I retire."

"If there's anything left." Tonya's teasing disappeared behind the grim set of her mouth.

"You worry about the research. Leave the rest to me." Paul pulled a stack of papers to the center of his desk. "Get Cat settled while I review these patents. Someone's got to protect our inventions." With that, he shooed them out the door.

"Is something bad happening to the company?" Bree asked once they were in the hallway. Tonya waved the questions aside. "It's nothing." Tonya led her out of the main building and across a parking lot to a cement block bungalow. "Our labs and offices are housed in here. Once *Naturalistics* vacates the premises, Paul and Lydia—that's his wife and business partner—will donate these labs to the college."

Bree caught the second reference to trouble in the company. She plastered a smile on her face and tried to pretend she was awed by the space Tonya led her into.

"This is our communal kitchen." Tonya gestured toward a smattering of small appliances. "There's always coffee. Food left on the table is considered fair game for anyone. If you're not sure about something, ask. We're a friendly and informal bunch."

Tonya led her around the corridor formed in a large rectangle, pointing out washrooms, conference rooms, and the small lab stockroom. "Labs are along three of the outer walls. Offices are on the interior. Unfortunately, that means no windows." Tonya stopped by an empty office. "You'll be sharing this space with our other visitor."

Bree scanned the room, pleased to note the office wasn't near anyone else's. The large desk dominating the space appeared occupied, so Bree dropped her purse into the drawer of a much smaller desk, which was shoved into a corner between a bookshelf and a filing cabinet. If her office mate stayed AWOL, she would have privacy for her investigations. If not...she hoped her cover as a student intern would put her below everyone's radar.

"I'm eager to get started," she said, turning to Tonya. The young woman nodded and soon Bree was outfitted in a lab coat and escorted to the lab across from Tonya's office.

"Let's introduce you to the team. There are only four of us: me, Jackie, Ricco, and Emily." Tonya pushed open the lab door. "Hey, Em," she called, "I have a new temp for you to meet. This is Cat Holmes. Looks like you're no longer the token white woman in the labs."

A tall blonde in torn jeans and a tee shirt emblazoned with the molecular structure of caffeine flashed a cocky grin and introduced herself as Emily Appleton. "If Paul's filling quotas, I'll have to give up my special privileges. Damn diversity initiative."

"You can laugh now," a woman across the lab chided, her Hispanic accent sharp with indignation. "In my day, people of color weren't running labs and making light of civil rights. Especially women. My generation fought and sacrificed to make your lives easier."

"Jackie marched in the civil rights protests in the 1960s." Tonya led Bree across the room to Jackie's bench top. "She's our conscience. And a damn good scientist."

The short, stocky woman slipped off a lab stool and tucked a strand of wavy hair—still more brown than gray—behind one ear. "I'm Jackie Torres," she said, pumping Bree's hand. "I've worked for Paul and Lydia Bender almost from the day they founded this company. Good people, the Benders."

She released Bree's hand, but kept her eyes trained on the newcomer. "I was a nurse's aide who expected to spend my life scrubbing soiled linens. Paul had other ideas. He and Lydia trained me for a chemist's job making twice what the nursing home offered. They made sure my son got an education, too, even if it meant kicking his lazy butt now and then. He's Dr. Torres, now." Pride shone in her eyes.

"Speaking of Ricco, where is he today?" asked Tonya.

"He's over at the new lab building installing the equipment you two designed. Should be back before the end of the day. Didn't he tell you?"

"Why would he?"

Jackie snorted. “I’ve got eyes in my head. I know you’re sleeping together.”

Dark cherry-red stained Tonya’s cheeks. “My personal life is separate from my professional life.”

“Ah, cariña, who says you have to choose? You can have both. Just don’t hurt my boy.”

Tonya mumbled something, then dragged Bree away for a tour of the rest of the labs. After spending an hour teaching Bree about safety and documentation, Tonya instructed her to create an inventory of the laboratory chemicals.

Bree drew a sigh of relief when she was finally alone in one of the lesser used labs. Tonya’s detailed instructions had been perfect for a temporary technician who had yet to complete her BS degree in chemistry.

For Bree, it had been sheer torture as she struggled to remember she wasn’t supposed to understand the hazard rating systems, the safety data sheets (SDS), or any of a dozen other things that were second nature to her.

At least no one expected a temp to be fast when creating the inventory--which gave her time to investigate. Bree worked quickly, making one set of data to give to Tonya and another to analyze for herself.

Tugood instructions echoed in her memory.

The DEA needs this intel. Your mission is to determine if the lab is making meth or other drugs. If you believe they are, isolate the ring leaders and report back to me.

Bree moved from the organic chemicals to the acid storage area, pausing to strip off her old gloves and don new ones. The relationships at *Naturalistics* intertwined and wrapped around one another like a knotted ball of yarn. Or better yet, like a coiled polymer strand—every twist and turn creating a structure that influenced the whole in subtle—and not so subtle—ways.

“I’m here to observe, not to make friends,” she muttered as she wiped the bottles clean. Even so, Bree found herself liking the people in the small, quirky lab. The thought of spying on them knotted in her stomach, nestling like toxic lead.

Yet, she couldn’t abandon her mission, either.

Her snooping had already turned up evidence. Neat rows of chemicals and specialized equipment suitable for manufacturing narcotics filled the marble lab bench. Bree slowly placed the containers back into their scattered storage areas. *Just because they could manufacture narcotics didn't mean they were manufacturing narcotics.*

But someone at the DEA—Tugood's client—thought they were.

To learn more, she needed to get close to the team and earn their trust. She swallowed past a tightness in her throat as she folded one set of her inventory data into a small square and slipped it into the pocket of her slacks. Like it or not, someone at *Naturalistics* was probably involved in drug manufacture and possibly had ties to narcotics trafficking, distribution, and corruption.

One of the nice people she'd met today was a criminal.

Chapter 4

After a long day of sorting through dust and grime, Bree savored the cool brush of air against her bare hands when she stripped off her sweaty latex gloves. She shed her lab coat, placing it on a hook near the door, and pushed her safety glasses to the top of her head as she stepped into the hallway.

A murmur of voices from the opposite side of the building told her the researchers were gathered in one of their offices. Bree hesitated, debating whether to go into the occupied office or not. Getting close to the team was critical to her mission.

She ran her hand through the tangle of hair at her nape and made her decision. First, she would comb out the knots and pop a breath mint. Then she'd join her lab mates.

Bree headed away from the voices, toward her temporary office. At the sound of an unfamiliar voice inside the small room, she paused, hugging the wall. Quietly, she knelt, pretending to tie her shoe. With one ear alert to any sounds behind her, she focused the rest of her attention on the conversation in the office.

"Of course, my goal is complete integration," said a woman. Her low-pitched voice carried deference and a hint of defensiveness. "Give me a few more days to convince the staff. We can promise better

benefits than the current owner. I'll have the rest of the IP *and* the inventors, just like I promised."

IP referred to Intellectual Property—in other words, patents. Bits of data lined up in Bree's mind, forming an incomplete, but intriguing, picture.

Paul Bender was worried about the corporate IP and determined to focus on it. Tonya had referred to the corporation being disrupted—perhaps sold or liquidated?—at least twice. Now, the unknown woman in her office was trying to get control of both the patents and the inventors.

Was *Naturalistics* being sold? Why? How did the sale effect the alleged production of illegal drugs?

Bree stood and backed down the hallway then retraced her steps to the office, whistling as she approached. "I know what's at stake," the woman inside said as Bree entered and headed for her desk.

"Who are you?"

Bree froze at the sharp demand. She turned slowly, ready to spin her cover story. "Hi, I'm Cat Holmes. I'm a—"

"Well, Cat Holmes, has no one ever told you it's rude to sneak up on a person?"

"I didn't sneak up on you," Bree lied.

The woman—who looked forty going on twenty-five—waved her comment aside with a slash of her hand. She flicked a hank of perfectly styled, inky-black hair over one shoulder. "What are you doing in my office?"

"I'm a new temp," Bree replied in a rush, gesturing toward the back of the room. "Tonya said I could use the spare desk. I didn't know anyone else was here."

She offered the woman a smile, which wasn't returned. Bree ducked her head and deliberately drew her lip between her teeth, trying to look young and uncertain. "I'll just...just grab my purse and get out of your way." She dropped the inventory list on the desk and pulled her bag from the bottom drawer, unsure of her next moves.

"Hi, Cat." Tonya's voice interrupted her internal debate. Bree looked toward the door where Tonya stood flanked by Emily and a tall handsome man who Bree guessed must be Ricco Torres. Jackie hovered in the background. "I see you've met Hannah."

Hannah thawed immediately and gave Tonya a warm smile. “Actually, Cat and I got off on the wrong foot. I hadn’t realized you needed to hire temps.”

“She’s part of a university work-study program.”

“I see.” Hannah turned to Bree and offered her hand. “I’m Hannah Rogers, HR representative of *Elemental Fractions*. We recently acquired *Naturalistics*.”

She pivoted back to Tonya. “I’m excited to have all of you as part of our company. The new venture will be a wonderful blending of talents. With the resources *Elemental Fractions* has at its disposal, you’ll have a staff of technicians. You won’t need to spend your time training undergraduates to help with the work. We pride ourselves on having the finest PhD researchers in the business.”

From her spot to the side of the main conversation, Bree noticed Hannah addressed her comments only to Tonya and Ricco, ignoring Jackie and Emily. Beside Tonya, Emily stiffened.

Bree understood Emily’s unspoken sentiment. Hannah probably didn’t realize the young woman was “ABD” or all but degree. Emily had explained to Bree that her PhD thesis depended on her work at *Naturalistics*. Bree suspected Emily’s confidence would be fragile until she passed her final examinations and thesis defense. No doubt Hannah’s dismissive attitude toward her stung.

Heaven knew it made Bree want to blow her cover and put Hannah in her place. She clenched her fists against the temptation.

Ricco stepped into the office, oozing Latin charm. Ignoring Hannah, he introduced himself and offered his hand to Bree. His accent—thicker and somehow smoother than his mother’s—was clearly a deliberate affectation, practiced and intended to seduce. Or something.

Whatever it was, it tingled along Bree’s nerve endings—whether in pleasure or warning, she couldn’t say. “Sorry we didn’t meet earlier. I would like to invite you for a drink after work. My treat.” He flicked a glance at Hannah. “You can come, too, if you like.”

“We all wanted you to join us.” Tonya moved to stand by Ricco. “Drinks at *All Mixed Up* are a tradition. A perfect way to welcome you to the team.”

Next thing Bree knew, she was hustled from the labs and chauffeured to a local wine and martini bar, surrounded by her new friends.

Ricco made a show of opening the car doors for her and taking her arm as they walked across the gravel lot at the edge of town.

Tonya and Emily teased her about competing for the lone male scientist's attention. Jackie playfully pushed all the women aside and claimed Ricco's first love was his mother.

Hannah stood to the side and watched, a look of longing on her face until she stormed her way to the head of the group and herded them through the door.

Bree resisted the temptation to relax even as she pretended to join in the playful banter. Instead, she swallowed a bitter taste in her mouth, knowing she was working her way into the confidences of a group of people she must ultimately betray.

Tugood would have been proud.



"I'll buy the first round." Hannah's voice rose above the din in the bar. Bree shuddered at the strident tone. Since her gaffe in the office, Hannah had tried to be friendly--without success. Her perky banter and backhanded compliments grated on Bree's patience like a zester on a lemon, peeling it away in painful, thin strips.

"I'm so impressed that you have group traditions for your lab. Although you have to be careful. Alcoholism in the workplace is a big concern."

One strip. And another.

The group found a table and Hannah waved a server to them. "Bonding with fellow workers is important for high functioning teams. I once led a phenomenal integration team. Even though the end of the project signaled the end of everyone's employment, they finished the task in record time. With smiles on their faces."

More curled tendrils of shredded patience joined the growing pile. Did Hannah not notice how Tonya rolled her eyes at the absurd statement? How Jackie's fingers curled into fists? Or how Ricco sat, arms crossed in a classic, closed-off pose?

Bree made mental notes about her colleagues, cataloging their body language and interactions, observing the inner workings of the team.

Other than their mutual dislike for Hannah—who didn’t stop her monologue until a waitress arrived to take drink orders—Bree didn’t know how she was going to bond with the staff.

Hannah picked up her topic again. “Gallup calls it the ‘Best Friend’ principle.” Bree imagined Hannah in a cheerleader’s uniform instead of a pantsuit while the words washed over her. What colors would a corporate cheerleader wear? Just-bruised-black-and-blue seemed to encompass Hannah’s integration style. Performance-review-red was probably another popular choice.

“I’ve known my best friend since childhood,” Tonya offered. “We used to do everything together before I went to grad school.”

“That’s not what we mean by best friend,” Hannah corrected, her voice as prim and stiff. “A best friend is someone at work who you know has your back.”

“Like Julio did when we got into a knife fight in sixth grade?” Ricco asked, an evil glint in his eye. Bree wondered if he was telling the truth or baiting Hannah. She’d have to ask Tugood if Ricco’s background check had turned up anything of concern.

“Definitely not. Best friend means something entirely different in the context of work.” Hannah flushed as she continued her explanation, but Bree lost interest.

She wasn’t going to learn anything from the *Naturalistics* team while Hannah was around. Her head pounded. The topic of best friends reminded Bree she hadn’t spoken to Kiki since Monday morning’s department meeting. Right before Tugood had given Bree her latest assignment.

She excused herself and wound through the tables toward the ladies’ room, guided by the light from the candy-colored neon martini glass lights on the walls. A banner on the back wall invited the patrons to attend the first “Mix Your Own Cocktail” party on Friday night.

Once in the safety of the empty ladies’ room, Bree swallowed a couple aspirin and leaned against the cool tiles, savoring the silence.

I need just five minutes of normal. Not as undercover Cat Holmes. Not as Bree the spy. Just five minutes as myself. She located

her phone and called Kiki. “What’s your weekend look like?” She crossed her fingers and hoped Kiki didn’t have plans. “I was thinking we should spring for a mani/pedi at the new spa by my condo. I could use some down time.”

“So, work at the client’s company has you drained?” Kiki asked.

Bree mumbled something about the fake company where her colleagues thought she worked, hating the secrets she couldn’t share with her friend.

“Count your blessings.” A stressful edge crept into Kiki’s voice. “I don’t know who thought Troy would make a good manager, but that person needs a sharp rap on the knuckles. Or worse. You’re lucky you work offsite so much these days.”

Kiki ranted about Troy’s new policies while Bree cringed, hating the part she’d played on inflicting Troy on the team at Sci-PHi. “I guess, I’m just cranky lately,” Kiki said. “I miss meeting you for lunch or coffee.”

“Me, too.” Bree laughed. “I even miss you forcing me to work out at the corporate gym.”

“Workouts aren’t the same. I almost never see you-know-who down there.”

Oops. That was a can of worms she shouldn’t have opened. Was it really only a few months ago when she and Kiki had gone to the corporate gym to ogle Matthew Tugood as he worked out? She hadn’t known his true identity as an undercover agent then. Briefly, she’d even wondered if he was a contract killer.

“Hello? Bree? Are you still there?”

“Oh, yeah.” Bree pulled her thoughts back to the present.

“I’m sorry. I guess things are a little strange with you and Matthew Tugood these days. I mean, now that he’s your boss.”

“It isn’t like that.”

“Sure, it is. Most of your work is run through his Special Projects Division. Personally, I think it’s great because Troy can’t stand having you report to someone besides him.”

“And anything that annoys Troy amuses you.”

Kiki’s laughter burst through the speakers. “Guilty as charged. But as for Matthew, don’t let an organizational chart stand in your way

if you want to get up close and personal with him. I hear he's available again."

"First Troy. Now you. Why does everyone think his interest in me goes beyond professional?"

"Because I've seen the way he looks at you. And I've seen you look back at him the same way more than once."

"It isn't what you think," Bree insisted. Not even close, but she couldn't admit to Kiki that she and Matthew were... What exactly were they? Whatever it was, it didn't fit neatly into an organizational chart. Or anything else.

"Listen," Bree said, "I've got some work to finish up. So, are we on for the weekend?"

After confirming her plans with Kiki, Bree cut off the call and stashed the phone. Her five minutes of normal were up. Thoughts of Matthew, her cover identity, and her mission crowded out any pleasure from her weekend plans.

On the other side of the bathroom door a table filled with her co-workers contained possible drug dealers. It was up to her to figure out who was innocent. And who was guilty.

Chapter 5

Bree grabbed a tiny plastic cup from an oversized martini glass decorating the bathroom counter and filled it with a pale green liquid from a vodka inspired container. A sniff assured her it was mouthwash, not actual vodka.

She swished the mouthwash and refreshed her pink lip gloss. As she ran a comb through her shoulder length hair Tugood's words sounded in her mind.

You can disappear into a role. People won't remember if you're blonde or brunette. They won't remember your face. It's a rare and valuable quality in an undercover agent.

Tugood's idea of praise—pointing out her unremarkable features—didn't make her feel either rare or valuable.

Bree wished she could be memorable, at least, to someone. But she hadn't inherited her mother's red hair, green eyes, or vibrant personality. She'd taken after her dad.

She threw the comb in her bag and glared in the mirror. Her silver peace sign earrings and peasant blouse covered with purple flowers made her look a dozen years younger.

Perfect for the role of Cat Homes.

Thank heavens her mother had forced her to join the high-school drama club instead of the physics club. Mom had been right. Bree had needed to develop better people skills.

People skills her new job demanded she use in uncovering a narcotics manufacturing ring.



Bree grabbed a flyer describing the “Mix Your Own Cocktail” party as she made her way back to the table. She perched on a stool between Emily and Hannah.

Emily leaned close. “Don’t desert me again. I’ve had about as much as I can take of Hannah’s needling. She treats me like I’m stupid. I don’t know how Jackie manages to sit near her without snapping her scrawny, dried-up, little neck.”

Jackie sat on the other side of Hannah, quietly watching while Hannah directed her comments toward Ricco and Tonya. Once, Hannah paused to scrutinize the flyer before pushing it away and continuing to court the PhD scientists.

“Just think of the fun you’ll have when you finish your degree and can rub it in her face.” Bree watched Emily’s reaction to her words. “That is why you didn’t tell her you were close to defending your thesis, isn’t it?”

Emily blushed, confirming Bree’s suspicions. “You guessed it. What about you? Did you ever think of going on for an advanced degree or are you going to stop with a BS?”

“I’ll see how this job turns out first,” Bree hedged, accenting her words with a shrug.

“Oh, good, the drinks are here.” Hannah’s voice demanded attention. “Miranda,” she said waving to the server, “and her father make the best margaritas in the business.”

“Especially when you insist on a private, \$500 per bottle tequila,” the server muttered as she put a chocolate martini in front of Bree and a beer next to Emily.

“Oh, you found the flyer for our “Mix Your Own Cocktail” event,” continued the server, changing the subject. “We’re having a lecture on cocktail mixing, then a chance to try your hand at bartending. Your first drinks are included in the cost of the event. Plus, there’s a contest. Bring in your own cocktail-inspired food or bar snacks to enter. If you win, your entry will be featured on our menu.”

“That’s ambitious,” said Hannah, earning her a dark look from the server. “Is it your dad’s idea, or yours?”

“My mother came up with the idea.” Her tone, brittle as crystal and cold enough to freeze a straight margarita, caused Hannah’s jaw to drop. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to get back to the bar.”

“Be sure to tell your dad I was in,” Hannah called after her. The forced cheer in her voice didn’t fool anyone. Bree—and everyone else—turned to their drinks as tension thickened the air around the table.

“So, Hannah, do you come to *All Mixed Up* frequently?” Jackie’s direct question broke the awkward silence and forced Hannah to face her.

“I’m a regular patron.”

“We come here every week, but I don’t remember seeing you.”

“I rarely leave the office before seven. I’m passionate about my work. Plus, I don’t think it’s fair to my employer for me to cut out early.” She turned to Tonya, shutting out Jackie. “By the way, did I tell you about our Young Professional Program? It’s for management trainees. I’d like to nominate you for the team.”

Tonya swirled the olive in her martini glass, concentrating on the swizzle stick more than on Hannah. “I’ve managed the *Naturalistics* labs for years. As I understand it, your program is targeting entry-level candidates. Like Emily.”

Tonya paused and turned to Emily, who blushed. “Emily is an accomplished organic synthetic chemist. She’s come up with some techniques to—”

“—to clean up chemical mixtures,” Ricco interrupted. He squeezed Tonya’s hand and she turned her attention back to her drink. “Emily has a lot of untapped potential. As Tonya said, she’s a good organic chemist. I’m sure she would be interested in your program.”

Emily sent Ricco a look that Bree interpreted as gratitude, before she lowered her gaze to resume studying her beer bottle. She picked at the label with her thumbnail. The tension in the air closed around the table, muffling it in silence.

Bree's gut told her Emily, Ricco, and Tonya were hiding something. Drugs? Or something else?

"Of course, Emily would be welcome to apply as well." Hannah broke the silence, her eyes still trained on Tonya. "But we're concentrating on people with demonstrated potential."

"What makes you think I'd be a good candidate?" Something in Tonya's voice caused warning bells to ring in Bree's head.

Hannah either didn't catch the warning or ignored it in her rush to answer. "I have a good eye for talent. Trust me when I say you are exactly the type of candidate we're looking for."

Tonya nodded. "*Elemental Fractions* has a new diversity initiative, don't they?"

"They do. I'm proud of our commitments and accomplishments." Hannah took a swallow of her margarita and continued, her voice warming to the topic. "Last year, we increased the number of women, GBLT, and minorities in management positions by 5 percent. Our target is to get to at least 20 percent diversity in our upper management."

"So, you want me as part of your young professional program because I'm black? Or because I'm a woman? Or perhaps both?"

"Of course not. I'm recommending you because of your accomplishments."

"Name one."

Hannah took another drink, sipping slowly, as if giving herself time to think. "I admire the work you did with improving citrus extraction rates in your processes. The method is part of the reason we wanted to acquire *Naturalistics*."

Tonya nodded, satisfied.

Behind her, an older man with sandy-blond hair streaked with white approached the table. "Did I hear someone say citrus extract?" He kissed Tonya on the cheek. "I thought you came here to relax after work. Do you ever stop discussing scent and flavor extracts?"

"Not until after my second dirty martini."

He nodded then directed his attention to Hannah. “Miranda told me you were here. It's always good to see you, my dear. Are you enjoying your drinks?”

Hannah saluted him with her glass. “I am. You make a good margarita.”

“My drinks are about to get better.” He flagged down a tall, slender woman dressed in a tight black tee shirt, short leather skirt, and leggings. Even in ballet flats the woman stood nearly six feet tall. “Everyone, I'd like you to meet Jen Stands. She's my new mixologist. Jen is giving our drink menu a facelift. These folks were just mentioning citrus extracts. How about sending over a pitcher of your new concoction?” He looked to Hannah. “On the house.”

“Sure.” Jen gave them a smile and a wave, causing her collection of charm bracelets to rattle. “It's a twist on a classic Lemon Drop Martini that I call Tangerine Tango.”

Jen chatted for a bit then headed off. Bree swiveled in her seat, craning her neck to get a look at the bar. It was too far away and the light too dim to get a good view. She turned back to the table and focused on learning about her colleagues. Finding out how a “mixologist” differed from a bartender would have to wait.

A few minutes later, Jen reappeared, carrying a glass pitcher filled with a bright, slightly fizzing orange liquid. Miranda, their server, followed with a tray of martini glasses and a bowl filled with fruit garnishes. Jen filled the glasses, plopped a skewer of fruit in each and passed them around.

Bree took a sip. The orange flavor sparkled on her tongue. No harsh alcohol taste burned her mouth or lingered after she swallowed. She took a second sip. “It reminds me of a Bellini,” she commented.

“A Bellini is straight champagne and orange juice,” Jen replied.

“Jen's Tango is a bit more potent,” said Miranda, giving Jen a wink. “Don't be fooled by the smooth taste. And don't drink too many unless you have a designated driver.”

Miranda collected the empty glasses at the table while Jen stayed to chat. When the conversation drifted into flavor chemistry, she didn't bat an eye. Instead, she followed the discussion, eyes alight with interest.

“How did you get into your career?” Bree asked.

Jen gave her a hint of a smile. "I didn't start out dreaming of being a glorified bartender. I started college at Northwestern studying liberal arts. That's a fancy way of saying I didn't know what I wanted to do.

"Anyway, in my freshman year I took a course in their Science in Human Culture Department. *The Physics of Amusement Parks*. I learned a little bit about circular momentum and a lot about how fun applied-science could be."

Hannah pushed her drink aside and sat straighter. "I remember that course. I was a business major, trying to get my science credits out of the way before graduation."

Jen's smile widened. "What a small world. It was a great program, wasn't it?"

"I could handle the tests, but the fieldtrip almost killed me." Hannah turned to the group, for once including all of them in her remarks. "We went to Six Flags Amusement park for a special tour. The lecturer would discuss the physics of a particular ride, then we'd try it out and have a sort of science debriefing after."

"That sounds like fun," Bree said.

"It was, until I threw up on my lab partner's shoes after the rollercoaster from hell. She spent the day smelling like puke. I spent it in the infirmary."

"Studying the physics of projectile vomiting?" Jen teased.

Hannah let out a bitter little laugh. "You could say so. I probably shouldn't have partied before the fieldtrip. In any case, I learned not to attend fraternity-hosted keg parties. And the value of drinking only high quality alcohol."

She fell silent for a minute. "Looking back, I feel sorry for my lab partner. When she joined my sorority house, the sisters dubbed her the *Puke Princess* and a host of other nasty names. I tried to stop them, but I got my share of ribbing, too." She shrugged. "It was a long time ago."

"Aside from being sick, it sounds like a great class to me," Bree said. "I love when science is applied to real life."

"Me, too." Jen focused on Bree. "To finish answering your question, the other applied science class I took was *Alcohol and Culture*. Basically, it combined the sociology of bonding over drinks

and the chemistry of alcoholic beverages. The fieldtrip for that was a pub crawl, if I remember correctly.”

“I’d love to learn more about the science of drinks.”

Jen hefted the tray to her hip. “I spent years experimenting with drink mixing. Eventually, I took a bartending class, and here I am, a Master Mixologist. Having fun in a job I love. I’d be happy to share some drink making tips with you one day when we’re not busy. But for now, let me send over another sample for you to try.”

After Jen left, the group shared stories from their own college courses. Bree sat quietly, observing rather than participating. Hannah flirted with Ricco, flattered Tonya, and generally ignored the rest of them.

The next round of drinks came and Hannah waved off the offering, instead, asking for a second margarita. “You’ve got an admirer,” the server said as she put the drink Hannah ordered and a second glass in front of her. “This is compliments of the gentleman over there.”

They all looked at the man occupying a booth with his much younger date. Hannah took a sip, licked the salt from her lips and saluted him with her glass. He smiled in return.

“Is he a friend of yours?” asked Bree.

“No, but whoever he is, I’m grateful. Salt, lime and tequila is just what I need to clear my palate after that fizzy orangeade.” She took a second sip and grimaced. “Miranda must have skimped on the ice. Plus, I can still taste that other nasty drink.”

She rotated her glass so the salt encrusted rim faced her, then raised it and addressed the group. “Here’s to a successful collaboration between *Naturalistics* and *Elemental Fractions*. May we continue to prosper together.”

Quiet greeted her words. Bree wondered if the others would join in the toast or leave Hannah hanging. Slowly, first Jackie, then everyone else raised their glasses and echoed the sentiments of the toast. Bree drained the last of her drink and suggested they order snacks to cushion the effects of the alcohol.

Hannah grabbed a menu and stared at it for a minute before passing it to Bree. “I’m okay with anything you want to order.” Soon chicken strips, loaded baked potato skins, and veggie tempura—for

Emily who didn't eat meat—arrived at the table and Bree switched from mixed drinks to Diet Coke.

Others opted for soda or coffee. Hannah stopped making everyone cringe with her comments and descended into an alcohol induced silence, cradling her head in one hand. Her long, dark hair formed an impenetrable curtain between her and the rest of them.

Watching Hannah's bowed head, Bree forgot how annoying the woman could be and wondered if she was suffering the effects of over indulgence. Surely three drinks wouldn't do that to a woman, would they? Or had she had four? Bree had lost count.

Someone—Miranda? Jen?—brought Hannah a cup of coffee. She dumped cream and sugar into it and drank slowly. The bar owner offered to call a cab.

One by one, the team dispersed until Bree was left alone with Ricco. "I'm sorry you had to witness that," he said as he led her to his car.

"I'm not sure what you mean."

Ricco sighed. "Hannah's been in our labs off and on since Paul sold the *Naturalistics* patents to *Elemental Fractions*. She's trying to convince us to move to her company."

"I thought when companies merged, all of the employees merged, too."

"Maybe that's the way it works in other industries, but Paul Bender didn't sell the company outright. He sold the rights to our extraction patents. It's a different thing altogether." He opened the car door and waited until Bree fastened her seatbelt before moving to the driver's side.

"You'll eventually learn that chemistry is as much a business as it is a science. They don't teach you that in school." He flashed a smile, teeth white in the darkness of the car.

Bree noticed his accent has slipped. No longer thick and sensuous, he spoke with only a hint of Hispanic pronunciation. "Why the game?" she asked.

"What game?"

"Why do you put on the Latin Lover persona around Hannah?"

“So, you caught that, did you? Good observation skills. You must be a scientist.” He was silent for a moment before adding, “Hannah's a cougar who sees what she wants to see.”

"Did you deliberately try to scare her by talking about knife fights when you were a kid?"

Ricco laughed as if she'd told a joke. "Guilty as charged. Hannah looks at me like I'm some sort of exotic diversion. Giving her what she wants keeps her out of my business."

"What business is that?"

"Mine." Again, Ricco's smile flashed, white in the darkness.

Before Bree could ask more questions, he pulled into the company parking lot next to her car. "Are you okay to drive?"

Bree nodded and thanked him for the ride. While she started her car, he waited in the silent lot. A familiar chill made Bree shiver. Ricco hadn't corrected her when she'd accused him of playing games. Nor had he offered a reasonable explanation for his behavior.

Had she tipped her hand when she asked him about his accent? She didn't want him to be assessing her observational skills too closely if he was the brain behind the illegal drug manufacturing.

With shaking hands, Bree started her car. A friend would wait to make sure the car started. An enemy might wait for different reasons.

She pulled away and began the long ride home keeping one eye in the rearview mirror as she pondered a single question.

Which was Ricco? Friend? Or enemy?

Chapter 6

The next morning, Bree dragged herself to the *Naturalistics* site, feeling cranky and disoriented. No wonder the mixologist had warned her about the Tangerine Tango martinis. They packed a punch. Or maybe it had been worry over her conversation with Ricco.

She'd filed her report with Tugood and fallen asleep on the couch while watching the news. She would have slept for another hour at least, if Sherlock—her oversized orange cat—hadn't awakened her by yowling for his breakfast.

Now, instead of heading into the labs she cradled a cup of coffee and slumped on her corner desk. Hannah's desk was empty. Bree thanked her luck for small favors.

"You look a little worse for wear today."

Bree sat up as Tonya stepped in to the office. "I didn't sleep well last night," she explained.

"Listen, real world chemistry isn't like doing a lab experiment in school. Being a straight A student isn't the same as wrestling with real world problems."

Bree remembered Ricco had said much the same thing the night before. What real world problems were Ricco and Tonya wrestling with?

Tonya perched on her desk and nodded toward the empty chair across the room. "Not everyone understands, or appreciates, your skills. *Naturalistics* values all its employees, PhD, BS, and student interns. Don't let Hannah get you down."

"But *Naturalistics* doesn't exist anymore, does it? I mean, didn't *Elemental Fractions* buy your company?"

"They bought some of our technology. They didn't buy us."

Bree noted that Tonya's answer to the question, much like her observation a moment ago, correlated with what Ricco had told her last night. Clearly the *Naturalistics* employees weren't jumping at the chance to join Hannah's company. Because illegal drug manufacturing was more lucrative? Or were there other reasons?

"I guess it doesn't matter to me, anyway," Bree said, dismissing the comments. She finished her coffee and stood. "I'm only here for an internship. Whatever happens won't affect me."

"Maybe. Maybe not. If Paul Bender likes your work, he might offer you a permanent position. You seem to be comfortable in the lab. Would you like to try your hand at a couple of reactions today?"

Bree jumped at the chance. The closer she got to the actual reactions, the closer she got to uncovering who was responsible for drug creation.

As Bree was buttoning her lab coat, Hannah entered the office. Actually, lurched more accurately described her movements. Her skin had an odd tinge and the oversized sunglasses covering her eyes hinted at other issues.

“I should know better than to mix margaritas with martinis,” Hannah declared as she sat and groaned. “My head feels like the university marching band is stomping through it. I need coffee.”

“I’ll get it.” Tonya scooted out the door before Bree could open her mouth.

Hannah booted up her computer and tossed her sunglasses aside as she squinted at the screen. She rubbed her eyes and looked again. “Where are my reading glasses?”

Bree watched as Hannah rummaged through her designer bag. When she stopped and put a hand to her mouth, Bree gave up trying to be aloof.

“Hannah,” Bree knelt to look into Hannah’s bloodshot eyes, “do you need me to help you make it to the bathroom?”

Hannah swallowed and shook her head. “It’s passed now. I swear, I never get sick unless I drink cheap alcohol. Everyone at *All Mixed Up* knows that. Did the orange drinks bother you?”

Bree shook her head, trying to ignore Hannah’s alcohol scented breath. “Let me try to find you something to settle your stomach.” She left the office to join the others in the kitchen.

Tonya stood by the coffee pot, tapping her foot while waiting for it to brew. Emily sat at the table, sorting through her purse. “I’ve got some aspirin in here,” she said. “Maybe that will help.” She pulled out a couple of capsules.

“She needs food.” Jackie slapped a plate of buttered toast onto the table.

“What’s on it?” Bree asked, looking at something dissolving in the butter.

“Cinnamon and sugar. Helps to calm the stomach and metabolize the alcohol, according to my mother and her mother before her.” Jackie shrugged. “It can’t hurt.”

Tonya took the plate, aspirin, and coffee and headed back to Hannah’s office. Bree followed with a glass of water. Once they had Hannah settled, they made their way to the labs.

At the bench, Tonya showed Bree how to purify a muddy green mixture she called clover extract. “This,” Tonya said, holding out a cone shaped piece of glassware fitted with a valve at the small end, “is called a separatory funnel. Use it to shake oil-based solvents with the

water-based plant slurry—like mixing salad oil and vinegar. Then let the components settle and drain off the bottom fraction.”

Bree nodded, hoping she didn’t look bored. “What are we mixing?”

“We’re extracting clover sent. It’s used to add freshness to outdoor inspired candles, fragrance sprays, and personal care products.”

The lab didn’t smell fresh to Bree. The sting of acetone and the sweet, sickly scent of toluene and other solvents assaulted Bree’s nose, despite the ventilated fume hood. She eyed the mixture. Was it really clover? Or something else? Something illegal?

“So, Cat, do you like to cook?” Tonya chatted as she worked.

“Cook what?” Bree asked cautiously. Was Tonya using the slang term to ask if she liked to synthesize—cook—meth? Had she cracked the drug ring that easily?

“Cook anything. Most chemists like to play around with recipes. Molecular gastronomy—the merger of science and cooking—fascinates me.”

“I enjoy puttering in the kitchen.”

“You might like synthetic organic chemistry if you enjoy cooking. Speaking of that, Emily and I are thinking about whipping something up for the “Mix Your Own Cocktail” party at the bar on Friday. Do you want to join us?”

“That would be great.” *Cocktail inspired foods*. Bree had put some chicken breasts in a pineapple-soy marinade this morning, intending to grill them for dinner. Maybe she could tweak the recipe to create a Pina Colada chicken strip with tropical chutney. Mentally, she composed a shopping list. Onion. Sweet bell peppers. Coconut. Pecans—or maybe almonds—to crush for the coating.

“You’re smiling,” Tonya teased. “You already have a recipe in mind, don’t you? What is it?”

“If it works, I’ll tell you.” Bree secured the funnel on a lab stand and let the layers separate. “Until then it’s a trade secret.”

“No fair keeping secrets from colleagues.” Tonya checked Bree’s work. “That looks good,” she said, referring to the experiment. She outlined the next steps in the separation process while Bree took notes.

Shaken Not Purred (Undercover Cat Series)

"I hear the word secrets and then find you two conferring in private." Both women looked up at the sound of Ricco's voice. "What brilliant idea do you have now, Tonya? And should I be worried that you're sharing it with Cat instead of me?"

"It's not my idea, it's Cat's. And yes, you should be worried."

The grin on her face belied the warning in her words, but Ricco's brows snapped together and he flashed them a look of annoyance. "Ideas developed in these labs are the property of *Naturalistics*. Don't forget that. Be careful who you talk to."

"It's not chemistry," Bree interjected. "It's a recipe. For the contest at *All Mixed Up*."

"My misunderstanding." Ricco colored as he gave them a curt nod. "I'll just go check on my reactions in the other lab." He ambled away, muttering something under his breath in Spanish.

An hour later, Bree slipped out of the lab while she waited for another mixture to separate into layers. She took the long way to her office, going first to the kitchen for a second cup of coffee before heading to the space she shared with Hannah.

As she approached the door, she spied Hannah, slumped at her desk, a half-eaten piece of toast nearby and a coffee mug at her elbow.

Bree stepped to the desk, intending to shake Hannah awake and send her home. The minute she touched Hannah, Bree's senses went on alert. The fine hairs at the back of her neck stood.

Hannah was stiff.

Hannah was cold.

Hannah was dead.



To follow the "Undercover Cat" series, as well as Kelle's other works scan the code or visit www.kellezriley.net. Extras include:

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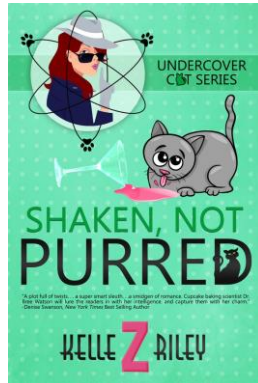
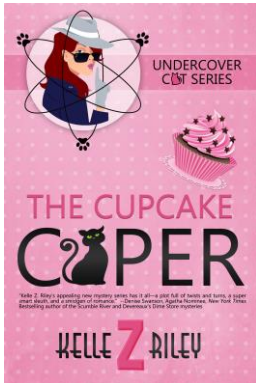


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Be careful what you wish for . . .

Bree Watson traded her lab coat for a trench coat, expecting the life of a spy to be fun. But when a body turns up on her undercover mission, she's forced to handle:

- 🐾 A murdered woman with more enemies than meets the eye
- 🐾 A hunky handler posing as her fake boyfriend
- 🐾 A sexy detective bent on wooing her—and wooing her away from espionage
- 🐾 A drop-out drug dog with a nose for trouble
- 🐾 Her cranky cat, curious coworkers, a cupcake challenge she can't resist, and too many secrets, lies and cover identities to keep straight...

In the whirlwind of investigations and undercover operations, Bree develops a serious identity crisis. Who is she, really?

A spy pretending to be a chemist? Or a chemist playing at being a spy?

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