

UNDERCOVER
C🐱T SERIES



THE CUPCAKE C🐱OPER

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KELLE **Z** RILEY

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Chapter 1

The week before St. Patrick's Day in "Chicagoland" meant two things: green beer flooding the city's bars and—more important to Bree—green shoots of spring grass poking through the desolate winter landscape in the suburbs.

She glanced out her condo window. Skeletal trees stood sentry in the mist as a lone commuter, shoulders hunched against the chill, hurried along the brick-lined streets and into a coffee shop.

The cold mist coalesced into rivulets on Bree's wrought-iron balcony railing. Not a blade of grass or a bit of greenery in sight. To be fair, neither was there a river of beer. Still, it didn't feel like spring was just around the corner.

Bree shivered and turned back to the clothes strewn across her bed next to her suitcase—the one she'd emptied only three days ago. Should she pack the blue trousers that were snug in the waist thanks to too many business dinners? Or the khaki pair with the button hanging by a thread?

The jazzy beat of her cell phone playing the "Chattanooga Choo-Choo" derailed her internal debate. She shoved both pairs of slacks into the suitcase and grabbed the phone.

"Hi, Gram. You're up early this morning." Bree tossed blouses, undergarments, and a blazer in beside her travel-sized sewing kit as her grandmother chatted aimlessly about whether or not the kudzu would take over the yard this spring, how soon Bree might come South to visit, and a host of other things.

"Your mother tells me you're traveling again. How are you going to grow roots when you don't stay in one place?"

Now they were getting to the point. Bree smiled at the familiar conversation. In another minute her grandmother would ask her when she was going to find a man, settle down, and pass the Mayfield genes on to a new generation.

"Travel is part of my job, Gram." An exhausting, grueling part.

"Can't anyone besides you make those trips?"

I wish. Bree swallowed her complaints and instead told Gram how much fun her trips were. She stepped into the bathroom and looked critically at her nose. Not a bit longer, despite her cheerful lies.

Gram—thanks to her TV shows—thought business travel oozed with luxury, including iced champagne, private limousines and five-star dining. Her version didn't include grimy industrial plants stinking of sulfur. Or late nights sewing on missing buttons while answering critical emails.

"Your boss must be mighty proud of you to send you to all those glamorous

places,” Gram said, trying a new tactic. “I’m glad to see they recognize how smart you are. All those years of schooling paid off.”

Bree wedged the phone between her ear and shoulder as she refilled her TSA-approved bottles with shampoo and conditioner. “Of course he’s proud of me.”

The nose on her reflection didn’t grow by a millimeter.

Bree checked her watch while she spun stories for her grandmother. In reality, her boss would lay into her if she was late this morning. He would drag her over the coals if he didn’t like the presentation she’d labored over. If she hurried, she might still be able to review her slides before the meeting.

“Since your boss is so happy with you, maybe he’ll let you have some time off.” Something in Gram’s voice put Bree on alert.

“Is everything okay with your health?”

“Me?” Outrage poured across the speaker. “I’m fit as a fiddle. It’s you I’m worried about. No roots, no social life. No *boyfriend*.”

“You worry too much. I don’t need a man in my life to be happy.” Bree refused to look in the mirror again. Instead, she crammed her toiletries, computer charger and a paperback into her suitcase, then zipped it shut.

Zippering her emotions into the tight little corner of her mind wasn’t as easy. Of course she wanted a social life. And someone to come home to at night. Who didn’t?

She rolled the bag to the door. There was plenty of time for marriage and children later. Right now her life was perfect. Her home was not—

“You’re lying, young lady. Fooling nobody but yourself. You’ve got wanderlust, just like your Ma. Look where it got her.”

—empty.

“Wanderlust?” Bree forced a laugh. “Are you sure you don’t have Mom mixed up with Aunt Lucy? Mom’s the one who got married right after college.”

“Married to a damn Yankee,” her grandmother grumbled. “Turned into one herself, too, with a fancy hyphenated married name and all that silliness. Your Ma’s never gonna move back home again. Just like you’re never gonna make a real home for yourself until you slow down.”

“It’s not like that, Grandma. Really.” Bree looked around at her tidy condo. Loneliness pressed in on her.

Her grandmother sighed. “Maybe not, Honeybunch. But don’t bury yourself in your career and wait forever. Take it from an old lady who knows.”

“Now who’s lying?” Bree chided, unable to hide the affection in her voice. “You’ve never been old a day in your life.”

“Don’t fool yourself, Bree. Life’s short. Don’t miss it while you’re waiting for it to start.”



Bree pulled into work, cursing the time. She was late. Too late to do half of what she wanted to do before the meeting with her boss. Yet she didn't regret her time talking to her grandmother.

She shifted the car into park and eyed the grayish-white salt residue dusting the blacktop of the employee parking lot. Lord only knew if she'd return from her business trip to find her car buried under snow or mired in mud from a spring deluge. Either case was as likely as the other in March.

As she hefted her bag from the trunk, a clammy, damp wind crept beneath the collar of her spring coat, chilling her more effectively than a wintery blast. She balanced her stuffed briefcase on top of the bag. A pair of dress pumps strained the faux leather of the case.

After a whistle-stop business trip where her lost luggage never quite caught up with her, Bree had learned to cram everything into the two carry-on items the TSA allowed her.

The operative word being "cram."

It beat the alternative of washing her lone pair of underwear in the hotel sink each night and hoping it dried before morning. Bree shrugged the memory aside and slammed the trunk lid shut.

As she rolled the suitcase across the lot on the trek to her building, the Ohio State Buckeye fight song boomed from her phone. The one buried somewhere in the briefcase. She kept walking while she fished with one hand in the case, only to come up with the corporate Blackberry rather than her sleek personal phone. Her mother's ring tone faded away. Bree tossed the Blackberry back into the briefcase, promising herself she'd return the call once she made it to the airport that afternoon.

She tugged the suitcase across the uneven pavement, listening to the thump of its damaged wheel as it bumped along. Thump. Thump. Squish.

Bree froze and looked down. Damn. A greenish gray blob of goose poop—the size of something one expected to come out of a small dog—oozed from under her new sneaker. No doubt it was embedded deeply in the treads. She should have worn her old shoes.

The beautifully landscaped campus of Chemical Industries Corporation (CIC, Ltd.) housed more Canadian geese than a wildlife preserve. At a distance, Bree admired them, but up close—and *en masse*—the aggressive, territorial, dirty birds created constant problems.

According to the company's oral history—as told to her by her friend Nate—

the executive director of research had once been bitten by a goose. He'd been a student intern at the time, but the incident had apparently dogged him throughout his climb up the ladder. He had personally made it his mission to rid the corporate landscape of geese. After several failed attempts, one of which involved a plastic inflatable alligator, Bree had helped him find a solution.

She often wondered how that had impacted her own corporate career. Especially now, with the evidence embedded in her shoe reminding her that the solution was imperfect.

Imperfect or not, and poop-covered sneakers aside, Krupke's arrival had reduced the impact of the geese. As if on cue, Bree heard a sharp bark.

She left her suitcase on the pavement, stepped onto the sidewalk and knelt down just as the medium-sized blond, shaggy dog of undetermined breed, raced up to her. "Hey, Officer Krupke." She rubbed his ears. "How's the job going today? Are you chasing those nasty geese off the property? What a good dog you are." Bree fished in the pocket of her coat and pulled out a dog treat for Krupke.

He finished the treat, gave her a lick on the cheek, then raced away, barking at a gaggle of geese until they took flight in search of a quieter haven. Bree stood in time to see a dented, ten-year-old Chevy pull up, sporting a new magnetic D.O.G. logo. Horace Clark, the owner of the Dog On Guard business where Krupke worked, stepped out.

"Good morning, Doc Bree. How's it going?" He flashed a weathered smile as he grabbed her suitcase and swung it up onto the sidewalk. "Are you traveling again? Krupke here was all mopey last week when he didn't get to see you. Your company should let you stay home once in a while."

Bree shrugged. "I thought being named project leader would give me more time in the lab, too. It turns out the job mostly involves tagging along with the sales guys so they can brag about having Ph.D. chemists developing the products. Not that I have time to develop anything these days."

Horace's smile broadened. "You just keep up the good work, Dr. Bree. We'll miss you. But Krupke and Mrs. Krupke are going to have their paws full, so to speak. We're expecting a new litter of rescue puppies any day now."

"That's great news." Privately, Bree wondered how many irons Horace and his wife Wendy had in the fire. D.O.G. was just one of the many dog-focused businesses the couple ran out of the small storefront in downtown Plainville, Illinois, where Bree lived. The Barkery—a bakery featuring only dog treats—and the Groom & Room boarding and grooming spa were the other main businesses. On the side they fostered puppies, judged dog shows and generally did a bit of everything—as long as dogs or other animals were involved.

“Speaking of puppies,” Horace continued, “how’s your friend doing? You know, the one who adopted Snickers last year. What was her name?”

Leave it to Horace to remember the puppy’s name and forget the owner. “That was Karen Koenig.”

“Oh, right. Koenig. Wife of the fella who hired us to drive off the geese. That was sweet of you to put us in contact with him, Doc Bree. I can’t believe the number of customers we’ve picked up since we started the D.O.G. business. Speaking of which—” he put his fingers in his mouth and blew a shrill whistle— “Krupke and I have an interview. Word’s getting around, and we’ve got more business than we can handle. Time to train another dog.”

Krupke ran up, and Horace loaded him into the car. “Have a safe trip, Dr. Bree. Stop by The Barkery when you get home, and we’ll introduce you to the new puppies.”

“I will.” Bree waved good-bye and headed to the research building, lugging her baggage up the three steps to the door. She tugged her purse out of the briefcase and peered inside, looking for her key card. No luck. Either she’d left it in the pocket of her other coat or she’d forgotten it in the lab again.

She scanned the parking lot, hoping to see another employee headed her way. A quick glance at her watch confirmed that the 7:30 crew had already arrived and the 8:00 crew wasn’t due in yet. Just her luck.

Bree fished out her Blackberry and dialed her friend Kiki. When the call went to voice mail, she hung up and tried Nate, who headed down from his second-floor lab to let her in.

Bree studied the area while she waited. The employee entrance, dusty and forlorn, was covered in scattered rubble. Gritty crystals of randomly strewn rock salt glinted in the corner where the security camera was mounted by the door.

She turned from the grimy entrance to a row of evergreen hedges. Beyond them, in full view of the windowed corridor that connected the research building to the marketing and executive buildings, she glimpsed a decorative fountain. The corporate focal point was easily visible from within the building and from the customer entrance. She could hear the musical sound of water cascading down its tiers. She’d bet a month’s salary that the area around the fountain wasn’t littered with salty grit or grime.

When she had started her job, Bree imagined her life would be like that fountain. Meaningful. Valued by the company. And maybe just a little bit exciting and glamorous.

Instead, her life had turned out more like the dumpster that lay hidden near the shipping dock. Useful. Necessary. But the opposite of exciting.

She refused to call it boring. Even if it was.

She focused her thoughts on the lab clean-up she would miss out on this week. She didn't envy her team for sorting through months, or even years, of old chemicals. Still, she'd prefer to be working alongside the team rather than have them think she was shirking her duty. Like her grandmother, they thought travel was fun.

Unbidden, the word "boring" popped into her mind again.

A cold breeze snaked around the corner, and Bree shivered, all thoughts of the lab clean-up, her routine and her normal life replaced by a longing for a hot cup of coffee to wrap her chilled fingers around.

A click alerted her to the opening door. Nate, dressed in his lab coat and safety glasses, grinned at her. His blue eyes twinkled beneath wavy, unkempt hair that was more gray than brown. "Left your badge at home again, did you, Bree?"

"You know me." She pulled the suitcase across the threshold and adjusted her briefcase on top of it, grateful to be inside.

"This company's too dang worried about keeping the employees out. On top of that, what's the use of having security cameras when they fired the guard who monitored them? They might-could do better if they'd focus on keeping employees happy with their jobs instead of snooping about when they come through the back door."

Bree smiled at Nate's southern phrase. "Might-could" was something her grandma would say. Like her grandmother, Nate hailed from Chattanooga, Tennessee. Bree suspected he worked hard at maintaining his accent, which hadn't dimmed in the twenty-plus years he'd lived and worked in the Chicago area. The broad southern drawl hid a mind as sharp and honed as the pocket knife he constantly carried.

"If you're not happy, you could always retire."

"I'd be bored. I'll keep working till the job isn't fun anymore. Speaking of fun, I saw one of your 'molecular mysteries' in the *Journal of Chemical Education*. Looks like they're rerunning the series. I enjoyed your take on chemistry problems."

"I haven't written molecular mysteries since I was a teaching assistant in grad school." Bree shrugged. "I remember trying to make it fun for the students by telling them that solving a chemistry problem was like being a detective—putting chemical clues together to find an answer."

"You would come up with an idea like that. Being Dr. Watson and all." He flashed a smile.

"That's Mayfield-Watson," she corrected, smiling as she remembered how much Gram hated the compound name. "Thanks for letting me in. I've got to

run. I have to go over a few things before my nine o'clock meeting with the boss." She checked her watch. Just over an hour till the meeting. If she dropped her baggage in her cubicle, she would have time to grab that hot coffee while the computer booted up.

With a wave to Nate, she hurried down the hall past "Vice Presidents' Row" where the technical officers sat with their shared administrative assistants. Her boss's light shone through the window of the closed office door, indicating he was inside prepping for their strategy meeting.

Bree skirted two admins—Trisha and Nancy—and hurried to her cubicle, situated in another section of the building. She booted up her computer, shrugged out of her coat and headed to the kitchen.

On the floor outside her cubicle she saw her badge, half shoved under the cubicle wall. She snatched it up and put it in her suit pocket, vowing to be more careful in the future.

Bree raced into the kitchen, her entire focus on the coffee pot. As she grabbed for the handle, her friend Kiki's voice stopped her. "Hey, Stranger, that coffee's for people who work here."

"Very funny," Bree said, tightening her grip on the pot. "You know why I haven't been around lately?"

"You sound grouchy. Fighting jet lag?"

"Not really. I just need some coffee."

"Sorry," said Kiki, no longer teasing. "You'll have to wait. I just poured myself the dregs of the last pot and started a fresh one."

Bree abandoned her hopes for coffee and turned to go. She stopped in her tracks when she saw Kiki sprawled at one of the tables. Even though her friend was at least a decade or more older—Bree estimated Kiki was in her early to mid-forties—her stylish, funky attitude made her seem much younger. Today Kiki's short, spiked hair sported orange and green highlights.

"What's with the do?" Bree asked.

"My hair? It's in honor of St. Patrick's Day, and all things Irish. Orange for Irish Protestants and green for Irish Catholics."

"You're a few days early."

"Around here the festivities last for weeks. So I figure I'm right on time." Kiki took a swallow from her cup and grimaced. "This coffee is nasty. You're lucky I saved you from it. I don't suppose you brought in any of your cooking experiments to help wash the taste out of my mouth, did you?"

"No. No treats today. I'm headed to Arizona in a couple of hours. If it wasn't for strategy meetings I'd have skipped coming in to the office and left from home."

“You would have ended up with a black mark in the boss’s notebook.”

Bree shuddered at the mention of the notebook.

“Wherever you were last week had to have been better than here,” Kiki said as she crossed to the sink and poured the rest of her coffee out. “The boss raged like a three-year-old hyped up on Mountain Dew. When Buckster wasn’t ripping into one of us or snarling at the other VPs, I half expected him to lay on the floor kicking and screaming.”

“Sounds like I picked a good week to be out of the office.”

Kiki nodded. “Definitely. I’m pretty sure he finished off one notebook and started on a second last week.”

The notebook again. Everyone in the Fundamental Applications Research—FAR—group knew about Buckminster—Buckster—Davis’s habit of keeping extensive notes in his bound journals. Bree suppressed a shiver of disgust at the mention of the notebook. Davis used it to record every nuance and every interaction with his staff—and to twist them into whatever form he wished.

If you did what he wanted, your career moved ahead. If not... Bree’s skin chilled and a rush of apprehension washed over her, leaving her knees weak. One of her earliest career lessons had been seeing a friend and mentor escorted off the property, pink slip in hand, as a result of twisted evidence from Buckster Davis’s notebook.

She had learned to keep her questions to herself and her head down whenever possible. Now—because Davis had used his notes to foist the role of project leader on her—she walked a tightrope, caught between trying to protect her lab staff while fueling Buckster Davis’s ambitions. The difference between corporate success and the unemployment line for a FAR employee was no bigger than the thickness of a single notebook page.

Bree glanced at her watch, anxiety coiling in her stomach. “I’ll get my coffee later.” She gave Kiki a half-hearted smile and headed back to her desk, one eye on Davis’s door as she passed. Even across the width of the corridor and the admin’s desk area, even through the closed door, she felt his eyes on her.

Chapter 2

Bree settled in at her desk, stomach growling and fingers still cold and aching to wrap themselves around a steaming cup of coffee. Instead, she logged in to her corporate account and pulled up the presentation on Project Midas.

She scanned the slides, wondering if Buckster would suggest changes before they presented their overview to Dr. Koenig later that morning. Now executive director of research and development at Chemical Industries Corporation, Roger Koenig had been a friend of Buckster's since graduate school. Their career paths had not quite mirrored each other, but both had been successful.

Bree understood the pressure that came with trying to impress a brilliant mentor. She had spent her life trying to make her dad proud of her scientific contributions. And trying to make her mother proud of, well, of anything she did. No matter how often they told her she'd succeeded, a niggling voice inside warned her that praise was fragile.

So she pushed herself. Pushed to get into the best possible undergraduate program she could afford. Pushed to graduate with a Ph.D. in chemistry earlier than her peers. Pushed to find and excel at a job in a field still dominated by old men.

So far she had reached all of her goals except one: to silence the voice of doubt that dogged her every waking minute. Her mother called the doubt an *imposter complex*, and her father called it *illogical*. Bree simply hoped the voice would go away if she buried herself deeply enough in work.

So she shoved her worries aside and focused on the presentation. If she avoided distraction for the next thirty minutes she would be ready for the pre-meeting. She glanced at the computer's clock. Make that twenty-five distraction-free minutes before the meeting.

"What's up, Doc?"

The booming voice startled Bree, and she cursed herself for jumping when she heard the baritone chuckle behind her. Damn the designers of the cubicles for placing her back to the door. She composed herself and turned to find Matthew Tugood, the marketing manager assigned to Project Midas, balancing coffee cups on top of his leather portfolio and leaning against the frame of her cubicle. Or at least leaning as much as a man could against a structure only as high as his shoulder.

Tall and slender, with broad shoulders, muscled biceps and a dusting of light brown hair on his forearms, Matthew Tugood didn't look like a graduate of the Harvard School of Business. He looked—or so Kiki said—like an underwear model. Kiki would know. She exercised in the company's gym on her lunch

hours—mostly, she admitted to Bree, so she could watch Mr. Too-Good-To-Be-True run on the treadmill and lift weights.

Thus far, Bree had used her travel schedule to avoid being strong-armed into joining Kiki. Besides, she had to work with the man. Best not to look too closely.

Matthew flashed her a smile and held out a paper cup filled with gourmet coffee from the company cafeteria. “Sorry if I startled you, but I come bearing gifts.”

“Thanks.” Bree snatched the coffee from him and swiveled her chair back to face the monitor screen. “I appreciate the gesture, but I can’t talk.”

“No problem. I won’t take more than a minute.”

Behind her, Bree heard him flop down in a chair at the small table in her cubicle. What she wouldn’t give to be back in a tiny research cubicle—the kind without a table and visitor chairs—at this point. She hit save on the computer and turned back to him.

And came face-to-face with a cupcake. A luscious, iced-in-pink-frosting-with-a-cherry-on-top cupcake. The smell of chocolate tickled her nose in a way only warm from the oven treats could.

“I scored this from the executive lounge.” Tugood wagged the cupcake in front of her face. “I doubt the boys in the blue suits made it, but someone’s wife or girlfriend outdid herself.”

“Thank you.” The words barely left her mouth before Bree snatched the cupcake from his hand and peeled the paper from it slowly. The moist cake yielded under her fingers then sprang back, a perfect example of how cake should look. It had taken her years of experimenting to bake cupcakes with that texture.

She sniffed, savoring the sweet chocolate scent. Took an experimental lick of the frosting. Heaven. She sank her teeth into the cake and chewed slowly, closing her eyes and letting the flavors of chocolate and cherry fill her mouth with a sweet complexity. Her second bite added the flavor of a slightly nutty yet smooth cream cheese filling that melted on her tongue.

Later tonight, in her hotel, she would search the web for articles on flavor chemistry and review the way sugar, salt and other ingredients worked to create satisfying complexes. Next week, she would pull out the notebooks in her kitchen and try to recreate the flavor. But for now, in this moment, she’d simply enjoy herself.

Matthew Tugood cleared his throat, interrupting her moment of pleasure. “If your office had a door, I’d step outside and close it so you two could be alone.”

Bree swallowed hastily and took a sip of coffee—strong, black and with a

hint of vanilla—to wash the cake from her throat. “Sorry, I just—” Oh Lord, she could feel the heat rushing to her cheeks. “I’m interested in cooking. It’s all chemistry, you know.”

“I’m interested in eating. So if you have any kitchen experiments you want me to test for you, give me a call.” He smiled again, and Bree felt the flush in her cheeks deepen.

“Really, Matthew, I have to get back to work. We can talk after the project review later this morning. Don’t you have something to do before your portion of the presentation?”

Matthew mumbled a reply around a mouthful of cupcake. He waved her comments aside, knocking his cup off the small table. His eyes widened as the lid flew off and coffee splashed on her skirt.

Bree stared at the dark, rapidly growing stain, then raced past him, ignoring a comment that might have been an apology as she headed into the ladies’ room. She dabbed at the stain with cold water. She didn’t have time to go back to the house and change. After the pre-meeting meeting with her boss, she and Buckster Davis would present the project overview to the business team. Then she would be in a cab on the way to O’Hare Airport by 1:00. If she didn’t get the stain out now, she would be paying hotel dry cleaning fees and hoping to save her suit.

Damn Tugood. For a jock that had been one clumsy move. She sighed. *It was an accident. Everyone makes mistakes.* No doubt her mother would tell her Tugood was flustered because he had developed an interest in her. She snorted. As if.

She hadn’t inherited her mother’s ageless beauty. Her mom’s vibrant red hair, green eyes and still lithe figure attracted attention everywhere. Bree’s hair—too dark to be called blonde and too light to be brunette—attracted even less attention than her boring brown eyes. And her hips—which had broadened since graduate school—only attracted the wrong kind of attention.

No, Tugood wasn’t interested in her. The man wallpapered his office with pictures of his boys and held his business books in place with Little League “coach of the year” trophies.

He was a flirt. A flirt with a family he adored. His teasing worked to grease the wheels of business. Nothing more. If her heart speeded up a bit when he smiled and she got flustered, well, she blamed it on pheromones and chemistry. Wedding rings—did he wear a ring, by the way?—didn’t prevent the secretion of hormones. But hormones clearly interfered with her brain if she couldn’t remember if he wore a ring. No doubt her mother would have offered her an unwanted, innuendo-laden explanation for her inattentiveness.

Instead of scolding herself for her lapse in observational powers, she decided to enjoy the pheromone-induced high and then do exactly as logic dictated: put it aside and get back to work.

Bree checked her skirt. The stain was gone, and the wet spot would dry soon enough. When she returned to her desk, Tugood was on his feet, looking sheepish.

“Is everything OK? Sorry about the spill. I mopped it up with some paper towels I found in your lab.” He jerked his head in the direction of the lab bay across from her cubicle.

“I’m fine.” She gave him one of her professional smiles and ignored the pheromone-induced softening of her irritation. “But I really must get back to work. It’s time for you to go.”

“On my way. As soon as I give you this.” He thrust a small flat box at her. “Open it.”

Bree flipped open the lid of the jewelry box and saw a flash of gold. A necklace, with a round medallion embellished with the Project Midas logo winked up at her. The sculptured gold bars of the logo were crafted in three dimensions with a bed of rhinestone diamonds beneath them. The words “Project Leader” were carved above the logo.

“It’s a lanyard,” Matthew said, pulling it out of the box and dangling it before her eyes. “All of the team members are getting one, although not as ornate as the project leader version. It will help you keep track of your name badge.”

Bree slipped it over her head and clipped her badge on it. “It’s kind of nice—for corporate logo wear. Most lanyards are ugly.”

“I would never give you something ugly. Would you wear it if it was?” He smiled at her. “What good is a lanyard you won’t wear? Plus, it’s got a flash drive in it. Right here.”

He plucked the medallion from where it dangled, and Bree felt the warmth of his hands near her chest. In places where she shouldn’t be feeling the effects of a coworker—a married coworker at that—or his hands.

Tugood seemed not to notice. He simply lifted the medallion up to eye level and pushed a lever on one of the gold bars. A tiny memory device popped out. “Data, ID and jewelry all in one. What more could a woman want?”

“Thanks, Matthew.” Bree opened and closed the flash drive mechanism, trying it out. “That is ingenious. Where’d you find it?”

“It’s a secret,” he said with a wink. “Now, I’m leaving you to get your work done. I’ll see you at the presentation later today.” He sauntered away, headed to the executive and marketing building.

Bree sat back in her chair, shaking her head. If the customers for the Midas

line of metal recovery agents were all women, she would turn Tugood loose on them, and the company would make millions in a matter of weeks.

As it was, she had to spend weeks touring dirty metal plating facilities and mining operations trying to convince the owners that the Midas Plate and Midas Mine products worked more effectively than their traditional cyanide-based metal working processes. In the end, the customers tried the product because of its stellar safety citations from the EPA. They kept it because it worked.

Win-win.

Even if it did require her to spend hours in airport lounges with total strangers instead of in trendy night spots with friends. She'd have time for a social life once she had been promoted to research vice president. Buckster, for all his faults, seemed to be grooming her to take his place once he moved up. She only hoped she would be ready when the time came.

Bree put aside her dreams of the future and woke the computer from its sleep mode. She glanced down at the presentation, only to see the bright flashing of her reminder icon. Fifteen past nine. She was late for her meeting. Not by a little. By a lot.

Panic washed over her, making her gums and teeth tingle with the intensity of the blood rushing from her head. Buckster hated tardiness. She glanced at the phone. No message light. No IM on the computer either. Maybe he'd been distracted.

She called his office to tell him she was on the way. The machine redirected her to his administrative assistant.

The assistant answered before Bree could cut the call off.

"Buckminster Davis's office, Norah Kingston speaking. How may I help you?"

"Hi, Norah, it's Bree. I'm running a bit late for a meeting with Buckster, so if you'd tell him I'm on my way, I'd appreciate it."

"No problem." Norah's voice dropped to a low whisper. "Don't stress, Bree. His light is on, but the phone's on auto-forward and he's got the do-not-disturb sign on the door."

Bree thanked her, then gathered her notes, undocked the computer and raced to Buckster's office.

She wouldn't let this fluster her. She would hold on to her professional demeanor. She would turn the situation around. If he marked the event down in his notebook—which he would—she'd work hard enough to make him add a dozen positive marks to offset the one negative.

She owed it to herself. To the members of her team. To her dad. She would make them all look good. She would come out on top. If it took every ounce of

energy and intelligence she had.



When Bree arrived at Buckster's office, Norah intercepted her as quickly and quietly as a ghost, despite her skin-tight black sheath and scuffed combat boots. Bree bit the inside of her lip to keep from commenting on—or worse laughing at—the outfit of the day. Buckster's twenty-something administrative assistant looked like a walking Halloween prop with her pale skin and artificially dark hair. But as much as she tried to appear hard and aloof, her natural warmth always shone through the cracks in her disguise.

“Like I said, Bree, chill. He's been quiet as a corpse all morning. No demands of any kind. It makes me wonder if caffeine wasn't his problem all along.”

“Caffeine? The man lives on coffee.”

“He did.” Norah smirked, causing her lip piercing to torque upward at an odd angle. She tipped her head toward the office. “While you were out last week, he decided to decaffeinate himself. Talking to him was like trying to pet a crocodile—you risked losing an appendage.”

So caffeine withdrawal explained the tantrums Kiki had told her about. “I'm glad I wasn't here last week.”

“You're lucky you weren't. Tuesday he lit into me for not setting the auto brew feature on his fancy personal coffeemaker before I left on Monday night. So it's his own fault if his coffee tasted like crap this morning. I'm never going to come in at five A.M. to get coffee for his early-bird butt, so I set it up on Friday night.” The grin she sent Bree had a touch of evil in it—or would have, if her bright red lipstick hadn't smeared and faded. “At least he didn't complain about it. Maybe he fell asleep from lack of caffeine.”

Bree let out a sigh of relief and stepped over to the office. She peered through the window but didn't see Buckster. She rapped on the door. No answer. “Buckster? It's Bree. We had a meeting set up for this morning.” She rapped harder.

Still no answer.

Unease tickled the back of her neck, and her hands felt cold again. Something wasn't right. “Norah, are you sure he didn't step out for a minute?”

Norah pointed to the do-not-disturb sign with a black lacquered fingernail. “I haven't moved from this desk since I arrived. No one's been in or out of that office.” Her lips curled into another smirk. “Trust me, I've been watching that door all morning.”

Bree's apprehension mounted as she looked at Norah. The wannabe Goth girl

seemed ill at ease, too. Bree shrugged it off and turned back to Buckster's office. She tried the knob. The door opened easily. The minute she stepped inside, the odor of burned coffee assaulted her nostrils. She glanced at the credenza, by the door. Buckster's coffee mug sat on the polished surface next to a nearly full pot of coffee. The hot plate on the coffeemaker sizzled as a drop of liquid splashed onto the exposed surface.

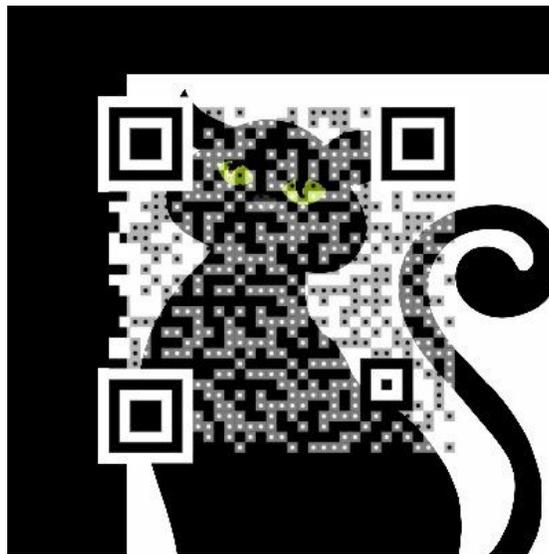
Bracing herself against the smell, she took a tiny breath, only inhale more *eau de burned-coffee*, now unpleasantly laced with something that resembled sulfurous sewer gas. What was going on?

In front of her, Buckster's desk was in disarray, the computer asleep, but emitting a soft series of beeps.

As she rounded the desk, she kicked an overturned coffee cup—the kind used for high end brew like the coffee Tugood had brought her—and liquid sloshed out of the paper. A sweet, nutty-cherry scent wafted up before being drowned out by the noxious sulfur and coffee stench.

She peered under the desk and froze, the chill from her hands now encasing her whole body. "Norah, call 9-1-1." Bree's voice sounded shrill in her own ears, but she didn't stop to think. She dropped her computer and notes on the desk and rushed to Buckster's prone body. He lay facing the wall, halfway under the desk, one arm outstretched, as if he'd fallen while reaching for something. She put her fingers on his neck, praying she'd feel a pulse, but the stiffness of the flesh—not warm, yet not cool either—told her she wouldn't.

Buckminster Davis was dead.



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Science is about solving puzzles. Why should solving a murder be any different?

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- 🐾 A sexy marketing manager—who may, or may not—be a contract killer.
- 🐾 A handsome lead detective whose interest goes beyond the case.
- 🐾 The dead man's cranky cat.
- 🐾 A goose-chasing dog in hot water with an animal rights group.
- 🐾 The search for the perfect cupcake recipe.
- 🐾 And, of course, someone who wants her out of the picture.

And she thought getting a Ph.D. was hard.

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