

PAYBACK

3



Two elevators descended—one from the 43rd floor and the other from the 39th. The bell dinged and the doors of the one from 43 slid open. Wouldn't you know it? I'd bet on 39.

People wearing sincere business suits stood squashed together shoulder-to-shoulder, unable to move. The scene reminded me of sardines in a can, but somehow when I flashed my sweet innocent "Goldie smile," a few of them managed to shift around as much as they could to clear a space for me. I don't know why, but that smile works every time.

During the ride down my head filled with thoughts of the days when Kate, Kim and I were a trio. While our investigation limped along, about once a month we managed to schedule time at one of our homes. Kim lived in Seattle, I lived in LA and Kate in San Francisco. Even though we were constantly worried about being discovered and scared silly every time a brilliant plan backfired, those were fun times. I think in some ways the fright added to the fun.

The elevator landed on the lobby level and passengers streamed out. I headed for the Century Cafe, a nice little restaurant located in the cavernous space. They feature good sandwiches and salads—a great choice for a fast lunch. A few booths lined the perimeter plus some tables for two or four. A placard on one wall proclaimed maximum capacity of sixty. Sometimes large groups pushed the tables together to create one long table. That afternoon it wasn't quite as crowded as it usually gets right at noon when every possible table is occupied.

One thing I like about Century Cafe is that it's pleasant, but not fancy like so many of the nearby Century City or Beverly Hills restaurants. The booths are upholstered in a combination of black and gray with granite-looking table tops made of some sort of synthetic, and black and white tile floor. You know how sometimes aromas in a restaurant make your mouth water? Century Cafe is one of those places. I was hungry but unfortunately also trying to watch my weight.

I settled for a Cobb salad and a cup of herbal tea. I was reading email messages on my

phone when a shockingly cold, wet chill spread over my head while something wet and sticky ran down my whole body.

"You fucking bitch," a man's voice shouted. "You don't know who you're messing with, Girlie. But, you're going to find out."

I looked up to see Jonathan Reid, Reid/Cunningham's managing partner, looming over me. He held an empty glass that had been filled with Coke before he poured it all over me. His piercing blue eyes flashed anger in a face the color of a ripe tomato.

Reid was impeccably dressed as always in a beautifully tailored suit easily costing several thousand dollars. His crisp white shirt had monogrammed cuffs and he wore a silk tie with a blue and gray swirl design. Reid's full head of steel gray hair was perfectly styled. Not a hair out of place. His nose was a little large for his face, but even though he was pushing sixty, Jonathan Reid was still a very handsome, successful-looking man unlike his bald, paunchy partner Cunningham. I imagined steam rising from the top of his head. *Someone could have a stroke with that sort of anger*, I thought.

Well, I was equally angry, and I have quite a temper when it is triggered. This former employer had just ruined an Armani suit. Coke and melting crushed ice remained in my hair while more ran down my face and body.

I shouted, "What the Hell do you think you're doing?"

People turned to stare at us.

His voice was a low growl. "Teaching you a lesson, you Twit. You can't just waltz back into LA and steal our clients."

That was the last straw. I got up from my soggy chair, balled my fists, and locked eyes with him. Even wearing stilettos, I had to stand on my toes to do it. The illustrious Mr. Reid stood about six foot three inches to my five foot six so I had to tilt my head back, but I was sure he saw the fire in my eyes.

"You ass! Take this message back to your partner. He made a big mistake firing me the way he did. You two *will* learn what payback means from the *over-the-hill* woman, he fired."

I took a deep breath and continued, struggling to keep my voice level and menacing.

"You know, I can still hear just about every word in that damned voice mail. Voicemail, Jonathan! After so many years as a loyal employee, he had the nerve fire me by voicemail.

I imitated Tyler Cunningham's voice. "Your replacement, a really sharp twenty-five year old, hit the ground running. In a way, she reminds me of you when you started with us. Have your office cleared by the end of the day."

I glared at him. "That was it—fired just like that. No class, Jonathan. No class, after everything I did to help you build the agency. Well, it's me against you now. Game on. Prepare for a rocky ride."

Standing there with drooping, sticky hair, makeup running down my face, and my beautiful cream-colored suit dripping with brown Coca Cola, I really didn't care what I

looked like. I was that mad.

I turned to the gawking faces all around us. “Okay, folks, it’s over now. Go back to your lunches.”

Then I mustered as much dignity as I could and spit in his face. “The best place for you and your sleazy partner is DEAD,” I shouted, and with that, gathered up my purse and signaled the waiter. “Do me a favor. Please have another Cobb Salad sent up to my office. Suite 2917. Cameron Harsen. You have my card on file. Give yourself a nice tip. Thanks.”

What a picture! I turned on my heel and stomped out into the lobby, trying to ignore the stares of passersby as I made my way to the elevators.

Jonathan Reid had ruined a perfectly wonderful day. At least I kept a change of clothes at the office, and we had a bathroom with a shower for when we worked late or even around the clock. Our receptionist gave me a questioning look when I blasted back into the office looking nothing like I had when I left. She knew better than to ask any questions as I headed straight for the bathroom. I flung over my shoulder, “Have them put my lunch on my desk when it arrives.”

By the time my lunch came, I felt more like myself. I had no idea whether the cleaners could save my suit, but I’d ask them to try. For the rest of the day, I concentrated on the presentation for a new power drink called *Feeling Feisty* manufactured by one of my biggest clients, SeniorSnaks. Their products targeted women over fifty and I’d stolen the account from Reid/Cunningham at the beginning of the year.

Can you imagine how stupid they were? My old agency used a twenty-something model with impressive silicone boobs that didn’t match her size zero body as the on-camera spokesperson. My guess was she probably tipped the scales at about one hundred pounds soaking wet, if that. Unlike Reid/Cunningham, because my agency specialized in the older market which included the huge buying segment of Baby Boomers, one thing I knew for sure—their Barbie Doll model was not the image an average woman in her fifties or more wanted to see. No drink was going to make them look like that. They wanted someone who looked like them, or at least what they could logically aspire to.

As soon as I saw the billboards and magazine ads featuring this young, skinny gal whose spirit supposedly felt awakened by *Feeling Feisty, the only drink for you*, I knew the campaign was destined to tank. That’s when I’d contacted a fit and gorgeous platinum-haired model I knew who was obviously over fifty, and put together a proposal with mock-ups featuring her. Score one for Cameron. I’d gone after the account like a warrior with exactly what the client needed, and got it away from Cunningham. I’m sure it hurt his pocketbook as well as his ego to lose one of his big personal clients to me.

With our campaign, sales and profits for *Feeling Feisty* soared, and we won an award. Clients were literally begging us to take them on.

I do have to admit I spent some time that day throwing mental darts at Jonathan Reid

and Tyler Cunningham. As I'd learned when our FraudBusters trio was at its most effective, revenge can be fun and I was going to have as much fun with that duo as I possibly could.

Looking back, though, shouting at Jonathan that he and Tyler should be dead probably wasn't the smartest thing for me to say with a room full of witnesses.

