

SAMPLE CHAPTER - SCAMMED



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THE DOOR TO CAMERON HARSON'S plush Century City office inched open as her receptionist called out, "'Hey, Boss, sorry to interrupt you. It's time to gather everything up and hit the road."

Cameron checked her watch, then looked up, confusion written all over her face. "But, it's only five. Hit the road now? Why?"

Ramona frequently teased her boss about how much she looked like Goldie Hawn. "There you go, pulling a Goldie again. Don't you remember you asked me to remind you about the HOA meeting tonight, and you know how tricky traffic can be. You should really leave now if you want to be on time."

Cameron groaned, picturing the stressful drive from Century City to the beach community of Venice right in the middle of the peak traffic hour. As much as she didn't want to fight the impossible traffic, she reluctantly picked up the items on her drafting table and put them into a small portfolio. Holding the portfolio in one hand and her briefcase in the other, she thanked Ramona and headed for the elevators.

The Venice Canals Homeowners Association held their board meeting promptly at six-thirty on the third Wednesday of every month. She silently cursed whoever decided to schedule it at that hour. It gave her no choice but to endure the worst possible LA rush hour traffic if she wanted to get there on time. It could take anywhere from an hour or more to drive from her high-rise office building on Century Park East to her home along one of the Venice canals. During off hours the drive only took about half that time.

She made her way through the canyon of high-rise office buildings on Century Park East, then turned right into the line of vehicles hardly moving on Olympic Boulevard.

As the owner of a very successful Century City advertising firm, Cameron enjoyed the luxury of making her own hours and generally made it a point to never leave her office at the same time thousands of cars streamed onto streets and freeways to create the legendary Los

Angeles traffic scene. Not unless it was absolutely necessary. Muttering obscenities under her breath, she tapped her fingers on the steering wheel waiting for traffic to move.

No matter which route she chose, every street and freeway would be jam packed. She glanced at the clock on the dash. Five-thirty. Traffic was even worse than usual. She had inched along for a precious fifteen minutes and travelled only a few blocks.

Her mind wandered to the great news two months before when the VCHOA won their ongoing lawsuit. They had sued three developers for polluting the canals while constructing huge McMansions on lots where modest bungalows had stood for years and won a settlement of several million dollars. Even after the necessary repairs, there would be a very comfortable cushion left in the Reserve Account, so tonight's meeting was really important.

If she stayed on Olympic there was no way she would be home in time. Reason prevailed. Better to head south to Venice Boulevard and hopefully less traffic, or at least fewer traffic lights.

During their last meeting the HOA Board decided to throw a gala party for all members as a celebration of their victory and their resulting fat bank account. The victory wasn't only about the money and having the ability to repair the damage to the canals. Winning such a large suit would certainly have impact upon other developers tempted to ignore restrictions in the interest of earning big returns. In fact, her staff publicist made sure their victory received a headline in the LA Times accompanied by an interview with her. Of course, Harsen Advertising Associates had been mentioned.

Lincoln Boulevard was in sight—only a short distance to her home now.

Almost the second she opened the door, strains of the song *I Am Woman* blared from the cell phone in her shoulder bag signaling an incoming call.

"I hear you," she shouted as she fumbled for her cell phone and managed to snatch it out of the shoulder bag just in time.

Kate Steele's husky, easily recognizable voice said, "Oh, good. I was beginning to think you weren't answering."

"I wasn't but I saw it was you. I'm running late for a meeting, so I can only talk a moment. After a little repair to my makeup and ditching these sincere clothes for jeans, I have to go. What's up?"

"I won't keep you. I just wanted to let you know I'm coming to town in two weeks to appear on the Crime Capers TV show. They're filming on the 23rd, but I thought I'd come down a few days early and maybe we can hang out. There's lots more, but I won't take up your time now. Call me when you get home?"

"Sure. But don't even think of booking a hotel. You know my guest room awaits. I should be back here no later than ten and can call you then. Does that work for you?"

"Absolutely. You know what a night owl I am. Wait till you hear the rest of what I have

to tell you. It involves you and Kim, too, and I know you'll love it."

"Okay, talk to you later. I've gotta run."

Cameron changed into Calvin Umberto designer jeans, a cream-colored cotton sweater and athletic shoes. A far better choice than her stilettos for the three-block walk to action-adventure hero Matt Darwin's house, although the spike heels did make her legs look great.

Cameron and her two friends, Kate and Kim, had uncovered a clever scheme to embezzle millions from the Federal government a few years before and split a huge whistleblower reward that rounded out to about a million dollars each. Cameron used a sizeable portion of her share to establish her own advertising agency, Kate formed a business called FraudBusters and Kim became Director of the division they had worked for which required her to move to DC. She also married the United States Attorney General.

What was Kate up to, anyway?

Maybe she was digging into a fraud again as she had been on many other visits to the LA area. She decided to worry about that later as she prepared for the short walk to the movie idol's house.

Colonel Michael Thompson, the old retired warhorse who lived a few houses to the east, called to Cameron as he limped toward her. An injury sustained in combat during the Korean War left him with a bad left leg.

"Hey, beautiful lady, wait up. That is if you don't mind walking to Darwin's house with a gimpy old gent."

She waited for him and they set off together. "Colonel Thompson, you know I consider it my pleasure to be escorted by a distinguished 'gent' like you. What's with the gimpy and old?"

He smiled at her, revealing teeth so perfect she always suspected they were not his own. "Just callin' it like it is, darlin'. After all, I'm close to ninety and the leg speaks for itself. But then, you've heard so many of my war stories over a glass of wine on your patio, you don't need me to repeat them."

Cameron loved spending time with the old dear and listening to his stories. He was a history buff and delighted in telling her all about the Venice Canals neighborhood. She remembered listening in fascination early in their friendship.

"It isn't just the name of a neighborhood," he'd said. "Why, back in 1905 there was this developer named Abbot Kinney. His Venice in America plan included lit canals, gondoliers and arched bridges. It was such a unique development that it drew widespread publicity and that sure helped to sell canal-front lots."

She hadn't known any of that and asked him to tell her more.

"When cars became so popular in the late twenties, can you believe they actually filled in some of those nice canals to make roads. The water stagnated and by 1940 the remaining canals had fallen into such disrepair sidewalks were actually condemned by the city. They

were practically giving away lots and bungalows. Even by the time I bought my house in the 70s, values had come up some, but no one suspected this rundown place would become what it is today. And that ends my history lesson for tonight.”

As close as they had become, somehow she couldn’t bring herself to call him Michael or Mike as many of the neighbors did. She always afforded him the respect of calling him Colonel Thompson, or simply Colonel. He finally gave up imploring her to call him Mike.

They walked along Sherman Canal at a pace that Thompson could handle, took a right turn on Grand Canal and after a while arrived at the brilliantly lit Darwin home. It occupied a choice corner lot and featured floor to ceiling windows that afforded spectacular views of the canals from two sides of the imposing structure. Lights blazed as if Matt Darwin wanted everyone to see how magnificent his home was. His wife greeted the pair when they rang the bell.

“Michael, Cami, welcome,” she said in a sexy breathless voice. The woman’s figure gave serious competition to the current Hollywood sex symbols. She wore a sleek black jumpsuit cut in the front nearly to her waist. Blonde hair highlighted with a hot pink streak cascaded around her shoulders. The former actress showed them into her cavern of a living room where many of the board members were already seated on plush sofas or easy chairs.

Matt Darwin’s rich baritone voice cut through the conversations around him. “Hey, Mike, Cami, we’re just waiting for Al Shady and Danny Garrett now so we can begin.”

He looked across the room at Shady’s wife Barbara, the HOA treasurer. “Barb, do you know what’s keeping Al? I’m anxious to get on with this, but since he’s the Vice President, I guess we should wait for him before any taking any votes.”

After Dr. Al Shady retired from his practice as an orthopedist a few years before, they sold their house in Beverly Hills and bought a house on Grand Canal. Both Shadys promptly snagged offices on the Board. Barbara, a woman who appeared to be in her forties, clearly paid a lot of attention to her appearance and claimed to be a CPA. She had been a shoo-in for open position of Treasurer. Her monthly financial statements were flawless and with the suit settled, she was now in charge of the huge reserve account.

She had informed everyone at the last meeting that it appeared the reserve fund would likely be bolstered by a few million more than it had before, even though several millions would have to be paid out to correct the canal situation according to the estimates submitted as part of the lawsuit. The ‘I’m better than you’ attitude Barbara radiated didn’t make her very likeable, but as long as she kept everything in order she didn’t have to be liked.

“I–I’m sure he’ll be along in a few minutes,” she said. “He was finishing up a phone call when I left, so I said I’d go on ahead. No problem. If he doesn’t make it, I can fill him in on anything he misses.”

There was a knock at the door, and Darwin’s wife sashayed over to it. She returned

followed by Danny Garrett. The retired FBI agent also bought his house before values skyrocketed into the millions and it became the best retirement plan he could have wished for. He shrewdly used some of the equity for lucrative investments that fattened his bank account nicely. Using his long experience as an undercover agent, Garrett discovered he had a talent for writing best-selling mystery novels. The newcomer made his way across the Brazilian rosewood floor toward the vacant seat next to Colonel Thompson.

He nodded as he sat down. "Mike, good to see you."

Colonel Thompson returned the nod. "You, too, Danny. Haven't seen you for a while. Up to anything dangerous lately?"

The handsome man grinned. "Aw, you know me, Colonel. That's my past. The most dangerous thing I've done lately was trying to kill one of my publishers." He flashed a smile that made it appear as a tongue-in-cheek statement.

Then he said, "Don't look so shocked. On paper, my friend. On paper."

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