

EAT, DRINK AND DROP DEAD

by Toni LoTempio

EXCERPT

Dale held out his hand, motioned me to sit. “Before you leave, I’d like to run something by you.”

I nodded. “Sure. What?”

He let out a breath. “It’s an idea the Board was tossing around. How would you feel about doing a piece on the blog, maybe once a month, sort of a who’s who around town is frequenting what restaurant, what they think of the food...”

I stared at him. “Turn it into a sort of gossip column you mean? To take the place of the one Jenny Lee did? What’s next? One on what all the top chefs are wearing this year?”

“Oh, I’m sure you wouldn’t have to go that far,” Dale said quickly. I noted his cheeks had flushed a bright pink. “Although you might make mention of any designer duds you happened to notice.”

I bit down hard on my lower lip. “Look, Dale, I’m not a gossip maven, and I’m certainly not the style or fashion Guru Jenny Lee was. If that type of thing is what the board wanted, then they shouldn’t have fired her!”

Dale’s hand shot out, covered mine. “Hey, hey, calm down. It’s only talk right now. I’m not saying anything’s going to change, but if it were—?”

I sighed. “Would it matter? I’d do it, of course, but I wouldn’t have to like it.”

“Please don’t worry about this. It may never happen. I just wanted you to be aware the possibility exists.” He gave my hand a brief squeeze, and then released it. “You know, Tiff, you’ve got a quality Jenny Lee never had-likeability. People like you, and they trust your opinion. If you tell women to wear their bedroom slippers to church service, I’m betting they’d do it.” He couldn’t suppress a grin as he added, “Besides, you’re a much better writer than Jenny Lee could ever hope to be.”

Something in the tone of his voice set off a little warning bell in my head. “Dale, did you mention any of this to Jenny Lee? About rolling certain elements of her column into mine?”

He hesitated, and then nodded. “Yes. She was getting rather loud, protesting that without her there would be no society slash gossip column, so I told her what the board was considering. Don’t worry, I also made sure she knew we hadn’t discussed it with you.”

Jenny Lee’s venomous reaction to me made a little more sense, now. “I’m sure that doesn’t matter,” I said with a large sigh. “If I was on her black list before, I probably head it now.”

“I think I might hold that dubious honor,” Dale said. He coughed lightly and then said, “I won’t take up any more of your time. I imagine you’ve got some notes to go over before the staff meeting?”

“Yes, sir, boss.” I got up and smoothed down my skirt. As I turned to leave, though, I was struck by another thought. “What did Jenny Lee mean when she said she’d rattle some skeletons if she had to? It almost sounded like a threat.”

He glanced up from his computer with an enigmatic expression. “I guess it did, didn’t it? Well, I’m not worried about her, and you shouldn’t either.” He made a shooing motion with his hand. “Go on, get out of here. Go call your family. I’ll bet they’re anxious to hear the news.”

He turned back to his computer and I took that as my cue to leave. As I exited, I saw Twyla Fay and Callie Johnson, Dale’s admin, talking in low tones at her desk. They looked up as I passed, and both gave me a thumbs up. Twyla Fay held out her hand, palm up, all five fingers extended which I took as a reminder of her offer for a drink. I smiled and nodded at them and continued on down the hall to my office. Once inside, I shut my door, kicked off my heels and did my version of a ‘happy dance’ – somewhere between a polka and a frug. Then I flopped into my chair, fished my cell phone out of my tote and called my family. The call went straight to voicemail, which wasn’t unusual. My parents were both retired professors and spent a good deal of their time travelling. I left a euphoric message and then hit the speed-dial number for Hilary. When her voicemail clicked on, I said, “Hey! When you get in come right to my office! We’ve got celebrating to do!” I tapped my phone against my chin, debating whom to call next, when I heard a soft tap-tap at my door. I knew it couldn’t be Hilary—she’d just open the door and walk right in. “Come in,” I called.

The door swung open, and I started as I recognized the figure framed in my doorway. “Chef Longo?”

Longo smiled at me. “Hello, Tiffany. I heard the news, and just stopped by to offer my congratulations.”

“Thank you.” I motioned to a vacant chair. “Won’t you come in, sit a few minutes?”

“Don’t mind if I do.” Chef Longo stepped inside and settled himself in the chair. He smiled, revealing his even white teeth. “I had no doubt you would snag the spot,” he said. “Might I say it’s well deserved?”

“You might. I’m sure there are some who would disagree.”

“Oh, I don’t think so.” He fiddled with the edge of his navy and white checked tie. “From what I’ve seen, you’re pretty well liked around here. Unfortunately I can’t say the same about Jenny Lee.”

“You’ve heard, then?”

He nodded. “I have to tell you, I was not surprised. From what I was told, this has been a long time coming. The only reason it didn’t happen sooner was because Jeremy Slater always took her side.”

“And now he’s gone,” I said. “I can’t say I’ll miss her, but I thought she wrote a pretty good column. I always looked forward to reading her fashion tip of the week.”

“That’s very generous of you, more than she deserves, I’m sure. Anyway…” He waved his hand in a dismissive circle. “Enough about her. I came by to offer my congratulations, and also to tell you that my appointment to the board has been approved.”

I offered him a wide smile. “That’s great. Congratulations to you as well.”

“Thank you,” he murmured. His eyes twinkled as he added, “One of my first suggestions will be to expand the food section. One thing I’ve learned, everyone loves a good recipe, and most people do fancy themselves amateur chefs.”

“I couldn’t agree more. That’s why those cooking contest shows are so popular,” I said with a vigorous nod. “I do have some great ideas I can’t wait to put into motion.”

“I am sure you do. Trust me, the better woman won.” He glanced at his watch. “I must be getting on. I did mean what I said the other night, though, about us having lunch. Are you free today?”

“No, I’m sorry. Our staff meeting is today and they usually provide lunch for us.”

“Oh. Well, some other time, then.”

“Absolutely.”

Longo left and I leaned back in my chair. Something in his tone when he spoke about Jenny Lee made me think their dinner the other night hadn’t gone as well as Jenny Lee had hoped. Longo had apparently seen it for what it most likely was – an attempt to cultivate his support. I had to admit, though, I was looking forward to Longo’s being on board. Having a pro like him in a position of power would definitely bode well for my blog.

I spent the next half hour writing down notes for ideas for several new articles, one sparked by my talk with Longo. It was for a new monthly feature on my blog called “Recipe of the Month”. I planned to have readers send in their recipes in a variety of categories, and I’d sample and choose the best one to be featured. Corny? Maybe, but I was certain it would bring a lot of foodies out of the woodwork—and over to Southern Style.

I saw it was quarter to eleven. I rose and picked up my trusty notebook. I didn’t want to be late for my first official staff meeting. I stepped out into the hallway but instead of turning right and heading for the conference room, something made me glance in the opposite direction, over toward the bank of elevators. I sucked in a breath at what I saw.

Longo and Jenny Lee, standing in front of the elevators, and they seemed to be engaged in a very heated conversation. Without giving it a second thought, I turned and started walking toward them. They were both so engrossed in what they were saying, neither one of them looked over. I stopped about ten feet away. There was no one else around, and their voices had grown louder, so I could make out pretty much what they were saying.

“You are just upset because your little trick did not work on me,” said Longo. “In the future, I’d thank you not to poke your nose where it doesn’t belong, as you did with Slater. If you ask me, the man’s lucky to be out from under your thumb.”

“Careful Fred,” Jenny Lee said with a sneer. “Poking my nose into people’s business is what I do best.” And I always get what I’m after. Always.”

“If I were you, I’d be very careful. Very,” growled Longo. “Because if you interfere, I will have no choice but to retaliate.” Then he turned on his heel and stalked toward the door marked STAIRS.

Jenny Lee watched him go, her face twisted into what I could only describe as an evil expression. In that moment, she reminded me of every Disney villain I’d ever seen in my life. Quizzing her about that photo could wait, I decided. Maybe forever. Jenny Lee jabbed at the elevator button. The doors opened, and she stepped inside. I turned to go, and once again something made me look over my shoulder.

As the elevator doors closed, I saw Jenny Lee staring straight at me. If looks could kill, I’d be pushing up daisies right now.